

# COMPOSING IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE:

## FEMINIST PEDAGOGY IN RICHARD LAGRAVENESE'S *FREEDOM WRITERS*

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### *Abstract*

This paper explores Richard LaGravenese's 2007 film adaptation of Erin Gruwell's teaching memoir, *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*. LaGravenese's adaptation chronicles the challenges and triumphs Gruwell faces as she earns her disenfranchised students' trust and respect both inside and outside of the classroom. Gruwell uses feminist pedagogical practices in order to transgress institutional practices that seek to silence her Students' Right to their Own Language. My purpose in analyzing this popular culture film is to discuss how feminist pedagogy is presented in *Freedom Writers*. While a considerable amount of scholarship has analyzed the way educators are both positively and negatively portrayed in film, there has been no attempt to critically assess how feminist pedagogical practices work to challenge traditional educational ideologies in film. My analysis also seeks to identify and evaluate some of Gruwell's exemplary teaching practices in order to analyze the ways in which feminist pedagogy might enhance other theoretical approaches and pedagogical practices in education.

*Keywords:* feminist pedagogy, composition practices, methodology

Critics have often dismissed Richard LaGravenese's 2007 drama, *Freedom Writers* as yet another stereotypical Hollywood teacher movie that follows the trope of the white savior film. Erin Gruwell, the film's white, upper-middle class protagonist, displays extraordinary personal pedagogy and makes a difference in the lives of troubled inner-city youth (Cammara, 2011; Hughey, 2014; Pimentel, 2010). Although the plot of the film is similar to other problematic representations of white educators and minority children (*Dangerous Minds*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Half Nelson* to name a few), *Freedom Writers* departs from this tired genre in that it addresses the sociocultural power relations that plague many inner-city schools, rather than suggesting classroom teachers alone "must shoulder the responsibility for making education empowering for urban youth" (Choi, 2009, p. 244).

Based on the 1999 memoir, *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*<sup>1</sup>, the film adaptation chronicles the challenges and triumphs Gruwell faces while earning her disenfranchised students' trust and respect both inside and outside of the classroom. Gruwell uses feminist pedagogical practices in order to transgress institutional practices that seek to silence her Students' Right to their Own Language. Her transformative pedagogy ultimately leads to the successful graduation of many of her students, a number of whom go on to attend college as first generation students. Gruwell herself becomes a teacher at the college that many of her students later attend. Unlike the teacher-hero in the traditional white savior film, Gruwell address the structural and institutional problems that her students face, empowering them to create change at the future institutions they attend.

My purpose in analyzing this popular culture film is to discuss how feminist pedagogy is presented in *Freedom Writers*. While a considerable amount of scholarship has analyzed the way educators are both positively and negatively portrayed in film, there has been no attempt to critically assess how feminist pedagogues work to challenge traditional educational ideologies in film. As Choi (2009) notes, many teachers may feel disempowered when faced with systemic and structural injustices and no alternative pedagogical practices or

models are suggested. The feminist pedagogical practices Gruwell exercises in *Freedom Writers* may provide a model for how educators might challenge systemic racism and the current-traditional rhetoric that continues to influence writing instruction at many secondary and postsecondary schools. My analysis of feminist pedagogy is limited to LaGravenese's film adaptation in an attempt to narrow the scope of my analysis in the much broader genre of the teaching film. The decision to analyze this single American film was also made in an attempt to avoid the tertiary issues associated with cross-media differences between the film and the memoir itself 2.

I begin by defining feminist pedagogy and then discussing its six individual principles as they relate to Gruwell's teaching practices. Because some films "have the power to work their way into our collective dreamscape and permanently alter the way we perceive and interpret our life and times" (Burbach & Figgins, 1993, p. 66), I conclude my analysis by exploring the way the feminist pedagogical practices highlighted in *Freedom Writers* might serve as inspiration for composition instructors at the postsecondary level. Like Giroux (2008), I would argue that the genre of film has the ability to act as public pedagogy and should become a part of a much larger public discourse regarding how to develop and engage alternative pedagogical practices.

## DEFINING FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

Carolyn M. Shrewsbury (1993) defines feminist pedagogy, or a feminist methodology for teaching as "a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies in terms of the desired goals and outcomes" (p. 8). Historically, this definition has encompassed feminist theory, method, and practice. This approach to teaching critiques traditional ideas about learning in order to create transformative political change. More specifically, feminist pedagogues use definite criteria to create what feminist composition scholar Kay Siebler (2008) calls "a keen awareness of classroom dynamics, continually striving to confront issues of power and authority as they play out between students and teachers" (p.

3). Deep level learning is conceptualized as a communal process in which teachers and students create meaning together. Through this collaborative learning process, teachers guide students “to critical consciousness, especially in regards to racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and other ideological forces that create hierarchies” (Siebler, 2008, p. 3).

Often considered hierarchal, conventional methods of academic assessment are also called into question. Feminist pedagogy challenges dominant masculine ideologies that privilege efficiency and objectivity as the only means of successful educational assessment (Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002). Consequently, feminist pedagogues tend to use journaling, peer review, and class discussion as alternative means of evaluating academic learning. Students often articulate their own learning outcomes and design projects that interest them on a personal level. Teachers honor agency as an important way to recognize the unique perspective each student brings to the classroom. This emphasis on individuality mitigates the undemocratic social markers many students bring with them to the classroom (Siebler, 2008).

Despite its success in providing scholars and students with an alternative to a patriarchal learning framework, feminist pedagogy is not without its critics. According to feminist philosopher Malka Berenice Fisher (2001), negative attitudes regarding feminist pedagogy often result from the negative connotations the word carries in contemporary American culture. Individuals inside and outside of academe often assume feminist professors intend to indoctrinate their students with feminist political ideology. While this perception may have been somewhat true of the early Women’s Studies courses of the 1970s, present-day feminist pedagogy has expanded beyond the Women’s Studies classroom (Siebler, 2008). Professors across disciplines now ask students “to see language as a powerful tool of ideology and [to] create connections between their identities as writers and thinkers and the larger culture,” rather than pledge allegiance to a particular political ideology (Siebler, 2008, p. 73). In this sense, language becomes an important intellectual tool in bringing about social change (Siebler, 2008).

Because intellectual development is privileged over rote memorization in feminist pedagogy, students are encouraged to think about ways their ideas might take shape outside traditional learning environments. Feminist pedagogues often solicit outside community members to discuss their activist work. These guest speakers “attempt to move students to action outside the classroom community,” and service learning is often incorporated into the curriculum (Siebler, 2008, pp. 54-55). Students frequently partner with community agencies in order to formulate “course projects that focus on public sphere rhetoric of change” (Siebler, 2008, p. 55). Ultimately, as a school of thought, feminist pedagogy seeks to form “connections between the external world and the classroom, creating a learning environment that is high energy, using the kinetics of a classroom as a critique of traditional models of education” (Siebler, 2008, p. 3). Feminist teachers value this mode of learning because they strongly believe “that social action leads to critical consciousness more directly than classroom critical thinking exercises” (Siebler, 2008, p. 55).

Although feminist pedagogy developed in early Women’s Studies courses that implemented and advocated critical pedagogy during the late 1970s, it has helped define the theories and practices that define composition as a field of study. Siebler (2008) contends that “feminism is not a ‘special’ category in composition, but infused in mainstream composition theory and practice, although not recognized as such” (p. 4) by many scholars currently working in the field. Although crucial to understanding the contemporary principles of writing, the broad definition of feminist pedagogy is not exclusive to composition studies. Webb et al. (2002) argue feminist pedagogy consists of six core principles: a reformation of the relationship between professor and student, empowerment, building community, privileging voice, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional pedagogical notions. While these tenets are certainly not limited to English Studies, each principle contributes to the goal of most composition classrooms—the creation of a collaborative learning and writing environment.

## BEST PRACTICES IN ACTION

In terms of filmic representation of the feminist pedagogue in a composition classroom, Erin Gruwell stands as an example of best practices in action, despite considerable adversity. *Freedom Writers* centers on the story of Gruwell (Hillary Swank), a young high school teacher who leaves her upper-middle class home in suburban Newport Beach, California to teach English at the urban Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California in 1993. Once a top performing high school, Woodrow Wilson High now faces budget cuts due to its poor standardized test scores. The social climate at the school is volatile due to its poorly implemented integration plan, and although the student body is diverse, racial tensions run high.

The film begins with the odds for success stacked against both Gruwell and her students. The opening shots of the film depict scenes from the 1992 Los Angeles riots. These riots were a series of civil disturbances that occurred in Los Angeles, California in 1992 following the widely publicized acquittal of police officers charged with showing unnecessary brutality towards African American citizen, Rodney King<sup>4</sup>. While critics such as Charise Pimentel (2010) argue that this opening scene functions to create a racialized frame that constructs minority students as academically and socially inferior, these images highlight the strong correlation between social injustice such as police brutality and the educational disenfranchisement of minority students. They further foreshadow the racial hostility Gruwell will face in the classroom, and suggest that academic underachievement is a multilayered social issue, rather than the result of the moral or intellectual inferiority of students.

As a white female, Gruwell clearly does not share the same racial or ethnic background as the vast majority of her students. Her class status, represented by the single strand of white pearls she wears every day to school, further separates her from the lived experience of the students in her class. Because of her race and social status at the beginning of the film, it would be easy to dismiss her as yet another white savior figure who seeks to rescue her students of color from poverty through her intelligence and benevolence. However, over

the course of the film, Gruwell acts as what Julio Cammarota (2011) terms a “white ally” (p. 244). According to Cammarota, the white ally differs from the white savior in that he or she joins in solidarity with people of color to actively challenge institutions that maintain systems of oppression. Allies must experience a “reduction of status” and a “sublimation of one’s ego” in order to counter white supremacy through the empowerment of people of color<sup>5</sup> (Cammarota, 2011, p. 244).

Gruwell experiences such a reduction of status and ego when she openly challenges the administration at Woodrow Wilson High School. By refusing to practice orthodox pedagogy and uphold a racist classroom curriculum, she commits class suicide by relinquishing her “social status to work collaboratively with the oppressed” (Cammarota, 2011, p. 251). She faces outright hostility from the mostly white faculty and administration at Woodrow Wilson High, and her marriage ultimately ends because her husband does not understand her newfound passion for teaching. Despite these challenges, Gruwell successfully uses each of the six core principles of feminist pedagogy in order to ensure that her students graduate from high school with a social conscious (Webb et al., 2002).

The following sections present my critical analysis of Gruwell as a practitioner of feminist pedagogy. Her feminist pedagogical practices create a unique classroom learning environment that foster best practices in composition instruction and support Students’ Right to Their Own Language. Thus, a major goal of this essay is to identify some of Gruwell’s exemplary feminist teaching practices in order to analyze the ways in which feminist pedagogy might enhance other theoretical lenses and pedagogical practices.

## **A REFORMATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROFESSOR AND STUDENT**

Webb et al. (2002) identify a reformation of the relationship between professor and student as the first principle of feminist pedagogy. In masculinist models, “the teacher represents an uninterrogated body of knowledge that is passed to the students whole-cloth” (Siebler, 2008, p. 16). In contrast to this traditional model of

education, feminist pedagogues share power and the responsibility of learning and meaning making with their students. This learning paradigm is particularly valued in the composition classroom. Students learn to conceptualize both themselves and their teachers as writers. Rather than omnipotent fountains of knowledge, teachers are merely more experienced writers that might guide students through an unfamiliar writing process. However, in order for this relationship to be truly symbiotic, trust must first be established between teacher and student.

In order to gain her students' trust, Gruwell first restructures the power dynamic within her classroom. As both a feminist teacher and a white ally, Gruwell shares power with her students; she emphasizes that both she *and* the students in her classroom are responsible for teaching and learning (Webb et al., 2002). Hence, she conceptualizes herself as a guide or classroom facilitator rather than as an absolute "power broker" (Siebler, 2008). Although she never explicitly names herself as a feminist over the course of the film, her style of teaching recognizes the need to model feminist perspectives and democratic relationships (Siebler, 2008). On the other hand, when consensus cannot be reached between Gruwell and her students, she is always transparent in terms of why and how she makes decisions for the group as a whole. In this way, Gruwell's leadership style clearly becomes an important component of her personal pedagogy (Siebler, 2008).

Gruwell initially encounters resistance from her students when trying to establish a more democratic classroom environment. When she first meets her students and attempts to converse with them, they are not receptive to her white, middle-class, heteronormative speech acts. Violence breaks out within the classroom, and many of the students stop attending class altogether. However, Gruwell is eventually able to reform the power dynamic within her classroom by using what Foss and Griffin (1995) term *invitational rhetoric* (p. 3). Invitational rhetoric "creates three external conditions in the interaction between [the interactants]—safety, value, and freedom" (p. 10). Gruwell establishes these conditions in her classroom in order to promote the feminist principles of equality, imminent value, and self-determination (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Rather than demanding



that her students obey her, Gruwell invites class members to respect her, themselves, and their fellow classmates by encouraging them to participate in alternative learning activities that promote unity and understanding.

In particular, Gruwell uses a privilege line activity<sup>6</sup> as one such way to kinesthetically appreciate and validate the perspectives of her students, although they differ dramatically from her own (Webb et al., 2002). Gruwell frames the activity as an alternative to “reading workbooks,” and calls the learning exercise “the line game.” Gruwell begins by asking students a series of general, nonthreatening questions such as “How many of you have the new Snoop Dogg album?” and “How many of you have seen *Boyz in the Hood*?” Nearly all of the students take a step forward toward the line in order to answer in the affirmative. However, Gruwell’s questions grow increasingly uncomfortable for the students and tension begins to build within the classroom: “How many of you live in the projects?” “How many of you have been in juvenile hall or jail for any length of time?” When a female Asian student asks, “Does a refugee camp count?” Gruwell responds, “You decide.” This answer affords the student self-determination, and she chooses to step forward.

The climax of the scene occurs when Gruwell asks the students to stand on the red line if they have lost a friend to gang violence. All of the students, except for Ben, a white student, take a step forward toward the line in order to answer in the affirmative. Through this activity, Ben must directly confront his white privilege and recognize the ways in which he might be both consciously and unconsciously supporting oppressive power structures. The students quickly learn that many of their classmates have lost more than four friends or relatives to the violence of the streets. Gruwell then asks each student to speak the names of the deceased aloud in order to pay respect. She then thanks them for their participation in the activity. This sobering exercise invites students to recognize their shared experiences, a hallmark of invitational rhetoric. Gruwell never attempts “to challenge or control” her students over the course of the activity (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 10). Instead, she communicates “a relationship of equality, respect, and appreciation” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 68) between herself

and her students through their new found sense of mutual sense of understanding. This shared tolerance for difference is crucial to the successful writing the students will complete later in the film.

## EMPOWERMENT

As “the primary goal of feminist pedagogy,” empowerment functions as an important component of reforming the traditional power dynamic between teacher and student (Webb et al., 2002, p. 68). Feminist pedagogy asks students to view themselves as knowledge makers rather than as passive followers of a teacher. Rather than indoctrinating their students into the conventions of a set ideological framework of learning, feminist pedagogues empower students to take risks in the classroom. These risks are particularly important in the composition process, as interesting writing usually requires a break from tradition in terms of genre, voice, or content. Feminist pedagogues tend to value creativity and individuality in student writing.

Like other feminist composition teachers, Gruwell views the act of composing as an important way to not only empower her students, but to gain their trust. After having her students complete the privilege line activity, Gruwell tells her students that she has something for each of them. She informs them that “Everyone has their own story, and it’s important for you to tell that story, even to yourself.” She proceeds to distribute black and white composition notebooks to her students, and explains that they are required to write in these journals every day. She promises not to read their entries unless they give her permission, although she volunteers to read their work if they wish for her to do so.

This journaling activity serves an important rhetorical purpose—empowering student writers. Gruwell is careful to include herself in this writing practice, as she uses the pronoun “we” when explaining the assignment. Her grammatical choice builds solidarity between herself and her students. She clearly views herself as a writer, and she encourages her students to likewise view themselves as writers. Gruwell tells her students to “write about whatever [they] want, the past, the present, the future.” Their compositions are not graded, as she

asks her students an important rhetorical question: “How can I give an A or a B for writing the truth, right?”

Gruwell recognizes that her students’ education is not “a neutral cognitive process” (Siebler, 2008, p. 68). Rather than facilitate her students’ “integration and conformity into the logic of the present system,” she encourages them “to deal critically and creatively with reality and to learn to participate in transforming their world” (Siebler, 2008, p. 68). The compositions they create in their journals may take the form of anything from a traditional diary entry to a song or poem—“any good thing, bad thing, anything,” as Gruwell puts it (Siebler, 2008, p. 68). Feminist scholars Middlecamp and Subramaniam (1999) call this process of acknowledging feelings and experiences “the practice of freedom” (p. 522). Gruwell eventually compiles and publishes her students’ journal entries as a collection aptly entitled, *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

In order to empower students, feminist pedagogy seeks to foster community both inside and outside of traditional learning spaces. Although feminist theories “provide a voice for an empowering ideology that has the potential to change the way people envision the world,” Siebler (2008) notes that these ideas “often stagnate in the academy instead of moving into the lives of women outside that privileged arena” (p. 109). The goal of most feminist pedagogues is to take feminist principles outside of the ivory tower of academia and into the streets. This objective also applies to feminist pedagogues working at primary and secondary levels of education.

As an English teacher working at a public high school, Gruwell acknowledges the need for her students to engage with liberatory practices outside of her classroom. She initially recognizes the necessity of enacting this principle after she unwittingly intercepts a racist cartoon created by one of her students. When she expresses her frustration and dismay about the drawing, Eva, a young Latina student angrily exclaims, “You don’t know nothing!” She then asks Gruwell a question that changes the course of the entire school year: “What are you doing in here that makes a goddamn difference in my life?”

Gruwell answers Eva's question by expressing "interest in the transformational potential of community and connectedness" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 69). She has her students read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in order to first feel connected to a community outside of the place and time of their classroom. She then invites various Jewish Holocaust survivors to speak with her class and share their experiences. The culmination of the unit is a field trip to the Museum of Tolerance. The students feel empowered by reading about other disenfranchised communities, and, when they learn that Miep Gies<sup>7</sup> is still alive, one black student suggests that they invite her to come visit their class. By letting the student participate in determining the classroom curriculum, Gruwell acts as an ally, allowing her student of color to take a leadership position within the classroom.

When Gies arrives and recounts her story, Marcus stands up and tells Gies that she is his hero. Gies denies this label and responds by telling Marcus and his fellow classmates that "[they] are heroes every day." This remark inspires Eva to tell the truth while being cross examined during her court testimony of a drive-by shooting she witnesses while shopping in a convenience store. By having her students interact with community members who have "[acted] toward the good of a more equitable society," Gruwell encourages her students to create a world "where people link together in a fundamental attitude of protectiveness" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 69) that extends beyond an individual's own race, class, or gender.

## **PRIVILEGING THE INDIVIDUAL VOICE AS A WAY OF KNOWING**

Recognizing the culture-bound construction of knowledge is a vital aspect of feminist pedagogy. While building community is certainly a fundamental principle of feminist pedagogy, it does not come at the expense of privileging the individual voice as a way of knowing. Officers of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) recognized the importance of student voices in the fall of 1971 and consequently drafted a language policy resolution that "[articulated] a rationale for broader language freedoms in education (and beyond)" (Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, & Jackson,

2015, p. 1). This policy aimed to “[emancipate] fugitive dialects,” (Perryman-Clark et al., 2015, p. 1) which until this point had garnered little to no respect from teachers, professors, and upper-level education administrators. Despite the near 44 year history of recognizing the importance of students’ voices by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), many English teachers and professors persist in only allowing students to compose written assignments in Standardized American English<sup>8</sup>.

Like most feminist composition pedagogues, Gruwell embraces her students’ Right to Their Own Language. The composition notebooks Gruwell distributes to her students not only function as a means of empowerment, but also as a way for students to recognize their individual voices as important sources of knowledge. Gruwell does not require her student to compose in these notebooks in any one particular language, dialect, or mode. Instead, she allows them to use the textual space as a means of finding and developing their own voices. By shifting authority to her students, Gruwell encourages each member of the class to slowly “emerge into the public space, speak for themselves, and bring their own questions and issues to the material they are studying” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 70).

At the conclusion of the formal “Toast for Change,” a classroom event Gruwell establishes to create a space where students publicly share their struggles and the ways they would like to work towards changing them over the course of the semester, a quiet Latino student steps forward and asks Gruwell if he may read an excerpt from his journal. None of the students know his name, and they have never heard him speak, despite the fact that he has been their classmate since junior year. Using his own words and speaking them in a Spanish accent, the student proceeds to recount his personal experience with homelessness. He explains that thinking of his “crazy” English teacher is “the only thing that makes him think of hope.” He concludes his short monologue by making the assertion, “I am home.”

Because he feels empowered to write about his personal experiences with poverty and homelessness in his own voice, this nameless student literally and figuratively creates a home for himself within the community of his classroom. By composing in his own

voice, he develops what Gawełek, Mulqueen, and Tarule (1994) call a “primary and critical way of knowing” (p. 181). The student’s public presentation of his brief narrative shows him exercising his “right to act, to speak, to tell the [story] that has the potential for discomfort” (Siebler, 2008, p. 102). In this sense, he uses the act of writing to become a knowing subject. This act is revolutionary in the sense that young Latinos and other minorities like them are often denied subjectivity in terms of knowledge making and truth telling.

## **RESPECT FOR PERSONAL DIVERSITY OF EXPERIENCE**

Because feminist pedagogy recognizes that the personal is political, lived experience is validated as an important and necessary means of gaining knowledge. The acknowledgement of these personal experiences often acts as “a basis for analysis, theory generation, activism, and research” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 70). In the composition classroom, feminist pedagogues aim to create a collaborative writing environment where students affirm difference in written and spoken English. The acceptance of linguistic variety manifests itself in an appreciation of the different lived experience of students. Consequently, they feel comfortable writing and verbally articulating their own hopes, fears, and dreams because of the rhetorical agency they exercise.

Gruwell’s “Toast for Change” is a clear example of how personal diversity of experience might be respected within the composition classroom. The activity not only provides a means of recognizing the individual voice as a way of knowing on a micro-level, but it also serves as a macro-platform for celebrating the differences between individual students. After receiving the books they will be reading over the course of the semester, each student steps forward and makes a toast for change. Again, Gruwell uses the pronoun “we” in order to include herself in the process of working towards change. In the scene, students step forward and verbally articulate their goals for the future. These aspirations vary: one student vows not to get pregnant and drop out of high school, while another promises not to accept domestic abuse. Marcus pledges not to allow his gang affiliation to

continue to damage his relationship with his mother. By speaking these goals aloud, students affirm their lived realities. The “Toast for Change” celebrates differences of experience and results in “increased respect, enhanced empathy, better critical thinking skills, and broader understanding of truths” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 70) for all members of the class. This activity also provides a heightened awareness of individual struggle, which fosters a collective support system for all members of Gruwell’s class. Consequently, students learn to respect and embrace difference rather than fear it.

## CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL VIEWS

The final and perhaps most important component of feminist pedagogy is a willingness to challenge traditional views in both education and social practice. As Webb et al. (2002) note, “Feminist pedagogy challenges the notion that knowledge and teaching methods can be value free” (p. 70). This liberation pedagogy challenges existing sexual politics and critiques the values that underpin traditional educational practices. This emphasis on self-criticism and reflexivity calls for sustained community engagement that is not always easy. As a result of its commitment to social change, many feminist pedagogues face considerable challenges in attempting to expand students’ understanding of themselves and the world around them.

In terms of Composition Studies, feminist writing instructors tend to challenge the expectation that students will always compose in Prescriptive English or adhere to the social expectations of mainstream American culture. They recognize the ascendancy of standardized English as an arbitrary social construct that potentially stifles voice and creativity. Feminist pedagogues attempt to combat an adherence to the standards of traditional writing practices by providing students with a deep understanding of writing that allows them to make their own meaning out of language, culture, and the act of writing. Consequently, many feminist pedagogues face opposition for their unconventional views on writing and their willingness to challenge institutions that support the status quo.

Gruwell is no exception. In order for her students to experience life-changing paradigm shifts, she must battle the other teachers at

Woodrow Wilson High School and the upper-level school district administrators. Gruwell's department head, Margaret Campbell (Imelda Staunton), refuses to allow her to distribute school owned copies of *The Diary of Anne Frank* to her students. Campbell insists that the students should not have access to the books because Gruwell can only hope to teach her students "obedience and discipline." After Gruwell purchases the books herself for the students, Campbell petitions the superintendent not to allow Gruwell to teach the students' English course during their junior and senior years of high school.

Although she angers her colleagues by pointing out the ways in which state sanctioned education marginalizes her students, Gruwell is ultimately successful in "[sharpening] [her] students' awareness that values are socially constructed and therefore open to question and change" (Webb et al., 2002, p. 71). However, this hard earned success does not come without a price—Gruwell's marriage ends as a result of the financial and time constraints placed upon her after beginning her teaching career at Woodrow Wilson High School. Despite the negative repercussions of practicing feminist pedagogy, the film ends with a joyful Gruwell announcing to her students that she will be their English teacher for their junior and senior years of high school.

## **TOWARD A FEMINIST PEDAGOGY**

The feminist pedagogical practices highlighted in *Freedom Writers* certainly inspire me as a composition instructor at the postsecondary level. Although these controversial methods are risky, their benefits certainly justify the efforts of instructors. I know I personally have reaped the rewards as a student of many feminist pedagogues. The teaching practices and philosophies of these brave teachers have no doubt inspired me to become a feminist composition pedagogue myself. Because popular film has the power to "send a message to the members of society about what is important" (Burbach & Figgins, 1993, p. 65), we might use a film such as *Freedom Writers* as a tool to critically examine our own values as teachers and our personal pedagogical methods. As rhetoric, composition, and English studies continues to develop as field of study, we may view *Freedom Writers*



as a touchstone teaching text for examining how the six core principles of feminist pedagogy might be applied in the writing classroom.

### *Author Note*

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## Notes

1. The title of the memoir pays homage to the multiracial civil rights activists, the Freedom Riders, who supported the desegregation of interstate buses in 1961. See The Freedom Writers and Erin Gruwell's *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them* (1999) for a further description of the title of the text.
2. My decision to narrow the scope of my essay was inspired largely by Harold J. Burbach and Margo A. Figgin's 1993 study of images of teachers in film titled, "A Thematic Profile of the Images of Teachers in Film." Burbach and Figgins limit their analysis to American films in order "to eliminate the problems arising from cross-media and cross-cultural comparisons" (p. 66).

3. Siebler (2008) cites “writing letters to public officials about sexual education funding or organizing a campus zap action to protest sweat shop labor” as specific examples of rhetorics of change (p. 55).
4. For a more detailed explanation of these national events, see “Rodney King Case and the Los Angeles Uprising.” *UCLA Film and Television Archive*. UCLA, n.d. Web. 29 April 2015.
5. Freire (1998) calls becoming a white ally engaging in the process of “true generosity” (p. 46).
6. A privilege line or privilege walk, as the activity is sometimes called, asks students to acknowledge unearned social advantages based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, or sexual identification. Although many variations of this exercise exist, students usually stand on or near a line, sometimes holding hands with their classmates. The teacher or professor then reads a series of statements regarding privilege aloud to the class. Students respond by either remaining stationary, taking a step forward, or taking a step backward as each question pertains to their individual life experiences. If physically linked, students are to remain holding hands for as long as possible, although at some point they will probably have to break the connection. The teacher is the only person allowed to formally speak during this activity.
7. Miep Gies sheltered Anne Frank, her family, and other Jews from German Nazis in a small annex above the Frank’s family business.
8. Perryman-Clark, S., Kirkland, D.E., & Jackson, A. (2015) Understanding the Complexities Associated with What It Means to Have the Right to Your Own Language. In S. Perryman-Clark, D.E. Kirkland, & A. Jackson (Eds.), *Students’ Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook* (pp. 1-16). Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s.