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## CHAPTER FIVE

## FROM URBAN CLASSROOM TO URBAN COMMUNITY

Susan Swan

Founded in the eighteenth century, Pittsburgh began as a set of forts designed to ward off French and Native American populations, and it soon coalesced into a modern city with fur trading and some of America's first glass factories. Early settlers discovered that Pittsburgh was built on mountains containing an endless supply of the raw materials necessary for making steel. From the nineteenth century to the 1980s, Pittsburgh's economy was supported by steel milling and fabrication, with its three rivers providing cheap and easy access to the ports of the east coast and the rapidly expanding Midwest (Lorant). Immigrants, working-class whites, and post-slavery/pre-civil rights blacks flocked to Pittsburgh with varying degrees of success. A thriving working and middle class made Pittsburgh an excellent choice for workers—if they were the "right" gender and ethnicity. As Tony Buba's 1996 film *Lightning Over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy* documents, the mills were host to racism and sexism, problems that did not begin to subside until the rise of unions in the mid-twentieth century. Working-class blacks, women, and Chinese immigrants found themselves locked out of almost all careers in the mills, even if they were highly trained machinists (see also Dickerson). The 1970s and 1980s brought stiff competition from Japanese steel mills that sold their products at extremely low prices. Pittsburgh's mills could not compete, and by the late 1980s only a few remained in operation throughout the city. Those mills that did remain in production held drastically reduced employee rolls. The three rivers were lined with abandoned steel mills, and Pittsburgh soon came to be known as the Rust Belt.

The collapse of the steel industry left Pittsburgh's working-class citizens devastated. Families used to union wages and benefits now struggled to make

ends meet with minimum wage jobs or government aid. The culture of work that used to spell economic success in Pittsburgh now means little in what remains of the city's meager steel industry. The mills are gone, and manual labor has been replaced by professions in technology, medicine, education, and the service industries. A low cost of living and attractive professional wages make Pittsburgh a good choice for many middle-class families. However, the emergence of Pittsburgh's postindustrial economy has barely affected its inner city communities—especially those that are primarily African American. In Pittsburgh's new economy, black workers have been largely left behind. Ralph Bangs reports that in 1999 only one in six young black men from urban Pittsburgh who were looking for work could find it, while nine of ten young white suburban youth (male or female) were able to find work. Further, Pittsburgh's inner city unemployment rate is two to four times higher than the rate of unemployment in its suburbs.

Although much has been written about the changing culture of work in America generally, and Pittsburgh specifically, I believe that historical and critical knowledge gleaned from even more specific intra-urban communities can lead toward activities that promote "social justice"—that is, the pursuit of egalitarian political arrangements through the intersection of education, community services, and the labor movement. Scholars in policy analysis, education, and sociology have struggled to construct a large-scale representation of how our economy has changed over the past several decades (see Datcher-Lourey and Lowry; Holzer, Ihlantfeldt and Sjoquist; Lynch; and Tannock). While this generalized literature is helpful in understanding (and criticizing) our current economic situation, it is not always helpful for those interested in making immediate interventions in the lives of specific people in specific places. As scholars struggle to give us the big picture, the voices of actual people fail to come through. It is my belief that this failure is a loss to the practice and real possibilities of social justice.

What I have found is that speaking with community members about work issues uncovers new and vital information about Pittsburgh's urban employment problems. My own research into Pittsburgh's food service industry examines what community expertise can add to situated problem analyses. Scott Goodrich and I have conducted several critical incident interviews (see Flanagan) in which local Pittsburgh food service workers were asked to recount instances of problems and successes from their own experience. The preliminary results of these interviews confirm that situated knowledge is crucial to solving problems. For example, the food service workers who spoke with me complained about missing their buses when management asked them to stay past their shift. Buses only run on half-hour intervals in Pittsburgh, and all stops are outside and unprotected. This data points to both a job-specific problem of miscommunication and a Pittsburgh-specific problem of when and where bus pickups happen.

Because I believe that we should teach what we know, I decided to base my own freshman composition course on local employment issues, culminating in an extended project on Pittsburgh's food service industry. Although at first glance the course seems unlike a typical composition class, I believe that the content and practice of the course support a growth in the skills of argument and interpretation, as well as a commitment to critical thinking and socially just rhetorical practices.

#### WRITING ABOUT WORK IN PITTSBURGH

Through exploratory and critical writing, this composition course helps students understand the culture of work in specific Pittsburgh communities; it also teaches students to construct rhetorical documents that have at least the possibility of improving working conditions at a particular Pittsburgh workplace. I derive the pedagogical philosophy for the course from three related disciplines: progressive education, cultural studies, and sociocognitive theories of learning. These disciplines, and my own pedagogical methods, encourage active learning through experience-based and student-centered practices, acknowledge the importance of context to the process of cognition, and promote social change through specific methods of analysis and intervention (such as Paulo Freire's generative terms and Stuart Hall's method of articulation). In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss each major activity that students complete for the course, starting chronologically from the beginning of the semester.

#### *Work Autobiography*

On the first day of class, I ask my students to write a short essay about their own work histories. The assignment is due the next day, when each student summarizes his or her working life while I make a "map" of our class history on the board. This work autobiography centers the course curriculum in the students' own experience, validating them as writers who already have expertise. In this way, student experience becomes the curricular melting pot for the course—I cannot teach about work, or its culture and rhetoric, until I know how we as a class represent it, how we know it, what our attitudes are toward it, and how we define it.

Even though this composition class is centered on Pittsburgh's employment environment, the connection between personal experience and culture, and the changing nature of the American economy, few of these general issues are addressed at the beginning of the class. Instead, working from students' own experiences, we slowly relate their own knowledge (life experiences, connections to popular culture, class readings, and the experiences of their family and community) to these larger issues and, perhaps, unfamiliar contexts.

Eventually, these issues and contexts become their own. For example, I work Pittsburgh's urban context into the discussion when students discuss the jobs they have held. For most of them, their summer jobs were easy to attain (usually through personal connections). I contrast their experiences with those of black youths in Pittsburgh, who struggle to find and keep even low-paying fast food jobs.

The work autobiography thus offers a platform for critical reflection. I want students to understand how politics, culture, and ethics affect their daily lives and the daily lives of people outside their circle of experience. The first question I always ask after I have mapped out my students' work autobiographies is, "What types of work don't we as a group represent?" This simple question leads to a barrage of answers. Students begin to see many new things as work: religious faith, sports, art, music, parenting, feeding oneself and others, keeping safe in "bad neighborhoods," staying healthy, studying, fulfilling dreams, having fun, and being good sons and daughters (among many other things). This first critical reflection is thus an important part of the process of the course; it places students in the position of being both knowledge producers and knowledge users.

Immediately after completing their work autobiographies, I have students read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This reading takes about two weeks, and students are asked to understand the difficult terms in the book through their own work experiences. For example, I want my students to see Freire's term *limit situations* as something that has happened to them. I also connect these terms and ideas to Pittsburgh's labor problems, relating limit situations to the urban youth I have spoken with who will not even look for jobs because of racist hiring practices and impossible transportation problems. My goal here is to offer my students a method for decoding the experiences of self and others in new ways.

In addition to the generative ideas found in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I also introduce students to Stuart Hall's method of articulation, and we read Jennifer Daryl Slack's article "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies." Articulation is a method of situating reality in its cultural, ideological, historical, political, institutional, physical, gendered, economic, and affective environments. Through the process of articulation, students describe what "links" one cultural artifact to another, what cultural glue binds institutional structures to particular institutional practices; they then explore how those links might be "re-articulated" into more socially just configurations. Students analyze representations of work in television, music, movies, the Web, print advertising, and newspapers. Then students are asked a series of questions. Why does this TV show represent work in this way? What is behind it? Are there particular "links" that are oppressive? How could they be changed (re-articulated) to be more representative, more just, more

educative? Again, I work Pittsburgh's specific history into our discussions and articulations about work and popular culture. For example, when we examine song lyrics about work, I bring in the recording of and lyrics for Billy Joel's "Allentown." The song, which focuses on the closing of a town's steel mills, is an opening for us to discuss Pittsburgh's own lengthy history with steel, how the industry's downfall affected Pittsburgh's residents, and how it still affects Pittsburgh's inner city African American population.

### *Three Generations Work History*

The first long paper I assign my students is a three generations family work history. Students must interview at least one member from three different generations in their families (themselves included) about their working lives. Students ask their family to be as specific as possible regarding each major job they have held. Once the interviews are complete, students analyze them for a theme—family "work traits" (such as farming), gender roles, social class, education, sacrifice, etc. They then must tie this theme to each member of their family in a formal essay. This assignment serves several functions. Many of my middle-class students recognize (for the first time and to their great surprise) that their families were "working class" only one or two generations before. Other students discover in their interviews that their families have dealt with gender discrimination, class discrimination, and the fight for a good education. Students begin to see the struggles of the oppressed as their own, and they begin the process of seeing their parents and grandparents as subjects rather than parent-objects. I have had students whose fathers were union organizers in Pittsburgh steel mills, whose grandfathers were killed in the mills, whose families had to re-create themselves after the industrial base fell, and whose families are still struggling with the lower paying jobs that replaced their union jobs.

### *Workplace Observation*

After the three generations work history assignment, and in preparation for their next essay assignment, students then read selections, including official policy papers, about urban unemployment in Pittsburgh. Students discuss these issues in class by performing skits about such issues as the changing culture of work, low wages, and racism. The second major assignment in the course, the "workplace observation" paper, requires students to travel outside of the university to do research. I ask students to go to an urban service industry worksite (there are many within walking distance of the university) and to observe this site until "something happens." This "something" may be positive or negative, though it is usually negative. They then correlate this observation with the readings from the class and ask themselves if these readings completely explain what they saw.

This assignment respects students as knowledge makers, asking them to think about how the course readings do or do not explain the problems they see. For example, many of my students have focused their observation papers on the behavior of customers in the restaurant industry—very few policy papers talk about the role of this “third party,” instead focusing on the role of workers or managers. Students have made eloquent and convincing arguments, backed by accounts of rude customers, that the behavior of the customer is a large part of the problems inherent in the food service industry. These students argue that customers should be more sensitive to worker issues, that they should, in short, stop objectifying fast food workers as objects without feelings.

This observation paper assignment asks students to construct sensitive arguments from disparate sources of knowledge. Students may negotiate between Freire’s work, class discussions, and their actual observations. The problem most students have with this assignment is where to stop—they find evidence for so many “articulation links” that they have trouble deciding which is the most vital to write about. But perhaps the most important result of this assignment is that students come to realize that real-world problems are complex, conflicting, and impossible to solve with “quick fix” solutions.

#### *Community Problem-Solving Dialogue*

Writers and readers build constructions of knowledge from a toolbox of ideas, experiences, goals, and words. Expert writers have both a diverse toolbox and a strategic arsenal for efficiently negotiating and building effective knowledge constructions, while novice writers may work from limited content and ineffective strategies (Flower). However, although expert writers may begin with a full toolbox, their composing processes often do not fully represent all possible perspectives in any given rhetorical situation, especially in urban contexts. Further, as we have seen from my discussion of the work autobiography assignment, many CMU students, in particular, construct limited representations of work, omitting from their essays the experiences of marginalized populations. Such incomplete representations may result from students: 1) living in privileged academic environments; 2) studying disciplinary discourses that define “expertise” in restricting ways; and 3) leaving their classrooms each day ill-equipped to access marginalized expertise. My goals are that students will leave my composition course with more experiences in their toolbox, better strategies for discovering knowledge on their own, and more effective processes for transforming their experiences and knowledge into coherent and convincing written arguments.

One pedagogical method that I have used to achieve these goals with my students is called “community problem-solving dialogue,” developed at the

Community House on Pittsburgh’s North Side. Community problem-solving dialogue is an intercultural discussion based on three powerful problem-solving strategies for building more elaborated problem analyses and hypotheses: seeking the story behind the story, gaining rival hypotheses, and testing options and outcomes. These three strategies help students acknowledge and benefit from community expertise in situations of intercultural communication and collaboration.

The first strategy in a community problem-solving dialogue is seeking the story behind the story. This strategy has the knowledge-building goal of finding the unspoken narratives behind specific community understandings of a problem. Seeking the story behind the story leads students and community members to reveal the logic, motivations, or implications that are visible from their insider perspectives. For example, one of my students found, through his interactions with workers at a local fast food restaurant, that some of these workers had to take three bus transfers to arrive at their minimum wage jobs. These bus transfers took more than an hour each way, were often delayed up to thirty minutes, and cost about twenty dollars per week. However, even though the workers had no choice in their mode of transportation (a car with insurance and parking fees was out of the question), they noted that many of their past coworkers had been fired for being late because of bus delays. This story behind the story points both to a deeper understanding of how transportation affects Pittsburgh’s urban workers and how a lack of intercultural communication between workers and managers (who may never have taken the bus) may lead to unjust actions.

In gaining rival hypotheses, the second strategy in the process of community problem-solving dialogue, students and community members work and role-play together to see a shared problem from as many points of view as possible. Linda Flower, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins define the rival hypotheses stance as “an attitude toward inquiry” that “addresses itself to genuinely open questions”; as a “strategy for inquiry that not only seeks out other voices, alternative interpretations, and their supporting evidence, but actively generates strong rival hypotheses that challenge and conditionalize favored claims—including one’s own”; and as “a constructive process, attempting to build a ‘better’ conclusion in the midst of strong alternatives” (2). In this sense, rival hypotheses do not always replace an original problem-statement; rather, “rivals” flesh out a problem-context by including viewpoints from as many angles as possible (including angles that are traditionally left out or deemed non-expert). Rival hypotheses, therefore, add breadth to the experience from which students and community members are trying to solve a problem. Students and community members use rival hypotheses to construct more viable problem representations and solutions that take many arenas of expertise into consideration (even if these arenas conflict). For example, if students are

standing why Pittsburgh workers keep quitting fast-food jobs, their under-  
standing will be much more realistic and inclusive if actual fast food workers,  
restaurant managers, policy experts, and customers elaborate the problem-  
analysis from their multiple perspectives.

The final strategy in a community problem-solving dialogue is options  
and outcomes. With this strategy, students and community experts test possi-  
ble problem-solutions by projecting their probable consequences. Because this  
collaborative move seeks to take many possible consequences into considera-  
tion, community expertise is essential. The options and outcomes strategy  
generates more solutions from a larger pool of expertise, increasing the chance  
that a solution will emerge that is viable from multiple community perspec-  
tives. Seen in this light, obtaining multiple perspectives is not just a step  
toward liberal inclusiveness; it is a sensible move toward solutions that work  
for as many people as possible.

#### *Interview*

In the final assignment, students interview actual food service workers about  
problems in the workplace. Students plan their interviews around the com-  
munity problem-solving dialogue strategies, usually taking conclusions from  
their observation papers and asking community members to rival these ideas,  
asking for stories behind the story, and then collaboratively brainstorming  
options and outcomes. This final paper asks students to engage in a discussion  
about why problems exist and how best to solve them. In addition, the stu-  
dents engage in praxis by constructing rhetorical documents meant to solve  
real problems, even in small ways. The final project does not always, therefore,  
result in a typical academic paper. I have had students write letters to the edi-  
tor about customer behavior, construct brochures on how to prepare for col-  
lege while working at the same time, write guides on how to start a new job  
in an unfamiliar career, and publish online guides to problem-solving strate-  
gies for worker/manager disputes. In one case, a student hand-made a board  
game about how to succeed at work—this game took approximately three  
weeks to make, and included art work, instructions, and 250 small cards with  
“success suggestions” on them. Of course, many students also choose to pre-  
pare academic papers; these papers are geared toward the audience of my own  
prospective students, and I keep them as reference materials for future classes.

Students almost always find that their conclusions from the observation  
paper are refined by discussions with actual workers. They learn about Pitts-  
burgh history, current employment practices (and racism) in the city, and par-  
ticular problems that are unique to the university neighborhoods they live in.  
They find problems with Pittsburgh's minimum wage, racist and classist cus-  
tomers and managers, neighborhoods that are poorly connected to trans-

portation and located far from good jobs, and education systems that are not  
training urban youth to work in a technological economy. Students take action  
against these problems by writing letters to policy makers, posting signs about  
customer service, recording and singing songs about work and its difficulties,  
and writing papers, brochures, and pamphlets geared toward helping local  
workers succeed in Pittsburgh's new culture of work.

#### CONCLUSION

In my students' final papers, I find traces of every activity we have done in  
class, even though using course resources is not a requirement of the assign-  
ment. Students talk about Freire, examine Pittsburgh labor history, use the  
articulation method, write about data from the community problem-solving  
dialogue, and see themselves, their families, and the people they interview as  
workers situated in culture and history. By the end of the course, many stu-  
dents are able to construct sophisticated arguments about a subject they knew  
little about only sixteen weeks earlier. Moreover, the lessons about social jus-  
tice seem to stay with many of my students. As I stay in contact with them, I  
know that some work in outreach programs, take additional service learning  
classes, and continue to use the methods of articulation and community prob-  
lem-solving dialogue well past the last day of our class together.

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## PART II

### COMPOSING SPACES