

English 101

Writing Topics for Essay #1: “Learning Power: The Myth of Education and Empowerment”

At our last class meeting, we discussed two short position statements, pro and con, by **Olson** and **Schlafly** on the issue of “school-to-work.” The three critical essays on education in our text, by **Gatto**, **Rose**, and **Anyon**, complicate and expand on the ideas and issues raised in the pro and con statements, examining various problems in education and implicitly addressing some of the purposes of education. In essence, all of the writers are exploring the question, “What are we educating people *for*?”

Choose **one** of the following topics and write an essay of about 3 - 5 pages in response. In your essay, be sure to make explicit references to two or more of the critical essays in our text. Keep in mind that you need to **engage with** the critical essays, incorporating them into your arguments, not just mentioning or briefly quoting from them.

1. “Tracking” students -- grouping students according to similar interests, abilities, or goals -- is commonly done, presumably to make it easier for teachers to tailor their lessons to the students’ needs and for students to learn those lessons without having to go too fast or too slow. (For further explanation, see the editors’ discussion of tracking and its relation to industrialization in the introduction to this chapter, p. 117-18.) Tracking seems efficient and sensible, yet Mike Rose’s experiences and Jean Anyon’s findings suggest that it may create serious problems. Certainly the *goal* of tracking is not to treat students in the ways Rose describes nor to imprison people, as Anyon suggests it does, yet frequently tracking does keep people where they currently are rather than preparing them to move onto more advanced tasks. Are there alternatives to tracking that could help to alleviate the problems that tracking is intended to solve? **In an essay, make an argument for some other ways or methods to make certain that the students in a class could all be successful *without* resorting to dividing them by abilities, test scores, or career goals.** What would you do to make certain that the brightest and most motivated students are kept engaged while also making sure that the students who are less able or motivated do not feel frustrated or left behind? How could you make use of things like group work, peer tutoring, smaller classes, or team teaching to best serve all the students in your class? Be sure to offer **specific** details about how you would structure a class, and make explicit references and connections to one or more of the essays in our text to support your arguments and suggestions.

2. Many politicians, commentators, and ordinary citizens put the blame for the problems in our public schools on the teachers. However, according to Michael Moore, this is not quite fair (see his discussion of this topic on p. 139-141 of his essay “Idiot Nation,”). Because of the low pay, heavy workload, and poor conditions teachers are subjected to, Moore (among others) believes that rather than blaming them for problems beyond their control, we should show teachers how grateful we are to them for choosing to do such important work despite the

difficulties they face every day. **Write a letter to the Governor telling what you think should be done to encourage more talented people to consider becoming teachers, as well as exploring how we can keep people who are teachers from leaving the profession, as a high percentage do within five years. In your letter, be specific about why it is so difficult to attract and retain good teachers and what steps could be taken to help solve those problems.** Be sure to make specific references to two or more of the essays in our text to support your arguments and suggestions.

3. Think back on your own time in high school in light of the critical essays we have read to see how the authors' ideas and arguments may reflect or help to illuminate your experiences. Then, assuming that you will have children entering the same high school in a few years' time, **write a letter** to the principal, the superintendent and/or the school board in which you **explain one or two of your major concerns about the school (similar to those raised in the essays we've read), and tell what you think should be done to address these concerns by the time your own children enter high school.** Be specific in your descriptions of the problems that exist with particular programs or courses and suggest possible solutions, drawing on at least two of the essays we have read to lend support to your concerns and your proposed solutions.

4. In his essay "Against School," John Gatto argues that the true purpose of modern schooling is to keep people dependent and in their places, not to liberate them, as we may believe education is intended to do. He states that compulsory mass-schooling has made it virtually impossible for people even to imagine a different way to do things. Presumably, this makes major educational change or reform unlikely. Conversely, in her essay, Jean Anyon's descriptions of the "affluent professional" and the "executive elite" schools suggest that Gatto's depiction of modern schooling does not apply to these more well-to-do institutions. **In an essay, tell how you would incorporate some of the methods of the affluent professional and/or the executive elite schools in order to achieve fundamental alternatives to the "six basic functions" of modern schooling that currently seem to plague many public schools.** What are some of the things (including money) that would be necessary to effect these changes?