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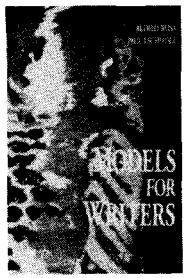

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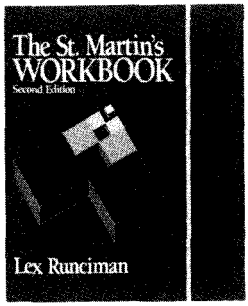

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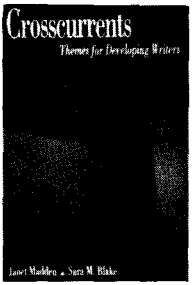

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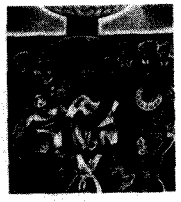

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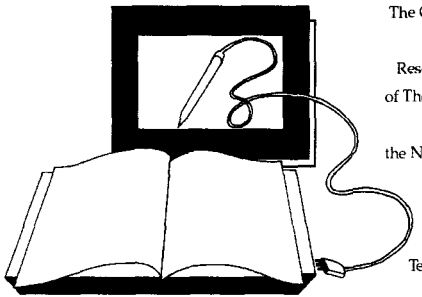

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The *Journal of Basic Writing* publishes articles of theory, research, and teaching practices related to basic writing. Articles are refereed by members of the Editorial Board (see overleaf) and the Editors.

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JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 1 SPRING 1992

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CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10–20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted.

Manuscripts will be refereed anonymously. We require four copies of a manuscript and an abstract of about 100 words. To assure impartial review, give author information and a short biographical note for publication on the cover page *only*. Papers which are accepted will eventually have to supply camera-ready copy for all ancillary material (tables, charts, etc.). One copy of each manuscript not accepted for publication will be returned to the author, if we receive sufficient stamps (no meter strips) clipped to a self-addressed envelope. We require the MLA style (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 3rd ed., 1988*). For further guidance, send a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope for our style sheet and for camera-ready specifications.

All manuscripts must focus clearly on basic writing and must add substantively to the existing literature. We seek manuscripts that are original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

We invite authors to write about such matters as classroom practices in relation to basic writing theory; cognitive and rhetorical theories and their relation to basic writing; social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; discourse theory; grammar, spelling, and error analysis; linguistics; computers and new technologies in basic writing; English as a second language; assessment and evaluation; writing center practices; teaching logs and the development of new methodologies; and cross-disciplinary studies combining basic writing with psychology, anthropology, journalism, and art. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening. The term "basic writer" is used with wide diversity today, sometimes referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and sometimes referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population which they are discussing.

We particularly encourage a *variety* of manuscripts: speculative discussions which venture fresh interpretations; essays which draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in nontechnical language, which offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; and collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy.

A "Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award" is given to the author of the best *JBW* article every four issues (two years). The prize is $500, courtesy of an anonymous donor. The winner, to be selected by a jury of three scholars/teachers not on our editorial board, is announced in our pages and elsewhere.

Editors' Column

Events for the purpose of publicizing and facilitating academic publishing have proliferated recently. *JBW* is certainly not unique in receiving frequent invitations to participate in panels and workshops on writing for publication, hosted by particular colleges and professional organizations. In common with the professoriate as a whole, teachers of basic writing are concerned with scholarly publication as never before.

Publication in refereed journals is increasingly the primary basis for reappointment, tenure, and promotion in American colleges and universities. To basic writing instructors staggering under the burden of frequent classes with ever-increasing enrollments, not to mention the task of reading and marking student writing, the demand to publish often seems arbitrary and unfair—all the more so when journals in our field, including *JBW*, are not always considered of equal weight in comparison to scholarly publications in literature. However, it is a foolhardy instructor who chooses righteous indignation over writing up one's latest classroom innovations and submitting them to *JBW* or a competing journal. The fact is that, for most of us, "publish or perish," is no less a reality than for our colleagues in more prestigious academic specialities.

As acknowledged experts in encouraging reluctant writers, teachers of basic writing should perhaps view the need to publish as an opportunity rather than as an imposition. Who better than we, ourselves, can find ways to energize and encourage ourselves and each other as writers? Who better than we, ourselves, can find ways to analyze the task and design practical strategies to complete it?

We hope that colleagues in programs, departments, and meetings, such as the National Conference on Basic Writing, to be held at the University of Maryland next October, will take seriously our need as professionals to develop a range of activities and structures to support and encourage scholarly publication. Certainly

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JBW considers one of its primary roles to provide feedback on submitted manuscripts that will help colleagues meet the demands of publication with confidence and realism.

Having said this, we now turn to a brief description of the articles appearing in the current issue. Overall, the essays take to task some of the cherished metaphors and assumptions behind our conception of basic writers and the teaching of basic writing, and offer an enlarged view informed by a broad awareness of cultural and historical difference.

In the first article, Carol Severino shows how the principle metaphors used to describe cultural literacy (the melting pot, the salad bowl) and those used to acquire academic literacy (the bridge, the gap, the journey to join the literacy club), fail to acknowledge any common ground between the two. She proposes cultivating this common ground as a basis for students to expand their abilities to comprehend the arguments and experiences of others. Moreover, instead of trying to "transport" students to academic culture, teachers would orchestrate the sharing of knowledge, perception, and experience.

Starting from Polanyi's premise that "we can know more than we can tell," Harvey Wiener considers nontraditional (remedial/basic) students as enabled learners, endowed with "sentient literacy," and possessing considerable knowledge in using *inference* in countless nonverbal and visual situations in their own lives. Wiener suggests numerous ways to build on this wealth of experience in the teaching of inference in reading and writing classes.

Marilyn Middendorf offers various innovations to create effective writing classrooms inspired by the ideas of M. M. Bakhtin about the dialogic nature of human discourse. Starting with the question "What is good writing?" Middendorf has students move away from their initially fixed, abstract, standardized, monologic definitions toward an awareness of the dialogic nature of discourse, which is inherently relative, ongoing, multivoiced, and interactive. Students move on to discover the primacy of this dialogic discourse in shaping the reality of our lives.

John Mayher critiques the commonly accepted metaphors of "skills" and "remediation" which lie behind much of the thought and practice taking place in writing and skills centers today. He goes on to offer *uncommon sense* alternatives, fundamentally holistic, constructivist, and transactional, where the primary activity would be having students learn how to learn.

Beverly Benson, Mary Deming, Debra Denzer, and Maria Valeri-Gold present a study which questions the effectiveness of

bringing basic writing and ESL students together in the same class. Despite showing that some similarities exist in composing techniques and patterns of error, the study suggests that it is better for the two groups to be taught by instructors suitably trained in each area, using materials appropriate to their separate needs.

Genevieve Patthey-Chavez and Constance Gergen propose taking advantage of the growing influx of students in writing classrooms from diverse ethnic backgrounds by analyzing cultural and historical differences through a problem-posing framework. Starting with the questions "What is a good essay?" and "How is print culture valuable?" the class embarks on an exploration that ends with a recognition of the uses of literature and some of the traditional rhetorical modes of expression in college writing.

Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller

Carol Severino

WHERE THE CULTURES OF BASIC WRITERS AND ACADEMIA INTERSECT: CULTIVATING THE COMMON GROUND[1]

ABSTRACT: *Despite the fact that we live in a heterogeneous society of intersecting and mixing cultures, literacies, and languages, scholars and teachers have overemphasized the distance and mismatches between basic writers' and academic cultures and ignored important correspondences and areas of overlap and intersection between the two. Evidence for their disproportionate emphasis on disparities and incompatibilities is the pervasive use of transportation and in-group metaphors in the discourse on academic literacies. The author examines two such areas of overlap between home and school, between basic writers and the academy: journalistic reading and leisure writing in the home, and positive high school writing experiences.*

Metaphors of Mixing

The continuing furor over E. D. Hirsch's notion of a single national cultural literacy symbolized by the melting pot has strengthened the competing notion of (plural) cultural *literacies* (Bizzell, "Arguing" 141), more aptly represented by the metaphor of the U. S. as salad bowl. The salad bowl suggests that the ingredients retain their separate identities, whereas the melting pot implies that they blend together and lose their individual identity by contributing to the collective personality of the larger society.

Carol Severino is interested in how culture, personality, and politics affect writing and writing pedagogy. An assistant professor in the Rhetoric Department at the University of Iowa, she directs the Writing Lab and teaches courses that explore the above issues.

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Both of these metaphors are problematic for different reasons. The melting pot doesn't describe the experience of African-Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asians who, confronted with discrimination and prejudice, find "melting" difficult if not impossible; nor does it describe those people of color who, victimized by racism and motivated to preserve their native culture, are not even interested in completely assimilating into the mainstream amalgam. The salad bowl metaphor accompanying "Cultural *literacies*" means that each cultural community operates with its "own" configuration of discourse patterns and linguistic features, but exclusive ownership of discourse features is impossible to sustain in a heterogeneous society; in most locales of the U. S., especially urban areas such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Boston, cultures are in close contact. Consequently, some communities' discourse features are inevitably borrowed or shared by other communities, both "minority" and "mainstream." In the sixties, for example, progressive White college students borrowed rhetoric from the Black Power movement, and much of both groups' discourse has been gradually incorporated into the rhetoric of the Democratic Party. With the homogenizing influences of media, education, and business, when classroom and workplace draw a mix of Asians, Latinos, African, and European Americans, no community is an island. Cultures mix, intersect with, and overlap one another.

As an example of cultures in contact, consider the hybrid snack "nachos" now available at every mainstream sporting event and movie house—tortilla chips coated with melted, processed American cheese. More specifically, an illustration of cultural literacies in contact is the March 18, 1991 cover of *The New Yorker*—a painting by artist A. McCarthy of a Puerto Rican "Cuchifritos Restaurant" in Manhattan. Signs on the storefront announce that besides Puerto Rican specialties of "bacalaitos" and "alcapurias," "cafe expresso" and "cuban sandwiches" are offered. Thus, in one illustration, features of Puerto Rican, Cuban, Italian, and American cultures and the Spanish, English, and Italian languages mix. (The Irish American artist must be included too.) Here, the cultural literacy of the upper-middle-class world of *The New Yorker* intersects with the less-than-affluent world of Spanish Harlem. Because cultures in many U. S. urban areas are, as Ralph Cintron (in press) observes, porous and permeable, the salad-bowl metaphor inadequately describes sociolinguistic processes in action, unless the cucumbers, absorbing liquid from the tomatoes, get soggier, and the tomatoes become more crisp by virtue of their contact with the cucumber. As

Betty Jean Craige notes in her explanation of the holistic model for the humanities:

> There are no culturally static populations of human beings any more than there are permanent genetically homogeneous populations of organisms of any kind; there are no ideal cultural types; there is no purity. Nor does any population evolve either genetically or culturally in isolation. Intermingling—of genes and of ideas, values, languages, religions, and models of reality—occurs in time. (400)

Intersecting Cultural Literacies

Investigating cultural literacies, as well as disciplinary literacies across the curriculum, is becoming part of composition studies as our classrooms grow more diverse. And, as there are multiple literacies based on cultures, there are multiple *academic* literacies based on particular disciplines and emphases within the same discipline. David Bartholomae's definition from "Inventing the University" is the most often cited; academic literacy is students extending themselves, "by successive approximations, into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine 'what might be said' and constitute knowledge within various branches of our academic community" (134).

Instead of emphasizing conventions of each individual discipline like Bartholomae, Mike Rose in *Lives on the Boundary* emphasizes *interdisciplinary* connections. For Rose, academic literacy is using the strategies of summarizing, classifying, comparing, and analyzing, to *cross* disciplines (138) especially between the humanities and social sciences as we do in rhetoric. For Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, and Robert Pattison, academic literacy is critical/political literacy—the ability to comprehend the disempowering messages from Washington D. C., General Motors, Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and CNN (Cable News Network) in order to formulate empowering arguments *against* them, arguments grounded in valorizing working class, minority, and women's culture. On campuses where critical academic literacy has been institutionalized in curricula, or at places such as the University of Texas where such attempts were made, we have witnessed a backlash of protests with cries of "ethnic particularism," "reverse racism," and "political correctness" directed against what more conservative faculty and students see as a kind of "diversity didacticism."

Ironically, some folks at both the left and right ends of the political spectrum have the same tendency to see students' home culture and academic culture as disparate, distinct, and distant entities. This dichotomous characterization of home and school cultures, I will point out, is even more extreme when the students are considered basic writers by the institution's placement mechanism. Yet given the aforementioned multiplicity of both cultural and academic literacies, a number of areas of intersection, overlap, and feature-sharing exist between them. I will argue that while the numerous and important disparities and mismatches between home and school literacies and cultures should be acknowledged and described, it is these areas of overlap that we should also emphasize in the way we perceive our students, their backgrounds and abilities, and the curricula we design for them. In Bizzell's Venn diagram of circles representing the "native" and the "school" discourse communities, perhaps the area of intersection should be larger ("Cognition" 219). Consider, for example, the way persuasion is done in writing at the university—with factual evidence, documentation, and appeals to scholarly authority, along with the way persuasion might be accomplished at home—through personal testimony, cajolery, and appeals to parental authority. As rhetoricians and teachers, we must acknowledge and describe in detail the differences but, at the same time, we should not fail to notice the obvious common features: the common aim of persuasion for getting work done, the common use of evidence, common appeals to authority and audience. Citing Bakhtin, Kurt Spellmeyer writes in his essay entitled "A Common Ground":

> Because languages "intersect" with one another on many levels at the same time, entry into a community of discourse must begin, not with a renunciation of the "home language" or "home culture," but with those points of commonality that expose the alien within the familiar, the familiar within the alien. (266)

Transportation and In-Group Metaphors

Our neglect of these points of commonality between two cultures is made painfully obvious when we examine two kinds of unsettling metaphors that pervade descriptions of academic literacy in composition—transportation and in-group metaphors. Transportation or journey metaphors include crossing bridges, crossing boundaries, traveling from the margins to the center, and *being on the way to or on the road to* literacy with a mentor as kind of

chauffeur or tour guide. Listen to composition teachers discuss their students and you will hear them asking, "How *far away* are students from academic literacy when they enter the university? How do we help them *get to* it? And then what happens to them psychologically and socially when they finally do *arrive*?" It is indeed difficult to avoid these metaphors in educational discourse. Bridge-building is Shirley Brice Heath's metaphor to describe the function of ethnographic study by teachers and students to make connections between home and school. Although this was not Heath's intention, the way we interpret the bridge metaphor, often used with "gap," as in "bridging the gap," is that the student crosses over the bridge (gap) from home to school culture as Richard Rodriguez did, not that s/he uses the bridge to go back and forth between cultures; the assumption is that after the student, with the help of the guide, crosses the bridge, s/he burns it. Operating with a certain missionary mentality, we neglect Heath's corollary that the bridge enables *teachers and tutors* to cross into the student's culture (354). Usually, when we speak of crossing boundaries, it is the student who is on the journey, not the teacher, and the implication is that the student has only a one-way ticket. When the student crosses boundaries, s/he is surmounting the barricades of race, the quicksand of class, and the boulders of gender, and moving linearly toward academic literacy. The movement is unidirectional—from home to school culture. Like Richard Rodriguez, you can never go home again. As a matter of fact, neither Rose nor Rodriguez seemed interested in bringing his home culture into the academy. In their particular circumstances, ethnicity represented a handicap to be overcome, not common ground for intellectual pursuits. To the young Mike Rose, being Italian meant being poor and depressed. To the young Richard Rodriguez, being Chicano meant being shy and excluded. Neither seriously considered going back and forth between communities—the option of a bilingual/bicultural mode. They felt impelled to *move on,* not back and forth. The journey metaphors have religious connotations, too; the student is being spiritually transported by the teacher and by an inspiring humanities program from the margins to the center. He is being brought into and invited into the club—the second metaphor.

Rose uses the club to describe the role of his mentor, Father Albertson, in his intellectual development: "Nothing is more exclusive than the academic club: its language is highbrow, it has fancy badges, and it worships tradition. It limits itself to a few participants who prefer to talk to each other. What Father Albertson did was bring us *inside the circle* . . ." (58). The other popularizer of the club metaphor is Frank Smith, whose book urges teachers to tell

students that learning to read earns them membership in the literacy club. The problem with the transportation and club metaphors implying moving from the outside to the inside, is that they are unidirectional and don't allow for the integration of home and school literacies, an acknowledgement of the common ground between the two, the back and forth movement between them, and the rhetorical movements made by the teacher/tutor as audience. Another problem with "the journey to join the club" is that rarely does anyone mention that the club should revamp its membership policies and its purposes for being, instead of inadvertently or, as children say, "accidentally on purpose" excluding by elitism, intimidation, and those mysterious discourse conventions and tricks that keep us all off guard, as Peter Elbow recently demonstrated in his article, "Reflections on Academic Discourse" (145). Eliminating the highbrow language and fancy badges, and diversifying the curriculum, including more third-world and women writers and texts, will be interpreted as signs of welcome to students (Guerra 83–84), most of whom rarely encounter mentors along the roadways of higher education.

Academic Advantages of Double Consciousness

When I taught composition in Chicago, my rosters listed students with exotic names: one quarter for example, I had Phongsak, Yuya, Lambros, Wieslaw, Moises, Jose, Sarkis, Teratha, Devonna, Ursula, Chemaine, Berko, Ilya, and Marek. In certain ways, I found that some concerns of this United Nations rainbow group intersected more with some academic concerns than do the interests of some of the mainstream students I teach in Iowa. Many of the Chicago-area students possess a double, even a triple consciousness; they have already experienced two or more cultures; many know two or more languages. Hence, even though many received less than adequate preparation for college, were admitted to the university through the opportunity program under "different qualifications," and are considered basic writers by the composition program, they are in some ways more experientially ready for, and indeed are active participants in, some of the inquiries into comparative cultural study and contrastive language study that occur in history, anthropology, political science, sociology, geography, psychology, linguistics, comparative literature, and foreign languages. For example, second- and third-generation Chinese and Filipino students pursued research projects on the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the Marcos regime with the same zeal and productivity that Terry Dean describes in his article "Multicultural

Classes: Monocultural Teachers." These students may not have mastered English verb tenses and modal auxiliaries, but their stories, analyses, and arguments about culture conflict, isolation, and acceptance are moving, powerful, often poetic examples of ethnic literature; the appeals of their writing and speaking move and change their audience of fellow classmates, tutors, and teachers. We also cannot overlook the fact that some are literate in biochemistry, fiber optics, and heat transfer—subjects in which we teachers of the humanities and social sciences are often illiterate.

Two Areas of Cultural Intersection

In my research and teaching, I have studied two other areas of intersection and common ground: 1) journalistic reading and leisure writing in the home, and 2) positive reading and writing experiences in high school. Survey data I collected on 45 academic support program students that registered for two credit-bearing composition courses, reveal home and high school literacy experiences that are rich and varied, contributing to generally healthy attitudes toward literacy. These data refute common and false stereotypes that working class and minority students are deprived of intellectual and print stimulation in the home, whereupon, the assumption is, they go to bad schools and develop bad attitudes toward reading and writing that we college teachers then have to change. As a matter of fact, much of the college literacy literature seems to ignore or dismiss high school altogether, creating in one's mind a picture of the entering college freshman just emerging from the comfortable womb of the home culture's oral tradition. College students are given the same psychological profile as five-year-olds leaving home to go to kindergarten for the first time. How can we fail to acknowledge that freshmen have just spent the last 12+ years in school? Even if schooling took place in a country other than the U. S., it was still an academic environment, often more demanding than the typical U.S. high school. Freshmen's backgrounds are not the blank slates on which we will write the new literacy experiences we design for them. Their psyches have already been engraved with a multitude of out-of-school and in-school reading and writing experiences, many of them positive. In the university where I taught, one of the reasons we revised our writing assignments for the sequence called "Issues in Writing and Schooling" was that we realized it was based on the premise that the students' language arts experiences up to the time they entered *our* classrooms had been filled with failure. We had even assigned essay tasks eliciting from them contrasting English class experi-

ences, high school vs. college, with subtle hints in the assignment that the college experiences were far different and far better than the high school ones.

The Literacy Profiles of 45 Basic Writers

By reporting the following survey information, I will paint a portrait of students from working class and minority cultures to counteract some popular beliefs about them based on impressionistic and anecdotal evidence and to demonstrate common features with academic culture. This group of 45 basic writers was admitted through the opportunity program usually because of low ACT's or low high school ranks. They had an average reading level of 11.8 (the eighth month of the 11th grade) and average ACT verbal score of 12.6. A little over a third of the group was African-American, a little less than a third White, one-sixth was Hispanic, and one-sixth Asian.

At-Home Reading

Lack of reading material in the household is a common deficit explanation for students' difficulties with reading and writing. In what Stephen North calls the practitioner's "lore," anecdotes abound decrying how the living rooms of working class and minority families are bereft of bookshelves, or if bookshelves exist how they are occupied by ethnic and/or religious knickknacks instead of books. Knickknacks, instead of the latest magazines, also rest on the coffee table.

However, as an index to the availability of reading material in their homes, the students in the study were asked which magazines their families subscribed to. Over two-thirds said that their families subscribed to one or more magazines, and over one-third said they subscribed to two or more, figures that are especially positive because many academic support students are economically burdened and receive financial aid for their tuition. The most frequently mentioned magazines were news weeklies such as *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Report.* Second most frequently mentioned, but only by African-American students, were *Jet, Essence,* and *Ebony.* Third most frequently mentioned were magazines geared toward teens' and women's fashions and other traditionally feminine interests: *Teen, Seventeen, Glamour, Vogue, McCall's,* and *Better Homes and Gardens.* However, special and academic interests were well-represented; a number of students' families subscribed to the kinds of publications that Maxine

Hairston recommends as serving as excellent models for student writing: *Popular Science* (4 students), *Consumer Reports, Sports Illustrated,* and *Reader's Digest* (each mentioned by 2 students), *The New Yorker, New Shelter, Discover, Psychology Today, Rolling Stone, Crain's Chicago Business, Chicago Magazine, Photography, Photo World,* and *Architechtural Record* (each mentioned by one student). This magazine reading is a clear area of intersection between family and academic literacies, between home and school cultures. Four students subscribe to computer magazines—*Byte* and *Family Computing,* two students to car magazines like *Hot Rod,* a student on the tennis team to two tennis magazines, two to *Playboy,* two to the gun magazines *Combat Arms* and *Combat Weapons,* and one student apiece to *Playgirl, People,* and *True Story.* Nine of the 45 students, one-fifth of the sample, read publications in another language. Three read Spanish publications, one each read Chinese, Filipino, Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian ones, and another read Armenian, Arabic, and Turkish periodicals. When asked about out-of-school, unassigned, or voluntary reading of *books,* all but 6 of the students reported doing some. Most of this reading was for pleasure and enjoyment which contradicts the assumption that hardly anyone reads anymore. Especially popular were books about teen-age alienation, especially Hinton's *The Outsiders,* and among African-American students Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Walker's *The Color Purple,* and Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* Science fiction and horror were next in popularity with Ray Bradbury and Stephen King frequently mentioned. Nine students, all female, read romantic stories and novels, especially V. C. Andrews and Jackie Collins. However, even works in the canon were mentioned as having been read in the students' leisure time. One student said he had read *War and Peace* and *David Copperfield;* another read Hemingway.

Out-of-School Writing

When asked about writing outside of school, all but two reported doing writing that was not assigned by a teacher, which again seems to invalidate the corresponding piece of lore that hardly anyone writes anymore. The most common genre was letters to friends away at college, boyfriends, and relatives. Almost two-thirds of the students said that they wrote letters. Two students wrote to pen pals. One wrote letters in Spanish to pen pals in Chile, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. A Philippine student wrote to friends she left behind, a Chicano student wrote to friends in Ireland. The Burmese tennis player wrote letters of inquiry to tennis coaches across the country.

A total of 11 students were at the time of the study writing in a diary or journal. Three students wrote poetry, one in Croatian. One student wrote short stories when she was bored and another was working on a novel that she hoped to have published. In addition, a few students reported doing extended writing on the job. One fellow who worked for the Boys' Clubs had to write about the activities he organized and the way the boys responded to them. Two who were doing consumer surveys had to write down customers' responses.

When asked to describe positive high school writing experiences, *every* student had a writing story with a happy ending to tell, especially if the assignment involved writing about themselves, writing on their own choice of topic, or winning a prize. These data refute the stereotype we college writing teachers have that writing curricula of inner-city high schools are punitive at the worst and at best pedagogically naive or unsound, and that therefore we college teachers have to redeem them from their sordid pasts.

The literacy histories of these basic writers contributed on the whole to generally positive attitudes toward reading and writing. Before and after their composition course, students were given the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and a parallel Reading Apprehension Test. On a scale that went from 26 (the lowest apprehension or the most confident) to 130 (the highest apprehensive, or the least confident), the average apprehension score for both reading and writing before the course was 63, closer to the bottom than the top, that is, closer to confident than apprehensive.

Of course, one may reply that browsing through popular magazines and breezing through teen-age novels do not a scholar make, but these journalistic and leisure activities are undeniably more common ground for extending the practice of rhetoric. This common ground can be expanded and cultivated by increasing students' rhetorical, linguistic, and cognitive repertoires of purposes and ideas, genres, and composing processes, by helping students comprehend others' arguments, criticize them, and incorporate them into their own. Likewise, social science and humanities curricula can use the common ground of culture as a base to expand students' interests and knowledge and to foster a multicultural education. Historically underrepresented students may even find themselves advantaged rather than disadvantaged, the traditional perception of them, as universities mainstream multicultural education into the canon and core curricula. A double consciousness should be viewed as an asset to academic literacies, not a detractor from them.

Not only do transportation metaphors in the discourse of academic literacy fail to acknowledge the common ground between

student and school culture, they also fail to provide a model for what happens to the teacher, tutor, or fellow students. What kinds of moves do *they* make? Surely in that rhetorical situation, both teacher/tutor and student alternately act as the moved or persuaded audience. Surely, we as teachers have been changed by the appeals of our students' speaking and writing, especially by their ethical appeals, the appeals of their backgrounds, culture conflicts, and past struggles. As Patricia Bizzell asserts, education should be truly reciprocal, not "something done to one person by another" ("Arguing" 151).

Clearly these rich and varied experiences do not fit a deficit model of alleged cultural and linguistic deprivation; nor do they even describe a culturally exotic "other." Such multicultural literacy experiences are fertile ground for exploration, by both teachers and students. When learning is a two-way rhetorical street, teachers can abandon the roles of chauffeur/tour guide for the role of collaborator/facilitator—orchestrating the sharing of knowledge, perceptions, and experiences. Instead of trying to "transport" students to academic culture, teachers can strive to replace metaphors of transportation with those of collaboration and, through curricular change, make academic cultures even more diverse and multicultural, thereby cultivating the common ground between basic writers' and academic cultures.

Note

[1] The author would like to thank the members of the Rhetoric/ Composition Study Group in Chicago, especially John Schilb and Sally Harrold, for helping stimulate some of the ideas in this article.

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Harvey S. Wiener

INFERENCE: PERSPECTIVES ON LITERACY FOR BASIC SKILLS STUDENTS[1]

ABSTRACT: *Teachers of basic skills too often perceive their students as victims of an intellectual disease. To recast this educational vision, the author suggests new philosophic premises for viewing nontraditional learners, asserting that basic skills students, like everyone else, have innate knowledge that teachers can help them discover and enhance. Of major significance is the universal skill of* inference *that many identify as a key activity in critical thinking. The author describes how* inference *contributes to both visual (also labeled "sentient") and verbal literacy and suggests strategies for mining students' inferential powers. These strategies are designed to help basic skills students bridge the divide between recognizing their own inherent ability to infer meaning when reading, and using this knowledge of* inference *when writing for other readers.*

Teachers of basic college reading and writing often perceive their instructional audience as damaged. The language that teachers use to describe students suggests the degree to which this notion of damage permeates both the imagery and the theoretical underpinnings of our efforts. We are physicians and nurses: we see our workplaces as reading *laboratories* or *clinics;* we talk of *diagnosing* skills, of teaching *prescriptions,* of *remedial* courses. From the Latin *remedium,* this last word is an especially pervasive artifact of the hospital ward. *Remedial* means intended for a remedy or for the removal of a disease or an evil. Using *remedial* to identify students casts them as victims of some intellectual malignancy.

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This is not a new complaint: Enlightened educational critics and researchers frequently have criticized deficit models for students and the curricula designed to teach them. Gerald Coles in his attack on the neurological foundations for learning disabilities insists that failure is anchored in economic, social, and cultural conditions of the society at large; the core of current learning theory rooted in dysfunction wrongly says "that the individual is at fault for his or her failure" (211). Similarly, Mike Rose posits the social, interactive context of literacy; and in highlighting the abandoned underclass, he calls for acknowledging strengths more than weaknesses in "a philosophy of language and literacy that affirms the diverse sources of linquistic competence" (*Lives* 237). Elsewhere he speaks of problems in our views of remediation as medical deficiency and in the stigma of illiteracy for student and teacher alike ("Language"). Steven Judy reminds us to build on existing language rather than focus on deficits, "the skills not yet mastered" (16). Perhaps most direct and passionate among postsecondary speakers for literacy, Mina Shaughnessy exhorts us to avoid the medical terminology that infects our educational philosophy and turns it into a deficit-oriented program (137).

Despite a history of complaints the view of many beginning students as disabled persists today. Exhortations against such a view have failed because educators often erroneously assume that learning is an orderly accretion of skills through time and that this accretion is predictable, definable, and norm-based. Teachers arbitrarily will designate what skills students must learn by when and then assume that the designations are immutable. Acknowledging deviations from such an unyielding scheme, we identify learners as anemic and needing treatment.

In order to recast this educational vision of the diseased and handicapped, I would like to draw new philosophical premises into the view of nontraditional learners. I want to adapt the mathematician-philosopher Michael Polanyi's concept of *tacit knowing* to the college classroom of students whose reading and writing skills have not yet reached a level high enough for sustained academic work, students typically placed into basic reading and (or) basic writing courses in their first semester.

Tacit Thought and Knowing

At the core of Polanyi's reconsideration of human knowledge in his book, *The Tacit Dimension,* is this essential point: "We can know more than we can tell" (4). For Polanyi, certain kinds of knowledge inhere in us without our being able to say how we reach

them or what their parts are. "We recognize the moods of the human face," he points out as but one example of this inherent knowledge, "without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it" (7). Polanyi suggests that "tacit thought"—the quality by which we know more than we can say—"forms an indispensable part of all knowledge" (20). He says that "we keep expanding our body into the world, by assimilating to it sets of particulars which we integrate into reasonable entities" (29). He considers science itself "a variant of sensory perception" (ix) and he rejects as "patent nonsense" any explanations of life that derive solely from "the laws governing inanimate matter" (37). His conclusions about the paradigmatic nature of modern scientific progress have profound implications for learning: "Discoveries," he says, "are made by pursuing possibilities suggested by existing knowledge." In *Personal Knowledge* he talks of "the inarticulate manifestations of intelligence by which we know things in a purely personal manner" (67).

Using some of these premises and observations from Polanyi, we can recast into practical teaching terms some of our current epistemology for basic reading and writing students. Knowledge exists in our students' minds; and we can move our students to make discoveries by pursuing inherent possibilities in their existing knowledge.

With this point at hand, I want to examine the skill of *inference,* which many teachers identify as one of the key activities that underlie critical thinking. What is *inference*? When we infer, we derive information by a complex process of reasoning that balances assumptions, induction and deduction, instinct, prior experience, perception, hunches—even, some believe, extrasensory perception. A familiar metaphor used to define inference is "reading between the lines." The figure says that being able to determine information in this way is the same as unpuzzling meanings beyond the overt ideas expressed by printed words and sentences. More information resides on a page of text than what the lines of print say, and we figure out much of that information through inference. Considerable meaning comes to us as embedded cues and clues in the writer's discourse.

A problem, however, with the well-known metaphor—reading between the lines—is that it may compel us to see inference only as a function of the print decoding process. In other words, we usually conceive of the act of inference as print-bound. But it is incorrect, I believe, to see the skill as allied exclusively to print. Countless inferential moments fill our students' lives. By acknowledging how adept most learners are in applying inference in nonprint, that is,

nonverbal or visual situations, we see how Polanyi's idea can influence teaching strategies. Like his example of the apprehension of physiognomy, many nonverbal scenes our students confront are layered with detail that any sentient observer uses to infer implied meanings. What I'm saying here is that our students, no matter how poor their reading and writing skills, know intimately, perhaps even viscerally, and practice regularly, the inferential faculty.

It is worth noting here that some philosophers see inference at the core of perception itself. Allying himself with Charles Sanders Peirce, George Santayana, and Wilfred Sellers (and against Roderick Chisholm and Alfred North Whitehead), William E. Hoffman, for example, argues that all "perceiving involves making an inference or taking something as a sign; thus seeing is essentially linguistic" (286). As a mediated entity perception is "an unconscious, acritical abductive inference" (296). Hoffman asserts that we learn to perceive even though perception may not appear to be learned (301). In effect, when we perceive we make "a hypothesis to explain why we are having a particular type of cognition" (303).

Inference is basic to everyday cognitive processes. In the realm of visual literacy, beginning students are experienced interpreters. They know how to unpuzzle the covert meanings of a moment, to use whatever combination of logic, emotion, instinct, and sentience that lie at the heart of making inferences. Like anyone else, students read the signs of danger or safety as they cross a deserted city street late at night; they read the signals swiftly about remaining or fleeing when a strange character enters a confined public space; they adduce what they hope are appropriate responses to the subtle body language of a job interviewer. Most of these quick responses are tacit in their origins and most rely on inference.

I have used the term *visual literacy* here because it is reasonably well known, although a more appropriate phrase for the meanings I am after is probably *sentient literacy.* I mean not only apprehension through sight but also its natural extension to other senses (like sound and touch) as well. In either term, *visual literacy* or *sentient literacy,* the first word helps focus attention on meanings derived from contexts that do not always rely on print, although in some communications that require a degree of visual literacy, print forms may play a role. The second word, *literacy,* as used here, also presents some problems. Many people object to using *literacy* for contexts other than print-based words and sentences. Nevertheless, I know no term other than *literacy* (or *literate*) that conveys both the intense effort to construct meanings from complex communication and the degree of competence necessary to succeed at that effort. I am aware of the lexical contradictions in popular phrases like

mathematics literacy, science literacy, and *computer literacy,* but like *visual* or *sentient literacy,* they are helpful nonetheless in signaling both the skills and frustrations that inform our attempts at understanding.

Sentient Literacy and Beyond

I want to examine briefly here what I mean by moments that draw upon our skills at sentient literacy, particularly in our attempts to infer information not overtly stated. Imagine this scene:

> Your supervisor comes to work one Monday morning at 9:30 a.m. (She's usually there waiting for you as you punch in at 9:00 a.m. sharp.) She mumbles to herself under her breath and shakes her head from side to side, biting her lip. She doesn't say hello as she usually does, but instead, staring straight ahead, she storms past your desk. At her office she turns the doorknob roughly, throws open the door forcefully, and then slams it loudly behind her.

What can we determine about the woman's behavior? And how do we know? Clearly she's angry. We guess that she's angry by adding up all that we see and hear and by relying on what we know about her usual behavior. No one has to *tell* us that she is angry. From her appearance, her actions, her body language, and her behavior, it is safe for us to guess that she is irritated about something.

To avoid making inappropriate inferences, we have to be careful not to go too far beyond the information given. For example, we cannot assume here that the supervisor is angry because she has had an argument with her son. Nothing in what we observed suggests that. On the other hand, we might have heard her mumbling an angry remark to herself about him in passing. Or we might know from past experience that she fought with her son often and that, when she did, her behavior resembled the behavior she displayed this morning. The point, of course, is that inference must be rooted in valid, available information, not simply on vague suspicions or wild guesses.

The rare student cannot use inference in the demands of living, although as we often see when students struggle over texts, its application to print may be elusive. Yet if we help beginning readers acknowledge their already existing (if tacit) abilities to infer successfully in familiar moments, we then can help them connect those skills to the demands of print.

As I have already pointed out, interpreting meaning from life's

experiences is one example, perhaps the most basic, of sentient literacy. In representational media (as opposed to personal experience), the simplest forms that require a degree of sentient literacy for understanding are pantomime, photographs, illustrations, drawings, and cartoons, all unaccompanied by oral or written words and sentences. More complex forms (drawing on multisensory impressions) include acted-out scenes (vignettes), stage productions, television and film productions, and so on. Although I acknowledge the elements of spoken language in some forms requiring sentient literacy, I exclude at the moment written words and sentences, the extensions of thought into print-based language.

To help move toward print-based literacy, we can use the classroom to call upon students' talents in exercising sentient literacy. Starting with a nonverbal situation, we can highlight students' successful use of inference in familiar contexts. For example, I describe this scene orally only to one student, asking the student to act it out without words for the rest of the class. Then the class tries to answer the questions I have posed.

> It is a hot July afternoon. After working an eight-hour day, you've been stuck in downtown traffic for two hours—it's ordinarily a twenty minute drive. Your air conditioner blew the condenser an hour ago. A pickup rammed into your car and smashed one of your tail lights. You've had to park three blocks from your apartment. You are now getting out of your car and walking toward your front door.

Inferential Questions After the Scene

1. At what time of the year do you think this scene is taking place? Why do you think so?
2. At what time of the day do you think the scene is taking place? Why do you think so?
3. What possible events do you think could have compelled the person to behave in the matter you've just observed?

An acted-out vignette will draw upon body language, facial gestures, arm movements—all actions that tap an observer's sentient literacy. Questions like those I've listed prod the use of inferential skills and demonstrate to students how well they use the technique in their sensory and intellectual lives. Questions drawing on *why, how,* and *what*—cue words for open-ended questions—help stimulate critical thinking. (See Anderson et al., 88–91.) Here, appropriate responses are rooted in inference. The last question

allows us to consider inferential notions that may be invalid or not supported strongly enough by available information.

Inferential Meanings and Representional Images

Moving toward the application of inference to representational forms on paper—ultimately, of course, to writing on a page—we can follow a progression of tasks designed to prepare college learners for critical reading. By grounding exploration of inference in students' familiar experiential worlds and by affirming students' abilities to use critical thought skills successfully in nonprint situations, we can help dispel the notion of remedial learning. Pervading the classroom activities I am describing is a view of the student as an *enabled,* an *endowed,* not a handicapped learner. In such an approach we help students to build strengths in higher and higher levels of abstraction, and to draw out and draw on what Polanyi calls "the inarticulate manifestations of intelligence" (*Personal Knowledge* 64).

If we use representational images unaccompanied by verbal support, we can continue raising to conscious awareness our students' sense of their ability to use inference.

Inference plays an important part in understanding the picture in Figure 1. If you asked students what the photograph was about they would probably say: "A little boy in school is counting on his fingers." How did they know, however, that the child was a boy?

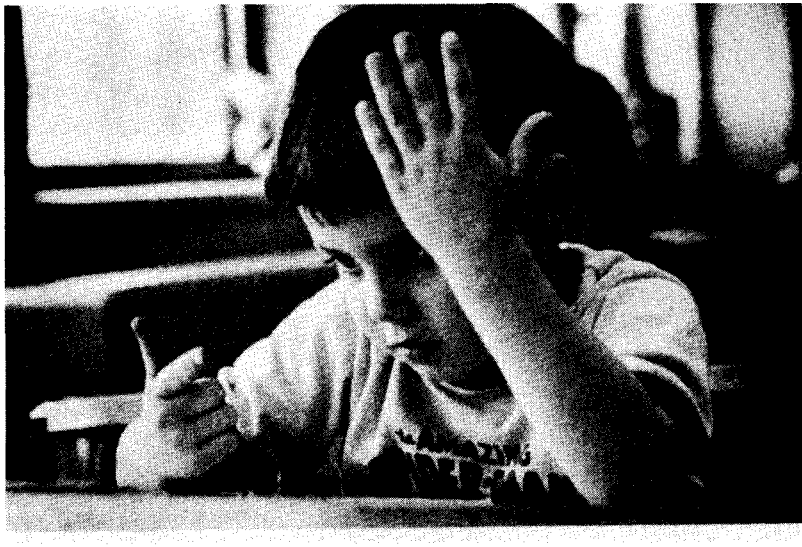

Figure 1

Certainly they don't know for sure; yet to understand the moment captured by the camera, they used tacit knowledge of physiognomy as well as hair length, perhaps, and clothing (*"Spiderman"* on the T-shirt suggests—but does not guarantee—that the wearer is a boy). How did students know that the child was at school? Again, they adduced the specifics of the scene from the large institutional window and the chairs and desk set up in the room. How did they know that the child was counting instead of merely pointing with his right hand and holding up his left hand, or simply looking at his fingers? Again, no absolute evidence in the picture supplies a response. The use of tacit inferential knowledge is a key to understanding the photograph.

I do not wish to minimize the complex intellectual tasks involved in interpreting visual representations through inference. Inferring from pictures requires an understanding beyond simple perception to "states, events and circumstances which are not defined completely and explicitly by available perceptual information" (Higgins 216). In a study of picture interpretation behaviors among ten- and twelve-year-old children, Higgins identifies six factors: Analytic Approach to Problems, Semantic Comprehension, Ideational Fluency, Operational Facility, Verbal Facility, and Visual Comprehension. He suggests that logical abilities regulate visual processing and that as students move to higher levels in the developmental cognitive sequence, their picture interpretation behavior changes (231).

Without the added burden of decoding written language, untraditional learners can exercise a wide range of cognitive abilities as they explore visual representations. Indeed, when we highlight a college student's ability to infer information in a pictorial context and point out that the skills relate directly to critical reading of print, we keep at a distance the notion of remediation and its roots in damage, ruin, and failure.

To highlight further the importance of inference in determining meanings, we must examine representational forms that combine both visual and verbal elements on a page. We are at a critical point here, the juncture of forms, the visual and the verbal working together to convey meaning in a kind of multitext. Words and pictures join in numerous instances in our everyday environments: cartoons and comics, graphs and charts, emergency information, instructions for assembling objects, recipes, advertisements, commercial packaging, identifying signs, and captioned photographs and illustrations. Drawing regularly on these types of materials, we can ally the verbal and nonverbal as joint contributors to meaning

and can highlight the common skills that allow us to understand the two forms both separately and together.

In a study of the relations between systematic thinking and its connection to illustrations in scientific texts, Richard E. Mayer concludes that illustrations stimulate a reader's cognitive processing. Within a text, however, only labeled illustrations—a combination of words and pictures—as opposed to illustrations alone, affected attention to ideas and helped the reader connect separate elements in the presentation. "Providing only pictures (without corresponding labels) or only labels (without corresponding pictures)" did not help students in problem solving, "whereas students given labeled information performed much better" (244). This study underscores the interrelatedness of text and visuals and supports the value of instructional efforts to ally the two.

A caution here: In our enthusiasm to draw on sentient literacy, it is easy to miss some of the demands made on an inexperienced reader by the mixed communicative elements. Students sometimes are uncertain about how words and pictures mutually convey an idea. Looking at a cartoon or an advertisement, for example, unpracticed readers may ignore the visual element or the verbal—one or the other—expecting each to repeat the other's intent. Similarly, examining a chart or a graph, students often will find the illustration mystifying or the words, perhaps, inappropriate. Thus, we need to provide guidance in how to use visual and verbal interplay to extract the full meanings of a multitext.

Familiar items like cartoons and advertisements build upon visual literacy and make the leap into the symbolic entity of communicating in written language.

To understand what the cartoon in Figure 2 means and to appreciate its humor, a reader relies on inference. Thoughtful questioning taps the cognitive skill. Where does the scene take place? Well-dressed people sitting in a room and staring straight ahead, talk of prayer—these conditions imply a church setting as

Figure 2

opposed to a movie house, say, or a classroom. By the man's comment we infer his attitude about churchly behavior: people who pray should keep their eyes closed. Why does the man cover his mouth as he speaks? We infer from this action that he wants no one but the child to hear him. From the implications of the scene, we must reject other possible interpretations of the gesture that the man has a cough or that he is merely rubbing his face. What can we infer from the child's question to the man? The man's eyes, too, were opened during the service, making him guilty of the same offense for which he criticizes the child. Adducing that point accounts for the humor we respond to here in "The Born Loser."

Advertisements are another excellent source of analysis anchored in visual and verbal elements working together.

In the ultimately sexist advertisement (Figure 3), quite popular a few years back, applications of inference not only provide meanings intended by the visual image, but also move readers toward the subtle dialectical entrapments of advertising in general, such as longing and aspiration, social acceptability and class identity, individual feelings and "appropriate" behaviors for demonstrating emotion, and so on. Yet to reach the territory of judgment, that is, to understand the intended results of the ad on our actions, we must apply inferential skills to comprehend meanings from the visual and verbal interplay. Thus, we infer that to express their love, men should give women diamonds because diamonds tell deep feelings better than words can tell them. We infer the woman's delight at the gift of earrings and that the man and woman are lovers, perhaps even husband and wife—more, certainly, than first-night daters. We infer that in return for diamonds, the woman will give the man her love and that diamonds are more valuable than gold. From the statement "A diamond is forever" we adduce many meanings: diamonds are indestructible, never lose their value, and help make relations permanent between men and women. In order to elicit these inferential responses, we ask students open-ended questions—for example: According to this advertisement, why should men give women diamonds? How does the woman feel about the gift? What does "A diamond is forever" mean? Such questions engage students actively in applying their tacit skills to a representational multitext that draws on pictures and words.

Important though visual and verbal interconnection may be, beginning readers may miss some of the demands made by mixed communicative elements. Students are uncertain about how to deal with words and pictures as mutual supporters to convey an idea. When looking at a cartoon or an advertisement, unpracticed readers may ignore either the visual element or the verbal, expecting each to

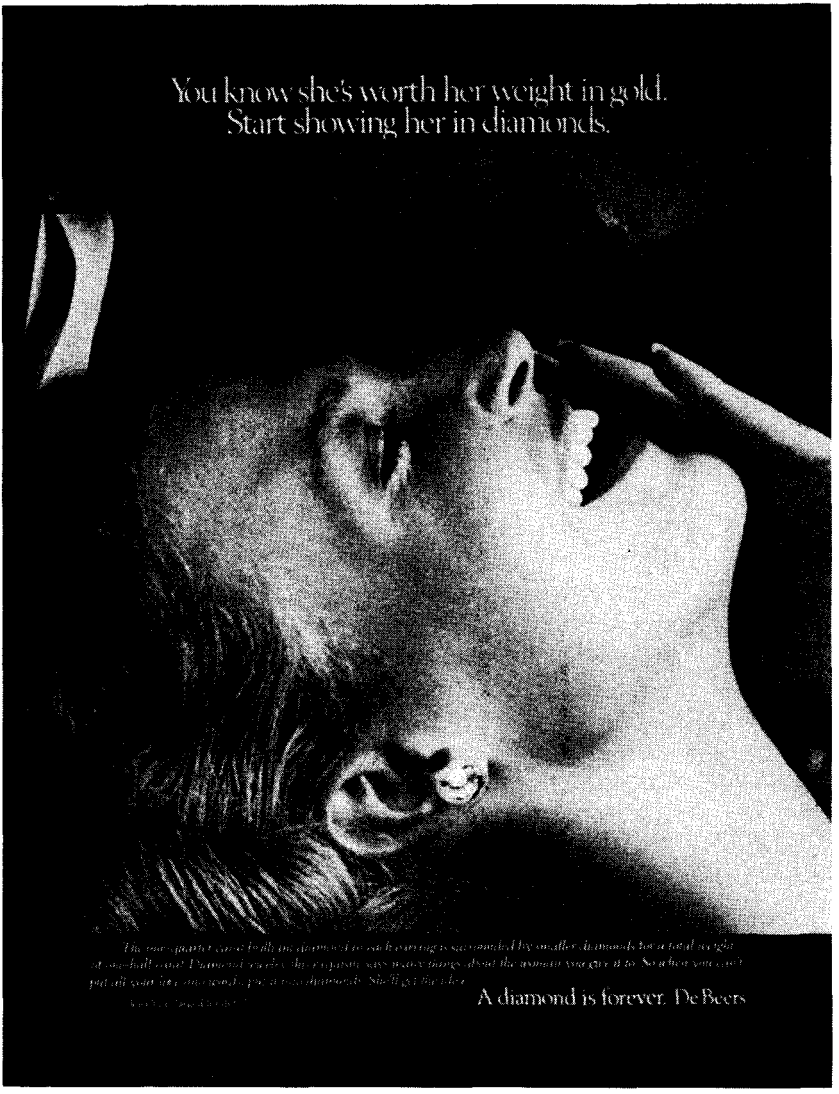

Figure 3

repeat the other's intent. Similarly, in examining a chart or a graph students often find the drawings mystifying or the words, perhaps, inappropriate. Thus, teachers who want to help students become independent readers and writers should provide guidance in using visual and verbal elements to extract the full meanings of a multitext. Here are some pointers to help beginning college students use visual aids for meaning.

How to Use Visual Aids to Help Understand What You Read

- **Pay attention to visual aids.**

Pictures, charts, or other illustrations are not simply decorations. Look at visual aids carefully. If you skip an illustration, you might be skipping a piece of information that is important for understanding what you are reading.

- **Read carefully the captions, titles, or notes that help explain the illustration.**

A caption is a written explanation for a picture. Often a few words or sentences tell why the illustration is important. In newspapers, photograph captions usually name the people in the picture and may give other information. Captions and titles often highlight the main point of a drawing.

- **Try to connect the words with the illustration.**

You may look at the picture before you read, or you may read, then study the picture. However, when an illustration appears with a writing selection, readers most often use the words and picture together. Read a few paragraphs and then examine the illustration to relate it to what you've read. Continue reading, returning now and then to the illustration. The point is to try to connect the picture and sentences.

- **Ask yourself questions.**

What does the picture show? How does the picture relate to what I'm reading? Why has the writer included the picture? What does the picture express that the words do not?

- **State visual information in your own words.**

Illustrations give information. Try to state that information in your own words. In other words, produce sentences to explain visual entities.

New interactive technologies in the classroom of the future—computer terminals, video screens, print applications all working together—will create for students much more complex multitext formats than those I have considered here, and students will need more and more guidance on how to extract essential information from integrated media presentations.

Making Inferences From Text

Toward the goal of helping basic reading students apply inferential strategies to academic texts, we move now to print alone. Recommended classroom activities to this point stressed the

students' innate skills at inference and drew first on nonverbal and visual representations, then on combined visual-verbal illustrations.

We will examine a simple prose paragraph for which inference is critical to meaning and, next, a more complex selection from a current periodical. Questions follow the second selection.

> After lunch Diane took her bike and sneaked quietly into the yard. She moved carefully to the plot of soil under the oak in back of the house as she checked to see that nobody watched her. She leaned her bicycle against the tree and bent down. All around dark clouds rumbled noisily in the sky; a streak of yellow zig-zagged far away, and she trembled. Digging swiftly in the hot earth, she made a small hole and quickly took a crushed ten-dollar bill from her pocket. After she slipped the money into the ground and she covered it, she breathed deeply and smiled. She was glad *that* was over! Now no one would find it or know how she got it. Certainly it would be there later when she wanted it.

> The morning of New Year's Day was cold and overcast: flat light coming from a yellow sky; empty streets. Christmas wreaths hung in dark windows of McFeely's bar, on West Twenty-Third Street. A solitary man crossed an asphalt playground on Horatio Street, trailing a plume of cigarette smoke. There were four padlocks on the front of Ponce Sporting Goods Sales, on Madison Street, and Joe's Spanish-American Record Shop ("Candies—Reg. Nylons—Panty Hose—Latest Hits") was also locked, as were the Misión Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witnesses buildings down the block. An elderly Chinese man wearing a blue ski jacket with a fur collar moved slowly across Mott Street at Grand. A long subway train came rattling and rumbling down the ramp of the Manhattan Bridge into Manhattan. Six teen-agers with two footballs began throwing passes in the small plaza between St. Andrew's Church and the Municipal Building, behind the United States Courthouse on Foley Square. At the Ng Yung grocery, on lower Broadway, a man was putting boxes of red apples on the sidewalk; a pile of ice left to melt in the gutter remained solid. Seagulls were flapping around the Department of Sanitation dock on the Hudson near Twelfth Street. No boats were moving on the river, and parts of it were frozen and white.
>
> —*The New Yorker*

1. The main idea of this paragraph is:

a. to show the effects of cold weather on New York City
b. to describe an area of Manhattan on January 1
c. to demonstrate the ethnic variety of people who live in New York
d. to show how hard people work in the city during early morning hours
e. to argue against laws that keep businesses closed on holidays

2. We may infer that most stores and other establishments are closed because:

a. the weather is much too cold
b. there are no customers available
c. it is too late at night
d. the noise of the subway train disturbs people in the shopping area
e. it's a holiday

3. The sporting goods store probably has four padlocks on it because:

a. the owner does not want to encourage people from the Misión Pentecostal to come by
b. the store has been robbed many times before
c. the police require four locks for safe protection of neighborhood establishments
d. there is valuable merchandise inside that requires protection from robbery
e. all of the above

No visual elements provide hints to meaning in the first sample. Despite its apparent and deliberate simplicity the passage about Diane is rich in inferential meanings, and thoughtful questioning will draw them out.

How old is Diane? Nothing in the paragraph directly answers that question. Yet, we know from her actions (burying ten dollars in the ground) and the level of her thinking that she's not sixteen, say, or a young mother, or a three-year-old. We infer her age roughly at about nine or ten. How did Diane get the money? From her actions we can tell that she obtained it suspiciously although no sentences overtly state such information. To determine the setting (the scene occurs just before a summer rainstorm) and Diane's feelings after she hides the money (great relief), inferential reasoning plays a major role.

Also without visual presentation, the second selection, taken

from *The New Yorker,* taxes the student's inferential skills with sophisticated vocabulary and syntax. I have included here multiple choice questions like those typically provided on reading assessment measures or in textbooks and other practice exercises for college basic skills students. Again, these questions can tease out important inferences as we keep in mind that the same reasoning and logical trains of thought used in nonverbal contexts also come into play here. In the selection, we adduce that the writer's main interest is to describe a city scene early on the morning of January 1. Although the writer points out both the effects of cold weather in New York City and the neighborhood's ethnic variety, neither of those points captures the dominant idea of the selection. Why are many of the stores closed? We infer that the New Year's Day holiday interfered with normal business. We would not assert that cold weather prevents the shops from opening (although it's cold, certainly) or that no customers would be available (the grocer expects shoppers), or that the noise from the subway train disturbed people and keeps them away (the train is noisy but we have no evidence to assume that the rattle and rumble deter commerce). Why does the sporting goods store have four padlocks on the front? We can safely infer from information in the paragraph that to protect valuable merchandise, the owner rather dramatically padlocked his door. We may infer that the neighborhood is probably not burglar proof. Yet, we would be probing more speculative territory if we asserted that the store has been robbed many times before or that the police in this Manhattan neighborhood required four locks on all commercial storefronts or that the owner distrusted people from the Misión Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witnesses buildings.

To bring inference skills to the surface as the student examines print-based text alone, and thereby to make a connection between sentient literacy and academic reading, we can present and discuss a set of strategies for enhancing students' abilities to use inference. Designed to bridge the divide between students acknowledging their inherent abilities to infer and applying those abilities to academic writing, these strategies help students think critically about what they read and serve as general guidelines for independent textual analysis. Basic skills students can use the pointers listed here to heighten their inferential learning from print.

Building Inference Skills

- **Try to read beyond the words.** Fill in details and information based on the writer's suggestions. Important meanings often lie below the surface.

- **Question yourself as you read.** "Why is Diane hiding the money?" you might have asked as you read the first brief selection. "Why are there clouds and lightening in the sky?" Supply the answers on the basis of the writer's hints and your own experience. Questions help you piece together important details that allow you to make valid inferences.
- **If a writer describes a person, try to understand the person** from how s/he moves, what s/he says, and what s/he looks like. You can infer things about character from the way a person behaves. Try to build a picture of the person in your mind; base your picture on the writer's description of action and appearance.
- **Try to draw conclusions and predict outcomes.** Answer questions like: What may happen if what I've read is true? What can I expect as an outcome of these issues?
- **Try to generalize.** That is, see if you can establish a principle or rule that might be true based on what you have read.
- If you find you cannot easily answer the question about what you have read, **remember to draw on your inference skills.** Return to the part of the reading where you expect the answer to appear. Then see if the writer suggests something that you yourself have to supply in clearer and fuller terms.

Living and Thinking: Conclusions

Once again, the way we make inferences from print is not unrelated to the way we make inferences in nonverbal settings. I believe that both of these processes manifest what Polanyi calls "the logical interrelation between living and thinking" (*Tacit Dimension* 90). So rooted in our representational artifacts is the tacit dimension that to ignore it—to assume that beginning college readers know little and need emergency medical attention—is to ignore the dormant seeds of learning.

In this paper I have used sentient (or visual or nonverbal) literacy as a correlative of Polanyi's idea of tacit knowing. I have tried to show that by starting from the enabling skills of learners, we can both alter the basic tenets of our epistemology for adult student readers and writers and, very practically, can provide instruction that moves to higher and higher levels of abstraction in the often evanescent quest for critical reading and writing skills.

My intention here was to examine basic *reading and writing*

instruction in the postsecondary setting and to acknowledge their explicit connections that Marilyn Sternglass believes we accept almost as an article of faith in that we "say that reading and writing should be taught together in language-centered classrooms" (184). The role of inferential reasoning is vital for both readers and writers—in weighing audience, purpose, thesis, issues of logic and sequence—in short, many of the essential elements in composing draw on the confluence between denotation and connotation, implication and inference, suggestion and statement. Other skills traditionally identified as essential for critical reading, skills such as generalizing, predicting outcomes, drawing conclusions, understanding figurative language—these too infuse the writing teacher's concerns.

Writers at all levels must attend carefully to the inference they wish intelligent readers to draw from a text; and readers must be alive to language and style that stimulate the inferential faculty and produce meaning beyond the word on a page.

Any links we can forge between visual and verbal literacy in those critical areas will enrich learning for beginners in college. Underlying these links, finally, are our beliefs in students' abilities to extend and expand personal knowledge to abstract thoughts, worldly transactions to representational forms, cultural experience to symbolic print.

In the last chapter of *The Tacit Dimension,* wonderfully titled "A Society of Explorers," Polanyi extends the connection between living and thinking. "Rising stages of evolution," he says, "produce more meaningful organisms, capable of ever more complex acts of understanding. In the last few thousand years human beings have enormously enriched the range of comprehension by equipping our tacit powers with a cultural machinery of language and writing. Immersed in this cultural milieu, we now respond to a much increased range of potential thought" (91).

We must at all times keep our eye on that range of potential thought among our students. We must recognize their latent abilities and we must build on those abilities as we move our classes to gain command over comprehension and expression.

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Marilyn Middendorf

BAKHTIN AND THE DIALOGIC WRITING CLASS

ABSTRACT: *The writer proposes and describes a process by which teachers of basic writing can painlessly initiate their students into the complex world of meaning and text, encouraging them to understand their own texts with far more sophistication than habitually required of beginning writers. This article and this pedagogical approach stem from and elaborate on the discourse theories of M. M. Bakhtin. While relying on only those Bakhtinian concepts which are useful in creating a dialogic writing classroom, this writer manages to show how a sometimes arcane theory can be useful in the modern classroom.*

Working in relative isolation during the 1930s, in Kazakhstan, USSR, M. M. Bakhtin wrote his comprehensive theory of discourse. This "non-system" profoundly challenged and undermined the dominant discourse "systems" which attempted to account for the dynamics of language. Again and again throughout his 50-year writing career, his works were nearly "lost"; many were literally saved from extinction by a devoted friend or a dedicated Bakhtin circle. The works which survived were marginalized even in Russian academic circles. Yet, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, his writings and ideas have surfaced in the West.

While I have been surprised to see his name crop up in the popular American press (four times last year in my regularly read magazines), I am not at all surprised to hear Bakhtin's name in

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composition studies. With increasing frequency, writing teachers and researchers have evoked or applied his ideas and concepts in diverse, provocative contexts. As more and more of us grapple with his theories and understand the complexity of utterance, we collectively gain insight into the magnitude of the problem we pose for our students. Bakhtin seems to be appreciated for just that—he deepens our understanding of the web of discourse and meaning. Most of the conference presentations and the growing number of articles on Bakhtin explicate his key concepts or interpret his ideas through the individual writer's philosophical or political filter. Yet, essentially, Bakhtin remains outside the writing classroom. Andrea Lunsford, in her 1989 keynote address to CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), defined our profession by citing five characteristics; one was, "We are dialogic, multivoiced, heteroglossic. Our classroom practices *enact* what others only talk about; they are sites for dialogues and polyphonic choruses" (76). Bakhtinian theory not only helps us understand texts better but it also helps us "read" ourselves and what we do. In support, I will venture a nonhasty generalization: all effective writing teachers know instinctively (even if they have never heard of Bakhtin) that the writing classroom must be dialogic.

But what is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense? To answer this question, I need to provide an admittedly sketchy map of Bakhtin's universe of discourse. While inquiring into the peculiar nature of the novel and its discourse versus other literary genres, Bakhtin constructs an approach, or rather, a philosophical stance describing humans and their words. He understands language as primary in our lives: it connects humans to one another throughout history; it transforms reality; it shapes our experience; it claims ideas with utterance. The word "becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions" (*Dialogic* 293). Our discourse is ourselves. However, opposing forces are at work within human discourse, human society (perhaps human consciousness itself). One force (centripetal) moves to consolidate and homogenize a hierarchy of values and power into authoritative genres, languages, institutions, postures, people. The counter force (centrifugal) moves to destablize and disperse the impulse to seek authoritative, hierarchical values. Heteroglossia results from the struggle between these two forces. When this struggle is healthy and not lopsided, heteroglossic awareness is at its most potent. This key Bakhtinian concept—heteroglossia—is as important in the modern classroom as the modern board room (or war room, back room). Context prevails over text. All texts and parts of any texts constantly shift, slide, slither, and sluice their way toward meaning. Texts alter "meaning" along with social, physiological, psycho-

logical, historical, socioeconomical, religious, and other contexts. When heteroglossia survives and thrives, no word, phrase, sentence, genre, authority, can be canonized—"written in stone" as commandments. Heteroglossia is life lived; canonization removes that which is canonized from life. The dialogic imagination—dialogizing—is a manner of living which acknowledges our tentative and multivoiced humanity.

Obviously, this "non-system" of discourse moves into realms well beyond considerations of novelistic discourse, or the writing classroom for that matter. What of this philosophical stance can be productively used in the writing classroom? Given the unique, dialogic nature of the writing classroom and given the increasing awareness of Bakhtinian insights into the complex interaction of discourse and meaning, we should move the discussion of Bakhtin out from behind the closed doors of the academy to the more open doors of the writing classroom—at every level. We would profit from forming a Bakhtin Circle of writing teachers *and* students. To this end, I offer the following suggestions for using Bakhtin in the writing classroom.

My writing classes—both basic and freshman composition—are now structured to demonstrate the dialogic nature of all discourse. My primary focus in all the following classroom activities is to have my students discover the dialogic heart of written communication. I want them to experience the dynamic of language and meaning as Bakhtin outlines it:

> Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering it, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression. (*Dialogic* 354–55)

Although resistant to accepting this level of linguistic complexity, my students become better writers and thinkers when they come to understand language as a force constantly interacting with, shaping, reacting to both that which precedes and that which is still forming. At the beginning of the semester, the students' sensitivity to the power of words is virtually nonexistent, yet they need to build a respect for a word's singular force: "The word in a living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (*Dialogic* 280). In a larger context, dialogizing requires students to see everything as unfinished, relative, with many voices competing and intermingling, shaping

the texture of the idea being formed—but never fixed. I hope they see all human experience—their human experience—as double-voiced, interactive, tentative. Admittedly, most students reject the philosophical underpinnings and remain indifferent to the primacy of language which Bakhtin espouses, "It is not experience which organizes expression, but the other way around—*expression organizes experience*" (*Marxism* 85). However, they readily accept the notion that writing is an ongoing dialogue. So this is an easy place to begin. The more radical, philosophical concepts wait until the winds rise and it's time to trim the sails.

Upon first leaving the solid land of their old beliefs about writing, students need to acquire "sea-legs." They begin by learning to recognize and suspect writing which is monological, standard, pat, based on received modes of thought. In other words, they learn to reject what most had previously considered "good writing." My classes start with the question, "What is good writing?" Small groups explore the characteristics they believe define good writing, and each writes a group definition. Dissenting definitions are allowed, even encouraged. Group leaders read their definitions for the class to ponder; at this point, dissenters will frequently find a compatible new group (or, infrequently, remain alone). After some discussion of group definitions, they regroup and amend their definitions. Next class, they bring in samples—one or two paragraphs—which fit their definitions. Each group chooses the best of the samples and I xerox those for the next class period, when we discuss the samples and the corresponding definitions: this class is chaotic and contentious. After this dialogic "free-for-all," I ask the students to start keeping a dialectical notebook, focusing on the changes in their individual responses to the group's definition of good writing. This notebook, continued throughout the semester, records personal journeys into linguistic awareness.

These journeys begin when they reject their initial definition. Then the problem is to steer the journey, and this is where Bakhtin enters the class. His critical oppositions between Art and Life, between The Epic and The Novel have been my touchstone. His chapter "Epic and Novel," defining the salient features separating the two genres, showed me that my writing students were reenacting history. According to Bakhtin, throughout history, cultures have recorded and canonized only High Art while ignoring the lowlife, comedic genres which parody the seriousness and piety of the contemporary High Art. Only the features which the dominant class valued and thought worthy were passed down to us, and, Bakhtin claims, those features were remarkably consistent throughout the centuries. The culturally privileged features are epitomized in the Epic:

> By its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation. One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it; one cannot look at it from just any point of view; it is impossible to experience it, analyze it, take it apart, penetrate into its core. It is given solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself. (*Dialogic* 16)

The epic is fixed, closed, received, removed from contemporary life. "It is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. . . . One can only approach the epic world with reverence" (*Dialogic* 17). From my students' early definitions of good writing, I gather they regard all written discourse much the same way Bakhtin observes our culture regarding the Epic and other forms of High Art: it is understood to be monologic, immutable, certain, abstract, received from a higher authority. This is canonized Art. My students were merely reenacting the cultural inclinations of the powerless. I, of course, want them to move from this consciousness and change their basic understanding of written discourse. I want them to see writing as part of life, not removed from it. I guide them to view writing as Bakhtin describes the essence of novelistic discourse: it is many-voiced, playful, detailed, tentative, fleeting, still—and always—becoming.

To nudge my students towards this altered consciousness about written language, I use (for want of a better word) Daffy Definitions. On this class handout, I oppose a number of creative, misconstrued definitions from *Harper's Magazine* with a number of straight definitions. Here is one example of what I mean:

acad e mate-v. (academy + accommodate): To imprison white-collar criminals in resort-like surroundings, a contradictory response containing aspects of both reward and punishment. "The Wall Street broker *academated* in Florida, where he served two sunburned years of hard tennis."

in car cer ate-v. (in + carcer = enclosed place): To put in jail. To shut in; confine.

After reading a number of these juxtaposed definitions, small groups consider the type of communication each definition accomplishes. I ask them to name that type of communication and

to list as many features as they can. Invariably, the names are Creative or Imaginative pitted against Informative. Granted, no breakthrough here. However, the opposing features are revealing. As the groups name the oppositions, I write the results on the board. Cleaning up the vocabulary and organizing the features as oppositions, this is the list we arrive at:

Daffy Definition	*Straight Definition*
funny/playful	boring/serious
circular/recursive	linear
multireferenced	single referenced
provocative	limits thought
connects new ideas	no connections made
open-ended meaning	settled, closed meaning
"becoming"	"received"
expansive	contractive
dialogue between ideas	monologue
reader brings meaning to text	reader distills writer's meaning

With this list (or one very similar to it) on the board, I ask the students to decide which list describes the characteristics of "good writing." They argue about diverse purposes and are reluctant to choose. (Imagine the cultural baggage a typical college student must overcome to claim, in an English class, that a dictionary definition is not good writing.) When I gently insist they choose, they all agree that the characteristics under Daffy Definitions better describe "good writing." The next question: Why? Someone eventually answers something like, "Well, it forces you to think and doesn't tell you what to think." The next question: Is that what good writing does? or should do? Good writing provokes rather than limits thought. There's recognition in the silence. Now I ask the original groups to reconsider their initial definitions of good writing. They always manage a rewrite which incorporates the features attributed to the Daffy Definition. As a group, they have forsaken their former, unexamined notions of writing, so reminiscent of Bakhtin's epic world: restricted, closed, serious, accomplished, respectful, on a distant valorized plane, removed from the chaos of life.

Once they alter their definition, and the accompanying perceptions, it is difficult (but not impossible) for them to return to their old automatic, pat, monologic habits of mind. However, this new awareness must be constantly and creatively reinforced. I will briefly describe a number of the follow-up exercises I use to keep students focused on the differences between dialogical and monological communication. Every day we begin class considering a student blooper which I write on the board. Here are a few

examples: "Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock," "Arabs wear turbines on their heads," "The family group consisted of three adults and six adultresses," etc. We talk about the student's intention and the intriguing, multireferenced error which resulted; we discuss the necessary dynamic between what the reader knows and the writer doesn't realize. Here, the reader dialogizes the writer's utterance. In another exercise, similar to Daffy Definitions described earlier, I pair a cartoon with a straight-forward, noncomic drawing. We discuss how one communicates dialogically, the other linearly. Also, I frequently use "paired" student texts, one illustrating dialogic treatment of an idea and the other monologic. Another reliable resource for examples is any Letters to the Editor section; this works best with "hot" local or student issues, but it's frequently difficult to find a dialogic voice. My classes eventually become adept at calibrating degrees of monological thinking (another advantage to these letters is the degree of hilarity in some of them). Also, we have an ongoing competition in "nailing" each other's monological and dialogical statements. This type of record-keeping is also fruitful during political campaigns or heated public debates. The students become adept at skewering public or authority figures for their monological statements.

A by-product of these activities is the students' increasing, healthy skepticism; Bakhtin calls this "radical scepticism toward any unmediated discourse and any straightforward seriousness" (*Dialogic* 401). Another unfailing result of these activities is classroom laughter. Bakhtin believes laughter is a powerful intellectual as well as historical force:

> It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought up close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into the zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation. (*Dialogic* 23)

Virtually all of the classroom exercises I incorporate to reinforce the students' sense of the dialogic involve laughter. This emphasis

evolves naturally. Laughter helps students escape from the Epic frame of mind and into the dialogic uncertainty of the novel, of life. Through these exercises of recognition, the students become sensitized to the distinctions between monologic thinking/writing and dialogic thinking/writing. Once they know that "good writing" embraces uncertainty and double-voicedness, they naturally prefer the intriguing playfulness of the unfinished dialogue.

At this point, they are almost ready to write, but, before they do, I try to establish two additional Bakhtinian ideas: the first concerns all written discourse as ongoing dialogue and the second concerns the primacy of language in our lives.

I urge my students to understand all written discourse as unfinished social dialogue. Through using groups of essays discussing different sides of the same issue, I hope my students discover the actual writing situation to be interactive and interpretative—beyond or outside of rhetoric. (I am aware of, indeed intend, the "rashness" of this statement and hope to argue it fully another time.) Over my years as a writing teacher, I have interminably discussed the elements of rhetoric with my students. Both the textbook and I would elaborate on the rhetorical modes, the rhetorical triangle, the rhetorical square, the rhetorical situation. All the clear, amply illustrated explanations never seemed to sink in and take root, probably because of the sheer artificiality of the construct (perhaps the voice of the academy failing again to affect, positively, students' writing behavior). At best, the study of rhetoric taught students to dissect arguments of others, but it was unhelpful in the students' own writing. In discussing the essential differences between novelistic and rhetorical discourse, Bakhtin describes three branches of rhetorical discourse—legal, political, publicist—and then generalizes:

> Rhetoric is often limited to purely verbal victories over the word; when this happens, rhetoric degenerates into a formalistic verbal play. But, we repeat, when discourse is torn from reality, it is fatal for the word itself as well: words grow sickly, lose semantic depth and flexibility, the capacity to expand and renew their meaning in new living contexts. (*Dialogic* 353–54)

The power of the word to mean is lost when it is captured in a rhetorical construct because "it is not fertilized by a deep-rooted connection with the forces of historical becoming" (*Dialogic* 325). Bakhtin argues that rhetorical purpose is unitary, single-referenced, unrefracted, polemic, and only artificially double-voiced, hence lifeless.

While students are eager to reject rhetoric as artificial, they are suspicious of the primary role which Bakhtin assigns language and downright hostile, at first, to the idea that our lives are dominated by the language of others. They learn that "in real life people talk most of all about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people's words" (*Dialogic* 338). This is a key Bakhtinian concept:

> In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varying degrees of accuracy and impartiality. The more intensive, differentiated and highly developed the social life of a speaking collective, the greater is the importance attaching, among other possible subjects of talk, to another's word, another's utterance, since another's word will be the subject of passionate communication, an object of interpretation, discussion, evaluation, rebuttal, support, further development and so on. (*Dialogic* 337)

In class, we discuss the nature of internalized dialogue—our own interpretations of other's words and our own ideas—and find minuscule the number of ideas which can claim any degree of originality. Predictably, students are shocked. They want to believe in the independence of, at the very least, "the great thinkers" (if not themselves). Now, instead, they come to understand the complex interrelated reality of the ongoing social dialogue that they had so easily, in the beginning, agreed existed. But, beyond this, they begin to understand the dynamic of language and its operating principle in their lives. At this point in their journeys, I introduce the following passage:

> Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the border between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (*Dialogic* 293–94)

We puzzle out this dynamic and find illustrations before accepting it. Understanding this idea of language, the students move well

beyond the typical novice writer's idea about "using" (or misusing) sources. They begin to perceive the interplay between their own ideas and words, and others' as existing "not in a mechanical bond but in a chemical union" (*Dialogic* 340). Utterance itself is dialogic.

By this point, the students have experienced the complexity of discourse as interactive, continuing, multivoiced dialogue. Now they are ready to write with a dialogic imagination and—for the most part—they are up to the task. I initially used pairs of essays about controversial issues readily available in any number of anthologies. But I soon found how easy it was to assemble my own materials; these "homemade" issue packages can be tailored to student interests and newly developing ideas in our social dialogue. I will describe two of the issue packages I use to illustrate the continuing social dialogue.

For basic skills and freshman composition classes, I first begin with two companion articles from a newspaper: these pieces disagree about the ethics of capturing dolphins for a newly built Baltimore aquarium display. Their respective headlines pinpoint the crux of the debate—"Confining dolphins won't save them" and "Aquarium display can make man their ally." Along with these readings, I supply brochures from a swim-with-a-dolphin park in the Florida Keys and a number of newspaper reports: the decreasing dolphin population in the Atlantic, beached dolphins and rescue efforts, restrictions on the tuna-fishing industry, the rescue and later release of a dolphin by Orlando's Sea World, and a dolphin's "miracle save" of a sailor. Together, the materials in this package illustrate the unfinished, still-becoming, multivoiced dialogue about our human fascination with dolphins. The students see this issue debated by well-meaning, earnest professionals who are sometimes monologic, sometimes dialogic in their thinking. After chewing on this issue for a number of days, the students write their responses to an audience of their own design (Sea World, Greenpeace, the Baltimore Aquarium, the swim-with-a-dolphin park, the local newspaper). They enter the ongoing social dialogue and attempt to present their position dialogically. For the most part, these essays have something to contribute: they are thoughtful, lively, disdainful, some impassioned, others sarcastic. But because they have witnessed the heteroglossic, many-sided issue, these student writers seem aware that their position about this matter is, in fact, of only partial consequence and still evolving—one voice among many; therefore, their writing is rarely certain, self-contained, monologic. By changing their thinking about writing they change their writing.

My second sample issue package, used only in freshman

composition, revolves around the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This sequence begins with a *Time* essay written on the 40th anniversary of the event; with perfect hindsight, the essay reviews the reasons why we dropped the bomb. The next three essays were written contemporaneously: one is an eyewitness account of the bombing mission itself by a science writer for *The New York Times,* "Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki Told by a Flight Member"; the second is John Hersey's recounting of the moment of impact on the lives of six survivors, "A Noiseless Flash"; the third is an *Atlantic Monthly* article, "That Day at Hiroshima," which reports an official White House task force visit to the bombed out city. These contemporary voices—one focused unblinkingly on ground zero at impact, another officially reporting the aftermath, and still another looking on from above, an aerial viewpoint—present so dissimilar a description of the same event that the students are jarred into seeing the multivoicedness of history. History is never finished, a closed unit or system. It is merely written about the past, but it is not passed; history is with us in the present, with us in the future. By studying this issue package, my students, I hope, may succeed in reading these historical bombings as a multivoiced, unfinished event in *their* lives. This writing project encourages the students to explore the dialectical refraction of their individual perception and the historical event. At this point near the end of the course, "the relativizing of linguistic consequence" has, at very least, begun: "the inevitable necessity for such a consciousness to speak indirectly, conditionally, in a refracted way—these are all indispensable prerequisites for an authentic double-voiced prose discourse" (*Dialogic* 326).

I suppose it is time to confess. I think I was a Bakhtinian before I even read him. I used to experiment and try to accomplish much the same thinking/writing goals as I have just described. But since struggling through and with Bakhtin's works, I have a more evocative vocabulary and certainly a more cogent system for holding together all the separate spinning worlds which comprise writing, thinking, meaning. Since I started using Bakhtin's sense of language and his dialogizing thoughtfulness in my writing classes, my students—at all levels—have become better thinkers and writers. They learn what good writing entails, and, more importantly, they learn to value dialogized, multivoiced thinking as they struggle to produce "good writing."

What makes writing good? Even teachers of writing have an ongoing dialogue about this question. We seem only to agree on the abstractions (organization, development, sufficient evidence, and so on). Lester Faigley capsulizes the contents of a 1985 book, *What*

Makes Writing Good (Coles and Vopat). The authors had asked 48 of our most illustrious colleagues to submit a sample of their best student essays and to briefly describe what made their choices "good writing." Faigley surveyed the results and found that 30 out of the 48 writing specialists agreed about the essential ingredient of good writing—authentic voice. The number agreeing surprised me, but the ingredient they agreed upon dismayed me. While I agree that authentic voice is desirable in writing, and clearly preferable to the poorly constructed, wooden persona typical of beginning writers, where is it taught? How is it learned? I can hear my students complaining, if they ever got wind of this "finding," about the unmitigated perversity of writing teachers to designate the most important feature of good writing as the one thing not covered in writing texts. I believe their outrage would be justified.

But, for my part, I harbor a far more primal fear. To me, the idea of authentic voice sounds too single-voiced, too self-contained, too monologic. What is authentic voice? One coherent consciousness communicating a unitary, unique, possibly unrefracted plunge (somewhere). This seems contrary to a dialogized view of the social, heteroglossic reality of our lives in a language community reading other communities. In his article, Faigley seems similarly astonished by this settling on—"canonizing"—authentic voice and pursues the subsequent political implications. In constructing his own argument, he gives voice to my fears:

> To ask students to write authentically about the self assumes that a rational consciousness can be laid out on the page. That the self must be interpellated through language is denied. It is no small wonder, then, that the selves many students try to appropriate in their writing are voices of authority, and when they exhaust their resources of analysis, they revert to moral lessons, adopting, as Bartholomae has noted, a parental voice making cliched pronouncements where we expect ideas to be extended. (409–10)

A "canonizing" focus on expressive, personal writing, striving for an authentic voice, may actually impede our students by encouraging grand illusions about the hallowed "self." Authentic voice for professional writers is certainly a requisite component but still a most difficult concept to define, control, even find. Inquiring into this problem of voice, Toby Fulwiler concluded, "I have come to believe that I have a recognizable public voice, both embedded within and yet distinctly apart from others who inhabit the same community" (219–20). The voices of professional writers are

dialogic. Such writers have learned the realities of academic and other discourses. Our students have not.

The social reality the vast majority of our students "know" is the 1980s. In a speculative leap, I am going to suggest that this agreement on authentic voice is indicative of the Reagan decade, of Hirsch and Bloom. In the place where we have most recently been, what constituted "good communication"? One consciousness talking to passive receivers. Voice, style upstaging content. Bakhtin maintains that content is style; the two cannot be separated. Writing in the 30s and 40s in backwater Russia, Bakhtin "described" the more open-ended, uncertain world of the 90s. What makes communication good today? I hope I am not being naive, but I believe we have exhausted the simultaneously playing monologues of the recent past; we are witnessing, perhaps, a renaissance of dialogic thinking and communicating.

Bakhtinian ideas are a natural for the writing classroom, and we writing teachers could profit by directly using these notions of language in our classes. Understanding Bakhtin's theory of discourse has helped me answer the first question I require my students to answer: What is good writing? Good writing is good dialogue—always mixing, changing, incorporating, answering, anticipating—merging the writer and the reader in the construction of meaning. Good writing speaks with the playful double-voicedness with which we, as living, breathing individuals, approach the reality of our lives, the uncertainty of our existence.

When students learn dialogizing as a habit of mind, more than their writing improves.

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John S. Mayher

UNCOMMON SENSE IN THE WRITING CENTER[1]

ABSTRACT: *This critique, written from the perspective of the author's book,* Uncommon Sense, *exposes the underlying commonsense metaphors and labels used by and about writing centers. This essay focuses on the "skills" and "remediation" metaphors and argues that their fragmentation and inadequacies have done students and teachers more harm than good, practically and conceptually. He suggests an alternative set of metaphors based on a constructivist, transactional, and holistic view of learning which would provide a sounder theoretical, pedagogical, and political basis for the work of writing centers.*

In these troubled times at home and abroad, it is hard to concentrate one's energies on the day-to-day. But those of us who work in education must, by definition, be optimists with our eyes on the long term. Therefore, we must somehow find a way to believe that our efforts still count, that our students need us now more than ever, and that we can still make a difference to the future.

I am only indirectly involved with writing centers, but since my main involvement has been teaching people who teach in them or who direct them, my commitment is a deep one. While I'm going to have some critical things to say—mostly about the language we use to talk and think about what we do—I hope they will be taken as coming from one who hopes to solidify the place of writing centers in schools and colleges, not from one who seeks to further marginalize them. Indeed although I'm sure that there are

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exceptions, my sense is that writing center people sincerely try to help their student clients, and what I hope to suggest are some ways of rethinking what sort of help they need and how it might be provided.

Those of us who are concerned with the work of writing centers are always in jeopardy in the academy because the academy is a bit embarrassed by our presence. Like all other programs which are or have been labeled as "remedial" or "developmental" or concerned with "skills"—particularly "basic" skills—we are perceived to be an overt symbol of systemic failure. Higher education manages to deflect some of the criticism implied by blaming either the lower levels of schooling or the students themselves (or both), but the existence of huge numbers of students repeating the same noncredit courses year after year in the vestibule of the nation's colleges reveals that all levels of education are complicit in the same syndrome of failure. In tough economic times, we are more vulnerable than ever, partly because we are costly, but mostly because the conservative pressures for cost-cutting frequently make even more explicit the usually tacit belief that limited educational dollars are really wasted on the less able and should be saved for the gifted.

My purpose is not to bemoan our fate, however, or to seek to develop a full sociopolitical analysis of the educational system and its failures. The former might make us feel good, but would accomplish nothing more, and the second would take us too far afield. Even though I am going to concentrate on our own situation, however, it must be remembered that the linguistic systems and educational practices that I am going to explore do take place in, and are in part shaped by, a larger economic, cultural, and ideological framework. I'm going to concentrate on our own practices because those are the ones we have the most control over, but I fully recognize that many of them are dictated implicitly or explicitly by the institutions we work in.

My title and my perspective here stems from my recent book: *Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education* (1990). In it I argue, among other things, that much of the inertia that has prevented progressive innovations from taking root in the educational system stems from what I call *common sense:* the set of unrecognized, unexamined, and uncriticized beliefs and assumptions about schools and schooling, teaching and learning which define "normal" practice. I therefore try to show that while what we need is a new set of lenses: which I call *uncommon sense,* we'll never get them without recognizing and ridding ourselves of the commonsense lenses we already have. What I hope to do is to look

at some of the common sense that lurks in the language of writing centers and to suggest some uncommonsense alternatives. For many readers of this journal, I'm sure many of these ideas will be familiar, but my sense is that they are not familiar at all in the wider beliefs and practices of the academy which is where these battles will be fought.

What's in a Name?

One of the issues we need to think about is what we are named—officially—or (if there's a difference) what people call us. To what extent does it matter if we are named (or thought of) as:

a writing center?
a writing skills center?
an academic skills center?
a writing lab?
a remedial writing lab?
a writing clinic?
a learning center?

At one level, of course, it doesn't really matter at all since we all know that euphemisms rule the American roost, that we don't rest in rest rooms, and that to be in special education does not mark your prospects as favorable. But insofar as these labels do reveal some of the metaphors we live by (in Lakoff and Johnson's sense, 1980), then we must take them seriously indeed. I'd like to focus particularly on two of them: **skills** and **remediation**, partly because they are pervasive throughout the academy, and partly because, sadly, we too often believe in them ourselves either explicitly or tacitly.

Skills

The metaphor of skill is the most pervasive and pernicious of all. It is so interwoven into the linguistic (and conceptual) fabric of education, that it is extremely difficult to avoid using it even with deliberate effort. Such is the power of common sense that it is difficult to escape its linguistic clutches. You may grant its ubiquity, but wonder why it makes me so crazy.

Fundamentally my objection stems from the reification phenomena involved in the process of labeling.

Our minds have the capacity to analyze complex phenomena by constructing abstract models of them. In the case of language, for example, we routinely ignore such potentially important phenom-

ena as absolute pitch—it doesn't matter whether I talk very high or very low—in order to attend to those distinctions which do make a difference like those between long and short vowels as in *fat* and *fate*. So far we are talking about **un**conscious processes, and there is nothing much to worry about—partly because everybody seems to master them about equally, and partly because they go largely unrecognized. But given the nature of human minds—What inquiring minds want to know!—sooner or later somebody builds a model of such processes involving either how they work, how they are learned, or both.

And this is where the trouble starts. Once we have a model, we see that it has parts, and this is where the "Skills" are supposed to come in. (Indeed I was curious about how this happened so I looked it up. Turns out the etymology of *skill* derives from "making distinctions" in Old Norse and from "butcher" in Gothic!) And so we start the labeling process by calling various aspects of our models "skills" or "sub-skills." Depending on the level of abstraction involved these can be really big "skills": like reading or writing, big "skills" like reading critically or writing cohesively, medium sized "skills" like identifying main ideas or using topic sentences in paragraphs, or smaller "skills" like distinguishing: fat from fate or of spelling them correctly and so on and on and on.

But what does it mean to call such things "skills?" *It means that we are labeling parts of our model of process X and are thereby claiming that if a person wants to do X (or do X well) they will? must? be doing Y and Z?* If, for example I want to read sentences a. and b. below, I will have to distinguish between fat and fate (as well as fête, which is still another story). And, of course, I had to in order to write them.

a. They roasted the fat pig at the fête.
b. He met his fate with style and grace.

But what are the "skills" here? Is spelling them correctly a "skill"? Is knowing their meaning distinctions? Is recognizing the letter shapes? Is incorporating them appropriately in each sentence? (And on up the discourse ladder to whatever whole text they are embedded in.)

While it is clear that we can make such distinctions and label them, the decision to label them as *"skills"* can and often does have disastrous consequences. The problem stems from the implication that because they can be separately analyzed and separately labeled, that they can therefore be separately learned and/or that they are separately used. And this, in turn, derives from the idea that complex processes are learned as a conglomerate of these individual

"skills," indeed that some of these "skills" are "basic" (i. e., foundational—we are, after all, dealing here with a building metaphor of learning). This, finally, leads to the all too common belief that these "basics" can and must be learned before one can **do** the larger process (or "skill") they are supposed to be the basics for.

And, of course, since the cornerstone of commonsense education is the belief that learning depends on teaching, if these things must be learned, then they must be taught. And taught they are: as phonics rules, as spelling rules, as rules for subject-verb agreement, as maxims for paragraph organization, as paradigms for the perfect argumentative essay, and so on and on and on. And, worse still, they are taught out of the context of use. They are taught as a matter of preparation for (possible? eventual?) use. It's a kind of prophylactic teaching designed to prevent error by equipping the learner with the appropriate series of inoculations before they venture into the jungle of real reading and writing.

Worst of all, of course, they don't do the job. They don't help people learn to write (or read) and they don't prevent error either. And an unintended (?) consequence is that they make many if not most people fearful writers and reluctant readers. Even many of those who do develop some writing (and reading) ability despite the ways they were taught rarely choose to do so, and even though there may be other societal factors which account for this as well, clearly it is a sad day when our means of teaching writing and reading are part of the problem not part of the solution.

But we really shouldn't be surprised. If "skills" are just labels of parts of our models of complex processes, then the "skills" will be only as good as the models are. We still have only a very fragmentary understanding of how the mind works as it creates and understands language. That is, we still have poor models. But what we **do** know shows even less promise for the "skills" mavens in that we are discovering that many of the processes of language use are *necessarily* unconscious—and therefore not subject to the kind of conscious control that a drill and practice "skills" model depends on—and that they are so complex and subtly interconnected that attempts to atomize them for separate teaching doesn't correspond to the ways they are learned and used. We can, for example, sort out the tenses of English, but there is no evidence whatsoever that they provide a useful order through which to organize the teaching and learning of English as a second (or a first) language.

This point really can't be overstressed. It may be upsetting to us to understand it, but we must come to grips with the fact that the processes of language use—of speaking, listening, reading, and writing—are simply not consciously and separately controllable.

We can control our intentions—our meanings—and monitor the extent to which what we've said or written conforms to them, but I simply have no idea—and **can't** have—how my mind is choosing the appropriate tense for this clause. I didn't write it to express a tense—I wrote it to express a meaning. On reflection—and only **after** I've produced it—can I check it. But even there my checking mechanism is not rule driven, but rather a process which allows me to use my—**un**conscious—rules as a template against which my output can be measured.

While our model building and labeling processes can make it seem like we need to **know** "skills" in order to **use** language, the facts are entirely the reverse. It is our meaningful use of language which builds the mental systems that we later label and these mental systems simply can't be built by meaningless, out-of-context "skill" drill.

The solutions here are not particularly new ones nor are they surprising to anyone who's been paying attention to the developments in reading and writing theory and language learning theory for the past 25 years. I don't want to spend a lot of time therefore arguing in favor of:

> learning language through meaningful use (not dummy runs)
> holistic (integrated) approaches to language learning
> indirect approaches to language teaching
> meaning making in a social context as the key process
> pleasure, significance, and pride as the key motivators
> beyond equality of opportunity to equality of outcomes
> excellence is possible only through this path
> high standards of achievement can be attained by all learners.

These issues are discussed in much more detail in Mayher (1990).

What I do want to point out, however, is the obvious fact that not everyone shares these uncommonsense beliefs—if they did, they wouldn't be uncommon any more!—but even more important, part of the reason that they don't is that they are trapped in the commonsense conception of "skills." Indeed many of us are too—these ideas have been around for so long they are now osmotically acquired without reflection or critique. They've survived the nearly complete demise of the behaviorist/associationist mind models they were based on. And they've survived generations of failure as well as we've always found someone or something else to blame. (Including, by my most cynical colleagues—ourselves—either as a part of the great tracking and sorting machine or as featherbedders interested in saving our own jobs at the expense of our students.)

What is critical, therefore, is that we find ways of helping people change their metaphors about who we are and what we do as teachers—and indeed who and what our students are and do—because unless and until they change, nothing much else will take root and prosper.

Remediation

To see how this works in a bit more detail let's look at how the "skills" metaphor gets played out in the health/disease metaphor which undergirds the notion of remediation. In this set of metaphors, being able to write (read) at the appropriate level of fitness is healthy; falling behind, having abnormal processing problems, etc. is diseased. The teacher becomes a clinician who diagnoses the problem and prescribes a remedy so that the student (patient?) can be restored to healthy language use. Although the term remediation itself has fallen out of favor in recent years (too blunt?), the metaphor lives on as do the practices it justified. (And, in the early grades, in reading at least, some new euphemisms are here: the most recent is reading recovery which is premised on the metaphor that children can be diagnosed early as potentially unhealthy readers and given enough of a booster shot so they never catch the full disease.)

Indeed I expect that something like this metaphor underlies most visits to writing centers. In this case, however, the illness is not supposed to lie in the writer, but in the text. **It** is suffering from some disease or other and needs to be cured before it can be turned in as a healthy paper and receive the good grade it deserves. Treating the text as the problem is easier, of course, since both writer and reader can keep some distance and seem to avoid personal threat. Even more important it provides a soluble (or at least more soluble) problem than looking underneath the text to its author. And perhaps most important of all, it meets the needs of the client who is usually primarily focused on getting through the course and is eager for any help which will cure the text and get the grade.

Since most writing centers don't see themselves as editing services, however, writing center teachers are not eager to merely fix up the text for the writer and send her on her way. We are concerned with the writer—at least to some extent—and certainly our mandate from the institution is to provide the kind of more permanent cure which will prevent future texts from suffering from the same diseases. This gives rise to a certain amount of tension between the writer who has—in the main—come for a short-term

cosmetic repair, and the tutor who believes that a more long-term solution is needed which will, in turn, demand a deeper diagnosis and, usually, more sustained treatment.

While different people and different centers behave differently at this juncture, too often the "skills" metaphor returns to provide a convenient and apparently effective solution. As the tutor is editing the piece with the writer, he or she can make a quick diagnosis of one or more of the "skills" deficiencies the paper reveals. Then a drill regimen can be prescribed to cure the problem. Everyone seems happy. The writer got her paper fixed. The tutor doesn't feel merely like an editor but like a successful clinician. And the institution can pat itself on the back for providing a useful academic support service.

But, sadly, for all the reasons discussed earlier, the prescription simply doesn't work most of the time. That is, it doesn't really contribute very much to the writer's development as a writer, a reader, or as a learner, which is what I take our goals to be. (I would argue, in fact, that even when it seems to "work," that other factors are really involved, but that's an argument for another day.)

Learning How to Learn

If our goals really are to help all learners achieve their maximum potential as language users, then we must, I think, reconstruct our metaphors of who we are and what we do. We must recognize that there are no short cuts in language education: no gimmicks, no tricks, no medicines which will drastically speed up the learning process. If the problem wasn't a "disease," then the solution is not a "cure." The good news, by contrast, however, is that every time we use language meaningfully in one mode it has the potential, at least, to contribute to development in all the others. So although we have lost the apparent speed-up of the drill regime, we have gained the synergy of integration. To do so effectively, however, we must recognize that whatever brings the learner to our center is only the tip of a complex mental system. My sense of writing centers is that we have done better in dealing with the human complexities of anxiety and failure which our clients bring with them than we have with the complexities of their language and learning systems.

Being nice, supportive, and so on is certainly an important part of our role and an increasingly vital one in large, impersonal, bureaucratic institutions. But if we want to make a critical educational difference, it is not enough.

The key metaphoric distinctions here are those of the nature of learning and language. The commonsense/behaviorist/"skills"

model of learning assumes a set of separable parts which can be independently practiced and "mastered" out of context. The uncommonsense model of learning, by contrast, is fundamentally holistic, constructivist, and transactional. While recognizing the possibility of **analyzing** the parts of complex processes, it simultaneously denies their separability in use or in learning (and teaching!). By emphasizing the centrality of meaning making in context, uncommonsense keeps its eyes firmly focused on constructing whole meanings through transactional processes involving writer intentions, textual phenomena, and reader reconstructions. In this sense even "writing" itself is a falsely separated activity implying that it can be dealt with—in writing centers—without regard for reading, thinking, learning, and so on.

A good example of the danger here has been the use of research on the composing process. While the analysis of such processes done by Janet Emig (1971) and, among others, Sondra Perl (1975) then of Hostos now of Lehman College, has taught us an enormous amount about how people write, it has, naturally, only permitted us to make inferences about the unconscious parts of the process and their effects. Further it was not designed to shed direct light on how to teach writing. When such analyses were placed in the commonsense pedagogical context, however, we immediately discovered a new set of "skills" which could be practiced—especially those like brainstorming and mapping which related to prewriting, and using sentence combining as a revision strategy. While some of these may be effective things to do in context, the commonsense practices of either requiring them or taking them out of context killed their effectiveness as surely as outlining had been rendered useless in pre-process pedagogy. (Most of us licked that one by writing the paper first and the outline later; today's kids write the paper first and the "rough draft" later.)

Students who come to us with a question/problem/issue, therefore, should not see themselves or be treated as "skill" deficient, but rather welcomed to a "learning club" in Frank Smith's (1988) sense. The focus should not be on their texts, but on what and how the students are trying to learn. The best entree to this may be the intentions that lie behind their texts, but to discover them we have to work to help them redefine the learning enterprise and their goals. The concept of "skills" and its fragmenting of the curriculum have certainly supported if not created the get-the-grade, punch-the-ticket, get-the-diploma structure of commonsense schooling. But by detaching such punches from either learning or competence, both student and society have been the loser. There's a lot of unlearning to do about learning.

Indeed one of the challenges for the contemporary school or college is to find a way to create such learning club environments and to foster them wherever they exist. Where—in class or out—are students and teachers (or students and students) working together to learn? to solve a problem? to create a text? to produce a play? to debate an issue? to explore an idea? Where—in class or out—is learning fun? exciting? challenging? stimulating? Is the writing center such a place? The library? The theatre? The classrooms?

To do so we must expunge the label and the concept of "skill" from our centers and from our practice. And we must begin to educate all concerned—students and administrators—about these issues. We must recognize—and help all concerned recognize—that "surface errors" don't respond to superficial treatment—that the only effective solutions are long-range and long-term.

We must change the processes by which students are tested, sorted, and judged in our schools and colleges. To fully make this argument would take another talk as long or longer than this one, but it is clear that we will have "skill" teaching as long as we have—overtly or covertly—"skill" testing. We are not, to be sure, the only ones who make such decisions, and we are—or we ought to be—well aware of the political motives of many involved in them—but as language education professionals it is high time we said: **Enough!** These tests don't test anything meaningful and they are destroying our attempts to actually do the long-range job that is required. What would happen if we simply said: **NO—we won't give them, we won't grade them, we won't use them, we won't teach to them?**

Therefore, we must act on our understanding that every student who comes to us needs to work in a long-term integrated way on, at least, reading, writing, and learning. As noted, some of our clients will not be initially enthusiastic on this front. They want help today—to deal with today's problem. And while we can provide some help—even some editing—the most important goal of each session should be to help the learner learn how to learn—to develop—to grow. And part of the process will require us to help each of them reconceptualize their own definitions of learning, and their own goals for education.

We must help our colleagues and the administrators we work with come to understand that virtually every student in their institution—even the most successful ones—have had too few experiences of independent learning to really have learned how to learn. The spoonfeeding that dominates commonsense schooling—and is, if anything, intensified in universities—has enabled the successful to learn by figuring out what needs to be regurgitated and

has left the unsuccessful almost completely at sea. Saddest of all, neither the "successes" nor the "failures" are well equipped for the real world.

If we can rid ourselves of our commonsense "skills" heritage, we can redefine ourselves as **learning centers** and claim a place at the center of the academic enterprise.

This would be not done in the spirit of territorial aggrandizement, but rather as a process of reaching out to all of our colleagues who recognize how little genuine attention learning and teaching have gotten in universities in recent years. I certainly have nothing against either research or publication—both are vital for the health of the academy—but if we can't radically change the way learning happens in our institutions, there will be few people around to do either in the next century. The ideal situation would be for even learning centers to become unnecessary: each classroom could become one. But, sadly, we have a long way to go before we reach that nirvana.

Clearly writing/learning center people don't have the clout to reform the academy by ourselves. What we do have, however, is the clout to begin to reform ourselves. And as we do that, it will effect our students, our colleagues, and the institution at large.

The road to uncommon sense isn't an easy one, but I have confidence that writing center people will be in the vanguard of those who will lead us there.

Note

[1] This paper was adapted from a keynote speech delivered at the CUNY Writing Centers Conference held at Lehman College in Spring 1991.

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A COMBINED BASIC WRITING/ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASS: MELTING POT OR MISHMASH?

ABSTRACT: *To better understand what differnces may exist between basic writers and ESL writers, a research study comparing the written products of both groups of students was conducted at a suburban two-year college located on the outskirts of a major southeastern urban area. Results of the study indicated that both groups used topic sentences and preferred exposition. Even though basic writers wrote longer compositions, they averaged fewer errors in the construction of verb tenses, the use of prepositions, articles, and diction than ESL students. The authors discuss implications for teaching and future research.*

With the increasing diversity of students entering colleges and universities and the continuing focus on assessment, educators are concerned with the fairest and most effective instructional means for ensuring a desired standard of writing among various groups. Some think that two of these groups of nontraditional students, the

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basic writer and the English as a Second Language (ESL) writer, can be conveniently grouped in already existing developmental writing programs. At quick glance, ESL and developmental writing students do share many of the same writing problems. There is often a lack of coherent rhetorical structure, standard sentence construction, punctuation, and control over certain grammatical structures (Shaughnessy 1977; Santos 1988; Vann et al. 1988; Connors & Lunsford 1989). On the other hand, Kroll (1990) notes that there is a similar variation in performance in the writing of ESL students themselves and that they operate within a complicated system of language rules to which they have had limited exposure and at best have only partially mastered. In an effort to better understand what differences may exist between basic writers and ESL writers, a research study comparing the written products of basic writers and ESL students was conducted at a suburban two-year college located on the outskirts of a major southeastern urban area.

The enrollment in the college was over 12,000: 24% minority, 5% out-of-state, and 5% international students from 92 countries. Approximately 50% of the students attending this commuter campus worked 20 or more hours a week. Fifty-seven percent of the total student body were day students, while 43% were night students. Within the ESL program, 52% were female, 26% had F-1 student visas, 60% were permanent residents, and 14% were citizens of the United States. Twenty-eight percent took night classes, and 45% took developmental math classes. Forty-two percent graduated from high schools outside the United States; the non-native English speakers participating in the study have lived in the United States an average of four years.

Of the entire student body population, 27% were categorized developmental studies students (enrolled in more than one developmental studies class), and 48% of the entire population were required to take at least one developmental studies class. The developmental studies population of the college was comprised of 43% males and 57% females. SAT verbal scores for developmental studies students ranged from 200–390.

In particular, this research examined topic development on an assigned topic and analyzed students' essay organization, content, and length. It also investigated essay structure particular to each group by noting grammatical and sentence-level characteristics. The purpose of this essay will be to share the results of this study and to discuss other possible research avenues. More importantly, however, we will suggest pedagogical implications for curriculum development and teaching techniques to help meet the needs of these two diverse groups.

Method: Subjects, Materials, and Procedures

One hundred and twelve freshmen participated in this study, which included 56 basic writers and 56 ESL students. The basic writers were enrolled either in English 98 or English 99, the two-sequence developmental studies writing classes. The ESL students were enrolled in either ESL 15 or ESL 17, the two-sequence ESL writing classes. Developmental Studies classes are offered in mathematics, reading, and composition for students who need to polish their skills before enrolling in regular collegiate-level classes. ESL classes in reading and composition are provided for non-native speakers to improve their skills in English. Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) verbal scores for the basic writers in the first-level writing class, English 98, were below 320, and scores for students in the second-level writing class, English 99, ranged from 330–390. ESL students in this study scored more than 460 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the equivalent on a state placement examination and less than 400 on the SAT verbal section. The Developmental Studies students scored less than 75 on the statewide college placement examination in English (CPE), and the ESL students placed into ESL classes rather than into regular freshman English courses based on a writing sample. Consequently, both groups of students were enrolled in either developmental studies or ESL pre-freshman composition courses.

The basic writer sample consisted of 24 males and 32 females with an average age of 19.2 years. The ESL writer sample included a slightly older group of college students: the 36 males and 20 females averaged 21.5 years. The subjects indicated a variety of college majors; while business majors predominated, many students in each of the four courses were undecided. All of the basic writers were American-born whose majors included: business-related fields, 18; medical-related, 12; education, 4; humanities, 3; science-oriented, 3; criminal justice, 2; pre-law, 1; and undecided, 13. Over one-half of the ESL student population (27) planned to major in business-related fields. Other ESL majors were: medical-related, 5; education, 1; humanities, 1; science-oriented, 4; pre-law, 2; and undecided, 16.

The 56 ESL subjects spoke 18 different native languages (Amharic, Arabic, Cambodian, Chinese, Farsi, French, Gola, Gujartic, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, Tigringa, and Vietnamese) and came from 26 different countries (Brazil, Cambodia, China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Haiti, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Laos, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, Thailand, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Vietnam). There were

44 permanent residents or U. S. citizens in the group and 12 on F-1 student visas. Thirty-six had graduated from American high schools. In the ESL population, students' length in the United States ranged from 8 to 18 years: 17 students with less than one year, 18 students with 2 to 5 years, 8 students with 6 to 10 years, and 9 students with more than 10 years.

During the first week of the Fall academic term, students were requested to complete permission forms and personal information surveys. Then, they were asked to write a composition on the topic, "Describe the qualities of a good parent." Subjects were given 30 minutes to complete the tasks; this time frame was chosen because it is used by the Test of Written English (TWE) portion of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). No dictionaries were allowed, and subjects were given no additional instructions other than those on the written instruction page. This topic was chosen in the belief that it might reveal cultural differences, yet not hinder either group because of a hidden cultural bias.

In order to examine the writing differences between basic writers and ESL students, this study analyzed overall structure and topic sentence usage and location. In addition, students' choices of rhetorical modes (expository, narrative, or mixed) were examined. Composition length and use of first, second, or third person were also tallied. The qualities of a "good parent" found in each essay were listed and categorized. Some students used examples to delineate a particular positive parental quality, and these were counted.

On the sentence level, essays were examined for their word count, number of sentences, number of words per sentence, sentence variety, and use of transitional expressions. Grammar and mechanical nuances were measured by noting errors in verbs, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, diction, articles, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. These grammatical and mechanical errors were chosen because they most often highlight the writing differences between basic writers and ESL students. (Sloan, 1979; Purves, 1986; Connors & Lunsford, 1988; Liebman, 1988).

Results

The results of the study were both expected and surprising. Even though these two groups have many characteristics in common, it is the differences that are more important in finally determining how the two groups should be taught.

Native speakers wrote longer papers, with basic writers

averaging 239 words, whereas the ESL writers averaged only 179 words. Advanced ESL writers wrote longer papers than intermediate ESL writers. Surprisingly, however, first-level basic writers composed longer papers than more advanced basic writers. This discrepancy might be explained by the placement procedures in developmental studies in which students are scheduled into their classes based solely on a language test instead of a writing sample as is the procedure in ESL. Another explanation why lower-level basic writers composed longer papers might be that they have yet to be influenced by the somewhat constraining requirements of formal academic prose taught in most college writing programs where emphasis on correctness is often more important than fluency and voice. Native speakers on average wrote five more words per sentence than ESL students, but they also wrote more run-ons and comma splices.

In the area of essay development, the four groups were similar in their use of topic sentences. Twenty-eight native speakers used topic sentences in contrast to 23 non-native speakers. Topic sentences are part of the English language tradition, and not necessarily part of the written culture of other languages. ESL writers who have not been taught about topic sentences might not be expected to perform as well in this area; however, their performance did not differ significantly from that of native speakers. This result may be explained by noting how many of the ESL students attended American high schools in which "topic sentences" and "five-paragraph" themes are in many cases the norm. In the selection of a rhetorical mode to develop topics, it might have been expected that both groups of students would use narratives to write their essays typical of lower ability students (Emig 1972; Perl 1979; Raimes 1985; Zamel 1987). However, when given the choice of writing in either the narrative or expository mode, both groups of students preferred exposition. Since students were not asked to describe their own parents, this strategy seems appropriatge as the topic lent itself more to exposition than narration. In addition, the four groups of writers evidenced inconsistency in their choice of person, with writers employing first, second, third, or a mixture of persons. This result confirms the work of earlier studies with basic writers (Hunter, Pearce, Lee et al. 1987; Deming & Gowen 1989). Both groups had problems with pronoun case and reference.

It is in the results of grammatical and usage errors that the greatest differences between these two groups surface even though in certain areas, the two have similarities. For example, in spelling, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement, there do not appear to be great differences between the two. However, in the construction of

correct verb tenses, use of prepositions, articles, and diction, the ESL students averaged far more errors than the native speakers. In fact, ESL students made *four* times the number of verb errors, more than *two* times the number of diction errors, and nearly *five* times the number of article errors when compared to basic writers. As expected, basic writers made many mistakes at the sentence level, but they made fewer sentence-level mistakes than ESL writers: ESL 15 writers made an average of 18 mistakes per paper; ESL 17, an average of 17; ENG 098, an average of 12; and ENG 099, an average of 11. It should be noted that ENG 098 and 099 students wrote longer papers, so the **frequency** of their errors is considerably lower than the frequency of errors written by students in ESL 15 and 17. (See Table 1 for the mistakes per paper averages of each of the four classes; averages are represented for the eight grammar/mechanical errors examined. For example, students in the ESL 15 class made an average of 3.4 verb errors per paper as compared to the average of 1.1 verb errors found in the students' essays in the English 098 class.)

TABLE 1

GRAMMAR/USAGE RESULTS*

$\bar{X}$ = Mistakes per paper

CLASS	V	S-V	PREP	DIC	ART	RO/CS FRAGS	PUNC	SP
ESL								
15	3.4	1.2	1.4	2.8	1.5	1.9	1.9	2
17	2.3	1.25	1.2	3.5	1.7	.75	3.32	2.4
ENG.								
098	1.1	.85	.31	.43	.25	.68	2.53	2.25
099	.39	1.02	.18	1.21	.43	.86	3.49	1.93

*(V = verb tense errors and wrong forms of the verb; S/V = subject-verb agreement errors; PREP = preposition errors; DIC = diction errors; ART = article errors; RO/CS/FRAG = run on sentences, comma splices and fragments; PUNC = punctuation errors; SP = spelling errors.)

Certainly ESL writing was characterized by error, its variety, and frequency. Verb problems, prepositions, and articles were areas of anticipated difficulty for non-native speakers because of the complexity of language transfer and interlanguage development (Vann et al. 1984; Santos 1988). Agreement and spelling errors were areas of anticipated difficulty for both groups.

The topic, "Describe the qualities of a good parent," was chosen as a neutral topic, hopefully one that would not create cultural problems for non-native speakers of English, but instead one which would reveal cultural differences between the two groups of subjects. Interestingly enough, the same four qualities appeared in the papers of both basic writers and ESL writers (love, understand, communicate, and spend time); however, the number of times each was used differed for the two groups. Basic writers wrote about love and understanding from parents; whereas, ESL writers most frequently described parents as teachers and providers.

Examining holistically a sample paper from each of the four groups helps provide some interesting content differences as well (see Appendix A). In the ESL 15 sample paper, the student early in

TABLE 2

QUALITIES OF A GOOD PARENT
(in rank order)

BASIC WRITERS	ESL WRITERS
1. love	1. teach
2. understand	2. provide for
3. spend time with	3. spend time with
4. discipline	4. love
5. communicate	5. communicate
6. give emotional support	6. understand

the paragraph promises to talk about the relationship between the parent and society, a concern not echoed in many of the basic writers' papers. Consequently, throughout the paper, there is this sense of "control" expected of a parent. According to this writer, parents shape their children's personality, provide educational opportunities, and monitor their children's friends. All these controlling actions will result in the betterment of society. The ESL 17 paper echoes that same type of "controlling" attitude, encouraging parents to be "demanding and tough." Parents should also read moral stories to their children. This sample paper reads like directions for following a recipe. Be aggressive if your children are out of control. Raise them properly by correcting their mistakes. Be caring, loving, and demanding.

Many of the basic writing essays, on the other hand, seem to emphasize more lenient and understanding characteristics than the two ESL samples provided in the appendix. In the sample English 098 paper, the student calls upon parents to be understanding and flexible, willing to break the rules if necessary. For this student parents should possess a sense of humor, be willing to talk things out, and not lose their tempers. "They should know that we (children) are not perfect, and we are going to make mistakes." For the English 099 student, understanding is the most important characteristic of a good parent. Good parents should be sensitive in case a child needs a man or a woman to talk to. Notice, however, that neither paper in the developmental study sample either directly or indirectly mentions the parents' role in relationship to society. These four papers, chosen at random, certainly encourage the research team in a future study to compare the content of the paragraphs written by each group of students.

In summary, ESL writers wrote shorter papers with more sentence-level errors. The usage of expository development and topic sentences was similar for both groups as were the topic choices students used to describe the qualities of a good parent.

Implications for Teaching and Research

Given the exploratory nature of this study, any teaching implications based on these preliminary findings should be treated with caution. Still, the results suggest some general implications for the classroom. For example, the results of this study call into question placement procedures based solely on standardized, multiple-choice scores. The basic writers in this study wrote longer

papers, averaging 239 words, whereas the ESL writers averaged only 179 words. What is interesting, however, is that first-level basic writers (English 098) students wrote longer papers than the more advanced basic writers (in English 099). Perhaps a writing sample administered before these students enroll in classes would better determine into which level students should be placed. Moving away from standardized language placement instruments or coupling such tests with a writing sample is becoming more commonplace as many authorities in composition instruction have questioned the validity of multiple-choice language skills tests in measuring students' writing abilities. For example, the SAT testing experts have recently designed a writing sample prompt for a written composition to accompany the verbal section of the college admissions instrument. Also, a writing sample, the Test of Written English (TWE), is now becoming a standard part of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

In addition, given that this research has delineated differences between the writing of basic writers and ESL students, immediate attention must be given to the instructional materials for both groups in order to meet the teaching objectives and particular academic writing needs of each. In particular, close attention to choice of textbook is crucial. ESL textbooks which focus on second language difficulties are likely to be inappropriate for basic writers. ESL texts may stress issues more related to specific areas of grammar and diction, areas which may either have been covered repeatedly in elementary and high school for basic writers or have been part of the natural acquisition process. Being taught from developmental studies texts, ESL students, on the other hand, may find their areas of difficulty left unaddressed. Many current composition textbooks, including those for basic writers, now emphasize literature-based writing assignments, attention to rhetorical mode, or whole language writing assignments. Sentence-level editing, if covered at all, is relegated to chapters on proofreading or in traditional grammar handbooks. The emphasis in most non-ESL composition textbooks is on writing as one flowing process; not one which is to be separated into its parts or grammatical stages. Second language writers, while less able in the nuances of the English language, are frequently more sophisticated in terms of talking about language. They need an instructor who understands the second language acquisition process and how to communicate about language in the ways they, the writers, have learned language. Whereas current research in composition theory emphasizes the unification of the language arts (Bartholomae, 1979; Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1987), Kroll (1990) advocates the separating of writing components for ESL students.

At present, supplementary materials are more available for mainstream composition students including basic writers at the college level. Auxiliary materials such as teaching guides, transparencies, test packets, extra activities suggestions, and computer software programs are usually geared for the "middle of the road" composition student. Computer software designed for native speakers abounds, ranging from spell checks to word processing to organizational and developmental writing programs. For ESL students, in the area of computer software, we have found only two helpful computer software programs that students currently use in our college writing lab. These programs include grammar, vocabulary, and sentence-level exercises, and students are directed to specific exercises for additional work.

Feedback to the two different types of students might also differ. Willing (qtd. in Nunan) conducted a large-scale study investigating the learning styles of 517 adult immigrant learners of English as a second language in Australia. One finding of the study revealed that certain learning activities were popular with these students including error correction by teachers.

> It appears that error-correction is considered by learners to be a very important aspect of the teacher's role. It may be that the current selective practice of indicating errors only when these are "causing serious communication problems" needs to be re-examined. . . . Learners themselves seem to perceive the status implications of poor English, and correctly see that in the real world mistakes are a more serous matter than they often are in English class. (*Understanding Language Classrooms* 52)

In particular, non-ESL-trained instructors must carefully consider the role that culture plays in interpreting and discussing topics. More attention must be given to topics assigned to avoid topics that are culturally biased, loaded, or inappropriate for ESL students. Topics designed for native English-speaking American high school graduates may be unfamiliar, offensive, or just misconstrued by ESL students. Consider, for example, the Chinese student who dropped his freshman English class because the first assignment was to write a 500-word paper describing what he liked or disliked most about his last Christmas. The student was not raised in a Judeo-Christian culture, so he had no experience from which to draw. Even more so, his own culture made it impossible for him to question the teacher. Similar culture-bound topics have appeared on statewide writing proficiency tests:

Should prostitution be legalized?
Should sex education be taught in schools?
Each year, many teenagers run away from home. What do you think are the main causes?
Do you favor or oppose the goals of the women's liberation movement in the U. S.? Why?

Questions like these are as difficult for some ESL writers just as the following might be for an American native speaker:

Choose Baba Den, Setsubun, Hina Matsuri, or St. Nicholas Day and tell how you celebrate it.
How does reeducation improve our community?
Choose one sign of the Chinese zodiac and describe the characteristics of that sign.

Close attention to topic choice, organization, and development should be considered. Instructors must remember to offer more than one topic choice for each assignment. So too, ESL students should be advised to choose the topics that they are most familiar with or have the most experience in. For example, one of our international students failed a state-mandated, forced-choice, timed writing sample because she wrote an essay answering the prompt: "Should tipping be eliminated in restaurants or in other American service institutions? When asked if tipping was a practice in her country, Korea, she replied, "No," and admitted difficulty with the topic.

Since not all students are linear thinkers, a skill often required and valued in the American academy, teaching rhetorical modes frequently helps students focus on audience expectations. Basic writers as well as ESL students might need assistance in organizing and developing their topics. While English faculty can naturally provide this type of instruction, they are not always equipped to deal with ESL issues of articles, two-word verb combinations, and idiomatic usage. They may also be unaware that ESL students seeming to lack organization may actually be using an organization pattern transferred from their native languages. This is especially likely among ESL students who have been well-educated in their own countries.

While group work in which the students peer-edit is effective for both groups of writers, ESL students coming from more traditional cultures often believe that the authority in the classroom belongs to the teacher alone, and initially may resist various forms of group work. Furthermore, experience suggests that ESL peer work is best done at the meaning level. However, both groups can benefit from careful analysis of their learning and writing styles. Teachers who

recognize and celebrate the differences in both groups truly experience the cultural diversity available. Experience suggests that ESL students while lacking the fluency of native speakers often have, because of life experience, more sophisticated ideas to relate.

As a result of this study, a variety of future research besides pedagogical considerations is recommended. First of all, this investigation might be replicated with a larger sample utilizing the same variables. A similar research study should specialize in its analysis to examine certain types of errors particular to either ESL or basic writers. For instance, a careful analysis of verb errors between both groups might be revealing. Other areas of error analysis might include an in-depth study of sentence structure, diction, verb endings, or pronouns. Students' paragraphs should be examined carefully for content, structural patterns, and methods of development.

The results of our study have led us to believe that other variables might influence both groups of students' writing processes and products. Additional studies of inquiry might include the influence of gender, race, age, or culture on the writing processes of each group. For example, would a Black forty-year-old female from Jamaica have the same challenges in writing as an eighteen-year-old Cambodian male? To what degree do length and locale of residence in this country, time away from high school, and economic constraints affect the writing processes of members of both sample populations? Since this research has just begun to examine the influence of cultural differences on topic choice and development, more research on topics is needed. It might be interesting to substitute examples of culturally biased topics to compare the effect on both groups of students' writing. Research might also be conducted comparing students' development of narrative topics versus development of expository ones. Rater bias and writing quality are two other variables worthy of study. For example, why and how do regular English faculty members rate ESL or basic writers' papers differently than ESL faculty or developmental studies faculty (Santos 1988; Vann et al. 1984)? In addition, what is the best way, holistically or analytically, to evaluate the quality of student writing and is either method better suited for either group?

Or perhaps a more ethical question should be posed: Should composition instructors untrained in ESL be teaching ESL students or combined classes of ESL and basic writers? Are we confounding ESL students' difficulty when placing them in courses which cannot address their needs? The argument that English teachers can teach English to all students is just as fallacious as the one that states that any teacher who can read can teach reading.

Just as ESL and basic writers' writing processes differ, so too their preferred learning and study strategies might be dissimilar. Higginson, Stahl, Ming-Yi, and Lee (1989) examined the behaviors and attitudes toward learning by successful students enrolled in college course work in China, Korea, Scotland, and the United States using the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) (Weinstein 1987). Their research revealed significant differences in the learning and study skills strategies used by the students in the four countries. At this time, it appears that little research is being conducted comparing ESL students and basic writers in terms of their learning and study strategies.

Empirical research complemented by ethnographic research can study in greater detail particular differences in writing processes, learning styles, and study strategies of both groups. Interviews, journals, and write-aloud protocols can also contribute to the growing body of research in this area, augmenting empirical research.

Conclusion

This study suggests that it is better that English as a Second Language students and basic writers be taught by trained personnel in each area and with materials appropriate to their needs. While it may not always be feasible or desirable to separate the two groups, the students' differences are many, and the contrasts need to be handled individually. In some cases, as with this group, the issue of ESL versus developmental learning is compounded by ESL students who have been educated in U.S. schools and sometimes have the combined difficulties of second language and developmental students. Perhaps as both groups of students become prepared for regular collegiate English classes and academically and emotionally confident for success, they may be brought together through seminars, college orientation programs, and social activities to become integrated with the rest of the college community. For example, Hadaway (1990) paired ESL students with teacher preparation students in a university for a letter exchange program which ran for a minimum of one semester. As result of these pen-pal relationships, both pairs of students were able to overcome language and cultural barriers and in some cases establish supportive friendships. Finally, if academically well-prepared, both groups will have a chance to succeed in the often insensitive and fast-paced academic society.

Appendix A
SAMPLE PAPERS

ESL 15

I think parent has very important role to train his or her child because the first step, for learning how to deal in socitey is accomplished by parents. So qualities of parent how to be good one is important. I would like to explain and describe more about a good parent.
A good parent should be concern about the chiled sinnce he or she is a real baby because chiled pesonality can be build up starting from 3-4 mounts of age. The parent should know or study about how to rais the child and teach the child the best personality in subconcios way. When the child reach to the school-age, the parent has to give the best opportunity to child to learn education. Also the parent has to be carefull about child's environment. for example with whom does he or she have a frindship? or is he/she safe from drug problem?
anothe aspect of training is family environment that parent(s) make sure have a peacfull and educational atmospher.
In the end I would like to emphecise the educational program of every aspect of life at chiled that is the future of socity.

ESL 17

Qualities of "Good Parent"

Being a Good Parent there are qualities thats requair. You have to be caring, loving and at the same time very demanding or tough. In oder for the children to be obiedeent to their parent, the parent must be a good parent. Spend a lot of time with them, show them that you care and that you are there when they need you. Give them hope and dream for future by reading a moral stories. Tell them constently that you love them. And show them what love is and meaning of love. Once in a while, take them to zoo in picnic; and buy things that they would like and hug them at least once a day and say "I love you".

But most difficult to be a "good Parent" when you have to pun-ish them for their mistake, by retricing some freedoms or by grounding for certain period of time. And be aggressive if they are going out of control by not following the restriction or punishment. It's important to be good parent by showing them that you care and love them, but it is also important that you are to raise them properly by correcting their mistakes and make them realize it by punishment....Carin, loving, and demanding, these qualities will definetly make a parent a good parent.

English 098

The qualities of a good parent should contain the following. They should be loving and caring, someone you can always turn to for love and affectian. They should be very understanding in times when you have done good or bad. They should be hard-working in their job and parental life to have sucess in both their job and the parenthood. They should also set the rules for you when you are little and learn that as you grow-up the rules should be bent so they will accomadate both the child and the parent thru adolesence years. Your parents should be able to help you out in your social life and also with school needs. They should provide you with food to eat and clothes on your back. They should also provide a roof over your head. Another terrific quality of a good parent is when they have a great sense of humor. They should be witty when a joke is cracked even on them. They should learn to laugh with people and not about them. They should be able to fight to stand their ground in life. They should always be their when you need them. A parent should talk things out with you instead of always raising his or her voice. They should never lose their temper and do or say things which might hurt you mentally and physically. They should be able to have fun with you and learn to grow up with you. They should know we are not perfect and we are all going to make mistakes. They should be able to learn from our mistakes as well as their own. In an accident they should be able to accept it with a simple apology. I think these quali-ties make up a good parent: caring, loving, understanding, hardworking, witty, joyful, and be able to have fun.

English 099

The qualities of a good parent is understanding, trustworthy and one that act their age. I feel if a parent is understanding, everything else will fall in place. In order to be understanding there must be love in a relationship. Like for example, if you have a teenage daughter or son and you let he or she borrow your car on a Saturday night. He or she was supposing to be home at 11:00 p.m., instead, they arrive at 12:00 p.m. If you were a understanding parent, you will not argue about bringing the car home late. Instead, you will sit your son or daughter down and ask the reason for bringing the car back late. You'll just tell them don't let it happen again. The other quality is to be trustworthy, let you child(ren) be able to talk to you as a friend and not a parent. If he need a man to talk too, or she need a woman to talk too, be that man or woman and not their father or mother. I believe this quality is most important. A child(ren) need an older role model to look up too. He or she do not need a girl or guy who they're in competition with. If they have parents with all of these three qualities, I feel you have everything in a parent that will welcome you home.

Appendix B

SAMPLES OF SPELLING PROBLEMS

ESL 15

arround
careing/carring
dellebrate
emberrass
environent
especial/espicially
igrorence
serval
therefor
togheter
understant
weekness

ESL 17

arested
consern
hobies
importent
obay
obiedent
parants
poputed
problelly
qualitie/qualite/qulities
requir
sevear

English 098

actpect/expect
appeache/apprecaite
becase
dicpline
expesslly/especially
exampels
furget
greatful
incourage
teech
thair

English 099

adequickly
boathering
childern
diffrent
disapline
dosen't
patients
perticapating
posative
quities/quaties/qualities
rember
violunce

Note

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CULTURE AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE IN THE MULTIETHNIC COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that the diversity of backgrounds and academic preparations ESL composition teachers encounter in their classrooms can enhance instruction. The paper takes as its premise a situated theory of language use, and draws out how students and teachers may benefit from understanding the cultural and sociolinguistic practices within which writing traditions are embedded. It outlines how writing teachers can elicit and make use of 1) the usually tacit theories that both student and academic discourse communities have regarding academic prose; and 2) their experiences with and approaches to literacy. The very diversity characterizing the multiethnic composition classroom virtually guarantees that contrasting beliefs and practices will be formulated. These become the basis for a teacher-guided exploration of writing standards and their social origin, and student assignments designed to inform about, as well as train in, various academic discourse styles. Teaching activities that unravel writing theories are described for practitioners. The pedagogical practices advocated here help teachers to understand student beliefs about reading and writing, and thus to adapt instructional material to student perspectives.*

Introduction

Cultural difference can become the starting point for a rich and rewarding exchange between writing students and their teachers.

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Many of the basic writing courses into which budding college students are inducted are grappling with a growing influx of students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The presence of different voices and visions of the world can be transformed into an instructional resource, a bridge between teachers and students. A careful, well-structured exploration of student and student-teacher differences can provide a curriculum that pulls in, validates, and ultimately builds on the divergent points of view about writing that need to converge to fulfill the basic writing course's mission. It is this curriculum we hope to describe here, a curriculum we have developed over the course of several years of teaching culturally and ethnically diverse basic college writing courses.

Because of the changing ethnic make-up of many basic college writing classes, their standardizing purpose is taking on a problematic character. Indeed, whether basic composition courses ought to teach only one particular essayist standard is increasingly being called into question on both practical and ethical grounds. In practical terms, it is hardly the case that only one essayist writing standard exists across disciplines. More difficult still are the potential ethical problems associated with the imposition of one such standard on students who may be unfamiliar with and/or marginalized by that standard. Yet the traditional function of basic college writing courses—establishing a hegemonic, dominant mainstream "discourse" (Gee 1991) at the expense of others—has not really changed. The essayist standard may be unraveling empirically, but institutional writing curricula with well-defined performance criteria and exit exams spell out rather clearly that there still are standards to be met. Composition teachers are left facing a dilemma: On the one hand, a plethora of student-centered pedagogical approaches claim to provide a better instructional alternative because they validate student views and student writing. They are in fact so popular that they may be officially endorsed by writing programs.[1] On the other hand, students whose writing styles fall outside of the enduring canons of their institutions are usually penalized for it. Teachers are to embrace diversity, but deliver conformity. This dilemma can be especially acute in a multiethnic composition classroom.

Old and deep-seated beliefs rooted in a racist and xenophobic ideology from the turn of the century decry cultural diversity as divisive and dangerous for both nations and individuals (Cummins 1981; Kloss 1977). These beliefs persist in spite of more recent protestations to the contrary.[2] Framed thusly, cultural difference becomes a liability for students, who have to overcome language or

cultural "barriers" in their educational quest (Sue and Padilla 1986; Suarez-Orosco 1989: 22–48); and it is a challenge for the instructional infrastructure in charge of "assisting" such students (Rumberger 1989). Cultural difference is said essentially to impede the work and eventual success of students and teachers alike.

To help instructors mediate between the contradictory requirements of their multiethnic basic writing classes, we advocate a pedagogy that develops and encourages essayist literacy *in concert with* rather than at the expense of student voices. Drawing on the insights of educational critics like Freire (1982), the Vygotskyan school of psycholinguistics (1962; 1978; cf., Engeström 1986) and the Bakhtin circle (1981; cf., Todorov 1985), we have attempted to implement a curriculum that capitalizes on cultural diversity. Ours is a curriculum for practitioners, an attempt to flesh out student-centered principles that have been mulled over in the composition teaching community for quite some time, but that have not often been found relevant by teachers. Our experience in inner-city and ESL basic writing classes provides the observational and testimonial support on which our findings are based. We want to stress that this experience informs our effort as much as the theoretical work from which we draw. Just as we propose to construct a bridge between students and teachers, so too do we hope to build an equally crucial bridge between practitioners and the body of research and theory meant to guide their efforts.[3]

Traditional Theoretical Approaches to Literacy Education

Several leading metaphors have greatly influenced how writing education is conceptualized and undertaken in North American education. The deconstruction of these metaphors unravels both misguided (but robust) theories about learning and the metaphors' disempowering impact on the work of both students and teachers.

Learning how to read and write, or how to do a better job of it, is commonly considered the acquisition of "skills" that are transmitted from teacher to student. In his 1988 book *Joining the Literacy Club,* Frank Smith argues against this view. The "skills acquisition" metaphor revolves around the notion of *information transfer* from one person to another (or others). Smith points out that this view, when applied to literacy instruction, overlooks the true nature of literacy activities:

> The danger in using the word skill in conjunction with reading and writing is that it can justify teaching blindly through instruction and drill. Literacy is a matter not of

> honing skills but of increasing confidence, familiarity, and understanding, all consequences of meaningful use. (103)

Moreover, when we let the metaphors of "information transfer" and "skills acquisition" inform our teaching, we, as teachers, are tacitly endorsing what Freire (1982) calls the "banking concept of education." Information and skills take on the characteristics of commodities. Teachers become the vendors of these commodities, and the academic success of students hinges on their consumption of such commodities.

In a dehumanizing cycle, students become "objects of assistance" within a system that denies that their own experiences and views have any value. In order to receive this assistance, they are frequently asked to repudiate their own ways of expression and are offered the controlled discourse of an elite as a replacement. That discourse reflects and privileges elite views, disparaging all others as simply not up to standard. Under these conditions, if students are to succeed, and become "good" readers and writers, they must learn the "correct" way to engage the world and the world of print; that is, the hegemonic discourse of the elite.

In the United States, the basic writing course often continues to focus on teaching remedial students the "skills" they are lacking, thus endorsing a "banking" view of education. This has not helped bilingual/bicultural students, who find themselves in remedial education in disproportionate numbers. Given the theory of literacy underlying "banking" education, this is an entirely predictable result. It is their difference which, after all, makes so many bicultural/bilingual students candidates for remediation. The liability represented by that difference is then often compounded: Encouraged to adopt elite views in order to conform to the writing norms of essayist literacy, students may come to disparage their own cultural origins while finding themselves simultaneously barred from elite membership. The banking view can become psychologically devastating.

To develop a different instructional approach, we have turned to Freire's alternative educational philosophy of "problem-posing" education. Working primarily in pre- and post-revolutionary Latin American contexts characterized by extreme class differences and explicit elite domination, Freire argues that the only way to deal with the literacy needs of oppressed populations is to create a form of education that would expose the elite-dominated values inherent in most available literacy materials and practices. To do so, he would ask his classes to ponder the origins of such problems as bad housing. While students might at first blame themselves or their

neighbors for the dilapidated state of their own neighborhoods, they would soon discuss bad services and their origins. Problem-posing literacy education takes as its starting point the learner's historicity, stimulating self-reflection and an awareness of the social production of history and oppression. It views the learner's own life and experiences as valuable resources with which to counter the elite view of the world. In this manner, elite values can be seen as the cultural practices they are and the "false consciousness" they engender can be confronted with a more critical one.

We propose to apply Freire's problem-posing philosophy to the teaching of basic college writing in a multiethnic setting. We aim to counter the prevailing view of cultural and linguistic difference as a liability by encouraging a new consciousness about cultural and linguistic variability. The Bakhtin circle, empirically supported by sociolinguistic research, provides an alternative view through which literacy practices can be redefined.

The Bakhtin circle contends that "language," and by extension "literacy," is a heterogeneous collection of "voices" from which language and literacy users continuously draw to engage with their worlds. If linguistic heterogeneity is the rule rather than the exception, cultural diversity cannot be a deviation from a homogeneous norm. Brought to the fore in the basic writing classroom, this view of language forces a reconsideration of the "norm" that can be highly beneficial. This norm is, in fact, nothing more or less than a set of writing *conventions* endorsed by a particular discourse community. Other communities, such as the bicultural students' communities of origin, endorse different sets of conventions that express different communicative preferences. Ideally, bilingual/bicultural students learn from unraveling the norm that "different" is not synonymous with "deficit," and that their language abilities are not deficient. Rather, they have a considerable store from which to draw in order to acquire new forms of expression, including the forms they will need as college students.

A Bakhtinian reading of the phenomenon of language allows one to (re)define literacy as the situated practices involving print of particular discourse communities. These communities use print for very specific, historically grounded communicative reasons. Essayist literacy is usually a benefit of membership in a distinct, definable discourse community, which socializes its members in its particular expressive tradition. Learning it, as well as other, even more specific discourse styles, is a function of that membership. *All novices* are socialized into literacy practices, regardless of their

ethnic background, which does not affect the literacy learning process, but rather access to membership.

A growing body of sociolinguistic research into situated linguistic and literacy practices lends strong empirical evidence to both Freire's analysis of traditional literacy instruction and to the Bakhtin circle's conceptualization of language. Literacy research not only owes empirical debts to that research, but also some important conceptual ones. Recent literacy research aims to reach a socioculturally grounded understanding of the uses and purposes of literacy practices. To do so, it has adopted and adapted some key notions from sociolinguistic theory, foremost among them those of *speech communities* and *speech events* (Gumperz and Hymes 1964; 1972).

The first of these notions denotes the existence of a shared system of linguistic behaviors and beliefs amongst a group of people. For as many different sets of behaviors and beliefs as there are in the world, there are an equal number of such communities. According to Gumperz and Hymes (1972), speech events are "certain communicative routines" which members of a given speech community recognize on the basis of their "special rules of speech and nonverbal behavior." Thus, a given speech community will have many different speech events that help to define it as a particular community. One becomes a member of a speech community through meaningful apprenticeship, by participating in the speech practices of the community. There is an indexical relationship between speech practices and group membership so that to engage in the practices effectively signals affiliation.

Applied to the context of literacy, speech communities comprise a shared set of behaviors, values, and norms revolving around print. Like a speech event, a *literacy event* (Heath 1982) is characterized by socially organized communicative routines, but these are centered on print rather than oral discourse. The 1985 *Journal of Education* collection of literacy papers as well as the work of Heath (1983), Cook-Gumperz (1986), Scollon and Scollon (1981), and Gee (1991) are all exemplary of the recent merging of literacy research and sociolinguistic analysis. According to these researchers, learning to read and write requires socialization into a set of values, beliefs and ways of doing, in short into a *discourse style* that will in turn index group membership in a given literacy or discourse community. And literacy practices are just as multifaceted and cross-culturally variable as speech practices, requiring close, meaningful contact and eventual participation on the part of novices in order to become accessible.

These findings lend empirical weight to Freire's analysis of

traditional literacy as a set of practices aimed to validate elite perceptions. A dominant discourse is as much a cultural product as other discourse styles, and it originates in its own discourse community. If students are to master that discourse, they need access to its community of origin, and such access is problematic, at best. As pointed out by Gee (1991), hegemonic discourses bode ill for nontraditional students, for there is an inherent contradiction in assuming the trappings of a group from which one is excluded *a priori*. It should not be surprising that such efforts result in feelings of inadequacy and alienation.

Sociolinguistic research offers argumentative and methodological models that can be adapted for problem-posing, and thus can become part of a potential solution to this dilemma. Just like sociolinguists, students can observe their own and their institution's literacy practices in order to see the correspondences between social setting and language choices. Our claim is that the acquisition of literacy practices is a function of membership. By encouraging our students to become participant-observers of the discourse communities' engendering practices they are supposed to master, we are trying to provide them with an alternative writing apprenticeship, in effect an alternative means to membership.

In addition, accumulated student observations will bear out the Bakhtin circle's finding that, with respect to speech and literacy practices, heterogeneity (and thus cultural diversity) is in fact the norm. This should unmask the fact that any norm represented by a hegemonic discourse is a false norm. And once the acquisition of schooled or essayist discourse styles is redefined as a specialized apprenticeship, the crucial factors leading to that acquisition is no longer linguistic or cultural homogeneity, but meaningful participation in an inclusive discourse community.

This is where the multiethnic classroom presents something of an advantage. That classroom is already heterogeneous, and the connection between community of origin and discourse styles is quite apparent to any serious observer. Our curriculum takes advantage of this linguistic wealth. It explores the voices of different student discourse communities, and juxtaposes them with voices from the academic discourse community. We hope that this double exploration brings about the kind of meaningful engagement with print that our students need to become members of the literacy club.

Theory into Practice

The criticism and research reviewed thus far provide insights into the roots of the discourse problems faced by a culturally diverse stu-

dent body and yield some promising alternative starting points for instruction in the basic college writing classroom. Like most critical and investigative work, however, it has yet to engage in true dialogue with practitioners. Establishing such a dialogue is our project. Having drawn practical conclusions from research and criticism for three years, we have begun to flesh out an applied program for teachers. Our program, developed within the general spirit of problem-posing education, aims to establish a classroom "zone of proximal development." Following Vygotsky's pioneering framework, it is a curriculum that challenges all students to break beyond their actual level of performance to a more developed one with expert guidance (1978, 86). In addition, it challenges teachers to let students guide them to a better understanding of their needs and abilities.

Vygotsky concluded sixty years ago that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which [novices] grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, 88). He argued that instruction "must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions" of these novices (1962, 104). While one is learning to become literate, the key social process is meaningful participation in an inclusive discourse community. In a classroom, such a community can provide novice writers informed access to their target discourses. Our curriculum attempts to create one by examining and analyzing potential target discourses through a problem-posing frame, and by pulling the students into that analysis at every step. Culturally diverse students can become a true asset for such a project: They turn the classroom into a truly heteroglossic one, and thus help foreground the (seemingly transparent) cultural roots and interpretive processes at the basis of all discourse practices.

A number of principles have guided our adaptation of problem-posing education to basic writing instruction in the inner city. Three years of *field testing* in a number of inner-city composition classrooms have so far confirmed their usefulness. These *field-tested* principles can be summarized as follows:

1. Instructional activities are integrated around a central communicative or discourse problem that is analyzed through a problem-posing frame. In order to turn the classroom into a community of practice, direct instruction is balanced with repeated and intensive workshops, and the student voices need to be alternated with voices from the target academic discourse.
2. Integration and balance between student and teacher expertise is achieved with assignments that:
   a. focus on and take advantage of students' strengths:

their knowledge of their own world and of their own beliefs;

b. encourage the students to engage with their new college discourse community, especially through print;
c. demonstrate to the students the *functions* of different essay writing conventions and styles. For example, the function of a cause and effect analysis is to find or argue about responsibilities for changes.

3. The analytical thrust of each unit is maintained through the use of two central questions about text. These foreground the fact that texts are human products and that their use entails shared values. They are:
   a. What is the author communicating to you? (What are you trying to communicate?)
   b. How do you know? (How would your audience know?)

When considering these two questions, students usually discover that authors often shape and manipulate language to appeal to their audiences, and that students can do the same.

Compared to Freire's original project, our work is a modest form of problem-posing education. Freire sought to give his students a better understanding of the historical and human origin of their circumstances. That understanding presumably included knowledge of how to effect changes. We seek to give our students a better understanding of the historical and human origin of various discourse practices, and hope to gain a better understanding about their ideas and forms of expression in return. The knowledge we offer includes information about essayist literacy as hegemonic discourse, and of the students' own position with respect to that discourse.[4] In the knowledge we gain, we usually find the basis for joint educational activities. On the whole, we hope to give our students more power over their own or their second language.

Working in the Multiethnic Classroom

Students from linguistic and ethnic minorities are often considered *least likely to succeed* in mainstream institutions. As members of nondominant speech communities, they usually lack the kind of literacy experiences that would have socialized them into a mainstream, essayist discourse. In Gee's words, facility in mainstream discourse is "a product of acquisition, that is, it requires exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings and teaching is not liable to be very successful" (1991, 28). But essay writing may be neither natural nor meaningful in the lives

of most minority students, whose classroom experiences have often not been terribly functional. Conversely, our own expectations about writing within our academic discourse communities have often been shaped by a lifetime's worth of professional experiences with text and literacy that few of our students have shared.

In order to start one functional cycle and to begin bridging the gap in experience at the start of a composition classroom, one can begin with what Gee calls "metaknowledge." New college writers are made conscious of what is expected of them as future members of academic discourse communities through joint consciousness-raising rooted in historical and contextual analysis. An important first step is to have students focus on themselves, their writing histories and beliefs about essay writing. This follows from Smith's (1988) contention that students, especially those marginalized by the dominant discourse, "need to find sense and relevance in the situation they are in" (54). As a way to start, the students can be asked to discuss what they think a "good essay" should be, and that discussion can form the basis for a first assignment and a first instructional unit.

Even if students are unfamiliar with essays, they often have their own (and sometimes their former teachers') folk theories about such texts. These folk theories can be elicited in a discussion format and/or in writing, the objective being to get students to be as explicit as possible. This exercise will yield a number of interesting but often vague and underelaborated theories of the good essay. For example, many students will say that a *good essay* has a strong beginning, and the instructor can press further by asking: "What do you mean by strong?" Ultimately, several rounds of questions like these produce an extensive dialogue through which a more fully elaborated theory is constructed. The student also begins to explicate and perhaps even analyze his/her beliefs about literacy practices.

The analysis of the students' folk theories will eventually lead to their deconstruction, as can be documented by one of the present authors. Having been told that a *good essay* should "cover all possible sides of a given issue or topic," she pressed on and forced a more thorough analysis of both this belief and its origin. She asked the students if it were ever possible to cover "all sides" of an issue in a single essay, and started to list some of the sides to cover for a particular topic. Students soon realized that it was not possible, some with obvious relief. Through this questioning, they were also coming to realize that some of the ideas they had assimilated from past instructional practices were not written in stone. In fact, they began to sense that writing successfully had less to do with innate

ability or deficit and more to do with working on and negotiating joint meaning through print.

A second way to raise consciousness about the relationship between writing and its origin and use is to have new college writers collect information about particular contexts. These student *mini-ethnographies of print* can start with a thorough accounting of the uses of writing at work or at home.[5] They then become the raw material with which to begin an analysis of the relationship between form and function. Students who often initially insist that "we don't read or write anything where I work" find an amazing array of print and almost universally conclude that "reading and writing is really important." They also come to understand *why* print may be important in a given context. A construction worker's account of written safety instructions, for example, drove that point home while at the same time leading to a more detailed and thorough discussion of the conventions of safety signs. Since the size and color of safety signs vary considerably cross-culturally, opening the discussion up to the whole class brought out their variability, and the local human conventions governing their make-up.

The articulation of local rules and standards, whether prompted by definitions of the *good essay* or descriptions of the uses of print in a variety of contexts, forms the basis for a reconsideration of essay writing in general. This reconsideration stresses the human origin of essay writing practices, and emphasizes active negotiation. Student participation in these activities serves to overcome the "student-as-objects-of-assistance" mindset common in banking forms of education. The articulation of the rules and standards of different essay writing traditions can also lead to a historical review for our students, and to an analysis of their present situation. If they are in remedial writing classes, for example, questions soon arise about the process and the criteria by which they came to be labeled "at risk." Students may also ask themselves why, in a world full of heterogeneity and "minority" peoples, they are considered the "minority" writers and the rather small community of English teachers represents the mainstream. Such students may even put the many labels that permeate their lives into perspective, and in deconstructing them, may gain some independence from their "institutional grip" (Douglas 1986).

The Teacher as Mediator

While it is necessary to have students explore their own beliefs about essay writing and other literacy events, it is equally important

that they gain some insights into the values and beliefs of target discourses. They need "inside information" about future discourse communities that have not been too welcoming, and English teachers are an ideal source of such information. Teachers need to strike a delicate balance here. They have genuine authority over the subject matter, and they do know the standards to which their students will be held. But too much emphasis on standards and authority will quickly degenerate into a unidirectional, "banking" exchange. This conundrum can become especially acute when the teacher is responding to student work. How does one discuss difference when that difference is clearly stigmatized outside the classroom?

To achieve a balance of sorts, we have found it helpful first to discuss the values attached to accepted writing standards, and to follow up these discussions with informational lectures about the cultural values reflected in key college writing traditions. Essentially, either of the two initial units described above will, sooner or later, lead straight to values. Classroom discussions can touch on the historical basis of composition requirements in the United States (Heath 1981), or on the present testing rage that is sweeping higher education. But in order to lead an informed discussion, it is often helpful for the teacher again to begin by eliciting information about essay testing experiences from the students, and to probe student theories about successes or failures. While it is often true that students are mystified about why they might have aced one exam and failed another (an experience both present authors share!), they can usually recall whether or not an exam was "easy" or "hard," and they often have insight into what made it easy or hard for them.

Many new writers in multiethnic basic writing classes often come from communicative traditions that differ radically from those of their new discourse communities. The essayist tradition, for example, is one shaped by Anglo values requiring explicitness and decontextualization, both hallmarks of a "society of strangers" (Gee 1985). It requires a fictionalization of the self and of one's audience, but is otherwise marked by formality and restraint (Scollon and Scollon 1981). It strives for objectivity and a kind of cold passion that is uniquely North American and which, as Carlos Fuentes has observed, is obsessed with success and the realization of a utopian society. A second Anglo writing tradition, scientific report writing, embodies many of the same values, but it has been influenced by a greater need for conventions and cross-cultural transparency (Atkinson 1991).

To complicate matters further, marginalized groups in the

United States have developed traditions of their own, emphasizing *the plain truth* in a society that wraps discriminatory and oppressive practices in legalistic language reminiscent of essayist literacy. This is why an information *exchange* between students and teacher is particularly important. In order to establish the right contrasts between the communicative epistemologies that guide academic and student writings, teachers need to generate a great deal of information. This enables them to calibrate lectures about alternative epistemologies and writing traditions and to introduce unfamiliar ones. The two processes, raising the students' consciousness about theories of writing and communication, and the introduction of essayist or other institutionally determined norms, work in concert to sensitize new college writers to the communicative forms they need to master.

As teachers and students exchange information about communicative styles, the instructor's feedback becomes increasingly important. In order for discussions and lectures to pay off, students have to start engaging in their own essayist practice. Frequently, "getting it right" requires coaching, and it is at this point that a good teacher is indispensable. Responding to student papers, orally and/or in writing, the instructor can relate the standards that students are expected to meet in their future work. For instance, when minority students were asked to write about their experiences with discrimination, they would start out with "discrimination hurts us" without specifying who "us" was. Another common feature in writings on the topic would be for ESL students to say "in my country" without every specifying what their country was. They had a very hard time with the conventional fiction required in much essay writing, namely the pretense that their teacher who, after all, had given them the very assignment they were completing, would not know what they were writing about or who they meant. It is precisely at points like these that they could be reminded of their greater or potential audience, and that this notion could be made more real to them. The teacher could respond with something akin to, "You must pretend that your audience is a stranger and knows nothing about you," and thus lecture, discussion, and written practice dovetail.

Integrating Problem-Posing with Traditional Assignments

A final consideration in adapting a composition course to the needs of basic writers in the multiethnic classroom is how to tackle traditional rhetorical patterns. Often, composition teachers are constrained by their institution to adhere to certain instructional

goals. They are expected to develop assignments that fit a particular curriculum and to use certain institutionally sanctioned materials. In such cases, the goal becomes once again to find a means to take advantage of student knowledge while introducing institutional requirements. This can be where a true meeting of mainstream expectations and student experiences takes place. The institution rarely dominates the day-to-day implementation of its material, and it is frequently possible to find the space for student experiences even in a prescribed curriculum.

During the Spring semester of 1990, one of the present authors was strongly encouraged by her institution to use literary texts chosen from a pre-established list of works. She was working with new writers from a number of Latin American and Asian countries in an ESL class for which George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was strongly recommended. It was read and discussed over the course of several weeks. It soon became clear that the book touched on a number of sensitive issues for most students. Many of them came from politically repressive systems, and they were reluctant to approach the political implications of Orwell's book. Instead of coercing them into a political analysis, the teacher chose to frame the discussion as one centered on the realizability of utopian systems. The discussion included family systems, college systems, or even economic systems. The assignment that was ultimately developed (see Appendix A) allowed the students to write about whether they thought utopian systems were possible. It asked point blank: "Can there be a perfect family, or a perfect school system, or a perfect economic system?" Only then were students asked to consider Orwell's text, and then in concert with their own experiences.

We cannot really do justice to the many successful papers this assignment led to, but two cases were particularly gratifying: A student from Nicaragua (and former economist for the Sandinistas) chose to write about the impossibility of a "perfect economic system." Her paper discussed how the Sandinistas had tried to develop such a system and ultimately failed due to external pressures from the United States. Another Central American student chose to write about the inherent difficulties of trying to maintain "the perfect Latino family" in the United States. The following is his thesis:

> The ideal utopian family system is where the father, mother and children live together happy. But with the present American and Latino people these ideals are impossible to

achieve because a lot of people have changed their beliefs about marriage, and education for their family.

He went on to discuss how North American social influences, such as a high divorce rate and the necessity of two parental incomes, tend to conflict with and sometimes supplant Latino family values of parents remaining married and someone staying home to care for the children.

It was interesting to note that few of the students actually discussed Orwell or his book in their papers. But instead of expecting such a discussion, the teacher felt it was more important for them to have absorbed the overarching theme of the text—an anti-utopian critique of communism—and to have applied it to their own lives and experiences. They were receiving the required exposure to a text privileged by the academic discourse community, yet they were not compelled to remain within its confines. Rather, they could draw on their own lives and experiences in relation to dominant themes within the text.

While not forced outright into this kind of creativity, the second author has struggled for a number of semesters to familiarize her students with such traditional essayist staples as the description, compare-and-contrast or cause-and-effect essay in remedial writing courses. An instructional unit centered on "neighborhood problems" was found to be particularly successful in teaching one of these forms, the cause-and-effect essay. Simply put, the students were asked to describe in detail a problem from their own lives or in their neighborhoods. They were then encouraged to provide as complete a list of causes for this problem as they could muster, and to relate the different causes to each other (see Appendix B).

The problems described and discussed by the mostly immigrant and African-American students in her class tended to fall into two types, which could be called "problems in the home country" and "problems in the new one." Central American students would write about the civil wars in Central America, while Mexican and Korean students would focus on corruption. Inner-city immigrants and their African-American peers would find a lot to say about the drug wars in their neighborhoods, or discuss the heavy MedFly Spraying schedule to which they had been subjected.[6]

In order for the assignment to lead to a successful conclusion, students were specifically asked to link causes and effects. They were also asked to identify responsible parties, if possible, at a later stage of their analyses. It was reasoned that some genuine insight into the problems under analysis might result from such a format. The two tasks turned out to be very challenging, requiring a mix of

abstract thinking and real information that was new to the majority of students. The task also brought to light how little some of them valued their own knowledge. They were gunshy, meeting discussion questions and requests for elaboration with persistent silence, choosing not to divulge their own feelings on issues they themselves had chosen. They brought the instructor face to face with the "hidden injuries of class" Sennett and Cobb identified two decades ago (1973).

On a more positive note, the assignment also yielded some very successful papers by "new experts" who took to the investigative component in the assignment. A particularly memorable one examined the negative effects of year-round schooling[7] and offered this final analysis of the mode of instruction and its results:

> Students are treated as numbers not people. Year round school is at a much faster pace. The teacher has a series of books, programs and tests, they must conduct in a certain time frame. They have pressure. That pressure goes to the students. And the motif seems to be how many graduate not what grades did they graduate with? To develop this idea, I will quote my younger brother who graduated a year ago: "I can't believe 'Benny Martinez' made it. He couldn't read or write without messing up! He just got lucky, or they felt sorry for him too." I personally believe that the high school let go of students because it was afraid "Benny" would be there as long as they forced him to be there. They needed the room for new students, they decided to let him go. The problem is there are more than 1000 "Bennys" who graduate each year.

The student who wrote this had obviously pondered this problem, and had come to some conclusions about teaching that, we are sure, strike responsive chords in all of us.

Concluding Thoughts: Benefits and Limitations

Ultimately, the method advocated here should benefit teachers as well as students. No longer will teachers suffer the burden of being the sole providers of instructional resources, since multicultural diversity brought to the fore of the composition classroom ensures against this. Moreover, students and teachers alike, through a continual exchange of cultural values and beliefs on both sides, are opening a joint forum for much needed communication. This, in turn, narrows the gap between one of the dominant discourses of the academic community and more marginalized discourses. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the gap between theory and practice

is narrowed. Teachers begin to see for themselves how diverse, but connected, theories of learning, literacy, and sociolinguistics can work in concert with actual classroom practice.

Nevertheless, our approach is not without potential problems. Students may resist when asked to bring their own experiences with and theories about writing into the classroom. This can become especially troublesome when students wholeheartedly endorse a view of themselves as "objects" and teachers as "bankers," and dealing with this kind of resistance is not easy. However, teachers can at least begin to diverge from a disempowering educational model by asking students why they view their own education in this manner. Moreover, we have presented our method in a rather top-down fashion, starting with theories and beliefs and then shifting to specific literacy practices. Not all students or classes are ideally suited for such an approach, and some students may respond much more favorably to a bottom-up, exploratory classroom style. Working with the ideas we have outlined calls for *artful implementation* and sensitivity to the unique dynamics of each classroom. Each teacher ultimately needs to make his or her own decisions, based on his or her own understanding of the new writers' needs, implementing our suggestions in a manner most suitable for his/her particular population of students.

Appendix A

English 85 Gergen

Assignment #5 (in class) and #6 (out of class)

Title: Perfection in a less than perfect world

Background

George Orwell's book, Animal Farm, describes a situation where an attempt to create an ideal political and economic situation (a farm owned and run exclusively by animals) fails. Many feel that Orwell was right and that there can never be a successful revolution. For failed political and economic revolutions, people may point to the Soviet Union, certain countries in Central America or even the United States (where all men are created equal is an ideal, not a reality). What all of this implies is that utopias (systems that are perfect, i.e. no crime, no discrimination, equal rights for everybody, and the list goes on) are impossible to achieve in reality.

While Orwell's book focuses mainly on political and economic aspects, we could extend the notion of utopias to other systems beyond that of an entire country (or farm for that matter). For example, we could think of the educational system, in particular the community college system. What would the perfect community college system look like? We could even extend the idea of utopias to relationships and families. Is it possible to have the "perfect family"?

Assignment

What I would like for you to do in this assignment is to address the following question:

Are utopian systems possible in today's world? Why or why not?

In addressing this question, I want you to focus on one particular system. In other words, you can answer this question with respect to education (community colleges perhaps?), family, national or economic systems. I do not want you to try and talk about all of these different systems, just choose one! You also will want to have specific examples to support your thesis.

Hints

When you begin your paper, you might want to think about what a perfect family, school, political or economic system would be like. You ought to first write about this and then discuss whether or not this ideal is possible. Your answer to this will become your thesis. A good thesis will also be one that says why your answer is what it is.

Appendix B

English 31/86 Patthey-Chavez

Assignment #4: Cause and Effect Analysis

Now that you have heard how skillful descriptions can carry a convincing and powerful argument, I want you to apply your descriptive and organizational skills to your next assignment. This assignment will be a cause-and-effect analysis. I want you to use the second type of cause-and-effect organization we have discussed: Start with an effect, describe it, and then investigate the many causes that have led to it.

The topic of this essay is:

A problem in my neighborhood

Choose a problem that you are really concerned about (get as real as you can), and then follow these steps:

1. Describe the problem;
2. Identify as many causes of this problem as you can; this will probably involve assigning responsibility for the problem to various groups of people;
3. Rank the causes, and see if any of them are related;
4. Write a point sentence about the main cause(s); organize all the causes into superordinate and subordinate causes (big boss causes and contributing ones).
6. Organize all these causes into a rough outline and use roughly one it to organize your paper. A good rule of thumb would be to devote paragraph to each subordinate cause.
7. Show us, through description and full elaboration, that your analysis is right, and that the cause(s) you identify as the main cause(s) do have the predicted effect(s), i.e. the problem you started out with.

You will see that even in an essay that is not meant to be descriptive, you can make use of both good organization and good descriptions to support your analysis. If readers becomes engrossed in your writing, they are much more likely to entertain the point you are trying to make than if they are bored. Your readers are much more likely to agree with you that something is a big problem if you show destructive effects than if you merely name it. For those of you with a creative spark, description is the one part of the essay where you can shine: Make your text come to life, make your readers understand the depth of your convictions by illustrating them vividly and skillfully.

I would like you to refrain from developing or even suggesting any solutions. Instead, I want you to convince your readers that the problem you are addressing is indeed a problem. Show them, clearly and vividly, the destructive effects of this problem. Show them, again clearly and vividly, how the problem you are describing affects different groups of people--the people concerned, yourselves, your kid-brothers and sisters . . .

Notes

[1] All three writing programs for which the authors have worked so far espoused a student-centered teaching philosophy.

[2] Nothing exemplifies the persistence of this country's xenophobic legacy better than the current controversy about political correctness. Using "PC-excesses" like labeling the handicapped "differently abled" or setting

up an Afrocentric curriculum of "questionable historical and scientific validity," the bitter polemics surrounding PC are setting up an irreconcilable conflict between inclusive curriculum efforts and "the American (educational) tradition." The conflict and the contrast it sets up perpetuates a view of "American" as homogeneously White, and a view of diversity as irreconcilably alien. One of the most comprehensive discussions of the phenomenon can be found in the July/August 1991 issue of the *Utne Reader.*

[3] Another way to put this is that we are trying to reconcile two generally hostile constituencies, composition theorists/researchers, and composition teachers. The latter, faced with the immediate concerns of writing classes, find the work of the former overly abstract or obtuse. Teachers with whom we have worked, for example, have repeatedly asked for concrete, "hands on" ideas, while almost shrugging aside the more general principles underlying these ideas. Researchers and theorists, meanwhile, find the teachers' repeated calls to "get real" insufficiently principled or orderly (i.e., unscientific), and dismiss classroom experience as "anecdotal." Perhaps because our experience spans both worlds, we feel the two groups have much to offer each other, and would like to see a *bidirectional* exchange replace this mutual hostility.

[4] At the same time, it is important to let the students decide whether or not they accept the views we present about hegemonic discourse. It is very easy to turn our ideas into an alternate dogma, and simply to replace one set of views about literacy with another. One way to avoid this is to start with student-experiences with print and with schooling. These may bear out our views, or they may not. Many of our students have articulated analyses of language use by particular discourse communities that echo our own. For example, they see California's English-Only movement as a way to victimize them by excluding them from employment. Others tell us that they are grateful for past opportunities to learn "proper" English in order to get ahead. Unlike some proponents of problem-posing education, we do not advocate challenging such an opinion. Instead, we might encourage the student who holds it to try and investigate the English they think will help them.

[5] The typical student at the site for which this assignment was developed is older, gainfully employed, and often has family responsibilities. No doubt the assignment would have to be adapted to a younger student population more exclusively dedicated to college studies.

[6] In 1989 and 1990, parts of Los Angeles were subjected to monthly aerial sprayings of a toxic pesticide in response to an "agricultural emergency," an infestation by an agricultural pest known as the Mediterranean Fruit Fly. Most of the people on the receiving end of the sprayings were from immigrant or minority backgrounds. The disparity between the heavy sprayings of their neighborhoods and the light spraying ordered for richer neighborhoods (if any spraying was ordered at all) was not lost on them.

[7] In the last decade, immigration has greatly swelled the enrollment of urban California school districts. Neither school funding nor teacher training has kept pace with this rising enrollment, and many school districts have found themselves in the position of having to do more with less. In order to relieve overcrowding, they have frequently opted for year-round schooling. In such a system, schools are kept open year-round, and students are divided into several tracks with rotating schedules. Since

not all children are in school at the same time, more students can be accommodated by the same facilities. For the most part, these students have shorter school years and longer school days.

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New and Announcements

April 11, 1992: Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association Conference will be held at Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD. The theme is "Converging Voices: Writing Centers in the 1990's." **For information,** contact: Carl Glover, Writing and Communications Program, Mount St. Mary's College, Emmitsburg, MD 21727 (301) 447-6122, Ext. 4884.

April 22–25: The 12th Annual Meeting of The Southern Writing Center Association will be held in Colonial Williamsburg at the Fort Magruder Inn and Conference Center. The theme is "Embracing Connections: The Past, Present, and Future of Writing Centers." **For information,** contact: Dr. Tom MacLennan, Director, The Writing Place, The U of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC 28403-3297.

May 29–31: The City University of New York's Office of Academic Computing, together with the **Research Foundation of CUNY, the National Project on Computers and College Writing, and the National Testing Network in Writing,** will sponsor "Computers Across the Curriculum: A Conference on Technology in the Freshman Year," to be held at the Marriott Financial Center Hotel in New York City. Designed for faculty, administrators, and researchers in higher education, the conference will highlight innovative approaches to incorporating state-of-the-art computer technology into curricula and pedagogy. Presentations will explore the inclusion of computer technology in: Developmental education, core curriculum, humanities and social sciences, library research, mathematics and sciences, and counseling and advisement. **For information and registration,** contact: Max Kirsch, Computers Across the Curriculum, The City U of New York/Office of Academic Computing, 555 West 57 Street/14th Floor, New York, NY 10019 (212) 541-0324.

June 18 & 19: The Association of Teachers of English Grammar is seeking presentations for the Third Annual Conference on "The Teaching of Grammar in Grades K–College," to be held at the Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport, PA. Conference papers are sought in the following areas: textbook evaluations, classroom techniques, applied linguistics, teacher training, rhetoric and composition, reading skills, language development, and critical

thinking. Proposals should include A/V or computer needs, your name, address, phone number, and a short summary of the presentation. **Deadline:** April 1, 1992, but an extension is possible. **Contact:** Ed Vavra, Pennsylvania College of Technology, DIF 112, One College Avenue, Williamsport, PA 17701 (717) 326-3761 Ext.7736, FAX (717) 327-4503.

June 25–27: The 1992 Young Rhetoricians' Conference will hold its 8th annual celebration of the art of rhetoric at Monterey Peninsula College. Among speakers and workshops: Peter Elbow (U of Massachusetts) will speak as Rhetorician of the Year. Shirley Brice Heath (Stanford) will address the Friday Luncheon on the crisis of American public education and the responsibilities of the college teacher. Further talks will be given by Gabriele Rico on writing your way through personal crisis; Nell Pickett (editor, *English in the Two-Year College*) on how to publish and prosper in the two-year and four-year college; Hans Guth on redefining the canon; and Richard Graves (Auburn) and Susan Becker (Illinois Central) on exploring personal archetypes through writing. Workshops include the decentralized classroom/critical thinking/the bilingual student/rereading America. Humor Night will mourn "The Death of Literature." **For information,** contact: Maureen Girard of MPC (408) 646-4100.

July 8–11: The 11th Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition will be held in State College, PA. Among the featured speakers are: Donald McCloskey, Anne Ruggles Gere, Steven Mailloux, Jeanne Fahnestock, Richard Larson, Carolyn Miller, Christine Neuwirth, Gary Schumacher, and Bill Smith. Papers and workshops are scheduled on a wide range of topics, including rhetorical history and theory, the composing process, basic writing, writing in academic and nonacademic contexts, advanced composition, the rhetoric of science, writing across the curriculum, rhetorical criticism, writing pedagogy, computers and writing, technical and business writing, and so on. To obtain registration **information,** to volunteer to chair a session, etc., contact: Davida Charney, Dept. of English, Penn State U, University Park, PA 16802. (BITNET: IRJ at PSUVM)

October 2–3: The Midwest Writing Centers Association's 11th annual conference will be held in St. Paul, MN. The theme is

"Talking it Out: Writing Centers as Social Spaces." Steve North of SUNY-Albany will be the keynote speaker. The proposal deadline: April 15. **For more information,** contact: Dave Healy, General College, 240 Appleby Hall, U of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

October 8–10: The 4th National Basic Writing Conference, co-sponsored by CBW (Conference on Basic Writing, a special interest group of CCCC) and NCTE, will be held at the U of Maryland in College Park, MD. David Bartholomae (U of Pittsburgh) and featured plenary panelists will address the theme "Critical Issues in Basic Writing: 1992." How are we, our writing programs, and our institutions meeting or failing to meet the needs of at-risk students? Concurrent sessions and workshops will cover a wide range of topics related to basic writing programs and practices. **For information and registration,** contact: John Garvey, Education Director, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801 (217) 328-3870.

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