Newsletter

Conference on Basic Writing

A special interest group of CCCC

Volume 12, Number 2 December 1993

REVIEW: *A KIND OF PASSPORT: A Basic Writing Adjunct Program and the Challenge of Student Diversity,* by Anne DiPardo (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1933) NCTE Research Report No. 24. 202 Pages.

Karen S. Uehling

A Kind of Passport, by Anne Dipardo, is a fascinating story of crossing boundaries, a theme prevalent at the 4th National Basic Writing Conference a year ago. Dipardo describes the mixed motives, messages, goals, and desires of people of color beginning to study at a predominantly white state university. What is it that such students see from the perspective of double vision? How can instructors issue them thoughtful invitations to cross the boundary, as Mike Rose puts it?

DiPardo deals with these questions, presenting a "thick" description of basic writing and multicultural students. The title alludes to George Lemming's assertion that "language [is] a kind of passport." The author explores the passport of language, examining linguistic and cultural diversity as seen in four students: a Latina woman, a native American woman, an African American man, and a man recently immigrated from El Salvador.

I highly recommend this book because it told me so much about different kinds of students: I learned something about students from cultures different from mine; I learned about how multicultural students who have been here most of their lives differ from recent immigrants; and I learned about how difficult the job of student assistants is.

The heart of the study is Sections 2

BASIC WORKMANSHIP: A View from the Nineteenth Century

From *The Stones of Venice* by John Ruskin

But above all, in our dealings with the souls of other men, we are to take care how we check, by severe requirement or narrow caution, efforts which might otherwise lead to a noble issue; and still more, how we withhold our admiration from great excellencies, because they are mingled with rough faults. Now, in the make and nature of every man, however rude or simple, . . . there are some powers for better things: some tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought, there are, even at the worst; and in most cases it is all our own fault that they *are* tardy or torpid. But they cannot be strengthened, unless we are content to take them in their feebleness, and unless we prize and honor them in their imperfection above the best and most perfect manual skill. And this is what we have to do with all our laborers; to look for the *thoughtful* part of them, and to get that out of them, whatever we lose for it, whatever faults and errors we are obliged to take with it. For the best that is in them cannot manifest itself, but in company with much error.

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and 3, in which DiPardo deals with her primary research topics: (1) The larger context of instruction--the institution and the community; (2) the immediate context of instruction--the English Department, its administrators responsible for the program, and BW course instructors; (3) two student "adjuncts," upper division aids who mentor small groups of BW students; and (4) the BW students themselves.

Time in college teaching is always short--how well can we get to know each student in ten or fifteen weeks? Over the years we learn about our students if we let them teach us, but this book at least shows us more than we typically see, and also alerts us to what to look for. DiPardo helped me to appreciate important things about various cultures and about particular students.

As an example let me describe Fannie, the Native American student, whose struggles I find especially poignant. Fannie is from an Arizona Navajo Reservation. She spoke only Navajo until kindergarten when she was sent to a boarding school so far from home that she only saw her family on weekends. At the school she was allowed to speak only English. Fannie had a difficult time with education, attending various schools and living with several different family members, but somehow, after almost dropping out, she made it through high school in California and entered the state university.

Fannie's goal is to return to the reservation to teach. She possesses a painful sense of double vision--she desires education and the chance to teach that it promises, but she is also homesick, missing her family, the beauty of the reservation, and the Navajo language. She feels that the high Navajo school dropout rate is responsible for reservation poverty, but she worries about Native Americans losing their language and traditions, and she is concerned that education might be used to "'betray your people'" (115).

Fannie's instructor identifies her greatest writing problem as an inability to develop a paper with detail, and usually Fannie is quiet in small group work. Fannie's group leader, Morgan, finds both of these issues frustrating, and usually has a hard time "hearing" what Fannie has to say. In one memorable conversation, Fannie hints at her desire to write about the land; Morgan seizes upon this idea, trying to help Fannie find a focus and adequate detail, but ends up appropriating Fannie's idea and turning it into an environmental paper:

Fannie: I'll say, the country was, um . . . *[pause]* more like, I can't say perfect, I mean, was, the tree was green, you know, I mean, um, it was clean . . . *[long pause]* I can't find the words for it.

Morgan: In a natural state? Um, unpolluted, um, untouched, um, let me think, tryin' to get a . . .

Fannie: I mean everybody, I mean the Indians too, they didn't wear that, they only wore buffalo clothing, you know for their clothing, they didn't wear like . . . these, you know, cotton, and all that,they were so . . .

Morgan: Naturalistic.

Fannie: Yeah. "Naturalistic." I don't know if I'm gonna use that word.

Morgan: Well, maybe if you looked up the word *natural* in your thesaurus? (125)

DiPardo summarizes this exchange this way: "The Navajo's connection to the land is legendary--a connection, many would maintain, that goes far beyond mainstream notions of what it means to be concerned about the environment. However, in her well-intentioned eagerness to affirm Fannie's ideas, Morgan repeatedly used the term *environmentalism* to describe Fannie's stance" (126). After reading this, I asked myself, "What have I not heard when I talk to students? How many important issues have I missed?"

I also learned from Al, the African American student. Although he wants to learn standard English so he can help the people back home, Al is a resistant learner, not willing to join the white culture of the college uncritically. Al experiences real problems with Morgan, his group leader. Morgan, the first ever African-American tutor, is viewed by the faculty as the model minority student. Al, however, sees Morgan as too close to white culture. In the end, Al asks to be switched to another group.

Al feels that white people stereotype him as a gangster, and, by the end of the year, he joins an African-American fraternity as a source of support. Al also resists peer feedback. He's an independent person who, as the author notes, views the composing process as one of "rugged individualism" (139). The in-depth look at Al that the book provides helped me understand his complex motives for accepting instruction or resisting it--whichever he was doing, I am convinced that he had reasons and that he was learning.

I also gained from this book some understanding of the difference between recent immigrants and multicultural students who have lived here most of their lives. DiPardo employs anthropologist John Ogbu's metaphor of "caste" versus "immigrant" to characterize this difference (8). African Americans and Hispanic Americans often have the caste mentality--they do not necessarily see education as a way out. What is the incentive to learn standard English? Will it guarantee a "better" life? In contrast, recent immigrants may see America as a land of promise. Christian, one such recent immigrant described in the book, immigrated from El Salvador as a high school sophomore but is learning English quickly; he is fundamentally hopeful about his life here.

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The distinction between "caste" and "immigrant" mentality is critical for appreciating the challenges and motivations of our students. There is a great difference between learning English as a second language and using two competing languages from birth, or sorting out two dialects. There is also a great difference between becoming rooted in one culture and then

moving to another, versus growing up between two cultures from birth, especially if your culture is viewed by others or oneself as a lower caste.

In addition to BW students, DiPardo describes two upper division students. From this description I gained a sense of just how difficult the job of student assistants in a basic writing class can be--with little training or support they were expected to deliver individualized instruction to a small group of multicultural students. That the institution placed this load on their shoulders reveals the low priority multicultural students often have. Why hadn't experienced, tenured faculty who had specialized in teaching been assigned to work with these students?

The two adjuncts are both successful upper-division English majors in their late twenties, but they are otherwise very different. Kalie, an experienced Anglo woman, often spends time in class engaging in long, somewhat eccentric accounts of her own life and her own thinking, with the goal, she says, "to spark" something. She holds conservative views about linguistic difference.

Morgan, the African American tutor, is new to the job and uncertain about her role as group leader. Should she give right answers and teach grammar, or work on the social construction of meaning, guiding students so that they discover for themselves? (72) Morgan finally chooses peer collaboration and tries to get students to figure out their own ideas; she decides that her role should be to reflect back what students are saying.

Morgan is ambivalent about her ethnic heritage, having grown up in a white community. She does not speak Black English or have any close African American friends. She experiences conflict about her identity as a successful African American student at the university, evidenced from this entry she writes in a notebook: "NOT EXPECTED TO KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT MINORITIES"(80).

DiPardo's analysis of the big picture framing BW instruction is penetrating and useful. She concludes that not only are the group leaders failing their students in some ways but also the university is failing the group leaders. The leaders need more extensive training: "they needed a conceptual shift, a movement away from regarding their task as a collection of discrete 'how to's' towards a theoretically grounded view of their job's many complexities and unresolved tensions" (89). This shift could only happen if the entire university dealt seriously with the issues involved. The student group leaders only reflected and enacted the unresolved tensions within the university itself, sometimes painfully so. And worse, the BW students themselves, the people least knowledgeable of academic institutions of any of the players, lived out the institution's unresolved conflicts about cultural diversity in their daily lives.

In addition to the rich picture of basic writing instruction *A Kind of Passport* draws, the book has other appeals. The bibliography includes educational sources on multicultural experience, many of which I had not seen before. The study itself is a fascinating piece of ethnography; if you have ever wondered what an ethnographic study looks like or what the pieces are in such a study, this book will be helpful. Among the materials included are extensive interviews, transcribed tapes of group

sessions, excerpts from student essays, and summaries of teaching logs kept by the group leaders.

Perhaps I'm stretching it, but I think most students are in some ways "multicultural" when they enter college--they may be working adults, they may be working class, they may be first-generation college students, they may be from small towns and attending large schools, they may be tied to a particular religious tradition or family orientation. Just as Mina Shaughnessy suggests that the problems of BW students are the problems of "all writers, writ large," so I see in DiPardo's study the problems of any beginning student writ large.

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R*E*V*I*E*W*S

Recent Articles on Basic Writing

Sally Harrold

I thought of entitling this review section "Coming of Age in Composition," for the articles I've chosen have as common ground their examination of the past to suggest future directions in theory and practice. In her essay, "Conflict and Struggle: the Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" (*College English*, December 1992: 887-911), Min-Zhan Lu looks at the conception of conflict in the work of three prominent early scholars in basic writing: Kenneth Bruffee, Thomas Farrell, and Mina Shaughnessy. She indicates how their views of conflict--something to be overcome or assuaged--are reflected in, indeed undergirded, the educational philosophies of acculturation and accommodation. Lu discusses the academic, political, and literary contexts of the seventies that fostered these ideas. And she analyzes the assumptions about language inherent in their views: "1) an 'essentialist' view of language . . . and 2) a view of 'discourse communities' as 'discursive utopias'" with a single voice (889). Further, she contrasts their ideas of conflict and education with those held by Gloria Anzaldua, Mike Rose, and Glenda Hull. These current theorists see conflict and education as sites of change--both inner and societal--that help "students reach a self-conscious choice on their position toward conflicting cultural values and forces" (906). Finally, Lu uses this new position to critique the work of several current theorists and practitioners (Epes, Murphy, Rondinone, and Steele) and to call for a new direction for basic writing theory and practice. That new direction necessitates using the authority the early scholars in basic writing garnered to read students' conflicts and stories by the light of new views of language, pedagogy, and politics--ones that see conflict as sites of change.

Lu's work offers us a valuable

perspective on the work and context of those who began our field and on the educational philosophies and linguistic assumptions that have shaped much subsequent work. Its call for a new perspective would reshape both our pedagogy and our assumptions about language. By foregrounding these issues, Lu's work invites us to experience our own "borderland" with our past. We, too, need to make conscious choices on our "position toward conflicting cultural values and forces" (906). How do we regard our work--its purpose--our students, ourselves?

Yet another article that looks at the past to suggest directions for the future is Andrea A. Lunsford and Robert J. Connors' "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers" (*College Composition and Communication*, May 1933: 200-223). Lunsford and Connors did indeed look at the past--only to discover that teachers' commentary on students' papers was a recent phenomenon, dating from the early fifties. Before that, teachers primarily edited and graded their students work without commenting on it. With the rise of the communications movement, the idea of teachers' being the audience for students' papers--and responding rhetorically--began to come into currency. Lunsford and Connors briefly chronicle the research since the fifties, referring to Chris Anson's book, and note that no large-scale numerical study of teacher commentary has been done in the last forty years.

Lunsford and Connors discuss their methodology and provide tables, but they make no claims for being scientifically reliable or representative. Instead, they offer their study as the first that has examined large numbers of papers (3,000). Their findings: 77% of teachers make global/rhetorical comments; 75% of papers had grades--not always the ones with global comments; 64% of papers had terminal or initial comments that fall into familiar tropes, such as the praise/critique set (e.g. all praise, critique then praise, just critique, praise then critique); the most common foci of rhetorical concerns were using supporting details and overall organization; and few teachers commented on audience, purpose, or relationship to the assignment.

The researchers felt that the sample teachers' comments generated a picture of the teacher/responder--someone who is exhausted and overworked, who comments from a superior, judgmental, impatient stance--not from a reader-response mode or as a commentator on content. Many teachers confused revising and editing; few focused extensively on revision in writing; and many used grading sheets with few comments. They conclude that although we address rhetorical concerns as well as mechanical ones now in our grading of student papers, we often seem to focus on inculcating a standard of judgment in students, rather than a knowledge of how to write to perform up to those standards.

The article is valuable, its seems to me, not just for the wealth of information it provides. It is valuable, as well, because Lunsford and Connors take the stance with us that they advocate we take with students: they assume our good intentions, provide us with information about and possible reasons for how we perform, and suggest specific ways that we might improve our performance.

Finally, I want to recommend not an article but a collection them--the Spring 1993, Volume 12.1 special issue of *The Journal of Basic Writing: 4th National Basic*

Writing Conference Plenaries. All of these articles examine past practices and suggest new directions for the future--in theory, politics, and pedagogy. They also give evidence of the quality of those engaged in the teaching and research of basic writing. We form a community with each other, with our students, and with other writing teachers; that community can and often does call us to be "our own best selves."

This is a regular column discussing recent journal articles of interest to teachers and researchers working with basic writers. If you've recently written or read an article of interest, please send a copy to Sally Harrold, Dept. of English, Southwestern Oregon Community College, Coos Bay, OR 97420, for possible review.

Bulletin Board

March 4, 1994: The Sixth Annual Conference of the CUNY Writing Centers Association. The featured speaker will be Dr. Ira Schor, an expert on the philosophy and practice of Paulo Friere. For information call Lucille Nieporent (718) 368-5405 or Steven Serafin (212) 772-4212.

January 5-8, 1994: CCCC Winter Workshop at Sheraton Sand Key Resort, Clearwater, Florida. Call 800-369-NCTE. In Illinois, call 217-328-3870.

March 17-19, 1994: CCCC Annual Convention, Nashville Tennessee, in particular **the SIG meeting of CBW at this Convention!**

The CBW Newsletter is published twice a year by the Conference on Basic Writing, a special interest group of CCCC. The editor is Kay Puttock of Mankato State University in Minnesota. Opinions expressed in these pages are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor, the officers of CBW, CBW's Executive Committee, or CCCC.

Membership in the Conference on Basic Writing is $5 for 1 year, $9 for 2 years and $12 for 3 years and includes a subscription to the CBW Newsletter. Address: Sally Fitzgerald, Div. of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian, Hayward CA 94545.