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WARNING: BASIC WRITERS AT RISK—THE CASE OF JAVIER[1]

ABSTRACT: *Despite the abundance of research on basic writing, most definitions are reductionist and deficit-oriented. The implication that improved pedagogy and increased literacy experiences will solve all the basic writers' problems puts the blame on the students when they continue to fail. These definitions and their implied solutions ignore the multitude of cultural and idiosyncratic factors which may influence the feelings and behavior of those who fail—the basic writers at risk. The following case study illustrates these factors and our failure to recognize them, and suggests that rather than continually defining the basic writer, we should begin to redefine and reexamine our roles and attitudes as teachers of basic writers.*

One gets all kinds of students in basic writing, with all kinds of problems. As Mina Shaughnessy pointed out, "not all BW students have the same problems; not all students with the same problems have them for the same reasons" (40). This variety in students and "problems" has led to a variety of definitions and explanations for basic writing. Most researchers agree that these students are underprepared, but go onto find little agreement on what characterizes such lack of preparation or how it can be remedied.

Patricia Bizzell (1978) and David Bartholomae (1989) define basic writers as those students unable to handle the conventions of academic discourse. Sondra Perl's (1979) studies conclude that basic writers have a truncated composing process and that they fail to reflect. Mike Rose maintains that they have a "limited notion of

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what composing is" (1983, 116). Nancy Sommers (1981) agrees with Shaughnessy that these students are rule- and sentence-bound. In her survey of research on basic writing, Karen Greenberg concludes that "errors of basic writers result from problems in 'performance' rather than from any linguistic or cognitive deficiencies" (1987, 192). These students are characterized as "struggling with the complex demands of different writing tasks, rigidly following rules that impede their progress, and worrying almost continually about error" (201, 02). Such problems may be exacerbated further by poor reading skills and inexperience, cited in studies by Lunsford (1978), Ong (1978), and Bartholomae (1987), among others. (See Stotsky for a review of reading-writing research.)

David Bartholomae synthesizes these definitions when he notes that "the problems of basic writers can be seen more immediately (and more generally) as a writing problem—as a problem, that is, that all writers face" (1987, 69). In other words, if all writers were arranged on a ladder, the more experienced would be at the top, while the basic writers would be along the bottom rungs. But they wouldn't all be on the *same* rung. If we extend the analogy, some basic writers would be lower than others.

Perhaps due to the abundance of definitions, there has been little or no research which looks specifically at those denizens of the lowest rungs, the basic writers at risk. Troyka refers to them as those who "give up, or 'stop out' for a while" (3). In "The Rhetoric of Empowerment in Writing Programs," Harriet Malinowitz defines them as students who "often possess at least some of the following traits: they are working class, people of color, and older than the conventional college age; they speak English as a second language or a nonformal dialect of English; and they are the first or among the first in their families to attend college" (161).

These students are different from their counterparts. While their peers are usually able to climb the academic ladder, no matter where they start, these students often stay where they are, or simply fall off. These are the students who show signs of progress early, but then drop off, or drop out. They are not anomalies. According to Ann Murphy, such behavior occurs in basic writing classes "with startling frequency" (183).

Out of frustration, we may characterize these students as slow or lazy, not "college material." Hull, Rose, Greenleaf, and Reilly have found that despite the abundance of research about basic writers, "locating the blame for educational failure in students' character or intellect [is] still very much with us. . . . It is easy—and common—for older, deficit-oriented explanations for failure to exist side-by-side with these newer, more progressive theories . . . in fact,

the old notions can and do narrow the way newer theories are represented and applied, turning differences into deficits, reducing the rich variability of human thought, language, and motive" (1991, 7).

Such thinking can lead not only to a reductionist view of the causes of some basic writer's educational failure, but also to over-simplified solutions. Many definitions of basic writers are deficit-oriented; they imply the need for improved pedagogy, one which will raise the students' consciousness or broaden their literacy experiences. But if that were all they needed, we would not have students who fail. These definitions—and their implied solutions—ignore the multitude of idiosyncratic factors which may influence our students' feelings and behavior. The following case study illustrates these factors and our failure to recognize them, and suggests the need to get beyond classification of deficits so we can get "inside" the basic writers at risk.

The original purpose of this study was to describe the effects of combined reading-writing instruction on the composing processes of basic writers. The subjects of this study were Indiana University students enrolled in a special section of basic skills, a linked reading-writing course team taught by two instructors, one from English and one from Reading. Unlike many traditional research models, where the researcher appears only to test, I attended each class, completed reading-writing assignments, and participated in discussions and collaborative sessions, so that my presence would appear as natural as possible.

Rather than conduct an experimental study which focused on the curriculum, I decided on a research project centering around two case studies. To collect case study material, I interviewed students and instructors, videotaped students' composing episodes, audiotaped post-writing discussion of these sessions, and read all of the students' written work. The interviews covered the subjects's home environment, educational background, composing strategies, attitudes towards reading and writing, and reflections about and evaluations of the linked courses.

The videotapes were films of the two case study students writing each draft of three major writing assignments. Instead of completing these assignments at home or in the dorm (like the rest of the class), the case study students brought all notes, reading and writing materials necessary to complete the assignment, and composed each draft seated at a desk in my office. This was a familiar space, since it was just down the hall from their basic skills classroom, and was where they and their peers had come for interviews. Behind the desk was a videotape camera focused on their text. The students

were left alone to compose and were interrupted only when the videotape was changed at thirty minute intervals.

Following the composing session, the student and I would review the tapes and discuss what thoughts and strategies occurred before composing began and during observed pauses. All comments were taped and later transcribed for analysis. Based on the work of Bloom (1954) and Rose (1984), stimulated recall was used, because it proved more reliable than students' memory alone and less instrusive than oral protocols. When I interviewed the case study students at the end of the semester, they confirmed that the videotaping had not interfered with their composing; if anything, the context was more conducive to writing than their dorm rooms.

Following Graves' (1981) recommendation that case studies include a variety of data to provide a sound contextual base against which to examine the work of individual students, I also subdivided the class into groups for various levels of observation and data collection. Group I was composed of the entire class. Data collected from this group included pre- and post-semester reading and writing tests and interviews. This information helped me select a representative sample of six students (2 high, 2 medium, and 2 low ability writers) to form Group II. Data from Group II consisted of all of the above, plus additional interview information. This information was used to corroborate generalizations drawn about the entire class, to select two students (one high ability, one low ability) to participate in case studies, and to serve as a stratified base against which to compare the findings drawn from Group III, the case studies.

This essay focuses on the work of Javier, one of the case study subjects. I chose Javier because of his attitude and ability. From his early writing sample, it was clear that he was one of the least experienced writers in the class. He knew this, but said he wanted to work on his writing, and thought participating in the study might lend further help. Shy but friendly, Javier said he was "honored" to have been chosen as a case study subject.

The Class, the Curriculum, and the Cultural Environment

Javier enrolled in the basic skills linked reading-writing course on the advice of his academic advisor. The courses were taught by a reading instructor and a writing instructor who collaborated on course design, content, and teaching strategies. The class met two hours a day, three days a week, for one semester. The students had reading instruction the first hour and writing instruction during the second.

The reading curriculum was not what could be termed "developmental"; it was a survey of theories of learning. Students read various texts ranging from articles by Piaget to Richard Rodriguez' *The Hunger of Memory.* Instruction centered on strategies to aid comprehension, such as previewing texts and predicting their content, writing summaries, mapping organizational structures, synthesizing material, and identifying key concepts. The reading instructor used writing and discussion to help students learn these strategies. These strategies were reinforced in the composition course, where the students read and wrote about education. But the pedagogy was less traditional. The writing instructor taught the composing process by using freewrites, multiple drafts, and peer evaluation. Writing assignments included narrative, short analysis, argument, comparison/contrast, and research papers. These assignments grew in complexity, gradually drawing on the texts and skills taught in both courses.

The basic skills linked reading-writing class was composed of two Hispanic, two Black, and nine Caucasian students. Since this study was conducted in the Midwest, Hispanic students might seem atypical. However, in the basic skills classrooms, as in society in general, Hispanics are rapidly becoming the largest minority group. As such, Javier represented a significant constituent of the basic skills population.

There was no such minority representation among instructors, however. Both Ms. F., who taught reading, and Mr. A., who taught writing, were White/Anglo. Of the two, Javier seemed more comfortable with Mr. A. He was an easygoing, approachable man whose concerns were teaching the composing process by lessening apprehension, building confidence, and concentrating on the development of content. In early interviews, Javier said he felt secure in the writing class because of the relaxed environment and because there was little or no emphasis on mechanics, which he perceived as his weak area.

Ms. F. was not unapproachable. Yet her subject matter, psychological theories of learning, was beyond Javier's range of experience and interest. Her assignments—extensive independent reading accompanied by written summaries—were much more difficult than Javier had ever encountered. As well, Ms. F. appeared more demanding than Mr. A. Since writing was taught as a process, Javier could revise his drafts. But he didn't have this opportunity, or theoretical approach, in reading. There was no drafting. Consequently, when Javier turned in "substandard work," Ms. A. often asked him to redo it. In that class, revision may have been seen as punishment, not polishing.

My role as observer and researcher made my status unclear. As a fellow class member, I could be considered a peer; however, as a researcher, I became part of the authoritative triad. Nevertheless, my relationship with Javier began positively. Initially, he arrived promptly for his composing sessions. But as the semester progressed, his attitude and performance changed. He started skipping class and arriving late to our composing sessions, although he usually called to let me know. Then, he began arriving late without telephoning. Finally, toward the end of the semester, he skipped some appointments altogether. When I asked him to call and cancel, he would agree, but then wouldn't do it. As a peer, I was not in a position to punish or even chastise him; as a researcher, I was at his mercy. Since his participation was integral to my study, Javier's absences worried and frustrated me. However, as I became less a peer and more an authority figure, he grew more resistant. He didn't confront or openly defy me; he was passively resistant.

At the time, his behavior was inexplicable. But in hindsight, his actions seem related to his feelings about school in general and about the linked reading-writing course in particular.

A Case Study of Javier

At the time of this study, Javier was 19, the youngest of four children ranging in age from 19 to 24. He had two brothers and a sister. One brother was in the Marines and one was in college; his sister was married. Originally from Puerto Rico, Javier's parents moved to the United States before he was born. Family structure was patriarchal—his mother was a housewife, his father a construction worker who made all the rules. Although they had lived in the U.S. at least twenty years, his parents still spoke Spanish around the house, while the children answered them in English. Spanish was reinforced by nightly watching of Spanish television. In sum, Javier came from a bilingual environment.

Javier's family appears to have sent mixed messages about education. His mother taught him to read his name and write numbers, the alphabet, and his address before he entered public school; his father helped with math homework during grade school. And both parents were regular readers. Yet they did not, to his memory, ever read to him. When asked about this, Javier laughed and said, "They never read nothing to me. They always tell me, 'Pick up a book and read it yourself.' That was it." Javier refused. Instead, he spent much of his time with his oldest brother, who read comic books to him.

This relationship was apparently highly influential. Even in

college, Javier's main hobby and source of relaxation was reading and collecting comics. Moreover, he indicated that instead of attending college, he would prefer to further emulate his brother by enlisting in the Marines. Javier believed that life as a Marine would be much more fun and interesting than attending college. This attitude may have also been influenced by his relationship with his other brother, whom Javier called "the smart one." This brother was always able, in Javier's eyes, to read and write with ease, although he never helped Javier with his English classes. When asked if anyone helped him with English, he replied, "No, I just had to face it on my own."

Javier felt he would never be a student like his "scholarly" brother. Nevertheless, his parents insisted that he also attend college. His feelings about this are illustrated in one of his first freewrites, where he declares, "The reason I came to college was because I had no other choice. . . . The decision in coming to college was my Mom [sic] and dad telling me what I was going to do."

High school had not prepared Javier for the amount of writing and the type of reading required in college. He had much more reading than writing experience—and the reading may not have been extensive. Texts alternated between classics and books of the students' own choice. Javier usually chose books he had read before or those which had been made into television movies, like "the Newburgh [sic—Lindbergh] baby." Writing consisted of quizzes and short summaries. The only class requiring writing was in his junior year; it focused on the research paper. Javier paid no attention to the teacher, did none of the work, and failed the course. When I asked him why, he replied, "I don't know. I thought it was too much reading for me, about to blow my brain out or something. So I just said, 'I'm going to ignore it.' "

Because of his high school grades, Javier was designated a "borderline" student and placed in Indiana University's summer Groups program, a specially designed sequence of precollege courses to aid the success and retention of minority students. Unfortunately, this placement improved neither his skills nor his attitude towards school.

To learn about Javier's work in summer school, I interviewed his advisor, Mrs. J. She told me that even though he was taking a class for native Spanish speakers, Javier did little or no work until she assured him he had a chance to pass. At that point, he began to work and received a C in the course. In Language and Study Skills, his progress was mixed. His teacher said that in class discussions, Javier's grasp of the reading material was obvious and seemed far above that reflected on his placement test. However, when required

to write summaries or syntheses of what he'd read, his work was failing. Initially, his summaries consisted of sentences taken verbatim from the reading assignment. When his teacher pointed out that this was not acceptable, the summary writing degenerated to a series of non sequiturs plucked from the assignment, and eventually ceased altogether.

Mrs. J. talked extensively with Javier about his grades and his attitude towards school. While it was difficult for him to admit his feelings, eventually he revealed that he didn't know what he wanted to do. These feelings vacillated throughout the summer and were reflected in his grades. Because of his poor performance during summer school, Javier was admitted to college for the Fall semester on academic probation. He attended classes for 2 weeks, then dropped out, citing problems with financial aid. At the beginning of the second semester, financial problems apparently resolved, Javier returned to school. That's when I met him.

I first spoke with Javier in the initial interviews with each member of the class. During this session, we discussed goals and expectations for the linked reading-writing course. Javier's attitude towards writing was rather fatalistic. He felt that the ability to write well was a gift, not a skill. He cited his "smart" brother as an example, "God gave him his ability, so he had to take it." When asked if any other factors were involved, he said his brother's "smartness" helped. Because of these two "gifts," Javier believed his brother could sit down and write about anything at all. But not Javier: "I can't pick up a pencil; I don't like to pick up a pencil and just write about anything. And, you know, I have to know what I'm writing about, and what I'm going to write about." Like many basic writers, Javier saw his need as a negative trait, a skill he did not possess. Consequently, he seldom wrote. Javier believed that reading was easier than writing: "Reading is just right there at you, you know, you ain't got to write or nothing. It's more better." When we talked further about reading, Javier mentioned that his brother was such a good writer because he read a lot of books. Moreover, when his brother read, "He used to circle, underline words, main features of the book." Javier said he couldn't do that either because, again, he was "not as smart." In sum, he viewed academic reading and writing as unattainable skills. The time he devoted to homework further revealed these feelings.

During this semester, enrolled in fourteen hours of classes, Javier estimated that he spent one hour a day reading for school. The bulk of his outside reading centered on his superhero comic book collection, which he termed "like a career to me," and on which he spent about two hours a day. Javier said he didn't like to read books;

he preferred reading comics because they were more interesting and he could look at the pictures. Given these priorities, it is not surprising that Javier showed little interest or engagement in the activities of his reading-writing course.

Although the basic writing students completed a total of five essays, I videotaped the composing processes of only three: Essay 1, a narrative; Essay 3, an argument; and Essay 5, the research paper. I chose these essays because they occurred approximately every four weeks, so they would show the change in the students' writing abilities as the semester progressed.

The topic of Essay 1, the narrative, was "a problem which occurred in school." Javier wrote about when he had to face up to a bully. Despite considerable prewriting, Javier arrived at the first taping session with only paper and pen. Using no notes and none of the prewrite material, he wrote a four-page draft in twenty-seven minutes. Unlike the stereotypical basic writer, Javier's composing was neither slow nor overly recursive. He paused six times during the process. But like many inexperienced writers, he did not reflect or rescan. As soon as he was done, he stopped and stacked his pages together. When asked if he wanted time to look over the draft, he declined. He wrote and quit.

To encourage revision, the writing class required first, second, and third drafts. When Javier returned to work on these, videotapes and discussion during stimulated recall revealed that this time he did reread and revise. In draft 2, he made minor revisions in each paragraph until page 3, where he added seven lines, and page 4, where he added seventeen. On draft 3, he added dialogue throughout, plus ten additional lines at the end. The result was a much more detailed and interesting draft than the first.

Javier was interested in and involved with this paper because it centered on his personal experiences. But as the semester progressed and the topics became less personal, Javier became less interested and less involved.

While students worked on Essay 1 in their writing course, they were discussing what learning entailed and were introduced to new comprehension strategies in the reading course. The first task was to write about four learning experiences—two successful and two unsuccessful. Javier completed three out of four. His example of unsuccessful learning is revealing: "Learning not to do as well as others because sometimes my brains malfunction or I'm thinking of something else." He expanded on this idea in his first essay in the reading course on learning. In this paper, he said that to him, learning was an either/or situation. As he put it, "Learning is something a person really wants to do . . . and he or she succeeded

in it. . . . Some experiences produce learning because it is right to learn something. . . . Others do not . . . because they never try to learn something they never try to do."

Javier illustrated this attitude through his work in the next series of reading assignments. The class was to preview twelve articles on the psychological and cognitive processes involved in learning, predict what questions the articles would answer, and mark the main points. Javier didn't write any predictions. Instead, he copied some off the board. He didn't read twelve articles; he marked the main points in three. Of these, one summary was apparently written without looking at the article, since its content was totally unrelated. For the next series of assignments—reading, summarizing, and synthesizing articles—Javier relied on his habits of the previous summer: he copied a series of unrelated phrases and sentences. Apparently, Javier was either uninterested or unable to grasp the reading material. Consequently, he reverted to earlier, successful strategies.

The third essay in the writing course was an argument for or against attending college. To lend credence to their personal arguments, the students were to cite or refute one of two essays: "Where College Fails Us," by Carolyn Bird, or "Does College Really Matter Anymore?" from *Changing Times*. The students were also to bring in an additional article to support their thesis. Given Javier's attitude, this essay seemed like a good opportunity to vent his feelings. And he did so in his preparatory freewrite: "I believe people come to college because of Family Pressure [note the caps]. When you are to graduate from school your parents are already on your back telling you or pushing you to come to college. You are so confused that the next thing you know you are in college." Such feelings could have been easily supported by citing one of the class articles. However, Javier read only half of the first article and none of the second.

Because he had not read the articles, Javier was fairly unprepared and uncertain when he began to write the first draft of his essay. Before beginning to write, he spent twenty seconds scanning what he'd underlined in the Bird article. Then he began to write—or rather, to transcribe. His composing process consisted of copying almost verbatim (without quotation marks) underlined portions of Bird's article, stopping to think how to refute her, then writing that down. When asked how he chose his refutations, he said "I just started out with whatever came to my mind first." This process continued until the middle of Bird's fifth page. At that point, Javier copied the first twenty lines of his outside article,

stacked his papers together, and did not look at them again. Composing was done for the day.

During the next class period, following peer evaluation, the students were to write a paragraph on how their draft could be improved, then hand in the paragraph and draft for the instructor's comments. Javier did neither.

Javier's work in the reading course proceeded at about the same level. Most assignments weren't completed, and those which were had to be redone. As a result, Javier's midterm, which was to synthesize ideas on learning contained in twelve articles, was less than a page long and included references to only the first two articles. So Ms F. asked him to do it again. His second midterm appeared more developed; however, a close reading revealed that it was once again copied verbatim from the original texts and that it still contained nothing beyond the first two readings. Nevertheless, for this work, he received a C+ and this comment: "These pages are well-written but you need to tie them into Piaget's theory of learning."

An examination of Javier's work up to this point reveals that his last original writing was handed in on February 25. When his first midterm was rejected and his second one accepted, his fate was sealed. Javier's behavior suggested he had discovered that he could pass with minimal effort. As the reading and writing became more complex, Javier became less and less involved.

During the last third of the semester, the reading and writing instructors team-taught the research paper. The topic was education. Students were encouraged to narrow that to an area of personal interest. Javier chose to research alcohol's effects on students.

Research strategies included reading and summarizing ten articles on the topic and making three organizational maps. Javier completed two maps and wrote no summaries. Prior to writing the first draft, the students were to organize their material for an oral report. All notes were to be paraphrased and written on note cards which included a full bibliographic reference. Javier's notes were copied directly from source materials onto full sheets of paper and contained incomplete bibliographic references. Moreover, discussion with the instructors revealed that all information had been taken from only one source rather than the ten required.

Javier's notes were ten pages numbered consecutively. Videotapes of composing showed that he copied each sheet, stopping periodically to insert a fictional author's name and a page number. When he finished his draft, Javier heaved a sigh of relief. "Boy, I'm glad I got that all done," he said. He meant this literally. Javier wrote no more that semester.

Why Would a Student Behave Like This?

When I was conducting this project, Javier's behavior confounded me. The other case study student had made slow but steady progress. In fact, she made her most significant gains during the research paper. So I couldn't understand why Javier failed to work and improve. As I began to reflect on the semester, however, his behavior became more understandable.

Javier appeared to be an alienated student, ambivalent about his relationship to the university, and resigned to his fate. His interview responses suggested resentment, low self-esteem, and a fear of failure. These responses were echoed in his journal, where he revealed that he didn't want to be in college because he didn't think he was smart enough. Academic reading seemed too difficult, ". . . about to blow my brain out or something." Writing skill also seemed unattainable requiring "a gift from God" and "smartness." Javier's lack of self-esteem appeared most evident in his paragraph about unsuccessful learning, where he stated that he was "learning not to do as well as others because sometimes my brains malfunction or I'm thinking of something else."

Given these feelings and his educational history, it is not surprising that Javier had difficulty with the reading-writing curriculum. The readings, psychological theories of learning, were outside the realm of his interest or experience. As Mina Shaughnessy points out, the vocabulary alone would be threatening. Her examples of words used in the first twenty minutes of a psychology lecture—"legacy, mechanism, theological, philosophical, neural, rational, modalities, synthesize, empirical, apperceptive . . ., therapeutic, milieu, stimulus-response"—closely parallel those Javier encountered in the reading class. Shaughnessy maintains that ignorance of these words' meanings "reinforces the students' habit of not expecting to understand what teachers are talking about" (218). The vocabulary problem is exacerbated when students must "associate new concepts with familiar words or familiar concepts with new words." Basic writers sometimes resist learning this vocabulary, as if they "were consenting to a linguistic betrayal that threatens to wipe out not just a word but the reality the word refers to" (211–12).

Writing summaries about the readings probably contributed to Javier's feelings of alienation. Such assignments don't involve the students. Rather, summary writing "places them outside the working discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do" (Bartholomae, 1989, 278). To learn from academic texts, "the writer must get inside of a

discourse he can only partially imagine" (284). Javier chose not to do this.

This attitude is not surprising when we recall that Javier's principal reading experience was with his comic books ("like a career to me"). On the cognitive level, such limited reading experience would not have helped him develop the schemata necessary to comprehend the vocabulary and the sometimes convoluted syntax, or to follow the discourse structure of academic texts. On the affective level, articles taken from psychological journals would have been completely alien. Because they lacked familiar characters and context, and were written in an unfamiliar register, Javier must have felt like he was, again, not a part of this discourse community. No wonder he felt like these texts made his brains "malfunction."

Initially, this feeling of alienation may not have been so strong in the writing course. Javier completed all his assignments, and was certainly engaged with the personal narrative. However, he became less engaged as the topics grew less personal, centering on learning and education. In this, his behavior paralleled that of patients in analysis. According to Ann Murphy, "Just as Freud's patient eventually and inevitably resisted the energies he was eliciting, . . . so basic writing students often begin a reaction against their previous optimism—and sometimes against the teacher. Their initial rapid progress subsides or regresses; attendance may drop; commitment wavers; changes which at first seemed so possible and miraculous become difficult to sustain. Not for all, but for some the initial wonder of discovering their potential in language and self-expression gives way to doubts, fears, even hostilities and withdrawal" (183–84).

Javier coped with the curricular changes by reverting to a previously successful strategy—what the academy calls plagiarism. Such behavior might have seemed dishonest, but it was more likely inadvertent. Shaughnessy attributes this behavior to an ignorance of the sin of plagiarism compounded by a reverence for the printed page. Some basic writers believe they could not possibly reproduce the published author's ideas any more clearly. "For [them], the 'right' word is usually the word someone else has in mind" (222).

John Ogbu attributes these beliefs to cultural differences. He maintains that different cultures have different communicative strategies that may lead to "miscommunication" about how to deal with texts (228–29). These strategies are further complicated and misconstrued when students have to learn to speak the language of the academy. As David Bartholomae says, they must find "some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the

requirements of conventions, their history of a discourse." To cope, they must learn "to appropriate . . . a specialized discourse" (Bartholomae 273, 276). Javier's strategies demonstrate a literal appropriation. Yet Hull et al. suggest that such behavior "has a logic that merits careful observation" (12).

Recall that when it was time to write his argument for or against attending college, rather than rely on his own feelings, Javier copied Carolyn Bird's arguments from "Where College Fails Us." The legitimacy of this strategy was probably confirmed in the reading course, when copying Piaget onto his midterm earned him a C+ and the praise, "These pages are well written." It should have come as no surprise, then, that Javier copied the bulk of his research paper.

The purpose of the linked basic skills courses had been to build a bridge between reading and writing. Instead, the reading course's reading and writing assignments created a barrier which kept Javier out of the academic community. Viewed in this light, his failure to complete the assignments becomes more understandable.

On one level, Javier's case illustrates what happens when a marginal student receives mixed messages in two "linked" classes. The idea of linking reading and writing classes makes sense. Research in the last decade has concluded that writing instruction is most effective when linked with reading (Stotsky, 637). But for this linkage to be successful, the curriculum and pedagogy must have a common theoretical focus and implementation.

The traditional focus in the reading class on summary, synthesis, and key concepts probably reinforced Javier's misperceptions about the inaccessibility and irrelevance of academic reading. It certainly contradicted and most likely overshadowed the process approach and reflective essays in the writing course. When the two courses finally did link up during the research paper, the traditional approach from both teachers may have confirmed Javier's belief about the inaccessibility of language.

I would not have taught the linked course this way. Even so, its problems were not evident to me as I participated in it. The assignments were easy for me and relevant to my research. As I collected my data, I did not stop to consider why Javier had given up. The other case study subject (Elsa) was successful and motivated, so I was initially more interested in her: she confirmed my theories about the effects of combined reading-writing instruction.

In fact, Elsa's improvement was typical of slightly less than half the class. Of the thirteen students who began the course, six improved their scores and attitudes, five regressed or remained

static, and two dropped out. The six who improved were highly motivated to succeed. The other seven, however, paralleled Javier in attitude and motivation: they missed an average of two weeks of class, turned in late or poorly done assignments, and found the reading "boring" and incomprehensible.

Javier is representative of this type of basic writer. Their problems do not lie in their writing per se. If we compare Javier's work, among the weakest in the class, to samples in Troyka's 1987 national study of basic writers, it would rank as one of the stronger essays in the average group. His writing fits many of the definitions of "basic writer": he could not handle the conventions of academic discourse, he had a truncated composing process, he struggled with the increasingly complex demands of different writing tasks, and he lacked reading experience. This is how he started the semester, and this is where he ended. Clearly, the problem goes beyond writing.

How Do We Help These Students?

Javier's is a cautionary tale. At the very least, it suggests that we resist the temptation to oversimplify. Introducing students to academic discourse, making them aware of writing as a process, letting them freewrite, linking reading with writing—none of these is a panacea, a sure answer. More importantly, Javier's case illustrates the complexity of basic writers and hints at the social and cultural forces which shape them. If we are going to help these basic writers, we need to be aware of these forces and how they influence not only our students' attitudes and behaviors, but also our own.

My irritation with and dismissal of Javier is symptomatic of some researchers and research studies—and of some teachers. If we have more successes than "failures," we tend to look at what works, and fault the students for not working. Javier's case suggests that the "failure" is not wholly his fault. The problem may lie more significantly on the approach to teaching and the assumptions behind it.

Just as we cannot assume that pedagogy is the answer, we should not assume that our students will benefit from our curriculum, be able to deal with it, or find it relevant. It may seem obvious to state that our backgrounds differ from theirs. But our backgrounds have shaped our curricula and our expectations. The reading-writing curriculum, centering on education and theories of learning, sounds empowering, and it is—from the perspective of White, middle-class teachers. But Javier's (and his peers') lack of progress suggests these connections weren't made.

Failure to consider our students' needs and backgrounds when

designing curricula and assignments can lead to what Malinowitz calls "intellectual vigilantism, in which the insiders—that is, the students who demographically most resemble their teachers—swim, while the outsiders sink" (153). Because of our backgrounds and experience, we may be asking the "outsiders" to write in what Mike Rose calls a "cognitive and social vacuum" (1990, 181). Sharon Nelson-Barber and Terry Meier caution that teachers should not "expect to meet the needs of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds without access to the perspectives of individuals who come from those backgrounds" (1–2). While this doesn't mean that we must be familiar with the differing cultural expectations of each of our students, an awareness of potential differences may remind us to vary our expectations and teaching strategies.

I am not saying that we should lower our expectations. I'm saying we should broaden them. If some students do not improve, or if some who were making progress suddenly stop, we should see these as calls for help, not signs of sloth. If they begin making new writing errors, we should view them as signs of growth, not regression. If some turn in work that is obviously not their own, we should consider this a sign that they may not understand the conventions of the academy, not that they are lazy or dishonest.

In sum, rather than continually define the basic writer, perhaps we should reexamine our attitudes as teachers of basic writers. The case of Javier illustrates just such a need. Teachers working with basic writers need to take a researcher's view of their at-risk students—stop, ask why, be flexible, adjust the curriculum to meet their needs. The students in the lower levels of basic writing are part of a microcosm of American society. If we are going to meet the challenge these students represent, *we* are going to have to change.

Note

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