

Keeping Promises:  
Strong Democracy for a  
New Writing Workshop Classroom

by

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## Abstract

The writing workshop is a popular approach to writing instruction in elementary and secondary schools. This is true, in part, because its principles and methods reflect writing as practiced by real authors, but also because its advocates suggest that by using a workshop approach teachers can develop the values of good citizenship in their students and promote democratic communities in their classrooms. This study does not dispute that a workshop approach used to teach writing as a process and balanced with more systematic instruction in written conventions can improve students' writing competencies and increase their confidence in writing performances. However, it finds misleading the second claim that the workshop helps teachers engender citizenship and promote community in preparing students for democracy and suggests that a workshop can prove counterproductive in achieving these objectives. Philosophical and theoretical in nature, this study outlines the concept of "strong democracy" argued by Benjamin Barber and argues for its application in new, strong democratic workshop classrooms that will allow teachers to better prepare students for citizenship and to establish the type of classroom community necessary for achieving this important goal.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Overview

The writing workshop has proven to be one of the more successful educational innovations of the last 30 years, judging by the number of educators that have adopted some form of it and the community of advocates and researchers who have continued to support it (M. M. Taylor, 2000). It has revitalized composition instruction in the schools by drawing on the workshop model of professional writing schools and the studio teaching methods of other art forms (Willinsky, 1990). In a workshop environment, students have the freedom and encouragement to write about what matters to them and in multiple drafts as they move towards a language and a style that best conveys their meaning. Their intentions, whatever they may be, are supported by their peers and the teacher in writing conferences where they receive feedback about the quality and effectiveness of their written expression.

In advocating a workshop model for writing instruction, workshop advocates such as Nancie Atwell (1987, 1998), Lucy Calkins (1991, 1994), and Donald Graves (1983, 1994) make the substantial claims that a workshop approach to teaching writing, in addition to facilitating the acquisition of writing competencies and improving confidence in language use, engenders critical, engaged, and responsible democratic participation in students and promotes democratic classroom communities of difference and respect. For workshop advocates, this emphasis on social and collaborative support for almost any and all student choices provides the occasion for developing critical thinking and independence on the part of students and the possibility for ensuring safe and democratic

classrooms. It is the argument of this study, however, that classroom practice guided by workshop advocates' recommendations to encourage and protect individual decisions and choices in the writing process forestalls the contribution which writing skills might otherwise contribute to the development of citizenship and thereby misses out on an educational opportunity to achieve one of its very goals. An outline of the more specific flaws in workshop advocates' thinking about democracy, informed by a number of critical studies is provided and a revised and updated theory of democracy for workshop classrooms is developed.

This work on a democratic theory for the writing workshop emerges from my four years experience teaching English in a highly diverse and multicultural Vancouver-area high school. For the better part of my career, I have relied on workshop advocates' sense of learning and the principles and practices consistent with a workshop approach in teaching my students to write. Of course, the fact that I only see my students 2-3 times a week and am mandated to teach a full, but flexible language arts curriculum that includes studies in media and literature, visual arts, and drama (Ministry of Education, 1996) means that students are not always engaged in a writing workshop. But when we write, and we do so often, the writing workshop schedule (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1994; Rief, 1992), helps define what we do. In an 80 minute class, for example, I begin with a 10-15 minute mini-lesson. In these mini-lessons I teach writing conventions, model effective revision, share personal insight into writing, bring attention to the specifics of a genre, and highlight the style of a particular author. The 45-50 minutes following the mini-lesson is usually given for students to initiate new writing projects or continue projects started in a previous class. Throughout this writing time students apply

in practice what I have shown them moments before in the mini-lesson and confer with their peers and me about their writing. Near the end of the class, in the last 10-15 minutes, students often meet in self-chosen or teacher-assigned small groups to read out their writing, not so much to get feedback, as this is what the conferences are for, but rather to get a feel for how their writing, when read aloud, affects their listening audience.

For almost every in-class study, whether a study devoted to essays, memoirs, poetry, or short fiction, students select the one or two pieces of writing they are most proud of and then take care and time to shape their writing into final drafts, checking for complete ideas as much as complete sentences. As the year progresses students submit written work to a portfolio for evaluation. Their portfolios, made out of sheets of thin cardboard and decorated by them with text and images cut from magazines, are used for evaluation purposes, but also to keep a record of their growth as writers (Atwell, 1998; Graves & Sunstein, 1992; Rief, 1992). Any given year will see most students submit 10-12 final pieces of writing to their portfolio folders.

In between deadlines for portfolio submissions, however, and inspired by workshop advocates, I try to provide my students with what for many of them is a new perspective on writing. I show them that writing does not have to be so much assembly line work, but that it can also be fun. I am always pushing them to write well and often, and to think about how their thoughts may translate into meaningful words on a page. As an English teacher it is important to me that my students learn to write effectively and have fun while making attempts at doing so, and the workshop approach certainly helps me achieve these objectives in the majority of cases. Teaching writing in this way can be

magical, wonderful work, and with many rewards, as students tap a creative energy, make meaning of their lives, and discover a passion for the written word.

I should be clear at this point to say that I am proud of my students and what they have written and accomplished in my classroom and feel strongly that the lessons I have learned from workshop advocates in the way of nurturing my students as writers has been invaluable to this end. It is not easy (and maybe it never is) to share our words with others, and the admiration we may give to our students can go a long way in helping them think more of themselves, not only as writers, but as people. Adolescence can be a strange and wonderful time in life, but not always, and not for all students, a fact I have grown mindful of in reading the popular workshop literature and in my time teaching. So when students work with one another I ask that they first focus on what they like about what their peer's work and support it, and that second they react to how the ideas are presented, but only at the invitation of the student whose writing is being discussed. I want them to hear what others have to say, what others are writing about, and how it is that others are making decisions about their writing. And, most importantly, I want them to take care when doing so. With this level of support and in such an atmosphere, students have written essays on important societal issues like abortion, the death penalty, and drugs; poetry expressing the hope and promise, but also the angst and sometimes the disappointment associated with first loves; memoirs on the births and deaths of loved ones; and short stories about strange and fantastic adventures to far away places across the universe or even at home in their neighbor's backyard. I want to hold these efforts at expression in hand, as they have been important moments for my students not only to play with language but also to develop a sense of the world and to figure out their place

in it. However, I have to be careful here not to sound too romantic and naïve about the strengths of a workshop approach, because there is also a need to be honest about the limitations to a classroom practice devoted to serving individual interests and protecting students and their writing from a more critical examination.

I know as well as anyone how easy it is to be caught up in the workshop, in the students and their stories, as I have been on numerous occasions. I have taken to heart the advice to “follow children” (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1991, 1994; Graves, 1983, 1994; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987) and have been convinced, as others have been (Apts-Perkins, 1992; Graham, 1999; Smith, 1995; Stetson, 1996), by workshop advocates that supporting every intention can compel my students to think critically and in common with others, gain independence, and contribute to a safe and democratic classroom community. That my use of a workshop approach to teach writing, however, and in the ways suggested by workshop advocates, has not, to this point, led to the sort of critical thinking, independence, and harmonious relationships between students promised in the workshop literature has been a cause for concern and an impetus for this study.

More specifically, my experience at supporting uncritically students’ intentions has not helped them to become more critical in their thinking about the ideas they have tried to convey in their writing, but has made some students self-interested and more insular in their thinking on certain subjects than might have occurred had their writing been challenged in any critical sort of way. Neither have they been more independent in their choice of writing topics and in the construction and expression of their ideas. Instead they have routinely chosen topics that sway little from the status quo and reflect acquiescence to perspectives and attitudes on sex, relationships, and violence that are

typically given in popular culture and accepted by the majority of society. Lastly, following their intentions has allowed my students to ignore rather than to pay attention to the effect that their writing and behaviors have had on others in the classroom community, which has not so much meant an unsafe environment as it has contributed to an environment absent of empathy and compassion.

Nevertheless, there is nothing so totally wrong or misleading about the democratic objectives outlined in the workshop literature. Critical thinking that takes students beyond their own parochial interests, instills in them a sense of independence and rather a desire for isolation, and motivates a search for a common experience necessary to constitute a safe and productive environment conducive to learning are all objectives consistent with democracy, at least in its participatory mode. These are the same objectives Dewey (1944) had in mind for the schools when he imagined the purposes of education and its role in teaching democracy. Likewise, workshop advocates never fool themselves into thinking that all children have careers in writing. For workshop advocates like Randy Bomer (1995), learning to write is secondary to helping students “[become] prepared for their own futures as empowered authors of their own life stories and as compassionate collaborators for tomorrow’s society” (p. 153). The writing workshop, Atwell (1998) suggests, is just the place for this preparation. It is, she writes, where “everyone sits at a big desk, and everyone plans what will happen there” (p. 15) and where students “can capture and channel their ideas, feelings, and enthusiasms, have more say in their learning, and assume greater independence” (p. 85). In fact, many more workshop advocates than this, including Calkins (1991, 1994), Graves (1983), Harwayne (2002);

Murray (1982), 1994), Rief (1992), and Romano (1987) attest to the promise of a workshop approach in teaching democracy and making classrooms democratic.

But if workshop advocates give some suggestion about what they mean by democracy and their goals for workshop classrooms are made equally clear, it remains to be worked out how the objectives they seek in citizenship and community might be met in writing workshops. As chapter two explains, and with the help of other studies, it is wrong to think that students asked to make personal choices in writing whatever they like will help teachers in their efforts to teach students how writing and writing processes can further democratic goals. This is especially true in the event that students are refused critical examination of their writing and are never expected to contribute in positive ways to a discussion of shared interests. But this is exactly what workshop advocates seem to be suggesting in their recommendation to make time and opportunity for students to pursue individual ends without making them open to a test of their ideas.

In reality, permitting choice, as democratic as this may be in some circumstances, when practiced independently and with no checks and balances is not very democratic at all and does far less to make for safe and democratic classrooms than workshop advocates like to assume. It also does little to teach students about the role that writing can play in furthering the democratic quality of our lives. The promise for a better writing workshop classroom and, with it, a better world, necessitates that our children share in a common experience, if only a common experience of sharing their differences, hearing them out and gaining a sense of that difference. It is clear that we come fall far short in reaching our objectives when we settle for a limited idea of democracy of the sort currently posited by workshop advocates, that is, when we assume that simply writing

and sharing writing is enough to instruct students in the ways of citizenship. That this is not so obliges us to develop a more dynamic conception of democracy for workshop classrooms, one that aims to understand and guide the multiple and divergent lives and experiences students bring with them to school.

To this end, the third chapter describes a theory of “strong democracy” suggested by Benjamin Barber, which seems perfectly suited to clarify and extend arguments for democracy as a guiding ideal and a form of classroom practice. Barber is one of the leading contemporary thinkers on democracy, having written the popular and prescient *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995a), a book about the competing forces of unbridled capitalism and religious zealotry and the effects of both in undermining the quality of democratic life in our world. But his efforts in *Strong Democracy* (1984) to discern the limits of liberal democracy and his proposal for an alternative form of participatory politics that resolves its inadequacies makes him particularly relevant to this study.

Briefly, Barber finds troubling the excesses of a society bent on serving and protecting individual rights and interests and he faults our dependence on principles familiar to liberal democracy as the source of the problem. To be sure, the writing workshop classroom cannot be confused with the social and political world Barber is critiquing. However, his analysis of certain disturbing tendencies within liberal democracy, namely, radical individualism, selfish behavior, and lack of responsibility to others, is helpful in addressing what within the workshop approach can reproduce some of the same qualities in children, even if unwittingly and to the detriment of other, more democratic aims.

Like Dewey (1944) before him, but with much more of a sense of the necessary and undeniable value of conflict in our lives, Barber (1984) pursues democracy “not as a way of life but as a way of living” (p. 118). For Barber, it matters that we deliberate with one another, and in a generative fashion, the issues that affect our lives, make decisions in common, and commit ourselves to common action for effecting significant and lasting change. These behaviors, performed in the everyday and alongside others, make us citizens with civic commitments and duties willing and able to transform conflict, improve the quality of life, and reduce hardship.

Chapter four draws from a personal experience in a writing workshop to make Barber’s concept of citizenship practical for teachers in the way of a proposal that may help them to fix their sights on what the workshop might become, of what teachers might make of their time writing and learning with students. The fifth and final chapter considers limitations in using the workshop approach to prepare students for democracy and entertains implications for future work.

There is perhaps no better place and certainly no more important a place to learn democracy than in the schools. But our students can only ever learn the lessons of democracy and hope to affect change in society or make sense of their own lives when they develop a more conscious awareness of how they and their actions work in a community. They can do this when we teach them the value of defending their work and ideas and, more importantly, how to disagree with one another in ways that tend towards mutual respect. Ultimately, we can and must do better than have our writing classrooms serve as institutions for hollow or shallow forms of democracy, where students develop ideas and interests and where their peers and teachers acquiesce to their every attempt at

that expression. Instead, our classrooms can and must be sites for democracy in the real, where people and ideas develop, converge, and sometimes clash in pursuit of life within the scope of these differences. This thesis attempts to layout a framework for such classrooms.

## Chapter 2

### **Promise and Disparity: A Critique of the Writing Workshop**

There is a lot that students in a writing workshop will learn, not the least of which is how to write, as they say, properly, and with due attention to the conventions of the written language. At times, students will sit with each other and their teacher in writing conferences to discuss how best to convey an image, finish a story, or reconstruct a thesis statement. The guiding ethos at play in these conferences is to “follow children” (Graves, 1983, p. 101), responding to the writing in a way that helps children move ever closer to realizing their intentions in the writing, whatever those intentions might be. This is also to say, however, that as students learn to write more effectively, they will not be questioned about the content of their writing.

Generally speaking, workshop advocates identify three benefits to limiting the response to student writing to the particulars of technique and style. First, they suggest that students free to choose their own topics and write about these topics without criticism are more likely to delve deeper into the themes they are addressing and be better able to realize a greater connection between themselves and their conference collaborators. Second, workshop advocates believe that left alone to wrestle with their ideas and to impose their own judgments on the writing they produce students are most able to express their true selves and assert their independence. Finally, they argue that a guiding, but never critical engagement with student writing ensures a safe and democratic classroom community. This chapter relies on theoretical as well as ethnographic research to show the potential consequences that may stem from applying in practice these

assumptions about working with children in writing workshop classrooms. Throughout the chapter warrants are made for developing an updated and revised theory of democracy for workshop classrooms.

### **SELF-INDULGENCES AND FAILED CONNECTIONS**

Democracy has been a site for the public defense of perspectives and collaborative analysis of assumptions from the time of Plato and Aristotle (Barber, 1992) to the present-day designs on deliberative forms of democracy in social and political life (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), encompassing, as well, the possibilities for democracy in the newer media of online discourse (Willinsky, 2002). Civil and democratic societies depend on this form of engagement as it brings to bear an examination of ideas that may otherwise remain entrenched in dogma, and makes possible the discovery of new truths upon which to base future decisions (Mill, 1871/1991). Challenged to defend their ideas while being made aware of other, multiple perspectives, individuals become citizens capable of weighing their private interests with public needs, which makes possible a democratic community (Barber, 1984).

Workshop advocates have in mind something other than challenging perspectives as the means to citizenship and community, believing instead that the sharing of writing and ideas without judgment is a better way to realize these objectives. In work oft-cited by other workshop advocates as the model for responding to student writing, Graves (1983), suggests that the well-trained workshop teacher “[stands] as far back as they can

observing the child's way of working, seeking the best way to help the child realize [his or her] intentions" (p. 6). "There is no hurry," writes Graves: "There is only the need for the persistent, aided demand that [children] may become what [they] want to become" (ibid. p. 281). In a revised edition of this early work on writing instruction, Graves (1994) is again just as deliberate in his advice for teachers, suggesting that:

Our questions, as much as possible, should be free of any remarks that impose our own values on the child's world. In short, we don't comment on the child's perceptions other than to make sure we have an accurate rendition of what [he or she] sees" (p. 24).

Atwell (1998) gives a more detailed account of just what this may entail when she says: "I give advice, make suggestions, tell them what I think is working or needs more work, show them how something might work, and collaborate with them on pieces of their writing" (p. 25). But Atwell and other workshop advocates will not suggest that teachers challenge the writing produced by children or submit it to a critique of the ideas expressed or the experiences that inform its purposes. They are more apt to suggest that children be "cut loose" (Romano, 1987, p. 6) and be freed from the burden of any imposition to their rights of expression. "After hard, successful work at writing," says Romano, "students must have a chance to share without criticism" (ibid., p. 76) their writing with others. For Graves (1983), this manner of sharing with one another their writing helps children "become aware of what individual members can do" (p. 42) and makes possible an awareness of others that transcends self-interests and promotes

community. In these classroom conferences students “teach each other what [they] know” (Atwell, 1998, p. 72) and contribute to a “growing fund of facts about each other’s experiences” (Graves, 1983, p. 51), which, presumably, workshop advocates suggest, is enough without the added expectation to deliberate on the ideas held by the members of the group.

But as much as workshop advocates talk about the potential for expanding students’ perceptions, the focus on the individual as the center of the writing process and the protection of individual rights of expression in conference with one another makes this difficult to achieve in actual classrooms (Dressman, 1993; Edelsky, 1999; Henkin, 1995; Lensmire, 1994, 2000; Shields, 2002; Willinsky, 1990). Workshop advocates apply the word “liberating” (Atwell, 1998, p. 17) in describing a workshop classroom and its interests in individuals. But making “individuals’ rigorous pursuit of their ideas the primary content of the course” (Atwell, 1998, p. 71) can prove problematic and counterproductive to efforts at engendering citizenship. The achievements made by workshop advocates in humanizing the writing classroom must be recognized, but they are wrong to assume that preparing children “for their own futures as empowered authors of their own life stories and as compassionate collaborators for tomorrow’s society” (Bomer, 1995, p. 153) can be achieved with such a focus on the individual but without an expectation for critical and deliberative talk about the writing they would produce.

As Doug Aoki shows, though speaking in the context of university writing classrooms, allowing for freedom in choice and expression in a writing classroom, while suggesting “the very embodiment of radical democracy” (1995, ¶ 31), can prove undemocratic when the writing produced is moved beyond criticism. Student writers may

gain confidence in their writing abilities as a result of greater freedom and an emphasis towards control that may have been impossible for them in traditional classrooms. But without a focused objective for something more than just expression and, at that, more than expression for personal and individual edification, there is too easily a slide towards the vain and the superfluous. Aoki is not suggesting we “take away the ‘right’ of people to have their feelings” (ibid., ¶ 34). Feelings, he writes, are legitimate. What he is saying, however, is that as teachers and students we must “refuse to honor them, *if* honoring them means elevating them above interrogation, critique, or ethical evaluation *or* reproach” (ibid., emphasis in original). In a similar vein, Aoki (2000) writes elsewhere that while students themselves must remain safe from harm their “opinions, positions, ideas, and actions are ... never safe at all in that they are deliberately exposed to debate and criticism, and therefore regular rebuttal and rejection. Opinions, positions, ideas, and actions are always in danger in the careful and public weighing of ideas” (p. 360). In contrast to the university classrooms visited by Aoki and the workshop classrooms described in the workshop literature, democracy and democratic engagement, in particular, requires a commitment “to maintain that all human work and play, whether intellectual or emotional or something not reducible to either, should always be open to being opened up” (1995, ¶ 34), and not simply to criticism, *per se*, but to a mutual investigation into the purposes and content of the work.

Willinsky (1990) makes a similar recommendation in an early critique of the writing workshop approach and other “new literacy” programs in the schools. Willinsky suggests that workshop advocates have not done enough to account for the political in what children may write, what their words might mean, and what their interactions might

become. "In its success as a program," Willinsky writes, "it has yet ... to adequately confront what it is up to in, as the rhetoric goes, *enfranchising* the student population with its natural right to expression" (p. 27, emphasis in original). This is less true today, of course, as workshop advocates have made clearer their intentions in democracy and citizenship. But on the charge that workshop advocates have not provided a plan for realizing these objectives in democracy and citizenship, Willinsky's concern still remains important in determining the legitimacy of a workshop approach.

A witness to a workshop in practice, Willinsky notes the distress of a teacher poorly prepared for the violent and graphic writing produced by the boys in her class and equally unprepared to confront the stereotypes latent in girls' writing about flowers and princesses. Also disturbed, Willinsky remarks, "there is a need to challenge students' expressive inclinations" (p. 132), but not so much to curb excessive violence in students' writing or make their stories any less a fairy tale. The purpose instead should be to make students aware of the influences they take from the home, the community, and even the classroom in their drafting of a poem, story, or essay. Students would put this writing and these influences to the test of debate and discussion and for the purpose of realizing the potential for language and literary work in the construction of a literate environment and a democratic community.

Not surprisingly, workshop advocates have not heeded the sort of advice provided by Willinsky and similarly repeated in other critiques of their designs on classroom practice (Berlin, 1988; Edelsky 1999; Lensmire, 1994, 2000). In refusing critical engagement the writing workshop advocates may as well be refusing the potential for children to make the necessary connections between themselves and others. Instead what

persists in the workshop classroom is “a sense of isolation and estrangement from one’s fellows, accompanied by a conflicting sense of infinite possibility and yet finite capability” (Dressman, 1993, p. 459). The freedom to write becomes the freedom to isolate oneself from others who are themselves isolated, all of which is made possible because there is no expectation for a deliberative exchange of ideas and for the development of a critical stance about their own and others’ writing. What comes of the workshop, writes Dressman (*ibid.*), is “the postmodern community of the shopping mall, a community devoid of community, where people come together to mind their own business” (p. 459). The workshop program and the prominent dictum to “follow the child” which informs it is in many ways a blueprint for this sort of community, and the disconnections between individuals that defines it. Ultimately, children in a workshop classroom fail to realize the sort of connection between themselves and their peers that would give meaning and context to the writing and the work they would do in the workshop classroom.

In truth, students do not, nor cannot, become more critical in their perspectives and more committed to one another when given freedom to choose their own topics and then be supported uncritically by their peers and the teacher. Instead, they tend towards learned prejudices and unexamined personal and private experiences, which can make for individualistic and, in some cases, solipsistic writing and behaviors (Aoki, 1995, 2000; Shields, 2002). This can mean, as well, that they care little about one another in anything but a superficial way, and then only at the behest of the teacher. In extreme cases, students will abuse the freedoms in workshop classrooms and take opportunities in conferences and in their writing to harm one another (Deshon, 1997; Henkin, 1995;

Lensmire, 1994, 2000; Smith et al., 2001). Bent on “following children,” it seems rather suspect to think that teachers can help their students extend the perspectives they already have; it is more likely they will ensure that students remain exactly where they are in their thinking, even as their teachers teach them the specifics of writing structure and technique (Dressman, 1993). Workshop advocates, even in new editions of earlier studies, continue to leave unaddressed the question as to how allowing absolute choice accompanied by uncritical support and acquiescence on the part of teachers works against a plan to have children look elsewhere and raise important, critical questions in their writing. Until workshop advocates talk about the need to challenge and take up students’ ideas in critical and deliberative ways, any effort to help children look elsewhere and appreciate the other experiences and voices shared with them in conferences would seem to come up short (Edelsky, 1999; Kalantzis & Cope, 1993; Lensmire, 2000).

### **SILENCED VOICES**

Another assumption made by workshop advocates is the belief that teachers in a workshop classroom, who grant students personal choice in topic selection and follow students’ intentions in responding to their writing, can best provide for children an opportunity for expressing their individuality and asserting their independence.

Workshop classrooms, however, have proven much less an environment for individuality and independence than workshop advocates suggest they might be, and largely because teachers have borrowed from workshop advocates the inclination to “follow children.”

Even as workshop advocates seem so open to a multiplicity of voices and experiences, the encouragement to pursue personal interests and life stories in actual workshop classrooms can silence children who are uncomfortable with the prospect of sharing these experiences with others (Castell, 1996; McCarthy, 1994; Shields, 2002). More troubling, though, is the effect this may have on students whose backgrounds reflect different, more communal values than the student-centered and individually-focused workshop environment will allow (Dressman, 1993; Edelsky, 1999). The research shows that teachers who use a workshop approach as outlined by workshop advocates in emphasizing personal choice accompanied with uncritical, though suggestive, guidance aimed at helping children express themselves can result in oppression and conformity rather than liberation and autonomy (Delpit, 1988; Deshon, 1997; Kalantzis & Cope, 1993).

Workshop advocates have long maintained that writing is an “authenticating experience” (Graves, 1983, p. 23) and believe that it allows children a means for learning about themselves and discovering their individual interests and true nature. What children write, suggests Romano (1987), can be a direct representation of who they are: “It embodies [their] voice, [their] passion, [their] thinking, [their] intellect, [their] labor, and, on some occasions, [their] very soul” (ibid.). To this, Calkins adds: “As human beings we have a deep need to represent our experience. By articulating our experience, we reclaim it for ourselves” (p. 8). With this in mind, children in workshop classrooms are encouraged to choose topics that reflect their personal feelings on issues and experiences familiar to them, as these sorts of topics, workshop advocates believe, can prove a pathway to individual expression and, ultimately, independence.

However, workshop advocates too readily assume that all children, if only given choice in determining their writing topics and encouragement from their peers and the teacher, will be comfortable in recalling their life histories and in sharing these with others in the workshop classroom. As McCarthy (1994) shows, some children are silenced by the pressure to present their personal experiences and stories. In her study, McCarthy traces the steps taken by two children in response to conferences they had with their teacher, Ms. Meyer. McCarthy observes that Anthony is more willing to take the teacher's advice in writing a personal tribute to his grandmother than Anita who is telling a story about the relationship she has with her father. For Anthony, the tribute to his grandmother represents little in the way of risk. His relationship with his grandmother throughout her life was positive and this makes it easier for him to express his love and appreciation for her. But for Anita, whose father is abusive, writing a personal narrative proves more difficult and leads to "a conflict between Ms. Meyer's view and [her] view of what was important" (ibid., p. 187) to add to it in the way of description and detail. Needless to say, Anita rejects the advice from the teacher and refuses to explore the underlying issues related to the relationship with her father. Much to the disapproval of the teacher, she opts to write about a more common but less emotionally-charged school camping trip. For McCarthy, the persistence on the part of the teacher to have Anita share with her and the class a personal story about an abusive father effectively silences Anita and makes more difficult her attempts at expression in the second story she decides to write.

Workshop advocates, on the other hand, never admit to a potentially intrusive and therefore constraining push for children to share personal and sometimes troubling

stories. Quite the contrary, they believe that probing further into the details and events associated with students' personal and private lives is an effective means at helping children discover who they are and what they might want to become (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983, 1994; Romano, 1987). But the advice given by workshop advocates and used in workshop classrooms is more akin to therapy than anything else, a comment warranted when considering their desire to help "students feel better about themselves" (Romano, 1987, p. 101). Helping children to improve their self-concept is consistent with the purposes of education, but response as therapy is not necessarily the teachers' domain, nor is it conducive to teaching the basic skills involved with learning to write and communicate effectively (Stout, 2000). More to the point is the fact that efforts at helping children resolve their personal issues in the context of the writing classroom can quickly become manipulative. This is especially the case when teachers position themselves as objective guides in their response to students' writing, when quite obviously their agenda is not neutral but has a purpose in supposedly liberating the student to express their true selves (Aoki, 1995, 2000; Shields, 2002). Obligated to write on personal topics, many more students than the one described in McCarthy's (1993) study can feel restricted rather than liberated in a workshop classroom.

The subversive quality of this intervention into students' personal lives, argues Castell (1996), warrants comparisons to Foucault's discussion of the "panopticon effect" of spotlights used in prisons to watch over inmates. Like inmates, though he is aware of the limits of this metaphor, Castell argues that some children under the "spotlight" of a knowing teacher driven to "validate" (Calkins, 1991, p. 35) their experiences may refuse to reveal anything personal. She explains that "Where the discursive practices enacted in

the name of 'self-expression' actually function to silence, control, and render invisible, survival very often depends upon voluntarily making oneself as invisible as possible" (p. 30). But what is important for Castell (1996), as it is for others (Deshon, 1997; Edelsky, 1999; Kalantzis & Cope, 1993), is the effects of granting choice to any and all students in the name of equality and for the purpose of affirming independence can have upon children already marginalized in the schools and in greater society: "Pedagogy of unrestrained dialogicality, for students already at risk of discrimination, can so far only amount to a reaffirmation" (p. 30). Encouragement to pull writing topics from their personal experiences as a way to inspire expression, and help them maintain independence, works in the opposite way, she argues, "to enable and, indeed, to sanction their public eradication" (ibid.).

Lisa Delpit (1988) argues that the focus on respecting and tolerating difference serves to uphold the status quo and to the detriment of disadvantaged and minority students. Even as a workshop classroom seems so democratic, she says, in providing for children the freedom to express themselves in their writing and in whatever way, there is something wrong with thinking that all students will benefit equally from the degrees of freedom encouraged in workshop environments. Delpit argues that in refusing to teach the "basics" in grammar, spelling, and punctuation associated with the dominant discourse of a "White, middle-class culture," teachers in workshop classrooms perpetuate oppression. In what is admittedly a study about perceptions, Delpit suggests that many African Americans whose children are taught in workshop classrooms know that the predominantly "White" teachers in such classrooms "believe themselves to be operating with good intentions, but that these good intentions are only conscious delusions about

their unconscious true motives” (p. 285). Delpit argues that children already well-versed in the particulars of the dominant culture are further advantaged by a workshop approach, while those who are not, namely, many African American children, are further disadvantaged. When children from African American homes and communities are freely permitted to continue using a vernacular familiar to them this ensures they never learn to appropriate the skills and techniques associated with the dominant culture. This failure to learn the dominant discourse makes it that much more difficult, if not impossible, for them to transform their disadvantaged or minority status in the classroom and in society and ensures that “power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it” (ibid, p. 282).

The argument made by Delpit is not just a demand for improving the intellectual rigor of workshop classrooms. If this were true, the great steps made over the years by workshop advocates at revising the literature to include recommendations for how teachers might teach the specifics of standard written discourse (Noskin, 2000; M. M. Taylor, 2000) would be enough to quell the concerns she is raising. The thing is that even as revisions to the workshop approach appease worries about the content of learning going in workshop classrooms, workshop advocates continue to avoid discussions about power and privilege in workshop settings. Specifically, they refuse to see how particular practices of an “author’s chair” (Graves, 1983), wherein children share their writing and celebrate their achievements, and the drive for other individually-focused practices, continue to “cater to the interests and values of the affluent professional class and its cultural states” (Dressman, p. 259) and make it possible for children familiar with values of radical individualism to remain in a position of power over those who are not.

Failing to account for how writing teachers may help their students challenge the existing status quo and the ruling hierarchies of status and power persistent in workshop classrooms continues to diminish the claim that a workshop may in fact enfranchise all students (Kalantzis & Cope, 1993; Deshon, 1997; Dressman, 1993; Edelsky, 1999; Willinsky, 1990). Workshop advocates are still very much wedded to the notion that choice saddled with uncritical support is a means for ensuring individual voices are expressed and resonate in the classroom. Their commitment to this idea, despite the fact it represents a commitment to democratic aims, works to unseat the legitimacy of a workshop approach.

### **UNSAFE WRITING CLASSROOMS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIZENSHIP AND COMMUNITY**

The final assumption made by workshop advocates is the claim that freedom of choice and protection from critical judgment makes for safe writing classrooms. Workshop advocates, being teachers themselves, are not always so naïve, for they do recognize that children can be cruel to one another in their interactions and in response to the work written by each other (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1991, 1994; Graves, 1983, 1994; Romano, 1987). But workshop advocates also have the idea that if children are actively busy in the writing process conflict dissipates. For example, Atwell (1998) suggests that “because [children] do engage, there’s little danger” (p. 71). Instead, as Graves (1983) argues: “There will be some buzz in the room but it will be more a hushed, busy tone” (p. 13). If students are cruel to one another and conflict does arise, it is only

because children are unfamiliar with how they may respond to each other's work.

Learning the particulars of appropriate response, however, students grow aware of "an appropriate pattern [of response] that [protects] against hurt" (Graves, 1983, p. 38).

But as with their assumptions about the potential for choice and uncritical support in writing conferences to engender thinking and behaviors consonant with citizenship and to allow for independence, workshop advocates have the idea of safe writing classrooms wrong. The workshop is a place of danger or, more appropriately, conflict, *because* children engage, but this is only because this is the very nature of social and collaborative engagement. Children have multiple realities and thus multiple selves to which they continuously shape and reshape for any number of occasions and for any number of purposes depending on the environment and social conditions (Diamondstone, 1999; Dyson, 1994; Haworth, 1999; Manyak, 2000; Pratt, 1991). Too often, though, conflict is ignored by workshop advocates, as if it were not possible that children and their words can impact others in any way, either positively or negatively (Lensmire, 1994). The point is not that workshop advocates get wrong this very important truth about writing in classrooms as social as the workshop, or even that their retelling of their own workshop environments are so obviously misleading, which has already been admitted (Newkirk, 1992); it is that the social and political dynamics of the writing and interactions had in workshop classrooms informed by workshop advocates' promise for safe learning communities are ignored and the opportunity for making something of this writing and these interactions are missed. As it is, workshop advocates, in their recommendation to "follow children," poorly prepare teachers to work with children in transforming the

conflict that can arise in the workshop classroom (Deshon, 1997; Henkin, 1995; Lensmire, 2000; Wells-Rowe, Fitch, Smith-Bass, 2001).

There have been a number of studies conducted that attest to the problems involved with failing to theorize the social and political nature of conflict in the workshop classroom. One of the more comprehensive studies of children at work in writing workshop classrooms is by Timothy Lensmire (1994) who assumed the role of an action-researcher in a third grade writing workshop class. Retold in *When Children Write*, the study proves how wrongheaded and simplistic workshop advocates can be in their assessment of children. Originally interested in drafting a proposal for inciting more discussions in writing conferences than accounted for in the popular literature, Lensmire became overwhelmed at just how deficient workshop advocates were in theorizing such meetings with students. The writing and behaviors envisioned in the workshop literature were drastically different to what he experienced. It became clear to him that he had “put too much faith in the workshop ‘system,’ in its processes and routines, and had not worried enough about its content and ends” (ibid., p. 4). The common experience, the sense of unity, and respect for others promised in the workshop literature never emerged in his classroom. The writing workshop classroom, warns Lensmire, “loosens the lid on more than just repressed *positive* possibilities (ibid. p. 27, emphasis in original). For Lensmire, supporting any and all intentions his students had was not just uncritical; it was dangerous.

In his classroom, some children used their newfound freedom and choice to reassert their already high status in the classroom by casting aside children from the class for their low status and unpopular roles in their writing. One student who assumed for

these students a negative role in such writing was Jessie, whose larger physical size and lower economic status made her an easy target. Lensmire compelled students to adapt their writing, but was never satisfied that censorship solved the underlying problems that sparked this sort of writing in the first place, and which persisted long after editorial changes were made. Lensmire (1994) writes:

Ethical and political issues were at stake: how we would treat each other here; what rights people had to control an important part of their identities—their names; what part texts such as this one played in establishing, maintaining, and changing social relations among children.

(p. 123)

But without a means for working through these issues with children, censorship became more a short-term solution and a missed opportunity for promoting, in his classroom, a democratic community in which children respected one another and worked through these issues.

Roxanne Henkin (1995) offers another study that looks at how an inability on the part of workshop teachers to recognize and then work with students to transform issues of power and authority can prove problematic in establishing democratic writing classrooms. In this study of a first grade workshop, Henkin observes some of the same uses of writing to bully others that are noted by Lensmire, but takes more of a selective look at the prevalence of gender inequalities in workshop classrooms. In particular, Henkin looks at the practices initiated and maintained by a group of boys to exclude girls

from their writing conferences. In answering Henkin's questions about why the boys avoided conferences with girls, some of the boys suggested that girls simply did not know enough about the topics they were interested in, and so they ruled out any need to meet with them. Yet the girls experienced this neglect as oppressive and discriminatory and it "negatively affected their behavior" in the classroom" (ibid., p. 433). Committed as the teacher was, though, to giving students choice in their selection of groups and writing topics, and unable to resolve the value in this choice with the affects upon the girls, the practices of the boys to exclude the girls continued.

But even within the boys' "literacy club" certain boys, namely, Don and Rashi, were seen as outsiders. Rashi, more than Don, though, was always an outsider and the effect this had in diminishing the effectiveness of his writing as well as his love for writing was significant. In recalling Rashi's transformation, Henkin (1995) writes: "The boy who began first grade with enthusiasm and excitement grew angry and distracted. Though he began first grade already reading, he withdrew from books and writing" (p. 433). Henkin, remarking on the deficiencies in a workshop approach to assuage these affects but aware of the imperative to do so suggests "that as teachers we must help our students to examine injustice and take action" (ibid.) or else, it would seem, we risk not only the alienation of some students but their love for learning, as in the case of Rashi, which cannot but affect their participation in-class and in the future.

However much these two studies by Lensmire (1994) and Henkin (1995) can be taken as demonstrating the problems entailed with using an unfettered workshop approach or any other, they cannot be taken to mean a return to traditional writing instruction. The traditional writing classroom can certainly be a much safer classroom, if

for nothing but the fact that students' writing, as well as their interactions, is managed entirely by the teacher, leaving little room for the sort of writing and behaviors that may come about in a workshop classroom. Such a reading and consequent recommendation does not begin to understand what exactly Lensmire and Henkin findings prove.

Lensmire and Henkin, or any other researchers who have discovered similar findings (Deshon, 1997; Dyson, 1995; Wells-Rowe et al., 2001), are not meaning to show that children need constant supervision, or even heavy handed guidance, but to suggest that without due care to what children write and how their words work in a social environment, it is as if to say that anything they write or do is acceptable, which can never be the case when there are democratic ideals in mind. Both Lensmire and Henkin argue that teachers need to be more vigilant in defining their aims, pointing out in particular that teachers cannot afford to be neutral in their stances towards children's writing.

We cannot forget that children are capable of great things, as are adults, but must also remember that they are capable of doing harm to others, sometimes unwittingly, but also at times deliberately. A child's writing must be taken seriously, keeping in mind that "our children grow up in a sexist, racist, classist society" (Lensmire, 1994, p. 19) and that their expressions carry associated biases with them to the classroom that deserve to be questioned and examined for intent lest their writing work against our objectives for a democratic education. If we are committed to having children take up independent projects, as the workshop advocates most certainly do, and expect them to share cooperatively and responsibly as a way to develop democratic classroom communities, then "we had better pay attention to the classroom communities we create" (Lensmire,

1994, p. 146). This would presumably necessitate a more honest representation of children, one which Lensmire, Henkin and others help to construct.

For too long workshop advocates have settled for simplified, homogenized depictions of children (Dyson, 1994). This understanding of children makes easy their assumption that engagement in the writing process will consequently mean safe workshop classrooms. Barber's (1984) theory of "strong democracy," if applied in the context of workshop classrooms, would make no such assumption. Neither would a theory of strong democracy for workshop classrooms accept that individual choices meted out in all too accepting and uncritical writing conferences are conducive to inspiring citizenship in children and promoting community in the workshop. The next chapter distinguishes in detail the merits to strong democratic theory and proves its potential for realizing citizenship and community in workshop classrooms.

## Chapter 3

### Strong Democracy for the Writing Workshop Classroom

I have been saying that writing workshop advocates envision democratic classroom communities fit for engendering democratic participation in students, but that the underlying theory of democracy used to guide attempts at achieving these aims is inadequate for realizing such purposes. Their current conception of democracy in the workshop unwittingly forestalls democratic objectives. What is worse is that when applied in practice, workshop advocates' plans for democracy, in the way of protecting freedom of expression and celebrating individualism, reinforces individualistic and self-interested writing and behaviors that inadvertently can make for undemocratic environments. In order to better understand the flaws in workshop advocates' thinking about democracy and to retheorize democracy for writing workshop classrooms, this chapter draws from the work of Benjamin Barber. It develops an understanding of what Barber (1984) means by the participatory form of democracy he calls "strong democracy" and argues for its application in the writing workshop. The incisive critique of liberal democracy provided by Barber and his answer to it in the form of strong democracy proves helpful as a lens for addressing the democratic shortfalls of the writing workshop approach.

I begin the chapter by outlining the deficiencies Barber attributes to liberal democracy, paying close attention to what he identifies as one of three fundamental dispositions of this liberal approach, that of the anarchist disposition. I draw comparisons between what is discussed as the anarchist disposition and its articulation in the workshop

literature as a way to elucidate the concerns raised in the last chapter. I then highlight the objectives and virtues he assigns to strong democracy and demonstrate its theoretical application to the workshop approach. This last section ends with a discussion of the three stages to the strong democratic process, including talk, decision making, and action, and an explanation of how each may collectively contribute to the promotion of citizenship and the formation of community in workshop classrooms.

### **LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND THE WRITING WORKSHOP**

In Barber's view, liberal democracy strives to serve the private and personal interests of individuals. Liberal democracy, he writes, "is concerned more to promote individual liberty than to secure public justice, to advance interests rather than to discover goods, and to keep [individuals] safely apart rather than to bring them fruitfully together" (Barber, 1984, p. 4). But liberalism and its working out in liberal democracy, of course, is an intricate and complex philosophy and in an effort to give a complete rendering of liberal democracy, Barber outlines three dispositions that strike him as fundamental to it, namely, the anarchist, realist, and minimalist dispositions. He delineates between each by discerning their response to conflict, a likely feature, he argues, given that conflict is the fundamental condition of politics. To sum up his argument all too briefly, the anarchist response is to ignore conflict, the realist to suppress it in the way of rules and regulations, and the minimalist to attenuate its effects by living with it.

While a thorough analysis of Barber's stance towards liberal democracy would attend to each of the three dispositions he mentions, and their variations across three inertial frames also used to define the particulars of liberal democratic politics, his critique of the anarchist disposition is most relevant to this study of the writing workshop. However misleading workshop advocates are in their account of democracy, the conception of democracy they propose is ostensibly, at least in principle, anarchist, as their emphasis on student control realized through personal choice and their attempts at maintaining for children protection from critical discussions suggests that each child be allowed, within the scope of their writing topics and stances taken, complete unencumbered freedom, without responsibilities toward others, apart from "personal attacks." Comparing workshop advocates' depiction of freedom and their understanding of human nature to that offered in liberal democracy in its anarchist disposition makes the similarity between the two that much clearer.

For Barber, the anarchist disposition "disposes women and men to regard themselves as generically autonomous beings with needs and wants that can ... be satisfied outside coercive communities" (1984, p. 6). Politics, then, for the anarchist, is a matter of securing freedom from external constraints. It is the absence of constraints, either in the form of rules and regulations or in the way of obligation to others, that anarchists envision for themselves a peaceful, albeit independent and private, existence. Conflict is a consequence to imposing upon individuals a decision or will that is not their own and not the result of individuals exercising their rights and freedoms. To the anarchist, conflict is never imagined in any other terms than this, neither as a resource for future decisions and actions nor as something to transform. The realist and minimalist

dispositions respond to conflict quite differently, believing in the former that rules are necessary for realizing freedom and in the latter that a balance between absolute freedom from rules, and a responsibility to them, ends in freedom. The understanding that freedom is arrived at by what is almost indifference to individuals and their behaviors, and that this causes the dissipation of conflict, is what sets the anarchist disposition apart. It is also what determines its contribution to the thinness of liberal democracy. Anarchists would have it that individuals be left alone and their rights and freedoms protected without question; leave individuals alone to live out their lives as they wish, the anarchist might say, and they are most creative and productive. But this says nothing of what anarchism makes in the way of an intractable citizenry and an impoverished social life. The protection of individuals from external constraints and in a way that leaves them the way they are, rather than developing in them an affiliation to others that may inspire individual and group improvement, is its chief failure.

Workshop advocates' effort at securing for children freedom of expression by protecting them from critical discussion is equally problematic. While it is hardly the case that workshop advocates desire teachers to leave students alone, it is the case that their insistence on "clearing the way" (Romano, 1987) for students, that is, removing from them obstacles to achieving their intentions in writing, amounts to the same thing. Neither can it be said that children are permitted to act like anarchists in the classroom, as it is never the point that they be allowed total freedom in rejecting the structure and processes consistent with the workshop approach. But they do act like anarchists in the content and position of their writing. In effect, they are free to say and write whatever they so wish, as long as it is not deemed "offensive" by school standards, or otherwise

transgresses the proprieties of classroom decorum (Graves, 1983, 1994). This expressive license comes with it no obligation to listen to what others might say in response, or to persuade or negotiate with others new perspectives from which to view their writing and its purposes (Dressman, 1993; Lensmire, 2000; Willinsky, 1990).

Workshop advocates believe without question that delimiting critical engagement in response to student writing leads naturally and unequivocally to democratic citizenship marked by critical thinking and respect for varying and differing opinions, independence and thoughtful dissent, and a commitment to the formation of a classroom community for transformative change through action (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1991, 1994). But this is to assume that personal edification in writing is sufficient, which is more than misleading as I have already pointed out. Thinking about citizenship in this way and then applying in practice measures that enforce children's rights can lead to radical individualism that tends towards narcissism; silenced voices and conformity; and ignores conflict that turns disruptive rather than transformative (See Chapter 2).

Certain assumptions about human nature and the effects of social interaction upon individuals guide the limited view of citizenship maintained by workshop advocates in their anarchist leanings. Barber's discussion of three "frames" for thinking about social interaction and human nature, and that buoy liberal democratic theory, can further prove the flaws in workshop advocates' own assumptions about children.

Barber argues that the preconceptual, epistemological, and psychological frames or "givens" common to liberal democracy that aim at giving it legitimacy instead reveal its characteristic thinness and inadequacy as a theory for social and political life.

Generally speaking, the preconceptual frame intends to explain our physical materiality,

the epistemological frame our reliance on independent grounds for knowledge, and the psychological frame our desire for independence. The preconceptual frame of those with an anarchist disposition suggests that anarchists assumes that even as individuals interact with one another in social spaces they remain unruffled in their thinking and behaviors, that is, unaffected and unaffecting. With this in mind, the anarchist “conceives of human desires as moderate, of human aggression as unlikely, of human conflict as improbable, and of human relations as relatively contact free and consequently harmonious” (Barber, 1984, p. 37). The epistemological frame is Cartesian and supports the notion that there is an independent ground external to lived experience that provides for individuals and groups a means for making rational and just decisions. In the anarchist variation the value and test of knowledge remains forever the domain of private and personal interests. Rationalism in Cartesian epistemology provides for the anarchist “a philosophical framework for absolute freedom and unassailable individual rights” (ibid., p. 58). The final inertial frame is the psychological frame. It insists that “we are born into the world solitary strangers, live our lives as wary aliens, and die in fearful isolation” (ibid., p. 68) and the familiarity this perspective brings to individuals suggest the ease with which it is recognized and appreciated in Western democracies. The anarchist inclination in the psychological frame is to celebrate individuality and honor independence, believing that in so doing individuals develop in their abilities to resist the hierarchies and power structures that seek to rule their lives.

In truth, workshop advocates’ understanding of social interaction and human nature is not that unlike the anarchist variations in the preconceptual, epistemological and psychological frames to liberal democracy. Workshop advocates believe strongly that

freedom of expression and heightened interaction between students makes for harmonious, conflict-free environments (Atwell, 1998), provides children a means for discovering their own truths (Calkins, 1994), and inspires creative and transformative resistance to injustice and oppression (Bomer, 1995, 1999). These assumptions are evidently related to what Barber depicts as the inertial frames discussed above.

Yet contrary to what are given as “truths” in liberal democratic politics, or in workshop classrooms, for that matter, social engagement is rife with conflict, knowledge is determined in deliberation with others, and meaningful change emerges out of a necessity for union and collaboration. This is also to say that an alternative theory for democracy is wanting—a theory for democracy that can provide for citizens and citizens-to-be a guide for living. Discussion of the defining features and virtues to such a theory in the name of strong democracy as well as an argument for its application in workshop classrooms is given below.

### **STRONG DEMOCRACY IN THEORY: THE ARGUMENT FOR CITIZENSHIP**

In its formal definition strong democracy may be understood as:

Politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community

capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods. (Barber, 1984, p. 132)

More generally, though, strong democracy is “a way of living” (ibid., p. 118). Strong democracy reclaims for citizens a process for determining decisions and taking collective action that for too long has been given to the discretion of elected officials. In strong democracy, “politics is for amateurs” (ibid., p. 152). It takes seriously the relationships made and objectives achieved in, say, organizing a spring fair, participating on the school parent advisory committee, or holding a town meeting to deliberate on possible changes to existing restrictions on park use, and values the ways in which these processes may transform individuals into citizens and groups into communities. The emphasis here on citizenship and its appreciation for social and collaborative efforts in the common and everyday is what suggests its value to writing workshop classrooms.

By citizenship Barber means the capacity and willingness on the part of individuals to strike a balance between private interests and public wants. Strong democracy, writes Barber (1984), “permits the representation neither of *me* or *we*, because it mandates a permanent confrontation between the *me* as citizen and the ‘Other’ as citizen, forcing *us* to think in common and act in common” (p. 153, emphasis in original). “The citizen,” he continues, “is by definition a *we*-thinker, and to think of the *we* is always to transform how interests are perceived and goods defined” (ibid.). Citizenship practiced in this way is not meant to subjugate individuals to the will of others, for autonomy remains a vital necessity in its designs on social and political life.

But it is meant to encourage individuals to consider the ways in which autonomy of thought and action may contribute to establishing a civil and democratic society.

For Barber, the need for individuals to think and act in terms that encompass both the “me” that is private and the “we” that is public is determined by a set of conditions that define politics. The conditions he mentions in *Strong Democracy* (1984) are action, publicness, necessity, choice, reasonableness, conflict, as well as the absence of an independent ground. Barber argues that no other form of democracy is sufficient to the response demanded by these conditions. The problem he cites with the authoritative, juridical, and pluralist forms of representative democracy, in addition to their dependence upon principles and institutions consistent with liberal democracy, is that they “steal from individuals the ultimate responsibility for their values, beliefs, and actions” (Barber, 1990, p. 145). In these representative forms of democracy officials are elected, which, Barber agrees, is consistent with democracy. But he also notes that voting subjects citizens “to laws they did not truly participate in making” (ibid., p. 147). The reality is that most citizens who vote too easily leave their participation at that and abdicate to politicians the responsibility for making decisions and organizing their lives. Politics in representative democracy remains the domain of politicians not citizens, and can leave room for benevolent dictatorships and the social injustices that this form of rule reproduces.

Unitary democracy is no less inviting a theory for politics, even if it is more amenable to direct participation. Its intent to deliver consensus at the expense of individuality becomes “conformist, collectivist, and often even coercive” (Barber, 1984, p. 148) and undermines the necessity for dissent. It avoids elitism, a likely consequence

of representative democracy, but the potential for mob rule or a tyranny of the majority does nothing to serve the general interests of individuals, and therefore makes it an unfavorable response to the conditions that shape politics.

Strong democracy, in contrast to representative and unitary forms of democracy, places the responsibility for the kind of decision-making and the implementation of ideas necessary to form community in the hands of citizens rather than politicians and in the process respects difference and encourages diversity. It suggests an encouraging response to the conditions of politics and in such a way that reflects its component virtues. In strong democracy, then, action ennobles citizens; publicness confers community; necessity demands something be done; choice constitutes autonomy; reasonableness makes for effective talk; conflict becomes a resource; and the absence of an independent ground commits citizens to a process of ongoing discussion and with it the hope for renewal.

Save for the fact that students are not yet citizens by law and their freedom is circumscribed to a great extent by the influence of teachers, parents, and other adults, the conditions that shape politics in the social and political world are not unlike the conditions that affect the relationships and experiences that comprise their work in the workshop classroom. Children may write in classrooms that teachers take to be sanctuaries from the world and the politics beyond its walls, but the conditions of politics, at least in the sense Barber means them, do not end at the sidewalk that borders the school, or any other institution for that matter. In the school, the conditions of politics inform what children do there, what they wear, how they think and act, and with whom they make friends and enemies. The problem, however, has long been that workshop

advocates only recognize the conditions of action and choice, and, at that, in narrow ways. Students actively engage in the writing process so that they may learn to write more effectively than if they were sentenced, pun intended, to dittoed assignments and grammar worksheets (Atwell, 1998). And when they write they have choice to do whatever they may like (Graves, 1983, 1994; Romano, 1987). Ultimately, action and choice alone do not make for a democratic classroom. Neither does a focus on action and choice mean that the other fundamental conditions to politics are easily wished away in workshop classrooms.

The reality is that the publicness of a workshop environment, the necessity for making contributions to others, the reasonableness necessary for social interaction, the problem of conflict, and the way change precludes right answers and undeniable truths in making decisions all persist and when unattended to, as they are in the workshop literature, can undermine democracy in workshop classrooms (Berlin, 1988; Castell, 1996; Delpit, 1988; Dressman, 1993; Lensmire, 1994; Willinsky, 1990). But the point is not only to acknowledge the conditions of politics as determining factors in contributing to the makeup of the workshop classroom. It is to do something about them in constructive and generative ways, and for this strong democracy is invaluable.

In particular, Barber suggests three phases of the strong democratic political process. Talk, decision-making, and action when taken together make a compelling response to the aforementioned political conditions and make clear the practical application of strong democracy. Barber's discussion of these three phases is meant to show that politics is its own epistemology. Relying too heavily on Cartesian epistemology and metaphysical logic, liberal democracy tends towards passivity and

inaction. On the one hand individuals may be too skeptical to act or so certain that they make errors in judgment. Skepticism and certainty are similar errors that result from “thinking that knowledge about the conduct of life or the creation of community can be derived from abstract reasoning or justified by its appeal to the epistemological status of truth” (Barber, 1984, p. 164). Strong democracy does not pretend to stake a corner on the truth, even the truth about democracy. The truths citizens seek are not pre-existent and, even when they may agree upon what these truths are they are not set in stone. In strong democracy, citizens deliberate and work together at improving their communities in an engaged and active process in order to develop their own framework for developing answers to the problems that affect them.

In respect to political talk, Barber makes three general observations. He asserts that in political talk listening is as valuable as speaking, that there is an affective as well as cognitive component, and, finally, that intentions made by citizens in conversation with one another turns talk into to action. Workshop advocates understand the value of listening, most going as far as to suggest that children speak the majority of time (Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Romano, 1987). They also are adept at discerning the importance of the affective domain in outlining the conversations children might have in conference with their peers and teacher, and some would say to the point of insisting conversation serve the purpose of therapy, which brings its own set of problems (McCarthy, 1994; Morgan, 1998; Shields, 2002). But workshop advocates would do well to consider talk in the way Barber means, so that it might instigate action on the part of its interlocutors. Students talk to one another about their writing and to the teacher just as much, and there is the recommendation that this talk lead to improvements in the

writing. But this is to confine talk to what it may mean for the individual student whose writing is being critiqued. Few workshop advocates appreciate what these conversations may lead to in the way of action that takes student ideas off the written page and into the world, and those that do, for example Bomer (1995) and Atwell (1998), make action secondary to individual expression and development.

Barber's discussion of the nine functions of strong democratic talk is also helpful in developing a richer definition of talk for writing workshop classrooms. The functions of strong democratic talk that he lists include: the articulation of interests, persuasion, agenda-setting, exploring mutuality, affiliation and affection, maintaining autonomy, witness and self-expression, reformulation and reconceptualization, and community-building as the creation of public interests, common goods, and active citizens. All the functions of strong democratic talk would serve writing workshops well, but Barber's discussion of the articulation of interests, exploring mutuality, maintaining autonomy, and witness and self-expression deserve particular attention in demonstrating how a balance between individual expression and work towards a common experience can be met in workshop classrooms, if not every day and all the time then in carefully chosen democratic moments issued by the teacher and supported by the students.

Barber suggests that the bargaining and exchange associated with the articulation of interests is necessary to strong democracy, though it can resemble talk in strong democratic politics when individuals pursue their own ends, a consequence Barber admits limits its potential in strong democracy. Talk used towards achieving individual interests and not interests that can be shared between people "reduces talk to the hedonistic speech of bargaining" and in turn creates what Barber calls "free-riders" (Barber, 1984, p. 179).

“Free-riders,” he argues, “are self-interested individuals who do not care to comply with public policies and common decisions in the absence of careful policing and external coercion” (ibid.).

The phenomenon of “free riders” is not immune to workshop classrooms. It is, in fact, one of the qualities that workshop classrooms can best engender. A workshop classroom informed by the flaws inherent to its conception in the workshop literature does not easily or well lend itself to altruism. Some children in writing workshops seem only interested in the work produced by their peers so that they may receive attention to their writing in return (Lensmire, 1994; Willinsky, 1990). To compare children in workshop classrooms to “free-riders” in the sense Barber means the phrase, however, may sound harsh, and indeed it might be. Yet the careful attention workshop advocates pay to what students may receive in the way of advice and then to consider how evaluation may play a role in obligating children to reciprocate is to suggest that free-riders are inevitable in such classrooms, especially those informed by advocates’ limited conception of democracy. Suggesting that students think in terms of not only their own interests but the collective interests of the classroom community can transform the “free-riders” of workshop classrooms into citizens.

Exploring mutuality and maintaining autonomy, as well as bearing witness and engaging in self-expression are additional functions to strong democratic talk that may guide students in their conversations with others to redefine their interests so that community is developed. Mutuality would already seem to be a theme in the workshop literature. However often workshop advocates highlight the need for mutuality or, in their terms, a common experience (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994), in practice the common

experience established in classrooms informed by their work is never common except to those who may reflect the class, ethnicity, and values of the dominant, often “White” culture (Castell, 1996; Delpit, 1988; Kalantzis and Cope, 1993; Schreiner, 1997). This happens as a result of teaching that borrows from workshop advocates their romantic notions of the common experience and their inability to consider the many different and layered experiences and voices that pervade classrooms.

But in strong democratic talk, mutuality does not emerge by virtue of simply thinking it; instead it emerges as the product of a continuing and sometimes frustrating process that ensures a host of different experiences and opinions recognized. Its objective, however, is met not simply by recognizing differences, a problem which is addressed perhaps most famously by Charles Taylor (1994), but rather in working through differences in experience and opinion to the point of redefining the language in which these differences are articulated. This redefinition means for individuals to move, psychologically and even physically, in their perspectives of one another and the differences and problems that separate them. The certainty with which this double-bind of recognition and movement is realized is left to constant reexamination as is necessary given the human potential for change and the reintroduction of evolving differences and opinions.

Exploring “mutuality” in strong democracy may demand of citizens an open heart and mind capable of understanding and contributing to the experiences and opinions of others. In Barber’s view it is not possible to explore mutuality without maintaining autonomy and encouraging the dissent that may arise when citizens bear witness and self-expression. But this again means new definitions for autonomy and self-expression that

are, for all intents and purposes, different than what is given in liberal democratic politics.

Strong democracy does not mean for autonomy and self-expression to be about individuals alone or to mean the protection from critical discussion. To be autonomous and to express oneself in terms familiar to strong democratic politics is for citizens to be enriched by, not protected from, political talk. Strong democracy asks that citizens seek out talk that will prove the veracity of their ideas and where they will assert their autonomy, and practice self-expression and even dissent. The point in doing so is not to ask for recognition but to test the ideas citizens might have so that they may become worthy of recognition. This sort of talk performed as a means to evaluate and reevaluate our ideas allows us to “repossess our convictions” (Barber, 1984, p. 190) and contribute to society ideas that may have previously gone unconsidered, which is fundamentally important to its evolution. Like John Stuart Mill (1871/1991), Barber understands that “talk immunizes values from ossification and protects the political process from rigidity, orthodoxy, and the yoke of the dead past” (Barber, 1984, p. 190). The vital role that dissent plays in immunizing “values from ossification” and in keeping society from remaining stagnant cannot be overestimated. Allowing for, and even encouraging, dissent gives status to the views held by members who adhere to a minority opinion; it also means as well that society will forever be made aware of new ways of thinking and that those in the majority will be obliged to provide a justification for their views.

Barber suggests elsewhere that democracy is “about making mischief, asking questions, confronting power, challenging dogmas” (Barber, 1995b), and the necessity for strong democratic talk would seem to bring to life these possibilities. Workshop

advocates apparently have quite different designs on talk. In the workshop classroom they suggest that students be lauded for whatever writing they may bring to conference with their peers or the teacher, and that efforts be made to improve the more technical features of the writing, but to leave the ideas alone (Graves, 1983, 1994; Romano, 1987). This practice can make for poor writing, as students might never understand what is entailed in effective, quality writing (Aoki, 1995, 2000), but it also encourages undemocratic practice, as it is democracy in the real sense of the term that suffers when praise precludes critical discussion (Lensmire, 1994, 2000). Workshop advocates' intent to "follow children" can make sure that unseemly writing and preposterous ideas go unchecked and make for conflict between students and unrest in the classroom. But it can just as easily make for writing and activity that is safe and monotonous for want of something more challenging than that which is available to students in workshop classrooms. Dissent makes for lively and dynamic democratic communities; its absence makes for conformity.

Talk, however, makes for only one of three strong democratic stages, and while Barber spends considerably less time discussing the merits of decision-making and action, this does not suggest in any way that they deserve less consideration. Decision-making and action put to the test the ideals of strong democratic talk. Without the intention to make decisions and turn words into action, talk would be a far less valuable tool and would ultimately mean the demise of strong democracy itself.

Decision-making and action, like talk in strong democratic politics, requires collaborative effort on the part of citizens, which is an interesting contradiction to what workshop advocates say about these two features of the democratic process. As

mentioned earlier, workshop advocates place a great deal of emphasis on choice and provide extensive arguments for providing choice in workshop classrooms. They also suggest writing is learned as a process, which, of course, necessitates action on the part of students rather than passive acquiescence to teacher decisions and directions. Except for writing conferences which involve social interaction, even if it exclusively serves individual interests, choices made in workshop classrooms and the action involved in putting these choices to work in students' writing require little in the way of collaboration. Students decide whether to write an essay or short story, a poem or a memoir, and the choice of topic is determined in the listing of opinions, issues, and experiences comprising students' personal "territories" (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992). Topic chosen, students proceed to engage actively in the writing process, but always in silence and never to disturb their peers or the teacher from arranging a conference in one of a few designated areas of the classroom for sharing their work and receiving feedback to it (Calkins, 1994; Romano, 1987).

It is not surprising that Barber in his theory for strong democracy has quite a different interpretation of decision-making and action. While liberal democratic politics suggests that choices be made from a list of preferences and leave action, or, as is often the case, inaction, to the discretion of individuals or groups, strong democratic politics sees decision-making as public willing and action as its imperative but natural end. The challenge to decision-making in strong democracy, argues Barber, is to think in terms of a common future:

The challenge here is not how to make correct choices but how to make choices correctly, and this in turn is a question of judgment.... To render political judgment is not to exclaim "I prefer" or "I want" or "I choose such and such" but rather to say, "I will a world in which such and such is possible." To decide is thus to will into being a world that the community must experience in common: it is to create a common future, if only for selfish ends. In place of "I want Y," the strong democrat must say "Y will be good for us," a locution that is tested not by the incorrigibility of Y's philosophical origins but by the assent it finds in the community that must live with it. (Barber, 1984, p. 200)

This in turn means that citizens interested in the common will and not individuals interested in their own are essential to the decision-making process.

To bolster his case for public willing versus individual choosing, Barber asserts that only decisions mindful of the public will can be determined right or wrong choices, while decisions made by individuals from a set of preferences are only ever right so long as the individuals involved are satisfied. Importantly, this brings to bear Kant's categorical imperative on the political process. Citizens given to public willing make sure that decisions made are appropriate and necessary to the community in which they are made and stand the test of universal acceptance.

Ultimately, though, no strong democratic talk applied to decision-making that procures a common will is legitimized only by action carried out in common and with an eye towards realizing in practice what the community has to do in theory. Common

action gives focus to talk and decision-making and its emphasis on social and collaborative engagement towards mutual and shared objectives engenders citizenship and forges community. It instills in citizens the motivation and inspiration, as well as the confidence that is so necessary for making difference and effecting change in the community and in the world abroad. Liberal democratic politics can frustrate the potential for change by making individuals feel “forced to give and forced to take” (Barber, 1984, p. 211) and in ways that risk their autonomy. Strong democracy, on the other hand, by way of common action, “earns for each a common share and helps to justify the redistribution by which a society assures that shared will be held justly and in common” (ibid.).

In the writing workshop common talk and decision-making that engenders common will and compels common action in the ways suggested by Barber would make for a more democratic writing classroom than the one envisioned in the popular workshop literature. The following chapter tests this claim, first, by evaluating critically my use of a workshop approach to guide the in-class activities associated with a trip by a grade 10 English class of mine to a homeless soup kitchen and, then, re-imagining how this experience might have benefited had it been informed by Barber’s strong democracy.

## Chapter 4

### **Democratic Moments for Change: Towards Greater Citizenship and Community in Workshop Classrooms**

In the fall of 2000, my one grade 10 English class of 27 students visited a soup kitchen to prepare and serve lunch to a group of homeless men living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The trip was organized in conjunction with a study of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), as well as a number of writing workshop activities and discussions used to enhance our understanding of the novel. Mini-lessons held at the beginning of class were based on the ideas presented by workshop advocates on genre studies (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1994) and used examples from Lee's book to teach students plot development, the use of dialogue, and specificity in story-telling. In order to combine what they were learning in the writing workshop with the conversations we were having about the themes of race, poverty, and class in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students wrote fictional accounts of what it might be like to live in the shoes of a homeless person.

Lessons in empathy, of course, are not easily learned by writing and sharing such stories; I felt these lessons might be learned best if complemented by performing community service at the soup kitchen. In addition to the stories written before the trip, after it was over, students wrote powerful, genuine poetry expressing their reaction to the visit and reflecting their appreciation for it. But even as I remain confident in my decision to take these students to the soup kitchen and believe it was beneficial to them, the present study has allowed me to see more clearly than before the way in which the trip and the writing were limited in how I used the writing workshop. This chapter points to

these limitations, drafts a proposal for applying the three stages of strong democratic politics as a guide for teaching democracy in workshop classrooms, and then re-imagines what might have come of this visit and the related writing had they been informed by what I have discussed in the previous chapter as the principles and stages associated with a theory for strong democracy.

I should first state that my students grew in their awareness of the issues of race, poverty, and class as a result of reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and in visiting the soup kitchen, and that my use of the writing workshop approach was helpful to this end. In the weeks leading up to the visit the writing workshop provided them with the opportunity in both time and space to speculate on the experiences lived by homeless people, and to articulate their apprehensions about the soup kitchen visit to come. Once at the soup kitchen, many of the men were accessible, sharing their personal stories and inquiring about the ones my students had to tell about their own lives. Playing cards and sharing in conversation with the men at the soup kitchen helped students to see that the homeless were not so different from them. In their poetry written following the trip it was not uncommon for them to suggest that the men were “normal.” In their writing, the students were adamant that while the circumstances for these men may have been the result of bad luck, this did not warrant disrespect; all of this in spite of what is typically given in the media and reinforced in the popular stereotypes familiar to them. The experience at the soup kitchen challenged students’ assumptions about the homeless and relieved their worries. It was obvious to me that the experience at the soup kitchen changed the way students thought about the homeless and made them appreciate that much more the

quality of life familiar to them, which was significantly different than what they had seen and experienced in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

But these new understandings also gave way to a romanticization of the homeless, which made it easy for my students to write about these men and their experience of serving them food without considering how things might be different and what they may do to contribute to necessary change in the way society treats its homeless. In hindsight, it was not enough to ask students to write imaginative narratives about living poor and destitute on the streets prior to our trip to the soup kitchen; nor was it enough to have them write poetry reminiscing about the time spent there upon a return to the classroom. As important as this writing became to each student and as good as it made me feel, I hasten to think what this writing could have meant had it been questioned in more rigorous ways, and if it had been used to challenge our responsibilities in respect to these men and other homeless people than my application of workshop practices would allow. I wonder, too, how the trip may have better achieved its aims if our workshop activities were given a focus toward what brought about poverty, and what, if anything more, should a community be doing about it, even on a small scale, to effect democratic change. That no significant change came about in this sense and, in part, because of what I had borrowed from workshop advocates suggests not a failure but a missed opportunity in democratic learning.

To be fair, workshop advocates never suggest teachers take their students to soup kitchens, or really anywhere else for that matter. However, in reading the writing workshop literature I was led to believe that writing drawn from personal experiences, be they realized in the classroom, at home, or in the community, could develop in students a

greater appreciation for those experiences (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins 1994; Graves, 1983; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987). I was also led to believe that experiences written about in the workshop classroom, and retold in conferences alongside other writers, could prove to be a foundation for education in citizenship and democracy (ibid.). Inspired by workshop advocates, I trusted that the use of a workshop approach would compel my students to probe further into the larger social and political issues presented to them in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and again at the soup kitchen. But my use of the workshop approach to direct our in-class reading and, more specifically, the soup kitchen experience, fell short in realizing these objectives. The writing was always personal, which was not such a bad thing but for the fact that it was never discussed in any critical way that would have led to more meaningful writing and more democratic efforts at talk, decision-making, and action than was had at the time of the study-unit. Essentially, I was wrong to think a writing workshop, at least in its popular conception, could make for more than personal edification in student conversations and writing even when these conversations and this writing were inspired by the good deeds performed at the soup kitchen that day.

### ALMOST A DEMOCRATIC MOMENT

In order to give an accurate assessment of the democratic legitimacy of the writing produced alongside the visit to the soup kitchen and the manner in which it was written, the particular flaws inherent to workshop advocates' conception for democracy

mentioned in chapter 2 need reiterating and their affect on my use of the workshop in the soup kitchen experience demands explanation. To review, the first mistake workshop advocates commit is in thinking that a focus on the individual student, and in a way that precludes the examination of their ideas, be they written or otherwise, will naturally lead the student to think and act in a manner that is critical, engaged, and democratic. The second mistake is to think that all students, no matter what their background or experience, are essentially the same and have equal access to expressing themselves and asserting their independence. Finally, the third mistake workshop advocates make in their conception of democracy is to think that any conflict between students is resolved at the point of allowing students greater freedom of expression in their writing and in increasing the expectation for social and collaborative interaction in the workshop classroom.

Applied in practice, a workshop approach directed by this conception for democracy offered by workshop advocates can result in consequences inconsistent with workshop advocates' own objectives for citizenship and community: the first mistake potentially permits self-interested and individualistic writing and behaviors that draw students into themselves (Aoki, 1995, 2000; Berlin, 1988; Dressman, 1993; Willinsky, 1990), the second can mean the silencing of students' voices and a limiting of independence (Castell, 1996; Delpit, 1988; Edelsky, 1999; Kalantzis & Cope, 1993; McCarthey, 1994; Schreiner, 1997; Shields, 2002); and the third leaves teachers unprepared for recognizing and working with the conflict that may arise in workshop classrooms as a result of heightened social and collaborative interaction (Deshon, 1997; Dyson, 1995; Henkin, 1995; Lensmire, 1994; Wells-Rowe, et al.).

Realistically, the flaws in workshop advocates' conception for democracy were never such a factor in my teaching of this particular unit involving the soup kitchen visit, nor the consequences to applying in practice their assumptions about democracy too acute, to render the writing for the soup kitchen and the visit itself undemocratic. That my use of the writing workshop in this unit did not result in solipsistic writing and self-centered behaviors, overt unrest between students, and disrespect for the lives and experiences of the homeless men we served does not mean that effective citizenship was its outcome. My application of workshop advocates' thinking about democracy—to encourage individual expression without an expectation for critical engagement, to assume unquestioned assent to the progressive and liberal-minded views that supported this study, and to ignore the issues of subversive and divisive tensions in the social makeup of the classroom—did not actively assist in this development. Reviewing the specifics involved in these decisions and outlining the three respective problems that resulted can serve to underscore the inadequacy of the workshop approach in teaching citizenship and promoting community and to prove the need for strong democracy as an appropriate alternative to it.

First, asking students to write about the experience at the soup kitchen and then to limit the collaborative examination of this writing to the more technical and stylistic aspects to it did nothing to test or even to extend their ideas, which reduced the scope, purpose, and overall effect of the writing. There were conferences, of course, for students to share their writing with one another but in staying true to workshop advocates' recommendations these interactions remained focused on improving the quality and organization of the writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Romano, 1987). There were

also opportunities like the “author’s chair” (Graves, 1983) readings talked about in the workshop literature that allowed students to read out their work to an accepting audience of their peers without fear of judgment, technical or otherwise. Students valued the support provided them in such conferences as they were able to improve their writing competency and enhance the confidence in their words and ideas.

Certainly the writing shared in small groups and with the whole class was itself an important democratic act, even if only a personal act of expression. This cannot be ignored and neither can the fact that this writing and this sharing in the too accepting environment of the workshop classroom was not in the least bit self-centered be dismissed. But as productive as this writing and these sorts of interactions were, and as democratic as they were in the sense of choice and expression, students were still left on their own to figure out whether or not the actual content of their writing, that is, the ideas they were discussing, were true to reality or deserving of rearticulation, a task I suspect many students ignored altogether. This is also to say, of course, that other, more democratic possibilities for going beyond vicarious experiences and empathy might have been had.

The writing would have benefited from its discussion and debate. Such engagement would have pushed students towards more significant depth in their thinking than was likely achieved on their own. But most importantly, perhaps, is that this discussion and debate might have inspired a collective effort on the part of students to see how as citizens they might begin to challenge, starting with their writing and their growing power over the word, the larger issues and problems of poverty and class in our society. Instead, these efforts remained individual and as such amounted to so little in the

way of significant change, an observation that is consistent with a number of critical studies on the problems of focusing on student interests and ideas to the exclusion of critical discussion (Aoki, 1995, 2000; Berlin, 1988; Dressman, 1993; Lensmire, 2000; Shields, 2002).

Second, my failure to use the workshop approach to help students contribute multiple critiques of poverty and class and to use their writing to transform the micropolitics of the classroom into a common experience translated into another problem. Making the writing an individual project and raising this writing above the level of criticism, as well as not confronting the micropolitics of the classroom environment meant that fewer ideas circulated within the classroom. This left open the possibility for some students to be subjugated to the will of the majority, which in this case was a progressive and liberal stance towards poverty and its treatment. Students were always welcome to raise questions or doubts as to the nature of the trip to the soup kitchen and to challenge my interests in getting them to perform this community service. I suspect, however, that some of my students doubted whether they could actually express these questions and concerns. I suspect, too, that others were overwhelmed by the influence of the majority of their peers who, though maybe apprehensive, were enthusiastic about what I was asking them to do in volunteering at the soup kitchen. Being aware of their minority position on issues of poverty and class these students may have felt expressing their opinion would risk disfavor with the group. This is all speculation on my part, as these are observations made in reflection and with no accompanying data. I do know that in my enthusiasm to show students a new way of thinking about others from different communities and with different experiences, I did not adequately leave room for them to

express opinions and views contrary to the thinking I was asking them to adopt, which is to say that the potential range of writing and possibilities for discourse was limited.

One of the original purposes of this project was to have students consider in their writing and classroom discussions alternative perspectives in thinking about the poor and the underprivileged. However, this could have been enhanced had such work been carried out alongside a host of traditional and alternative views and not simply those progressive and liberal views of the white-middle class I brought with me to the classroom. There is a necessity in questioning any and all values, not on a random basis, but as part of a directed study into the strengths and limitations to providing services to the homeless in the form of soup kitchens and that may lead to an understanding, perhaps, of how these soup kitchens are necessary but not sufficient, as a critique of a society. In making so little room for this questioning, all classroom discussions reflected one perspective.

Many critics of the workshop speak to the consequences of doing what I now admit to in not allowing for difference and dissent. These critics emphasize that teachers must be aware of the weight their ideas carry in guiding student decisions and classroom conversations, as well as the need to realize the restrictions students place on expressing their ideas in such a seemingly open and accepting environment as the workshop (Castell, 1996; Delpit, 1988; Edelsky, 1999; Kalantzis & Cope, 1993; McCarthy, 1994; Schreiner, 1997; Shields, 2002). Failing to do so, teachers may subvert the freedoms of some students, in spite of their intentions to do the opposite, which is what I fear happened in the case of this unit. At the time I did not think I was doing such a thing, but I now realize how little difference of opinion or dissent was voiced by students

throughout the entire unit which resulted in a stifling, homogeneity in the writing produced and the discussions shared.

Third, these individual efforts to write about the homeless and the experience at the soup kitchen in personal ways and without expectation for opening their writing and ideas to question also made for another problem: it made it possible for students to ignore and, in some cases, avoid each other. Workshop advocates may think that an emphasis on student control in the writing process and opportunities to share their work in an environment free of criticism equates to better relations between students that equates to a safe classroom environment (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994) but this was not my experience. Unlike the writing and behaviors witnessed by Deshon (1997), Henkin (1995), Lensmire (1994), Wells-Rowe et al. (2001), and Smith-Bass et al. (2001) in their observations of elementary school writing workshops, my students were not given to personal attacks on each other or overt behaviors reflecting disapproval in one another. But even though the micropolitics of our high school English classroom were quite different from those described by these researchers, they persisted nonetheless.

Left on their own to pick conference and group partners, students made decisions based on race, class, and language ability. When directed by me to work with others who were from a different set of friends or unfamiliar to them they did so, but always with hesitation and unease. I never considered this anything but normal, given the fact they were not all friends to begin with, but it was my expectation in reading the workshop literature that their sharing of stories, even at the level of technical critique, would suffice for developing significant connections between them. Aware that these connections were not being developed in the framework of the workshop approach, but without a guide for

doing anything about it, the social and political nature of our workshop classroom went ignored, which, in turn, meant that tensions and conflicts were never transformed. It was never my intent that all students become friends but helping them to realize commonalities and to bridge lines of difference was, though the workshop approach was inadequate to achieving this objective.

It is striking that the experience as I have just described it, with its three accompanying problems, would have been reproduced regardless of circumstance or participants, a notion that is, unfortunately, not so much an assumption as a well-supported claim (Berlin, 1988; Delpit, 1988; Dressman, 1993; Lensmire, 1994). Nevertheless, there is much responsibility that I as a teacher have to assume. Again, there were positives to the experience and no dire consequences resulted. But asked if the changes in writing and behaviors were so significant as to make students more critical, more responsible, more engaged, that is more the citizen than they were at the beginning of the unit, I would have to say no. I feel now that I missed an opportunity to direct this necessary analysis of the prospects for democratic change in ways of citizenship and community. I also realize that this would have required a new reference for conducting a democratic classroom than the one I was borrowing in the name of the workshop approach.

For sure, it has taken years for workshop advocates to realize that leaving students alone does not help them in the way of writing, yet the same evolution in thinking cannot be said of their inclinations in the way of teaching democracy. Both Graves (1994) and Atwell (1998), as well as other workshop advocates, among them Calkins (1994), are much more instructive about how the specifics of convention and genre can be taught in a

workshop classroom than they fit were earlier in the first editions of their work (Noskin, 2000; M. M. Taylor, 2000). Equally important, they say, is the person or citizen the student is to become as a result of learning in a workshop environment (Atwell, 1998; Bomer, 1995; Calkins, 1991, 1994; Graves, 1994).

But if workshop advocates have become more specific in their recommendations to teachers on how to teach writing they have been less apt in being specific about how teachers may enhance democracy, despite the fact that they make continued claims for democracy in their literature (Lensmire, 2000). Their efforts to quell the criticism from conservative elites by providing teachers detailed lessons for improving grammar, spelling, and punctuation and improving the overall aptitude in writing performance, the most recent coming from Atwell (2002) in a large edition of lessons, still does nothing to answer questions regarding how one may explicitly teach democracy and citizenship. It is clear that students cannot be left alone to learn the values and behaviors consonant with democracy and citizenship any more than they can be left alone to learn to read and write. This is the overriding lesson to be learned from what I have described above in our trip to the soup kitchen, an experience that was almost a democratic moment but still not quite the one that a strong democratic theory might have helped to provide.

### **THE STRONG DEMOCRATIC WRITING WORKSHOP: A PROPOSAL**

In his book on education, *Aristocracy of Everyone* (1992), Benjamin Barber writes:

“Democracy is not a natural form of association; it is an extraordinary and rare

contrivance of cultivated imagination” (p. 5). As such, it is taught, and when learned requires constant attention in the way of critical, engaged, and responsible participation in the public sphere lest the liberty it earns for citizens give way to apathy, the likely arbiter to the sort of real and soft despotisms Mill (1871/1991) and Tocqueville (1835/2000) so fervently warned us about. In teaching democracy, we must believe that all of our children are capable of learning democracy and apply its ideals in the writing developed, the classroom discussions had, and the decisions made alongside others in constituting a civil and democratic society. Realistically, children will learn democracy, as well as many other things not democratic, in the home or in the community. The school, however, is “the only place where, as a collective, self-conscious public pursuing common goods, we try to shape our children to live in a democratic world” (ibid., p. 14-15). So it cannot be given to chance that students may learn democracy on their own or as the distant and secondary by-product of learning any other number of things in school. It falls to practical, critical educators to constitute critical incidents in developing citizenship in students and promoting community in the classroom.

With this in mind, and drawing from *Strong Democracy* (1984) and its specific definition of participatory politics, it is possible to re-imagine the soup kitchen visit and the way in which a workshop approach was used to direct it. First, however, I want to outline a proposal comprising the three stages in strong democratic politics—talk, decision-making, and common action—and work through each stage as they may apply in workshop classrooms. The basic premise that supports what follows is that in being serious about democracy we must seek out moments when students’ thinking about an issue, their hearing out others’ positions on this issue, and their carefully working out of

their own informed position, can contribute to decision-making processes and effective change, whether in schools, communities, or globally.

Like those fabled teachable moments, there can be radically democratic moments for those who make it their pedagogical practice to look for them. There are, of course, and unavoidably, moments in the writing workshop that are less ideally democratic, as in the teaching of a written convention or learning the specifics of an unfamiliar genre. It is not practical to think that democratic moments may be achieved everyday or in every writing workshop class that one teaches. This proposal only suggests to teachers what might be done in applying the principles and stages of strong democracy to take hold of these moments when, in fact, the time and opportunity presents itself.

***1. Place the writing and its influences at the center of critical and deliberative talk to establish mutuality while inviting multiple views and allowing for and encouraging difference and dissent***

The refusal of workshop advocates to recognize the need for critical and deliberative engagement in response to student writing translates into practice as the most prominent roadblock to citizenship and community in workshop classrooms. Conversely, talk in strong democratic workshops opens student writing up to discussion and debate as a way for students to share their writing and develop new perspectives while leaving open the possibility for reformulating old ones. The purpose here is not so much criticism, as criticism itself is not altogether productive or generative. Rather it is to encourage students to weigh carefully multiple and diverging perspectives against their own tightly held interests so that they may develop a broader understanding for the complexity

involved in whatever they and their peers are writing about and discussing in conference with one another. This sort of discussion is never a competition of interests but a clarification of many interests that provides a platform for students to discover commonalities and to explore and establish mutuality. The necessary critique of student writing guided by strong democratic talk, and with careful and timely intervention on the part of teachers, helps students to see the world as others might see it, which is, of course, a step towards effective citizenship.

The strong democratic workshop in its commitment to talk and allowing for differences in opinion and perspective establishes a basis for the students to hear each other out and engage in productive responses to that listening. Here, students' writing on an issue supports such critical exchanges. Actively engaged in the writing process, and encouraged to share openly their ideas with others and expecting these responses to represent a challenge to their views, students use their writing to further sort out their thinking on the issue at hand and marshal the resources for an informed argument that can contribute productively to an ongoing conversation about possibilities.

Talk, however directed towards clarifying interests and exploring and establishing mutuality, does not preclude autonomy or limit dissent in the strong democratic workshop. To the contrary, it is in efforts at exploring mutuality and in opening their work to critical examination that students in fact maintain their autonomy and develop their self-expression. "Subjecting a value to the test of repossession," writes Barber, "is a measure of legitimacy as well as of autonomy" (1984, p. 190). To this Barber adds: "Forced knowingly to embrace their prejudices, many men falter. Prejudice is best practiced in the dark by dint of habit or passion" (*ibid.*). The lesson here is that any idea,

whether it tends towards prejudice or not, is not worth having if it cannot withstand careful and deliberative scrutiny. Ideas that are never questioned are a contrivance of conformity and debased ignorance earned alongside other limited and limiting minds and not a result of independent and autonomous thinking and action. Only when encouraged to withstand the insight others may bring to bear in responding to our ideas can we ever hope to “repossess our convictions” (ibid.) and become autonomous citizens. This is as true in the strong democratic writing workshop classroom as it is in social and political life. Like civil society, the strong democratic workshop maintains for students their autonomy because it requires their autonomy to ensure an evolving and dynamic community safeguarded against the conformity of opinion and action that can occur in the absence of difference and dissent.

This description of sharing and student exchange in strong democratic workshops is not meant to be idealistic and harmonious, as it is so rarely the case that student work does not entail some sort of conflict and never the case that social interaction can avoid it, be it manifested in overt behaviors aggressive or otherwise or in more subversive forms like attempts made at avoiding others. In truth, talk engaged in social spaces, especially those like a workshop classroom in seating students closely together and making time for numerous interactions is never free of conflict for the simple reason that it is an undeniable and irrepressible product of social interaction, something that workshop advocates have for too long failed to realize. But even as conflict is an always pervasive and persistent factor in human interaction, this does not mean to say that it is immutable to the effects of strong democratic talk. Conflict is always present in workshop classrooms and while talk in the strong democratic classroom is not meant to incite

conflict it certainly does not shy away from it. Instead, talk in strong democratic workshops provides a way to work through and transform conflict, making it a resource rather than an impediment to citizenship.

***2. Facilitate collaborative decision-making to envision classroom communities for individual and group contributions for democratic change***

Just how students and teachers in strong democratic workshops transform conflict through talk is a matter for decision-making. Typically, the extent of decision-making in workshop classrooms has been limited to what students choose by themselves and for themselves. Usually choice of topics is made from a list of preferences derived from personal and sometimes private experiences, while a choice in genre results from the types of writing covered in mini-lessons.

Personal choice is important and consistent with what we have come to expect from democracy, but workshop advocates' emphasis on control through making personal choices suggests a limited potential for decision-making in constituting citizenship and does far too little to promote and support classroom communities. Teachers in strong democratic workshops allow for personal choice in topic and genre selection, as well the representation of their unique views so that students may exert their autonomy. But they will also ask other, substantive questions to do with what sort of classroom community students envision and how and in what ways their writing and ideas will contribute to its achievement. The decision-making process in the strong democratic workshop classrooms becomes vision-making and is the product of social and collaborative inquiry

with and for others in the workshop environment. Decision-making designed in this way increases the democratic value of the student writing done in workshop classrooms and enhances their sense of interdependence to others.

In order to institute decision-making as vision-making requires an entirely different set of assumptions about writing and its effects on community than the assumptions about writing made by workshop advocates. The strong democratic workshop classroom maintains that writing works upon others, influencing their thinking and behaviors and that when directed towards positive, shared, and mutual ends and realized in conversation with others it can mean something tangible in fostering responsible and engaged citizenship, and in establishing a strong democratic classroom community.

### ***3. Organize collaborative and individual writing projects for common action and community service***

Decision-making that fashions a common will and hopes for citizenship and community, as well as the talk used to inspire this vision for strong democratic workshop classrooms means little if it is not put to the test of common action. Students can share their essays, stories, and poems and do so in a critical and responsible manner and with a care for others, but action makes real these lessons in citizenship. Common action in the strong democratic workshop uses student writing as a tool for effecting significant change and forging a civic bond between students and any others they may come in contact with in the course of their work.

Common action for democratic change entails more than asking students to write, say, editorials to the local newspaper so they can voice their opinion on an event while remaining removed from the situation they are commenting on. It requires instead that students develop writing projects designed for implementation and application in the life of the classroom, school culture, or in the community. Students might use their writing, for example, to make a case for replacing older books with others that represent a wider diversity of cultures and interests, seeing to their selection, and then organizing their distribution in the school; figure out what might be done with an abandoned or unused part of the school and work at transforming it into a shared space for viewing and sharing and discussing student writing and artwork; or argue for a change in an existing school policy.

Classroom writing projects may also commit students to community service that takes them out of their familiar classroom setting, writing notebooks in hand, and into the neighborhoods that border the school grounds. Emphasis here would focus on students contributing their writing and conversations to the resolution of some of the practical but manageable problems that affect these neighborhoods. Students could use their writing to start-up, implement or support a neighborhood safe-walk program, a local literacy project, or possibly reconstitute a public space for the construction of a park or playground. They could gather background information about related programs elsewhere or gather local information by interviewing community members that could be used to inform the process.

In any case and whatever the project, it is important to work *with* and alongside the people students are intending to serve and to understand that these community service

projects are never just a matter performing acts of charity *for* them. Charity, while important, is not altogether a legitimating condition of citizenship and may, in some cases, forestall citizenship. “The language of charity,” remarks Barber, “drives a wedge between self-interest and altruism, leading students to believe that service is a matter of sacrificing private interests to moral value” (1992, p. 249). In contrast, continues Barber, “The language of citizenship suggests that self-interests are always embedded in communities of action and that in serving neighbors one also serves oneself” (ibid.). Student writing projects for common action and community service would side with fostering citizenship rather than selfless altruism, and would reflect the shared interests and principles of not only the people their projects are meant to serve but also their interests as well.

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This proposal in hand, it is easier to understand what went amiss in my efforts at organizing the soup kitchen visit and directing its associated writing workshop activities. This proposal also, and most importantly, allows for re-imagining it. Taking into account the powerful and compelling notions of strong democracy established by Barber (1984) I would re-imagine the study on empathy which led us to the Downtown Eastside soup kitchen that day in the following way:

First, students would again be asked to write about the possible lives lived by homeless people in writing their own narratives. Of course, mini-lessons (Calkins, 1994;

Atwell, 1998) would be used to teach the conventions of language and the qualities of narrative writing and would borrow, as much as possible, from Harper Lee's sense of these conventions and her designs on the genre of fiction. Consequently, time would be set aside for students to give and receive feedback about the stylistic and technical qualities of their writing. The difference would be their writing would be opened up to a more critical examination of the assumptions made by them and other students in their work than in the original study. Whether or not the assumptions made are true would become a focus for discussion. But more to the point, these conferences, both small-group and whole-class, would examine where we get our assumptions about the homeless from and would lead, perhaps, into discussions about the influence of the home, the community, and the media in our construction of the identities and behaviors students associate with the homeless. These discussions with the students would make room, as well, for examining the assumptions others make about them and how these assumptions play into their social interactions with others.

Second, students would be asked to assess what might be done to facilitate more accurate representations of the homeless and make decisions in common about the sort of collaborative work that may be done with the homeless men at the soup kitchen that can engender such representations. This is a tall order, indeed, and would be considered too idealistic except for the fact that individual and group advocates, professional and volunteer, who work with these men on a regular basis would be asked to enter into these conversations. These advocates would teach the students about what sorts of campaigns or projects are in place to educate society about the homeless population of the Downtown Eastside, as well as the greater issues in poverty and class that affect this area

of the city. Some of the homeless men who frequent the soup kitchen would also be invited to participate in these conversations in order that students get a first-hand perspective necessary for breaking down assumptions and replacing them with new, real ones.

Third, students, along with a small collection of advocates for the homeless and maybe some of the homeless men themselves, would initiate a number of writing projects designed to improve theirs and others' knowledge about poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. These projects may involve further work with local media and see students drafting service announcements; the crafting of dramatic scripts with help from local-area actors which would cast students and others from in the community in plays performed at a community center or park in the Downtown Eastside or even within the area the school is situated in; or a collaboration on a series of murals designed to showcase the interplay of language, text, and visual art in suggesting positive representations of communities defined by differences in race, class, and religion.

I would add that students be encouraged to suggest alternative and distinctively different opinions on poverty and the homeless. There is a pervasive feeling in society that homelessness is enabled by kind-hearted but ultimately misguided people. I know for a fact that some of my students felt this way in the original study, but that they were too overwhelmed by the task at hand or by my influence as the authority figure in the classroom to voice such an opinion. It would be crucial to this reorganized unit that students are given many opportunities to express their concerns and dissent from the views held by other students and the community advocates they might meet. The issues related to poverty and homelessness are too important and the potential for democracy

too great for dissent to be ignored or minimized. Encouraging dissent within the framework of the strong democratic workshop would give students a chance to sort out these issues, but it would also teach them the valuable lesson that the democratic state of the classroom and the world in general is measured by the degree of dissent that is allowed in social and public spaces.

This sort of work at organizing writing projects and facilitating the accompanying talk and decision-making used to guide their application in real and practical contexts and situations would not be initiated throughout the year and on a regular basis. Teachers in strong democratic workshops would also make time for students to engage in more personal, though arguably less democratic writing activities and experiences and allow for the celebration of this writing in friendly and uncritical groups and other classroom presentations. Strong democratic workshop teachers would understand that this time is important and cannot be sacrificed.

What distinguishes the strong democratic workshop and the role of the teacher in it is that time is set aside, perhaps 2-3 times a year and for a period of 4-8 weeks for those other moments, those democratic moments, when students are invited to write in order that they might incite critical and generative discussion and debate, contribute to a shared vision for the classroom community, and apply their talk and this vision to the practical contexts that surround them. And this is not something that I suggest teachers do everyday in every class that they teach. But then teachers in strong democratic workshops do not need to do this sort of work every day to increase the presence and possibilities for democracy in our lives.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The practices I have assigned to strong democratic workshop classrooms as well as those used by teachers in typical workshop classrooms are directed towards the same ends: the development of the values of engaged citizenship and the building of a sense of community. That said, my argument has been that teachers in workshop classrooms who apply workshop advocates' recommendations to emphasize individual choice at the same time as "following children" in their treatment of student writing will be ineffective in developing citizenship values in students and, at the same time, in establishing democratic communities in their classrooms. Worse, they may enable individualistic writing and behaviors, inadvertently silence student voices, and make possible an unsafe classroom. In contrast, their counterparts in strong democratic workshop classrooms would challenge students to share their work with others in critical and deliberative conversations, facilitate collaborative decision-making, and encourage individual and group writing projects for common action and community service. Teaching writing in this way, they would better be able to help their students in learning and practicing the art of effective citizenship, that is, the ability to balance individual interests with the public needs of the classroom community while maintaining for themselves autonomy and the capacity for dissent.

As convinced as I am that strong democratic workshops are a more viable and necessary alternative to regular workshop classrooms in realizing these possibilities for

citizenship and community, I do want to consider in this last chapter two probable counterarguments to initiating a strong democratic workshop program in language arts classrooms. The first is that children, whatever their age, either in elementary school or high school, are too inexperienced and immature to participate in, and benefit from, this sort of focused program in writing and democratic education. The second is that teachers, taxed for time and committed as they are to busy teaching loads and large-sized classes, are unwilling to assume the responsibilities necessary for a strong democratic workshop classroom to be effective. Both counterarguments represent related concerns. If children are inexperienced and immature and therefore incapable of accessing the attitudes and behaviors needed in strong democratic workshops, and teachers are too busy to implement its ideals then it would seem that these new designs on workshop classrooms are at best limited, and more likely an inconvenience to students and teachers alike.

Admittedly, I have my biases, but I recognize, as well, the concerns related to each of these two objections and have questioned myself throughout the course of this project about the practical feasibility of a strong democratic workshop. However, my experience of teaching in the schools and of working with students in a number of capacities, not all related to teaching English, suggests that these concerns are superficial. My biases and experience notwithstanding, these two concerns deserve careful, if only brief, treatment.

The first counterargument suggests that strong democratic politics demands a good deal in the way of empathy, independence, and cooperation from even the most experienced and mature citizens among us. To think then that children and adolescents, being as young as they are and admittedly less experienced and mature, are capable of

conducting themselves with as much poise and confidence as the least capable citizens in society is misguided. Individuals advancing this point of view might argue that the strong democratic workshop would not so much be counterproductive as it would be a waste of time if practiced in the schools.

The problem with this first counterargument is its assumption that citizens must already possess particular attitudes and behaviors consistent with citizenship prior to practicing it and evolving their attitudes to it. Having taught in the high school, I would be the first to admit that a strong democratic workshop would test many students, and although I have yet to teach in an elementary school setting, I can only imagine this would be more case in that situation. But I would also say that this is true of many of the adults I have met. The point about strong democratic politics is that it is not a finite state reached at a particular point in time; human beings are not preternaturally democratic and their development into critical, engaged, and responsible citizens takes place over the course of a lifetime, and can never be said to be finally realized. This is not just wishful thinking, as it reflects a major and proven tenet of learning anything, be it democracy or writing or any number of things. It is more appropriate, and more helpful, to think that children have, at the very least, the potential to learn the values of good citizenship, even if they might not always be capable of practicing it. This requires modifications in strong democratic practices, but it does not follow that such practices need to be dismissed.

A likely example can be drawn from the workshop study and the visit to the Downtown Eastside soup kitchen described in the last chapter and the changes I would have made to it. Perhaps it goes without saying, but I would never expect that a group of grade 3 students could be engaged at the level of participation as, say, the grade 10

students who participated in the original trip, and who I think would be capable of responding in kind to the new demands that would be asked of them if it had been organized as I have now suggested.

Any teacher will make changes in their teaching and application of a lesson plan or unit and I expect that teachers in a strong democratic workshop would be no different. However, if grade 3 teachers were at all apprehensive about asking their students to venture to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and collaborate on writing projects with the homeless and their advocates, as would probably be the case, they could very well adapt the unit to suit the limits and needs of this age group. This would likely, however, involve a reading of their assumptions about themselves and others and how they see themselves prepared to treat people based on these assumptions. The writing might explore further these assumptions and oblige students to write narratives or poetry demonstrating their knowledge, as limited as it may be, about the homeless, and ask them to consider more closely the influences their home lives and relationships with friends play into this writing. Conversations could then turn to drafting a vision for classroom interactions, including how they might be expected to treat one another and why. More specifically, the writing and the related conversations could be used to imagine what students as individuals or in groups might initiate as writing projects to tackle some of the problems they see in their treatment of others or in others' treatment of them. However they go about it, these teachers would use the strong democratic workshop approach and its stages in talk, decision-making, and common action to challenge students' perceptions about themselves and others.

I realize I am being abstract in my answer here and perhaps that is a consequence of my limited dealings with elementary-aged children. Nevertheless it is also that I believe that we need to be creative in teaching democracy and not settle for the inexperience and immaturity of our students as obstacles to this necessary work. The writing and the conversations had in a grade 3 language arts classroom committed to work on poverty and class in society may in fact be less descriptive and mature than that produced by students in higher grades, but, it could just as easily surpass expectations, which is to say that students cannot be underestimated. My thinking is that our ability and willingness to challenge our students and to teach them citizenship and promote democratic communities in our classrooms is as much a test of our imagination as it is a challenge to strong democratic politics, one which teachers would admittedly have to commit to in order for a strong democratic workshop to be effective.

I realize, too, that in terms of investment of time and thought and energy I am asking a great deal of teachers that might not be asked of them if they were to organize their teaching around the promises and practices associated with many of the popular programs in writing, of which the writing workshop is one. This raises the second likely counterargument to a strong democratic workshop: that teachers are too busy with a myriad number of issues and problems both academic and administrative to be able to give the necessary commitment that such a classroom would demand. My answer to this second concern, however, is less predictable in some ways than my answer to the first.

In truth, I am of two minds when considering the demands that a strong democratic workshop places on teachers. On the one hand I know as well as anyone the demands of the work of being a teacher having taught a full teaching load of English or

English and Drama for three years (in addition to being a basketball coach and involving myself in a range of student field trips) and juggling a part-time load in English this past year while finishing this study. I know what it means to take a box, or more likely, two boxes, of portfolios home to mark, waking up early on a Saturday morning and working through the day writing back to students in response to their writing. I also know that come Sunday evening I am sometimes too tired to think about planning for the upcoming week and have had to settle for less than my best effort on the Monday. I am aware, as well, that the extra-curricular activities in teaching are a necessary part of the overall job, whether coaching sports, assisting on hikes or art gallery trips, or sponsoring critical discussion groups, in developing a better rapport with students and colleagues in the school. All of this, plus the regular administrative work in making copies, filing lessons plans, and ordering books. The job is never easy for any teacher, and there are many more than not, who commit the same sort of time and energy to their practice as I have done.

I would be lying to say that the practices I have proposed for strong democratic workshops and the ideals entailed in them will make our lives teaching English any easier. The reality is that a strong democratic workshop will not be easier to maintain and the effort needed to make them work will be that much more a challenge to our resolve than seemingly less demanding approaches. But I also feel that if there is a challenge to be taken, then it is the challenge of teaching for democracy that we need to embrace. The strong democratic workshop is but one of the many important ways we might do this, and whether or not it may be a challenge to maintain or its objectives in citizenship and community too difficult to achieve is not fundamentally the determining factor. What is

at issue are the sort of decisions we make throughout the day, and in the course of a year, in advocating on our own behalf and that of our students the value of this work in preparing students for democracy so that one day we may put an end to some of the red tape and bureaucratic underpinnings of our education system that truly make our teaching lives difficult. One of the problems is that as teachers we have given in too easily to commonly held, but misguided beliefs about learning in a democracy rather than advocating the merits of this work. The strong democratic workshop can be for us a means for proving the legitimacy of democracy in our schools and making a stake for democracy in our lives, that is, if we take its practices and ideals seriously.

What I have tried to do in this study is to contribute to an ongoing dialogue about how we might extend the learning in workshop classrooms to mean more than it already does, which is asking a great deal, but not too much when we consider the promises already made by workshop advocates and the possibilities depicted in the workshop literature. If I can be accused of being too idealistic and my hopes for strong democratic workshops too ambitious, then so be it. At least I have this in common with the workshop advocates who first inspired in me the promise of promoting the democratic classroom, and with it the hope that my work with students might be as meaningful as they have suggested. The possibility of a renewal and a re-theorizing of this promise in workshop classrooms in the name of strong democracy, however, suggest to me that the approach and extension of the workshop ideal that I have developed here, might help students constitute a life in this democratic society that will be theirs to shape.

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