

Episode 100: Ira Shor

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

Thanks for tuning in and listening.

Here we are at Episode 100, which is just unbelievable to me. Our first episode was released almost three years ago; it's hard to believe we made it to 100. This conversation with Ira Shor, what you're about to listen to, was recorded in December 2019. It was a day or two after Christmas, and I remember calling him on his home phone number. It was a lovely conversation. I've held onto it for quite some time now. When I started the podcast, I set out to keep episodes around twenty-five minutes. As you can see, this one is closer to an hour and a half. I didn't know whether I wanted to share it because there was a part of me that wanted to just keep it for myself. What you're about to listen to feels like an historical account of someone's life in higher education, but most importantly, an account of someone who really dedicated their life to transforming the entire system and structure, the way we think about education.

Ira Shor opens up his life. This episode feels more like a story, like a personal narrative. Something private, something intimate. In some ways, I guess this conversation reminded me a lot of Episode 1 with Mike Rose, which was profoundly special to me. Because I wouldn't be a teacher and this podcast wouldn't exist without having read texts from the likes of Rose and Freire and Shor, and the late great bell hooks. I say all this to say, here we are. It felt like a perfect time to release this conversation with Ira Shor. Stories are meant to be shared, and that's the main reason why I started this podcast, for teachers to share their stories about teaching and for us to gather around and listen to these different experiences.

In this episode, Ira Shor talks about critical pedagogy, questioning the status quo, the ethical responsibility of educators, how teaching has changed with a new generation of students, writing assessment and negotiation, and his friendship with Paulo Freire.

Ira Shor is a professor at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, where he teaches composition and rhetoric. Shor grew up in the working-class area in the South Bronx of New York City. According to Shor, coming from a working-class area had a powerful influence on his thinking, politics, and feelings. In collaboration with Paulo Freire, he has been one of the leading exponents of critical pedagogy. Together they co-wrote *A Pedagogy for Liberation*.

Ira, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about critical pedagogy. Can you walk us through those earlier years in the late 1960s and 70s when this new transformative approach to education called critical pedagogy was beginning to take shape. Take us back to what was going on and what that was like for you, and what it meant or what it could do for teaching writing.

IS: Yes, okay, so I'm of the generation that came of age during the 60s and the 70s and in that period, it was the best of times to be young, and to be idealistic and utopian and hopeful and so

on. And millions of us young people thought that the world was really going to improve, that we would transform society so that the wars would end, especially the Vietnam War that we protested. That racism would end, and so we marched to Civil Rights. That the planet would be rescued, so we had our Earth Day on April 22nd, 1970. And then began the Women's movement, demanding women's equality. And in that same period, we had the start of the gay liberation movement. We even had a movement called the Gray Panthers, the senior citizens started organizing. It was a great period of popular upheaval in opposition, when all the bottom of society flooded the stage of history with their demands and their hopes and their protests.

So this was a great, great time in which to be young and to be studying. I was swept up in that moment, and joined just about every movement that started at that time. It gave me a launching for a lifetime into believing that social justice and a humane world were within our reach. And that it was also our responsibility, not just to wait for it, but to make it happen. That we had walk into it, walk towards it, and so on. That included, what work did you do? I was studying for a PhD in literature. I was preparing to become an English professor. I thought also, that the work we do should contribute to that. I didn't stop being a hopeful, young person, when I began teaching in my classrooms. And that the classroom also should be a place that pulled us all forward into that new world that so many of us thought we deserved and so on.

I began meeting with other graduate students at that time to talk about this. What do we do with our literature classes? And what do we do with our writing classes? Because we were being trained badly to do both, to become literature teachers. And also, the teacher composition in writing, is sort of like an after thought, because that was inherited by the English departments in higher education. So with some other folks, we started experimenting with this and with that. I was oriented that direction, that the classroom should include...should be part of this great change that we're sweeping the world and so on. But I hadn't really studied. I had no mentor, no mentoring. There was no modeling and no mentoring because there was nobody in the older generation who had embraced critical teaching.

We had some star professors that were very charismatic. There was one at the university of Wisconsin at the time, Harvey Goldberg, an absolutely brilliant historical scholar. And he was like a Michel Foucault in his celebrity status. When you went to his classes, you had to fight your way in, because everybody was...every square inch of the floor people were sitting and so on. Because when he gave a lecture, he was spectacular. He would close his books, take off his glasses, grab the lectern, and then start talking for an hour nonstop. And tremendously inspiring story of what had happened in history. So we had that model, but it's very hard to copy that, because he was a genius and he was 30 years older than us and...but he was our ideal, that we wanted our education to be that moving and that meaningful.

So that's where I started, and I joined the times, the radical times. Then I got my PhD in '71, and I had some trouble finding a job because I had been an activist. I had been sort of like a student activist in graduate school, and made enemies among the key senior faculty in the English program, the English department. So this is how you got a job. There was an old boy network, and some senior faculty who you attached yourself to, would call senior faculty elsewhere and say, "Hire this guy, he's my student. He's good." And that's how people got jobs. All the senior faculty were lined up against me, because I was involved in various movements and protests in

the English department and elsewhere. So one of them, in fact, put a poison pen letter in my job file, warning perspective departments not to hire me because I was a troublemaker.

So while I just about got all straight A's in graduate school and wrote a dissertation on Kurt Vonnegut, which I think was the first one ever produced in 1970 or so, but no one would hire me. I got a PhD, a tremendous record, and I was unemployed and broke. I decided that I would just to go off to California because I had been there once or twice and I loved the climate, and it was nice and warm, and the food was wonderful and multicultural. You could eat anything you want. And also, there were a lot of movements underway that attracted me. I was about to leave for California, and just through certain quirks, I heard about a job here and there. I applied, and I was offered a job at this third-rate marginal community college called Staten Island Community College, which at that time, was having a warfare between the liberals and the conservatives in the English department.

And the liberals who were in the hiring committee were trying to bring in allies and so on. So they heard about me and my major professor, and actually brought both of us, because he was fired too. So I started teaching there, and I must tell you, I was very happy to be employed, because I finally got a paycheck and I could pay my bills and move out and no longer sleep in my parents' sofa bed. I could get an apartment, pay my car insurance, the whole deal. But also, these were working-class students, and mostly White working-class students. I was born in the White working-class, and that's where I grew up. I grew up speaking a non-standard dialect of English. Very urban, New York English and so on. I had that kind of accent, and I never...and I dressed down in the period of that, and style of that time, for young people.

So when I got there, I discovered these were White working-class kids who I felt very close to, and that my style appealed to them also and so on. So it seemed like a very nice match, but I had no idea how to be a teacher, what it meant to be a teacher, a nontraditional teacher, because I'd only seen traditional teachers. So the first year, I taught like I was taught, and the students were very patient with me and they were very good natured. And they put up with me, because I was friendly, I didn't talk down to them. But I could tell that this was not working. So just on my own, I began to ask myself really, what's going on here? I tell you what I did, I asked myself this, "All right, you're Ira Shor. You have a radical consciousness, that you are questioning the status quo, and you have been marching in various protests and mass movements and so on. So why did you grow up in the working-class as a White person, a White boy, who became this, like that, and these other students that you're now teaching, who are also working class, this doesn't interest them or it doesn't seem important to them?"

I began to study my own development, what mattered to...how I became interested in questioning the status of quo and radical politics. It occurred to me, that my development would not be that helpful. So, I sort of went down a road that didn't lead me there. Because, see, I was like...I was academically inclined, I was like a scholastic star in the working-class schools I went to. I was always put at the top of the class. I always figured out things right away. I was very good at reading, very good at writing, very good at math. And then I was put into special progress classes. And then I went to the Bronx High School of Science, which was the most elite at that time. And then I went to an elite university, and I left behind all my friends in the White working-class who didn't get chosen to be among the top two or three percent. Certain number of

kids in the working-class are selected upward, to move into the upper ranks where the elite kids dominate, and then we have to adjust. As working-class kids, we have to adjust our cultural dissonance, our cultural difference with our new peers, who all come from higher class backgrounds than we do, but we've been placed there because we did very well. We were the few percent who did very well.

I thought, this is not really what my students at Staten Island Community College, who were the C students in high school and couldn't stand school, and intellectual life just seemed boring and pointless to them. I had to find something else than this. My own story was not really...couldn't be repeated, and it shouldn't be. Okay, so then I decided, I had to study the students very carefully, to get to know them as intimately as possible. I lived in their neighborhoods and I played basketball with them in the parks, and I ate in their bakeries and in their diners, and so on and so on. And hung out with them and this and that. I began to become familiar with the way they spoke and what mattered to them and their culture.

And somehow, I intuited, that I had to make them the subject matter of the writing class. Eventually I told myself, the most important question in critical pedagogy is, where does subject matter come from and what do we do with it? So I had to find the subject matter sourced in the student's lives, in their conditions, in their culture, in their ways of speaking, in the problems that they dealt with, in the contradictions of their own everyday lives. In their aspirations, in what they purchased, how they ate, how they dressed, how they dated, what their sexual lives were like, and so on and so on. And I had to represent that to them as questions and material for writing and reading and studying and so on. So somehow, I intuited that, that was important.

And of course, at the same time, I realized I had been very poorly educated, even though I had a PhD in English and had already started publishing literary papers in journals. That I had to start all over again and reeducate myself with an informal doctorate. This new doctorate was going to be in curriculum and teaching in cognitive development. It was going to be an educational policy, and it was going to be in the history of mass education. That I had to understand the institutional framework in which we were all encapsulated, that we were all in, what I later discovered, we'd call it discipline. A disciplinary apparatus called mass educational, formal education, which he and Bourdieu and some other theorists, identified as one of the very key apparatus for what we now call, the formation of human subjects.

That human subjects and the different...the inequalities, the hierarchies, the differences and so on, these were constructed through mechanisms and society. Foucault called them "disciplines," and Bourdieu called them "habitus," and so on and so on. I hadn't read them all then, but I intuited that I had to study the institutions through which we were being processed, and in which we were now acting. So then I began my own study of all those fields that I just mentioned, that had to do with cognitive development, educational policy and history. And while I was doing that, what I began to write about, changed how I taught a writing class to make it critical.

What I learned about why mass higher education, or the community college movement means, and why these students are all segregated into lower funded, lesser campuses than the students who come from higher income homes and so on. So while I'm doing that, and experimenting with other ways, a colleague of mine said, "There's this guy in Brazil who writes about what

you're trying. You should meet him." So I said, "Who is he?" So he said, "It's Paulo Freire." I said, "Okay." In those early years, in the early 70s, I got Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and another book, and I started reading. Eventually, I realized that we were moving in the same direction. We were really on the same page, and he was giving theoretical background and concepts to this approach.

And then through him, I went to study Dewey in greater depth, because Paulo Freire acknowledged that he stood on John Dewey's shoulders, because Dewey called...told us that children arrive at school ferociously curious about learning and knowledge, and wanting to find out about the world and so on. And tell me, teach me. And by the time they reach high school, they're completely bored and alienated, and the teacher has to use every kind of spectacular device to try to attract their attention. This is what Dewey said 100 years ago. Dewey said, well, this has to do with the fact that schools, the school curriculum doesn't include, what he called, "vital interests." That's his language. That meant, the concerns of everyday life, what mattered to the students.

And Paulo Freire called them "generative themes," that he discovered in his study of the everyday lives of the working-class students that he taught for. I found the language and the frameworks for continuing to develop what I had in mind. But really, what we're trying to do, is to stop being the kind of people we're being created into, and to become some other kinds of people who question the status quo and take our place in making policy. And not being objects of other people's powers or authority or policies, but making our own. And this was very in line with what Paulo Freire understood as the critical pedagogy or critical literacy, or why our nontraditional teaching has to be different than the standard model.

But look, there's something else here. Eventually, I realized that there is an ethical component to all this. There's a moral dimension or moral imperative that educators especially, have to face. Their moral imperative is that, if we don't question the status quo, then we are simply funneling all of our students into the status quo, uncritically, and asking them to accommodate to the way things are. And presenting the way things are, as if everything is okay. And that this vast amount of time we called education, or formal education and mass education, year after year, and thousands of hours, then somehow it's not involved with the nature of society, or the justice or the cruelty, or the inequality or the destruction of the earth, or racism or gender inequality. All these things that we live with, that somehow, they're exclude from the subject matters and the teaching materials of school. And that as long as we accepted that, then we were now implicated in maintaining an unequal, cruel, and inhumane status quo.

And that was immoral and unethical for a professional educator to make that choice. That what's eventually came to my attention, that it became absolutely necessary to teach against the status quo, precisely because the status quo was unjust, unfair, toxic to the planet earth and to the human beings in it, and adjusting the vast majority of society into accepting inequality. And what Foucault later discovered, what Foucault thought he would call it, docile bodies. Or that we were being trained for docility, or to be compliant with the way things are. I can't consider myself an ethical professional educator, unless I question the status quo and encourage the students to do the same.

SW: You're talking about how you felt this ethical responsibility as an educator to question the status quo, and how critical pedagogy provided this framework to do so. It offered an opportunity for you to challenge societal norms, systems, structures. You were teaching at a community college. You mentioned this moment when you realized you had to get to know students and their interests, their lives, their worlds. So you did that. How were students taking up this approach to teaching? How were they experiencing this paradigm shift, this move to critical pedagogy?

IS: Yes. Students expect to be lectured and to be dominated by teacher talk during their time in formal education. And Paulo Freire called this “banking pedagogy,” where the teacher is transferring a lot of information and so on. So a traditional classroom encourages alienation and passivity in the mass student who is just treated as an object and so on. So the fact that I believe all these things, that racism is bad or that the planet must be rescued, and the economic inequality is stealing our livelihood...I can't say those things, and I don't say those things in the classroom, and I never make a speech in the classroom. I've taught for 48 years now, and I just don't lecture in the classroom. My job, what I discovered I had to do, was pose problems based in the everyday lives of the students, and that those problems had to be posed legibly.

They had to be readable. Legible means readable. Understandable to the students. And that I certainly could not lecture them, because they're always...students in community colleges and working-class students and lower middle-class students, are always presented with teachers who are socially higher than them, better than them. That we're better educated, we're better spoken, we don't make grammatical errors, we have proper hygiene, we come to class properly dressed and so on. So automatically, our very bodies and voices are reproached to the non-elite style or position of the students that we teach. So we have to be very sensitive to how we use our voices and bodies in the classroom.

So I learned that the first year I was teaching, I was doing a lot of talking and presenting all kinds of grammatical exercises, and this and that. I learned that I had to...that I had to change the register of my voice. My voice had to become interrogative and not declarative. That the declarative voice is constantly providing commentary and material to be listened to and to be memorized. That's like the lecture voice, the declarative voice. I had to adopt a very interrogative posture. I was always posing questions, posing problems, asking students leading questions, so as draw out any comments they made. That the more they spoke in the classroom, the more they were engaging the material, and the more their expressions taught me how they thought about this material and themselves in the world. That I had to hear from them, language use, that taught me how to speak back to them, using their words, so as to draw their words and their concerns out further.

That's the dialogic process. And then of course, when I studied Paulo Freire, I discovered that dialogue was a very powerful feature of his approach, as well as the generative scene that's based in student culture. So first, I had to learn that I couldn't lecture about any of the ideologies or politics that I believed in. The second thing I learned, is that I had to develop for these students, activities that engaged them, and that drew them into reading and writing and thinking and debating. So then I needed very compelling themes or issues or materials, that would be very legible to them, but also that would provoke them into discussion and inquiry and so on. I began

to try to combine two things in this method, and you can see this in the first book that I published, called *Critical Teaching in Everyday Life* that I wrote 40 years ago, where I'm constantly preoccupied with, what kind of problems am I posing?

How do they relate to the everyday lives of the students? And how legible is this problem that I posed to the students understanding, so they can respond back? And you'll see that I put all kinds of frameworks and methods in it, for the students to work through in responding. So I understand this is a very different way of teacher training, teacher education, or a professional approach. That I'm questioning the students and making their discourse crucial to the success of the class, but never leaving their discourse alone. I have to say that. I'm not just endorsing the way they talk, speak, write, read, or see the world, or interact with the world. I want to draw out that circumstance and put it on the table for all of us to examine and question.

See, this is the critical part of it. Because we are all...because we're all subjects, formed intensely inside the disciplinary apparatus of the status quo, whether that's mass education, mass media, mass consumerism, everyday life, the family life, all these institutions intensely form us and teach us what is good, what is possible, and what exists in the world. And they sort of restrict our imaginations of how to understand what's possible in human life and so on, and what's good in human life. So because we're all intensely formed, if we begin a dialogic classroom instead of a lecture classroom, and learn enough about the actual students in front of us, to put their conditions and their everyday lives into a problem, pose it as a problem, then the next thing is that we...our job is not to endorse it or leave it alone and say, "Oh, that's wonderful, now that you've said it."

This is not sort of like an antiquarian search for the authentic productions of everyday life. That we're not going on a search for what people do in every day of their life alone. Once we search that out, we now have to ask folks to join us now in a dialogic inquiry about, what does this mean? How did it come to be? And how do we understand what it does for us and to us? And why do we persist in doing it this way? Now, that's a very delicate and challenging process for a teacher to engage. But that's how I understand what critical literacy means, that we draw out from students, the materials, and then when it's on the table and understandable to them and meaningful to them, then we have to lead a questioning process to move on to deeper levels of inquiry.

Now, here's the next stage. In those deeper levels of inquiry, my job is to now introduce text. I make a distinction between two kinds of texts. The official text, and the unofficial text. When I pose problems that are legible to students, and they agree to enter into an inquiry or a dialogue with me about it, everything they write and say about it, I consider that the unofficial text, because it's not published, it's not printed, it's not endorsed by anybody and so on. These are their spontaneous utterances about whatever we're saying. So my job first, is to bring out, to produce a rich utterance of unofficial texts from the students. Now, once those unofficial texts are out on the thing, my speech pattern, I speak the official text. I speak it, because I've been trained in the university. I've been professionalized and I have a doctorate, so my I speech habits are different than theirs.

So when I start speaking about it, I immediately begin as sort of an encounter between the unofficial text spoken by the students, and the official text in the linguistic formality of the teacher's voice. I have to do two things. First, I have to now create an idiom, what I call the "third idiom," which I wrote about in my books. The third idiom, that is even though I'm going to speak in a higher status discourse than the students offer, I have to infuse into my discourse, my utterances, common expressions and common ways of speaking that make my speech habit as the teacher, not detached from theirs, but somehow bleeding into or crossing the border into theirs. What I have to model for them, is now to ask them, who speak everyday dialects and the unofficial discourse, to adapt some of the formal mechanisms, the formal discourse that I use and some of the formal concepts I suggest, and to try to encourage them also to move towards that third idiom, where we're trying to invent a different discourse than both of us brought to class.

Now, if that succeeds, then we're beginning to reinvent our own literacy, our own literate habits. Now look, the formal, the official text is not only carried by the quality of my discourse because I speak high status English or high-status discourse, it's also carried by two things. The subject matter, when I talk about it and how I talk about it. And secondly, printed matter outside the spoken exchanges that we engage in. So my other task, is now to search appropriate printed matter, to engage or introduce into the dialogue, that enhances the discussion, but follows the same requirements. That it has to be legible. That it can't be so abstract and conceptual and scholastic, that the students can't make heads or tail of it, or the struggle to penetrate it is too great, at that level of the development.

I have to find mass media sources that are attempting to engage these topics that the students live with, and that are bringing up, but engage them also, by bringing in more theoretical material, more background sources, more conceptual frameworks. And to try to gradually introduce that, so that there's now a textural component to the discursive one, to the spoken one. And that's the next...when I say to you, how can we move towards a deeper dialogic inquiry? That's what I mean.

SW: In A Pedagogy for Liberation with Paulo Freire, Freire asks you to talk more about how you motivate students. You say, "The problem of motivation hangs over schools like a rain cloud." You talk about curriculum, overcrowded rooms, economic labor conditions, and other constraints that foster a lack of motivation. Then you mention pedagogical strategies that help deconstruct those limitations. For example, you talk about restraining your own voice so that students can talk more, something that you've already shared in this conversation. You also talk about the importance of destabilizing order and structure for a more organic, authentic, liberating learning experience. I have two questions since A Pedagogy for Liberation was published in 1987. 1) I'm curious about your current thoughts on the problems of motivation in education and the classroom, and 2) I'm also interested in what strategies you've adopted or altered to confront the same problems, or perhaps new problems, given our current generation of students.

IS: Right, look, you're absolutely right that times change. And when times change...the formation of the human subjects, in any time, changes. We are now living in different conditions than when I began, almost 50 years ago. So of course, we have to ask, what to do? So look, when I started teaching in 1971 at this community college, there was no tuition, and there was open admissions

at the same time. This was a very radically democratic, joint policy, that was won by massive student protests in 1969 here in New York. So this meant that, at the start of every semester, students did not have to come up with a big tuition check before they could get access. Okay? The second thing, is that their bad high school educations were not held against them. And they were not tested and subordinated into a remedial sub college, as Burton Clark called it in his very famous, early study of community colleges called *The Open Door College*, which came out in 1960.

So you might say that because of the mass movements of that time, that institutions like the one I was at, was compelled to be a much more friendlier place to non-elite students than typical. Then the status quo typically arranged, which meant, you don't have to pay us. You don't have to come up with a big check, and we're not going to hold your high school grades against you. We're going to start...this is like a fresh start and so on. Okay, that's good. So since that time, there was a war that we fought in the 1970s to try to defend open admissions and free tuition. And we lost that war, and that was an historic defeat. The status quo insisted on forcing our working-class students to pay tuition for their undergraduate degrees.

It forced them into a very tracked curriculum. In higher education, that is. They were not allowed...the C students in high school in New York were no longer allowed to register for the senior colleges in the community system. They were forced to go to the community colleges. And at the community colleges, they now had to face a battery of very oppressive tests in reading, writing, and math, that grew into a vast remedial empire that produced an enormous amount of failure. Eventually, they took remedial course after remedial course, for no credit, for which they had to pay tuition, and their progress towards the degree was tremendously obstructed. This became the working-class experience of City University after 1976. So you see, I started at an open admissions, free tuition university, and the students who came in, were much more relaxed and open or friendly or whatever. They weren't under attack and so on.

I'm fumbling around to figure out how...what does a critical teacher do to make a difference? They were patient with it and they put up with it, and I was very grateful. But decade by decade after that, the vocational and financial anxiety of the students, accelerated. And that was a direct result of what we call neoliberalism, which I'm sure you've heard the word. That now, everything had to have a bottom line and had to be organized into a revenue stream. The public sector became looted. The public parks, the public housing, the public hospitals, the public schools, the public universities, anything in the public sector was now going to be looted over the next 40 years, from the late 70s to today, and the assets and the revenue...the budget needed to maintain the public sector, were going to be drained and transferred to the private sector.

This was an enormous attack on the needs of the students. And in addition, their wages were frozen, while the cost of living kept increasing. The minimum wages have not gone up in 40 years, and so on and so on. So look, how could all these drastic neoliberal attacks on the majority of America, not have an effect on the classrooms, where we all met? So decade by decade, it began to undermine the...how should I put it? The openness of students to experiment. When you get involved in experiments, you have to be willing to put up with dead ends. Some things just don't work out, and that you have to be patient with it and tolerate it, and then try something else. So when you're paying so much tuition for a course, and you have so much struggle getting into

the course because the courses were cut, it was harder to get access to courses, classes became larger, so the teachers were dealing with more people at once.

Then also, a majority of the courses became taught by the contingent labor we called adjuncts, who were famously known as the freeway flyers, running from campus to campus, to try to earn a living, despite their PhDs. So look, the conditions degenerated terribly. Now, first thing I want to say, is that this is not properly a pedagogical problem. Now, if you ask me, well, what's the pedagogy that solves that? That is the wrong first question to ask. The first question to ask is, how do we gain the political power to push back against neoliberalism in school and society?

This is a systemic problem of a society being looted by the minority, the 1% who have captured government, the industry, and the mass media. And control also the school system and are able to transfer the wealth we need to operate in the public sector, to them in the private sector. This is a political problem of power, and that we must organize to get power in society, so as to stop this looting and this raiding of our national wealth and of our standards of living. And that's the first question. That means outside the classroom, is where you fight and gain the power to teach while in the classroom. Here's what I often say to folks, the classroom cannot be managed from the outside, and the classroom cannot be defended from the inside. That is the essential political problem of this moment.

That is, there is tremendous management, outside management of the classroom, via imposed technology and required textbooks and standardized testing. All of this comes from outside the classroom, and trying to manage what the educator and the students are doing inside the classroom. And that's a recipe for a disastrous failure of schooling. The second thing, is that if we want to rescue the classroom and actually find a learning process that's critical and student centered, we can't do that in the classroom. We have to leave the classroom and organize ourselves into mass movements that fight back against the authorities in the private and public sector, who are imposing these Draconian conditions on us. So the first thing, is to recognize the terrible conditions we work under now, and that are in many different sectors, including education, that it's not appropriately, firstly, a pedagogical problem.

Okay, so first thing I'm doing, I have joined, in the last 40 years, since all these things from above have been burdening us, I have joined every movement and political organization that I think is trying to deal with it, to solve it in society. And I still do. I've been a member of the Green Party, I've been supporting Bernie Sanders through two election cycles. I also support other organizations, and so on. I think I have to go out of the classroom and I have to become an activist, a citizen activist in society, if I'm going to rescue civic life from destruction. But look, I'm also a teacher, so I have to go to the classroom and I have to ask myself, okay, so what are we going to do? So look, I've been remodeling my critical pedagogy, decade by decade. I've been trying the negotiated curriculum that I wrote about, when students have power, in terms of doing democratic contracting of the grading system.

But I've also begun trying to focus on the vocational terrorism that burdens so many students. That they're so...that everything they need costs so much. And every time they work, they're paid so little. Especially around rent, and so many of them have trouble finding jobs and so on. So I've started to see...I study statistics a lot, and databases. I'm constantly studying databases

and statistics to try to understand the mathematics. The math, the quantitative look of these last 40 years. Okay? Now, I bring...then I decide, how can I integrate a data map, a statistical chart, into a generative discussion? So you see, when I go to the official text, I bring in not only mass meeting materials that help explain why women are paid so much less than men, or why black families have only one 10th the wealth of white families. These are statistics of data, but they're also stories I can bring in, in written texts, but also try now to bring in the quantitative version of it.

So what I'm doing, is I'm trying to test what I call...an approach called stories in the numbers. That is, when we look at a data chart that tells us, starting in the late seventies, productivity or the wealth generated by our society, began to be drastically captured by the 1%, while the rest of us remained flat. Can we read a data chart, which is quantitative and mathematical, can we now write a text that tells, textually, the story of what that's telling us? So that's what I've been experimenting in, because of the overwhelming vocational anxiety and anger that students bring to class, that I have to face. The money problems that they live with. So that's what I want to sort of write about now, is how that looks.

SW: When you mention financial anxiety and financial burdens, I immediately thought of student loans, student debt. And this feeling of stagnation, of never saving, of constantly owing, is a burden that student loans have caused me, and honestly, my family. The sheer quantity of student loan debt that has amassed in just two decades is completely unfathomable. You and I know, Ira, student loans affect a specific kind of student. Students that don't have the financial resources—it doesn't affect that 1%. Going back to what you said earlier, I think we do have an ethical responsibility as educators to have these conversations with students in our classes.

IS: Right. It's absolutely crucial. And I make this distinction, that this neoliberal attack on the majority, is not primarily...not, first of all, a pedagogical problem. That it's a political problem of power in society, that we can only solve by leaving the classroom. But then we are also classroom teachers, and we need ways of teaching, so that we teach in favor of our students who are suffering through this. So look, 40 to 50 years ago, when I began, it was common for...I would look up, and a student would be asleep. Okay? I would wake them up. And sometimes they'd tell me they haven't eaten yet today, so I said, "Why not?" She says, "I'm broke." Okay?

So in those days, I would make small loans to students for lunch. Okay? And it was within my resources, I had enough money to give lunch money to students. Also, some students would come to me and say that they're broke. They don't have enough money to get back across the bridge for the tolls. So I would lend them money for that. Okay? All right. It is so far beyond me now. Do you understand the difference? I want to tell you one other thing. Okay? Here's what I do. It's Christmas time, and in the working class and the low middle class there's a lot of seasonal hiring, say from November, through New Year. Late November, Thanksgiving to New Year, the amount of business done is enormous. It's equal to the rest of the year in this six weeks. So companies are required to suddenly, greatly increase their staffs, because they can't handle the flow.

So every time I see a company advertising part-time work, starting around Thanksgiving time, and they're often \$14 an hour or \$11 an hour, I bring all these ads. I pull them off the board, I

bring them all to class, I announce them at the start of class. Because I want to begin with an address of their primary problem, which is earning a living. And I tell people, UPS is hiring here, and the post office is hiring here, and Macy's is hiring there, and so on and so on. Here's the second thing I do. That I'm constantly looking to see where labor markets are very short on labor. When there's a surplus of labor, wages go down. When there's a shortage of labor, wages go up.

I bring in articles, for example, there's a shortage of long-distance truck drivers. And there's a shortage of energy workers out in Nebraska, and so on and so on. So I'll say, look, you could leave New York today and you could be making \$30 an hour here, or there. I want them to...because I follow the news intensely, every day. I read the New York Times from cover to cover, every day. I'm a well-informed mediator to, basically, lesser informed students who don't pay attention to these things the way I do. So another responsibility I have, is I announce jobs. And then it came up, and it turned out that, in New York city, there're about 300,000 internet workers in New York. High tech, but New York has about three and a half million folks working, and about 10% are doing something with tech.

And of those 300,000, half of them do not have college degrees. And they're earning \$60-70,000 a year, because high tech pays so much, and there's a shortage of labor in this. I bring the articles to class and I say, "Look, some of you already have tech skills. You know tech better than I do. And I want you to know that you could go into Manhattan, and that there are tech jobs. They're paying 60k a year, and you don't need a college degree." I bring that in. And then also, there's...what do they call it? A proprietary college that has a three-month course that will teach you how to code. And at the end, over 90% of their graduates are being placed in jobs, at \$60-80,000 year. So I tell them about too, because I want them to know about these alternatives. And these alternatives directly address the occupationalism forced on every sector of society, by the neoliberal period. That occupationalism said, everything must be connected to the dollar sign, and to work with some kind.

And that occupationalism has created this vocational anxiety. Even though I'm trying to take their side and say, look, there's these jobs here, these jobs there, this is not a solution. This is not an answer to the problem. This is only a band-aid, that some of them may get some temporary help. But it also announces the teacher, as on their side. That I'm now making a choice about how I understand us in the world, and that I'm taking seriously, their condition. And secondly, that in no way, does this authorize me to abandon the power struggle outside the classroom, to change all these awful conditions.

SW: Ira, let's talk about assessment and how you talk with students about grades, and how you reconstruct assessment through critical pedagogy. And when students have power, negotiating authority in a critical pedagogy, which was published in 1996, you talk about the importance of negotiation, and write about how course contracts help democratize learning. So you invite students to negotiate and co-direct writing assessment with you. What have you learned the most, about this process of negotiating assessment with students?

IS: In my classrooms, first, we begin to negotiate what A, B or C. That's the starting point. But also, on individual assignments, first thing I announce, is that anything handed in on time, can be rewritten for a higher grade, but I need it back in a week. Because I tell them, "I can't have 20 or

30 students show up with a suitcase of each, of rewrites on the last day, last class of the semester.” I said, “I couldn't possibly read them all and so on.” So I ask them...I tell them, if I put a grade on the paper, like a B plus, I just don't put the grade. But I say, “If you want to rewrite for an A, here's things to look for.” So each paper, I read carefully, and I give them guidance or direction about how I understand this to become an A paper.

Now, a whole bunch of students decide to rewrite for higher grade, and I tell them, “The highest grade you get on any paper, it counts.” So this also seems fair and useful to students. There are some students that will never rewrite, that just simply don't have the time or the interest to do it. There are some students who sometimes rewrite a paper five times and so on. So I'm constantly having an individual, intensive tutorial with students. In addition to this group process, there's an individual tutorial, and private mentoring that I have about their writing and their analysis. So, I think that matters. I'm obliged to give grades. I would rather not give grades, but I'm required to give grades, by the institution. And so inside that requirement, I tell students that, “Any grade can be rewritten for a higher grade, and you can come...” Also, I have office hours, and I invite students to come, to tutor. That I will privately tutor them about rewriting the paper.

I have to be available, and nudge students into the rewrites. And we all know, as writing teachers, that revision and rewriting are extremely important. That the first draft is very rough, the second draft's rough, and so on. All of us who write, do multiple, multiple drafts. We know that. This is not realistic to demand a lot of extra drafts from students, because not all of them want to become writers, and writing is just not that crucial to all of them. But in terms of becoming more critical and literate, it's not just linguistic form that the rewrite focuses on. For example, I'll say, “Look, you wrote four pages all in one paragraph, and there's no paragraphing.” So I said, “Look at this and decide, where do the paragraphs start and end in this? And then hand in for a higher grade.”

I'll say, “Also, this sentence goes on for 12 lines. So I can't follow the 12 lines, so where did...” Might give that kind of advice. So that's formal linguistic or grammatical advice. That's one side of the rewrite. The other side of the rewrite, “What are you saying? And how are you looking into things? What is the level of inquiry? So you said that this is...you made this claim over here. Where's the evidence? And here, you provide 10 lines of evidence, and then you never offer any claim about it.” So I'm also speaking about what's known as the rhetorical or argumentative side. And at the end, what's the takeaway that you want me to remember most? And so on and so on. I'm giving grammatical advice, linguistic advice, rhetorical advice, and how to think it through, as well as to write it.

So this is the individual tutorial that occurs when I write notes on a paper to a student, inviting them to write for a higher grade. Or they come to my office for a private tutoring session. When I read Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* 40 years ago, and when I read Mike Rose, it seemed to me, that there's a limit to what size writing classes can do. That writing was a very, very tutorial undertaking. And you'll notice that Mike, in his book, the famous book he published in 1989, that he is actually doing a lot of individual tutorials with his vets and other students, and advising them about how to craft whatever they're working on. Now Mike also reports in that book that that was his most important education. He had mentors in high school and college who did that for him.

So there's a subtext here, that really, we may be misunderstanding completely the nature of writing instruction. That writing instruction may require very intimate tutorials, where we face exactly a writing task and a writing text, and a context or a contingency for, what are you...who are you writing this for? What are you writing this for? And then we work on the text that's being produced. That's not a class. That's not a class lesson. That's not a syllabus. That's an individual tutorial, focused on an individual product. And that's good. And that's part of our writing teacher responsibility. Then we have to figure out, well, what are classes? What are group sessions good for? What can you learn in the group sessions? So then we have to figure out, what can all of us benefit from studying?

Not just these three, because they can't figure out paragraphing. The other twenty have paragraphing down. Okay? These six can't figure out sentence boundaries. The other fifteen, no sentence boundaries. Okay? So how can we teach any of these linguistic or grammatical items, if a whole part of the class already has some of it, and a whole part of the class doesn't have it. And yet, we're going to teach it simultaneously to the whole class. It's not sensible, it's not productive. So then, what I focus on as a critical teacher, is the importance of the tutorial and the individual mentoring of students. And I ask myself, in the classroom setting, what will be of benefit to everybody? And so on.

SW: Ira, I would love to end our conversation by you talking about and reflecting on your relationship with Paulo Freire. You mentioned earlier how you learned about this Brazilian educator who was thinking along the same lines as you in the late 1960s, 1970s. Maybe you could spend some time here talking about how that friendship came to be and how much that friendship meant to you.

IS: Paulo Freire contacted me. I did not contact him. I suddenly got a letter in Manhattan, where I was living in the early eighties, and it was an aerogram. You know those thin blue pages? And I looked at the return address, and it said, Paulo Freire, Brazil. And I thought, oh my God, why is he writing me? I opened the aerogram, in the early 80s, and he said that he got a copy of my first book, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, and he wanted to thank me for all the beautiful words. And it was just wonderful. It seems that...Paulo Freire's youngest son went to college in Ann Arbor. I had gone to Ann Arbor sometime, a few times, to talk about...because they had a new program called Doctor of Arts, and they were community college writing teachers.

And when my first book came out, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, they said to their professor, "This is the only book that talks about what we're living with." They said, "You got to...we got to meet this guy." So I was invited out there, and I spent a week or so with them. And one of the people there, apparently gave Paulo a copy of that book, which Paulo took back to Brazil and he read. Then he wrote me a letter about the book, which I was amazed and so on. So then a few months later, I got a phone call, and Paulo Freire was calling me from Stanford where he was doing a seminar. He wanted me to fly out to California and join him in doing the seminar.

So at that time, I was writing a new book. I had a fellowship. I finally got some support to write a book that became *Culture Wars* where I was studying educational policy, and what I named the conservative restoration, or how the authorities turned the tables on the experiments or the

movements of the 1960s. That came out in 1986. I was writing that book, and I told him I have to finish this before classes start because here's another thing. When you teach in the low rent districts of the academy, it's very hard to get free time to be a scholar. I taught large classes and large class loads, and the students required a lot of individual tutoring and so on, which meant that when the semesters began, my attention was taken up, just being a teacher. I had to use summers and the January break, intensively, to study and write the books that I wrote.

So I told him, "I had to finish this book before classes began in September." So then he said to me, well, he is going to be in Amherst the following February, in residence there, in the school of education, would I come up and work with him there? So I said, "Yes." Because Amherst was very close to New York, I didn't have to fly Amherst to Massachusetts. So next February, I came up there and met him, and he was wonderful. He was so friendly and affectionate and welcoming. He embraced me, and just brought me into his life. And asked me to sit with him when he did sessions, very large sessions in front of students at Amherst, and brought me on stage with him. And I was very overwhelmed by it because he introduced me to the audience as his son.

And I thought, oh my God, am I going to recover from this? This is so overwhelming. I made a few trips up there, made three trips up there to spend time with him. And the last trip, I proposed that we write a book together. And I said that, "I travel around the country, and teachers interested in critical pedagogy, keep asking the same questions, from place to place." I said, "Why don't we write a book about these questions?" So he said, "Let's start tomorrow." He said to me, "We start tomorrow." So I went back to the hotel room that night, and I wrote out by hand the questions that keep showing up. And I brought it to him the next day, and then he said, "Yes, we do the book. But we do a dialogue book." And he named it, a talking book. He gave it its name.

And he said, "You and I will talk in dialogue, on each of these questions." So that's the genesis of *A Pedagogy for Liberation*. I spent the next two years traveling wherever he was, and we kept producing the next draft, four or five drafts of this book. And each chapter, you will see, the title of each chapter is a question, a main question that teachers had been asking me, as I travel around America. And then we'd dialog on that question. I spent a lot of time with him and I sat in on many, many of his seminars, and I paid careful attention to how he answered questions. How he conceived of, what lawyers call the gravamen, or the heart. The problem of each question that came up, about motivation and about everyday life, and about reading and writing and what was their importance.

And I was very closely attending to how framed his responses. I noticed that he never lectured. That he wanted all the audiences to raise the questions that pushed the meeting forward. And we went to a lot of dinners. He loved to eat, and we drank his favorite wine and he told funny stories and tragic stories from his life. So we did a lot of laughing and also a lot of sadness, because of when he was separated from his family. He was arrested. He was forced to travel without a passport. So there were a lot of troubles, and there was also a lot of wonderful times and all the things. And then he told me that, he said, "You must travel as much as you can." Because he thought that traveling...and he said, "You must talk with as many people as possible." Because all of us get sort of locked into a very provincial life, or provincial way of seeing the world,

especially if you're an American and in charge of the whole world, and more powerful and rich than anybody, as a country.

And you have to hear how other people talk and live, and what matters to them, and listen to that. He always said that it's very hard to talk with anyone until you have listened to them for a long time, and they've told you how they see the world. So it was wonderful. And we did a 70th anniversary celebration for him in 1991 at the New School in New York. We had a celebration conference. I began producing more books along the way. And then I met him. He would call me whenever he came to the States, and talk, or this or that. He came to New York and was on route to Harvard, and he called me, and we met in downtown Manhattan for lunch. And he did not look well to me.

He looked tired, and I was worried about him. So I said, "Look." I told him that...this was 20 years ago when he died in 1997. I said, "I'm working with a group of writing teachers in the CCCCs." And this is when we started the working class culture group, in the CCCCs. It was just a wonderful group of folks. And I said, "We're trying to figure out how to raise the question of class, and social class, and put it more into circulation in our teaching and in the field and so on." And I said, "And these folks, some of these folks, they would like to come to Harvard to meet you, when you're there in the fall." So he said, "Yes, yes, absolutely." So he said I should bring them to Harvard.

So we had lunch and we hugged, and we made a date, that in the fall, I would bring this group of folks to Harvard with me, and so on. And then Paulo died. He died May 2nd, 1977. Word spread over the internet in a hurry, and it was just terrible. We were very sad. I was very sad. Cried a lot. Used to cry in airplane bathrooms when I was traveling on the road, suddenly I would burst into tears without warning. I tried to rush into the bathroom and lock the door, so I didn't create too much of a scene on the airplanes as I traveled around.

So he had very deep impact on many of us, and especially in my way of thinking about how important it is to work outside the classroom. He developed literacy methods that you could use class by class, and lesson plan by lesson plan. But he understood it was all under the umbrella of political movements, that needed this type of education to fuel their success. And that without this connection to the larger project, he wasn't sure about what a local classroom could accomplish in isolation.

SW: Thanks, Ira. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.