ISSN 0147-1635

JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

SPRING 1995
VOLUME 14, NUMBER 1

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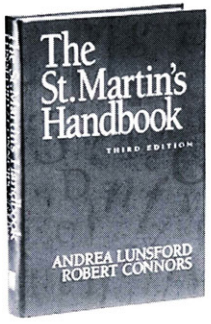

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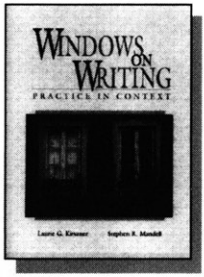

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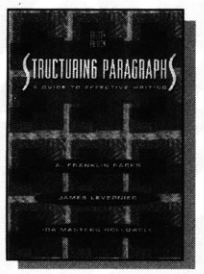

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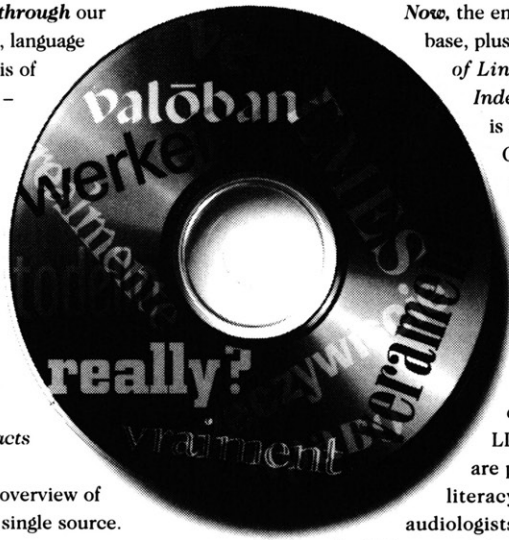

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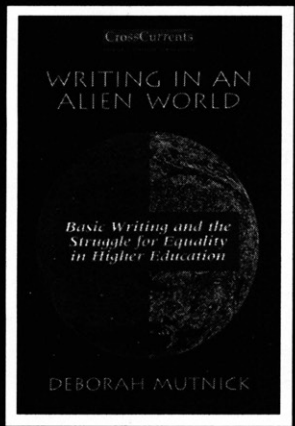

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CALL FOR ARTICLES

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 two years (four issues). The prize is $500, now courtesy of Lynn Quitman Troyka. 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

As we edit our second issue of *JBW*, we are aware of the serious challenges facing our profession, our students, and our colleges. Several hundred participants attended our basic writing panel at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication last Spring. Most spoke with eloquent anguish about the dissolution of their programs and the loss of resources for basic writing courses across the nation. They, and we, are troubled by the devaluing of literacy and education as government and public priorities. We believe that basic skills courses democratize higher education by providing students with academic access and support. Thus, the role of *JBW* as a voice for our profession has become more critical. The journal must serve as a forum for writing educators to explore problems, to reflect on critical issues, and to envision change.

The essays in this issue make explicit the questions underlying current definitions of—and crises in—basic writing. The opening essay by James L. Collins rejects composition curricula and pedagogies that privilege the process approach over other approaches. Collins challenges us to rethink writing instruction, to adopt a poststructuralist appreciation of difference and multiplicity, and to increase our awareness of how culture affects language forms and audience expectations.

In the next essay, Norbert Elliot asks us to think about narrative as an essential component of literacy. He contrasts the devaluation of narrative in basic writing classes with a demonstration of how professional writers use narrative as a tool of legitimation. Elliot asserts the legitimating function of narrative for basic writers and describes how it enables students to explore the relations between their ideas and their lives. For Elliot, teaching narrative discourse to basic writers is a step toward participatory democracy.

The next three essays relate these theoretical concerns directly to classroom practice. Relying on the power of music to motivate students, Sarah Coprich Johnson tells us how to engage basic writing students in critical literacy. Johnson describes class activities and explains how different kinds of music can provide springboards for writing and help students

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.01

understand the connection between purpose and technique in the expression of ideas. In her essay on redesigning a writing program, Mary Segall explains why basic writing students should be placed in college-level, credit-bearing "intensive" composition classes. Segall offers evidence that students' attitudes, motivation, and skills improve—while the college's academic standards are maintained.

In his case studies of basic writing students, Eric Miraglia demonstrates the effectiveness of writing autobiographies as a means of assessment and self-diagnosis. Miraglia shows how the diagnostic autobiography can be a powerful tool to help students reflect on themselves as writers and to help teachers guide students in setting goals for their writing development.

The issue concludes with two essays on assessment. Despite research studies showing the inadequacy of multiple-choice tests for classifying students as basic writers, Thomas Hilgers tells us that 49% of American colleges and universities continue to place students based on their scores on multiple-choice tests. In his essay, Hilgers describes appropriate measures for assessing students' writing and explains how the use of these measures would lead to improved placement and curricular decision-making. Edward M. White concurs with Hilgers; indeed White believes that effective placement procedures can increase students' retention and success. White takes an historical perspective on composition instruction and evaluation, contrasting egalitarian educational policies of the recent past with present elitist approaches. Advocating continued funding and support for basic writing programs, White presents evidence of increased retention levels for students involved in two large basic skills programs.

The essays in this issue underscore our commitment to having *JBW* reflect the complexity, contradictions, and multiplicity of approaches and points of view that have made basic writing itself a site of struggle. We thank the authors for taking on the important controversies in the field and for entrusting us with their words. In addition, we thank the Consulting Reviewers who devoted much time and expertise to responding to multiple versions of the essays in this issue. Finally, we want to express our gratitude to Vice Chancellor Elsa Nuñez-Wormack for her support of the journal and to Ruth Davis for her remarkable editorial and organizational abilities.

—***Karen Greenberg*** and ***Trudy Smoke***

James L. Collins

BASIC WRITING AND THE PROCESS PARADIGM

ABSTRACT: *Process approaches have become paradigmatic in the teaching of writing, but recent critiques claim that an implicit mode of instruction privileging mainstream students is typical of process approaches. Two central metaphors in the process paradigm support the criticism of implicit instruction: literacy learning as natural development and writing instruction as the facilitation of development. The article traces implicit instruction to the structuralist intellectual tradition and concludes that a poststructuralist appreciation of differences, especially differences among discourses, would be more appropriate for the teaching of basic writing.*

Over the past several years composition theorists have claimed that an implicit mode of instruction typical of writing-process approaches contributes to the difficulties nonmainstream students encounter in trying to master school-sponsored literacy. What does this critique mean for the teaching of basic writing? At first glance, criticisms of process approaches seem to be based on studies limited to the elementary-school level. Typical examples include the descriptions by Michaels and Cook-Gumperz of "sharing time" narratives in first-grade classrooms where teachers have an implicit model of literate discourse in mind, causing them to prefer the topic-centered stories of white children over the episodic personal narratives of minority children. However, the criticisms apply to analogous situations in secondary school and college. Cazden, for example, points out that the writing conference in high school

---

James L. Collins, professor of English Education at SUNY at Buffalo, has written numerous essays on the development of writing abilities. He has edited the Vital Signs *series for Heinemann Boynton, and he is currently working on a book called* Post-Process Writing Instruction.

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DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.02

and college is similar to "sharing time" in purpose and participant structure. Indeed both the nondirective writing conference and "sharing time" emerge from an implicit model of literate discourse.

Implicit instruction is teaching that works through nondirective suggestion and tacit implication rather than by explicit direction or modeling. Critics of process approaches to writing instruction, such as Delpit, Gee, and Kutz and Roskelly, repeatedly focus on the difficulties implicit instruction can pose for students whose discourse strategies and expectations diverge from mainstream literate discourse. Their argument is that mainstream literate discourse is the language of school but it is familiar only to students who use it regularly outside of school. If schools avoid teaching the mainstream code used tacitly in writing instruction, then instruction favors students who already know the code and how to use it to construct meaning. As one critic makes clear, writing instruction then imposes an inequitable burden on students less familiar with the mainstream academic code:

> [W]e should be aware that failing to focus on "forms," and stressing "meaning" and the student's own "voice," can privilege those students who already know the "rules" and the "forms," especially if grades are assigned partly on how well the writing ultimately matches traditional expectations, either in the "process writing" class itself or in later more content-based classes it is preparing the students for. The "process writing" class exists in an overall system, and it can become complicit in that system in replicating the hierarchical status quo in yet another form, and one that is, perhaps, more effective in that the students who fail, fail without understanding the basis of the system that failed them. (Gee 162)

Basic writers are disproportionately members of discourse communities other than the mainstream literate one, and if the process paradigm does indeed show a conceptual reliance on an implicit model of literacy instruction, then the critique of process approaches just reviewed applies to the teaching of basic writing. The process paradigm may actually perpetuate some myths that work against basic writers. As Lankshear and McLaren note, "the myths of dominant discourses are, precisely, the myths which oppress and marginalize" (44).

In what follows, I use publications from the writing-process

movement as artifacts to identify two central myths or controlling metaphors in process approaches: the beliefs that writing development is natural and that teaching is primarily the facilitation of development. An analysis of these metaphors shows that the process paradigm does indeed favor implicit instruction. I trace this bias to the structuralist intellectual tradition which analyzes phenomena in terms of binary oppositions; in this analysis, implicit instruction is a reaction to the highly directive, skills-based writing instruction which preceded the process movement. I conclude that a poststructuralist appreciation of differences, especially differences among discourses, would be more appropriate for the teaching of basic writing.

My starting point in reporting my analysis is an article entitled "Five Myths in the Teaching of Composition" by O'Dea. O'Dea perceived his five myths as popular beliefs among writing teachers thirty years ago, but they now seem curious and outdated:

1. Students learn to write well by reading great literature.
2. Students learn to write essays by analyzing professionally written essays.
3. Students learn to write well by grammatical analysis.
4. Students learn to write better by reconstructing other people's sentences.
5. Students learn to write better by taking into account extensive teacher criticism.

O'Dea's identification of these five statements as myths makes clear his opposition to what he saw as a popular approach to teaching writing through external models or directives, since that is what great literature, professional essays, grammatical analysis, other people's sentences, and extensive teacher criticism have in common. O'Dea concludes by recommending that writing be conceived as the communication of existing knowledge rather than as a gathering and synthesis of ideas new to the writer: "Try to establish a writing situation where there can be *real* communication, where the student is given a genuine opportunity to inform the teacher *and* the class about his specialized knowledge of bird-watching or whatever, or is encouraged to think that his opinion about the function of the witches in *Macbeth* might be interesting to the whole class" (330; emphasis in original). In rejecting methods employing an "outside-in" instructional quality, O'Dea anticipated the seminal Dartmouth Conference on the Teaching of English in 1966,

where participants decided to move "from an attempt to define *What* English is—a question that throws the emphasis on nouns like skills, and proficiencies, set books, and the heritage—to a definition by process, a description of the activities we engage in through language" (Dixon 7). This view of language as process and activity implied that it is a naturally occurring phenomenon and that literacy, like language in general, is latent within each student, an emergent ability which the alert teacher will notice and draw on. This led to pedagogical emphasis on emergent abilities and the means of drawing them out.

By turning from a skills model to a process model in the mid-1960s, writing instruction began to move in the direction of a developmental pedagogical stance. Considerable research on the writing processes of successful writers supported this movement, and rather quickly the profession came to believe in the existence of "normal" writing processes and a "normal" process of writing development; indeed research on the writing processes of unsuccessful writers used the norm for successful writers as a benchmark (Perl). Writing process researchers have studied the development of writing primarily in its relation to the development of thinking by borrowing a cognitive model from psychological and linguistic studies in child development, a model that emphasizes organic growth. An example of this borrowing is the notion of egocentric expression. Researchers in developmental psychology, especially those influenced by Piagetian notions made the assumption that developing writers undergo an initial stage of "egocentric expression" of their ideas, in which "egocentric" is a synonym for personally relevant writing or, as writing researchers termed it, "expressive writing" (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen; Emig). This assumption led to a belief that the majority of communication problems are stages along the path of the development of the writer. For example, in the stage of egocentricity, the developing writer was thought to assume that the reader "thinks and feels as he does, has had the same experience, and hears in his head, when he is reading, the same voice the writer does when he is writing" (Moffett 195). The teacher's task was not to intrude or discourage this kind of writing but to provide feedback, to encourage and facilitate elaboration and explicitness and thus overcome egocentricity; for "it is not so much knowledge as awareness that [the student] needs" (Moffett 195). Hence, teachers within this mode of instruction became "facilitators" whose role was to free students' personal stores of experience

and information for expression and to promote growth by sustaining a positive, supportive classroom atmosphere. This led to an avoidance of the study of model pieces of writing, the presentation of criteria, the structuring of instruction around sets of skills or strategies or rhetorical concepts, and the use of textbooks or teachers as sources of explicit instruction. These ideas found their fullest expression in Elbow, Graves, Atwell, and Calkins, where the emphasis is almost entirely on natural literacy development and implicit instruction to help students discover and elaborate meaning while allowing them to choose their own books and writing topics, freewrite to identify and develop ideas, and postpone attention to matters of conventional form, style, diction, and editing.

The process model in writing instruction today has the generic labels *writing process* and *process writing*; it is part of general pedagogical perspectives such as *whole language* and *new literacy* (Willinsky), and it has at least one specific label, *Natural Process Mode* (Hillocks). I prefer Hillocks' "natural process" label because the dominant metaphor in the process model—natural development—is suggested within the label itself. As Cook-Gumperz recently pointed out, the model has its basis in the self-discovery function of expressive writing. The process approach to writing instruction, in other words, is based on the belief that writing, especially early drafts of writing by inexperienced writers, is initially expressive in nature and characterized by a self-discovery function; only later, with subsequent drafts and increased writing experience, does it become more communicative. Underpinning this expectation are two related central metaphors. The first is the metaphor of natural development, as if literacy development were governed by a graphic version of Chomsky's language acquisition device. The second is the metaphor of instruction as the facilitation of writing development, as if the teacher's work were primarily to support writing development, rather than to initiate, shape, or direct it. Historically, these metaphors were juxtaposed against the previous axiomatic metaphor of writing as skill produced by "outside-in" influences, which is what O'Dea was opposed to. The outside-in model construed writing as artificial and static, and writing skills were often thought of as "things"—reified objects passed from teacher to student.

Translated into educational practice, the natural process model has meant encouraging students to trust themselves and their own designs, and it has meant conceiving of meaning-

making and writing development as unidirectional processes—from the inside-out. This spatial metaphor of writing as movement from the inside-out dominates the writing-process literature. Kirby and Liner with Vinz, for example, title their influential book on the teaching of writing *Inside-Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing*. The book opens with the following passage:

> It all begins inside: inside the heads of our kids. There are ideas in there, and language and lots of possibilities. Writing is a pulling together of that inside stuff. Writing is a rehearsal in making meaning. What we like to call "mind texts." The teacher's role in all this is to support those rehearsals, to help kids bring those mind texts to the page as powerful writings. (1)

In this model, students already have in their heads unconscious knowledge of the elements of writing, and the production of written text consists of "discovering" these elements. In other words, writing is a process of discovering latent inner representations of meaning and then relaying them to the outside world. The metaphor of writing as a natural process means that writing is an innate capability which needs only to be nurtured into existence through repeated practice. This viewpoint was reinforced by research in linguistics claiming that by the time a child begins school, he or she is very much a linguistic adult, possessing everything needed to produce a written text. Not only is linguistic ability imputed to already reside within the child, but in the case of secondary students, a fund of frames, images, observations, and ideas are waiting to be discovered by the writer. Romano describes this self-discovery function of writing this way:

> [It is] the aspect of writing that comes closest to magic. We write and soon find ourselves putting down facts we didn't know were in our heads. We write and explain something lucidly that had only been a foggy notion. We write and create examples that illustrate our generalizations. We write and suddenly "realize" or "notice" things. (18)

Romano's book is entitled *Clearing the Way;* in that title and throughout the book, he repeatedly uses images of letting writers grow, cutting them loose, freeing them from the constraints of rules and skills and directive teaching. Once implicit knowledge is established as the wellspring for writing, teachers need

only to keep ideas flowing, to suggest and encourage instead of explicitly stating, to trust developing writers to discover their own ideas instead of getting them out of books or elsewhere. The assumption of implicit knowledge in student writers is what permits implicit instruction by writing teachers.

The trouble with implicit instruction is that it is based on an assumption of natural development of language abilities. To return momentarily to the critiques of process writing with which I opened this article, implicit instruction is rooted in a middle-class educational ideology that favors students familiar with mainstream literate culture. Literacy development appears natural, that is, when there is a high degree of congruence between the language of home and school (Heath; Delpit; Gee). Since basic writers are disproportionately members of discourse communities other than the mainstream literate one, an implicit model of literacy instruction often is inappropriate in the basic writing classroom.

An example from a basic writing classroom will clarify and illustrate what I mean by claiming that implicit instruction and the developmental process approach based on it is inappropriate for basic writers. The example has three parts: The first part is an excerpt from an Hispanic first-year university student's initial draft in which she responds to her reading of Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," a short story describing the daylong arduous journey of an elderly woman, Phoenix Jackson, to obtain medicine for her grandson. The second part is an excerpt from a conference in which the student discusses the draft with her teacher. The third part is an excerpt from a conference in which the student discusses this draft with a tutor.

Excerpt from First Draft:

> "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty. When I first read this story, I could no understand what was going on. I did no know boys were all in the story. I thought Phoenix was the only character. I thought she was dreaming when Phoenix was going through the pines all the way up the hill and then down. I thought all this was nonsense. I could not understand why she kept on going and did not stop when she felt like it. From the beginning I did not understand why she started that trip in first place. Then I decided to read the story for a purpose. The first time I read it because it was my assignment. As I was reading for the second time, I could relate myself with Phoenix

but on a different path of life, my life. I forgot about Phoenix and I changed her. I picture walking on the difficulties of this, my own path of life. Since the time of the trip. I could see myself since the day I was born. Reading the story made me thought about life. While reading the story I thought of how many trips I have done. I also thought if my trip was worth something as Phoenix long journey. When seeing how long Phoenix journey was, I became more and more involved each time. I could relate to everything in Phoenix journey. Phoenix walking over the path was the meaning of determination in making that trip. As she walks through the maze where there was no path, I picture myself making my way through life somehow, even when there seems to be no way.

Excerpt from Teacher-Student Conference:

Teacher: It seems to me throughout this essay you keep saying, "Phoenix Jackson's life reminded me about something in my own life." Right?

Student: Uh humm.

Teacher: Well, we say that our essays need to draw from the story, not draw from our own life, right?

Student: See, I ...

Teacher: But, wait a second, wait a second. This is your first response, and that's really good. So I suggested, now, is there a thesis in this, for a paper on "A Worn Path"? And it looks like you are interested in the qualities that Phoenix Jackson shows, that have helped her in her life.

Student: Uh humm.

Teacher: You mention, um, you're relating to her [reads from student's paper] "through the path ... the meaning and determination .... As she walked through the maze where there was not a path, I pictured myself making ... through life somehow." OK, this one would be, you admired perseverance in spite of difficulties, right?

Student: Uh humm.

Teacher: You don't necessarily have to use how you had to persist. [Reads from student's paper] "I pictured myself making my way through life somehow."

Student: But I was comparing her to me.

Teacher: But, yeah, that's good, for your first response. Now I want you to be able to make a thesis statement where you can say something about Phoenix Jackson and illustrate it from the story. But you wouldn't have come to this point had you not written these first few pages of response. OK? So, what you can do is say, um, Phoenix Jackson faces life with blank, blank, and blank. This is not exactly, it shows, [writes and speaks her writing aloud] "illustrates a theme for the reader ... qualities in facing .... OK: Phoenix Jackson illustrates for the reader three important qualities necessary in facing life's difficulties." Now it looked like these were the things that you felt you noticed about Phoenix Jackson.

Excerpt from Tutor-Student Conference:

Tutor: What do you think of the essay you wrote?

Student: I like it, but she says it's not what she wants.

Tutor: I like it, too. This [points to student's last sentence] is your attempt to make a thesis?

Student: Yes. She told me to get a thesis and to take three points.

Tutor: Are you happy with that thesis?

Student: I don't know. I think it doesn't sound good. Because I don't, I always have trouble with the thesis. Like, I always put it at the end, and then I have to go back and put it out there. Then she told me that she wanted a new one.

Tutor: Why do you always put it at the end?

Student: I don't know. That's my style of writing. That's how I write.

Tutor: It's like you have to write what you think ...

Student: Yeah, then I ...

Tutor: ... before you discover your thesis?

Student: Yeah. That's how I write.

Tutor: Well, uh, do you think it would be possible to combine this thesis [pointing to student's first paragraph] with this evidence [pointing to the book containing the short story]?

Student: Yeah, this is why she told me to pick the three points, and then I'm gonna, these will be like my topics.

Tutor: Do you need help, or do you think you can pull that off by yourself?

Student: No, I think I can do it.

Tutor: OK.

Student: But, I don't, I'm not sure what she wants. Do you know what she really wants me to do? I thought this [points to her draft] was what she wanted.

Tutor: What you've done here is tell a story about yourself, reacting to the short story you read.

Student: Uh huh.

Tutor: That's a good way to understand the story. It's a good way to build an understanding ...

Student: But, see, what I'm trying to say, because in my old lit class, including every, she will tell us to respond to the story, saying, like, if you like it or no, whatever. Also, she say, critique the story, say what was wrong with it. But [the current teacher], she doesn't say that. She just say, "write." When I write something like this, then she says change it, but I don't know what she wants.

The writer's first draft is characterized by Flower's "writer-based" prose and Scardamalia and Bereiter's "knowledge-telling strategies" in that it reveals the writer's thinking in process. The draft records her attempt to make sense of the story. The writer notes that she didn't understand the story after her first reading and thought, "all this was nonsense." Actions in the story seem illogical to her: Why would Phoenix keep walking in the face of so many obstacles? Why did she start the journey in the first place? With her second reading of the story, however, she is no longer reading it "because it was my assignment"; instead, she attempts to connect the story to her own experience. What is being constructed by the writer is therefore a personally relevant account of the story's meaning, and her writing seems to fit the process model where early drafts are expressive and serve a self-discovery function.

The teacher gives token acknowledgement of process writing by stating that the writer's attempt to compare herself to Phoenix is acceptable for a "first response." The teacher wants the next draft to get beyond the expressive treatment to a more academic one: "We say that our essays need to draw from the story, not draw from our own life, right?" In the teacher's view, personal response may lead to personally relevant meaning, but achieving true explicitness of meaning is a matter of elaborating the content of the essay in a certain way. This involves gleaning pertinent information from the story and by writing in conformity with a "thesis statement and examples" code of discourse. The teacher implies that any further elaboration of the story's meaning should emerge from careful examination of the text itself to extract the necessary information and then writing about it in a fixed format, rather like filling in the blanks: "So, what you can do is say, um, Phoenix Jackson faces life with blank, blank, and blank." Clearly, this is an "outside-in" approach to writing instruction, since the teacher expects both the content and the form of the writing to come from outside the writer.

The tutor, on the other hand, uses the "inside-out" approach characteristic of process writing. His questions are nondirective, his conference style is student-centered, and he is apparently making every attempt to be supportive of the writer. He thinks the student is doing well because she is using writing to discover meaning; he believes that she needs to write more to discover her thesis and that by writing about herself she will discover the meaning of the story. The writer, however, is not

so sure her writing is going well. Several times she mentions the difficulty she is having figuring out and delivering what the teacher wants: "I like it, but she says it's not what she wants" and "I'm not sure what she wants. Do you know what she really wants me to do?" Finally, the writer openly admits to confusion: "When I write something like this, then she says change it, but I don't know what she wants," suggesting that the code governing academic writing in this classroom is too implicit to be accessible to her.

This example presents an apparent conflict between a "traditional" approach to writing instruction and a "process" approach. The teacher is representative of secondary and postsecondary instructors who have fixed expectations for academic writing: It should contain information from reading and other sources; the information should be logically and hierarchically arranged; clear transitions should connect ideas; and so on right down to conventional mechanics and spelling. The tutor represents expectations built into the process approach: writers should discover meaning as they go, initial drafts may be overly expressive and disconnected, revision should move the writing in the direction of communicative prose, and final editing should take care of any surface infelicities. So who is right?

My point is that the question I just posed is not the appropriate one. The expectations of both the teacher and tutor remain tacit. As a result, the writer remains unconscious of them in spite of her willingness to provide exactly "what the teacher wants," if she could just figure out what that is. It may be, in fact, that the teacher and tutor are unaware of this student's culturally determined pattern of discourse the writer is using, just as the writer is unaware of the culturally determined pattern of discourse that operates in composition classrooms (Dunlap). A more appropriate question than "Who is right?" is *How can we learn from each other?*

Writing development is a hybrid combining development in the sense of genetic maturity with development in the sense of learning from socialization and instruction (Collins). I think the teaching of basic writing always involves the balancing of direct modeling and instruction with culturally determined, habitual and therefore seemingly "natural" discourse patterns. Since basic writers are disproportionately members of discourse communities other than the mainstream literate one, an implicit model of literacy instruction is frequently inappropriate,

by itself, in the basic writing classroom. Implicit writing instruction calls out habitual discourse, and habitual discourse varies with culture more than with language development. As basic writing teachers we should set the same goal for ourselves that would be most appropriate for our students—to become more conscious of how culture influences linguistic forms, more aware of the patterns we use and how they differ from those our audiences expect. This means, of course, making explicit many aspects of language instruction that are currently implicit or taken for granted. Mina Shaughnessy expressed much the same sentiment:

> The special conditions of the remedial situation, that is, the need to develop within a short time a style of writing and thinking and a background of cultural information that prepare the student to cope with academic work, create a distinctive tension that almost defines the profession—a constant, uneasy hovering between the imperatives of format and freedom, convention and individuality, the practical and the ideal. Just where the boundaries between these claims are to be drawn in basic writing is by no means clear. (152)

What Shaughnessy referred to as "the imperatives of format and freedom, convention and individuality, the practical and the ideal" is, I suspect, the same difference I have discussed in terms of conscious and implicit instruction. Where Shaughnessy saw tension and a need for boundaries between opposites, however, I would advocate a poststructuralist appreciation of differences. Too many of us see educational change in structuralist terms, as a continual movement between poles arranged as a set of binary oppositions. This view makes educational innovation seem like an endless process of pendulum-swinging. Certainly the process movement fits the structuralist philosophy. Zemelman and Daniels, for example, use a table to "identify the key points of contrast between the old and new paradigms" (340), that is, between traditional teaching and process writing. Here are excerpts from their table, which they call a "comparison of polarities":

Old/traditional view	New/process view
Writing is a product to be evaluated.	Writing is a process to be experienced.
Writing is taught rather than learned.	Writing is predominantly learned rather than taught.
The process of writing is largely conscious.	Writing often engages unconscious processes.

According to this structuralist way of thinking, innovation is a reaction to tradition; process-writing was a reaction to directive, skills-oriented teaching. Once process writing has itself become the dominant tradition, we need another reaction or a new paradigm. Such a view runs the risk of oversimplifying education by suggesting that teaching always involves choosing between alternatives and establishing one alternative as the authoritative one. A poststructuralist or postmodernist view of education makes more sense because it rejects the claims to exclusivity of insight and authority of any one view and allows the inclusion of opposing views. James Gee describes this position:

> A given sign system (language, way of seeing the world, form of art, social theory, and so forth) can *claim* universality or authenticity or naturalness, but this is always a claim made from *within* the system itself. Outside the system, we are in another sign system that may well have different canons of universality or authenticity. . . . A sign system operates not because it is inherently natural or valid, nor because it is universal, but simply because some group of people have engaged in the past and continue to engage in the present in a particular set of *social practices* that incorporate that sign system. (281; emphasis in original)

The process paradigm is the dominant discourse in the teaching of writing, but that does not validate its claim to authority or exclusivity. The teaching of basic writing would benefit from rejecting the structuralist notion of two extremes in the teaching of writing in favor of a view that both ends—tradition and innovation, development and socialization, psychology and culture—are necessary. In this view, differing discourses represent differing social epistemologies and differing personal and cultural identities. Appreciating these differences gives us *both*

creativity and conformity in written expression, and it gives us invention and convention, discovery and communication.

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Norbert Elliot

NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND THE BASIC WRITER

ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that narrative is an important aim of discourse for basic writers. Although a major rhetorical strategy in our professional lives, narrative often does not gain the attention it deserves in classroom practice. The author begins by examining the use of narrative by leaders in the field of basic writing, then focuses on the significance of narrative for students: the use of narrative yields legitimacy, allows for metacognition, and provides a vehicle for numinous expression.*

Basic writers have only themselves. They are the method. There is no projected self on paper, no repertoire of discourse strategies to which successes and failures may be attributed. In basic writing courses, students hurl themselves into the void, expecting to receive the benefits that literacy brings. To the basic writer, everything is personal; they try to capture their lives on the page. The most significant form of discourse for these writers, therefore, is narrative. Through narrative, basic writers incorporate the world of the academy into their own lives. To examine the power of narrative for the basic writer, I will first examine the role that narratives play in our own professional lives as teachers and theorists of basic writing. Then I will focus on the significance of narrative for basic writers.

Pledging Allegiance: The Mina Shaughnessy Controversy

The current controversy over the value of narrative discourse for basic writers began with the Min-zhan Lu essay. In the

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© *Journal of Basic Writing,* Vol. 14, No. 2, 1995

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.03

Spring 1991 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, she suggested that *Errors and Expectations*, the seminal 1977 work of the late Mina Shaughnessy, belied conservatism. Lu continued the attack in a 1992 article in *College English*. According to Lu, Shaughnessy feared conflict: Shaughnessy (along with her conservative counterparts such as W. E. B. DuBois, Lionel Trilling, and Irving Howe) made instructors hesitant to use conflict and struggle as a vehicle for writing in the classroom. "The consensus among the gatekeepers, converters, and accomodationists," Lu wrote, "furnished some Basic Writing teachers with a complacent sense that they already know all about the 'problems' Basic Writers have with conflict and struggle. This complacency makes teachers hesitant to consider the possible uses of conflict and struggle . . . " (907).

Response followed. In the Fall 1993 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Patricia Laurence reminded readers of the political complexities surrounding Open Admissions in the 1970s at City College of The City University of New York. Shaughnessy, Laurence wrote, "guided institutional change with a nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the diversity of the faculty, awareness of the public, and a rhetorical strategy of indirection and understatement. What is now fashionably explicit [i.e., airing political conflicts in public forums] had to be implicit at that historical and educational moment at City College" ("Vanishing Site" 27). Laurence continued her rebuttal in the December 1993 issue of *College English*, which featured a "Symposium on Basic Writing, Conflict, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." Laurence advised a moment of clarity: "I think Lu and her supporters need to get real about the world I'm talking about [the world of poverty from which basic writers often come]. Unless someone offers to pay my rent and to put shoes on my little girl, no one is going to convince me that hovering between the two worlds (educated and uneducated) is the place for me" (885).

Min-zhan Lu's attack on Mina Shaughnessy's politics reveals more about Lu's beliefs than about Shaughnessy's. Lu was trying to throw an academic fast ball, a long-standing tradition among assistant professors who must, in Harold Bloom's terms, deliberately misread the work of the previous generation in order to gain academic maturity. Like so many new writing instructors, Lu seems zealous to rack up the mistakes of others and, in doing so, create replacement paradigms. However, while Lu is passionate about bringing the discourse of conflict into the basic writing curriculum, she does not do it effectively.

It is difficult for me to imagine why Lu did not simply phone Laurence, a past director of the City College composition program, and ask what the students were reading in English 1, the first basic composition course, designed by Shaughnessy in 1970. If Lu had done this, she would have found that students were reading "Chapman and Abraham's *Black Voices,* Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha,* René Marques' *The Oxcart,* George Orwell's *Essays,* Richard Wright's *Black Boy,* and Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Diary"* (Laurence, "The Vanishing Site" 20)—instead of, say, *The Autobiography of Henry Adams.* Lu probably would have changed the tone of her article, if not the thesis itself. But for Min-zhan Lu, the battle was worth it all: It further illuminated for her the "urgent need" for those interested in " 'education as a process of repositioning' " ("Symposium" 901).

The Lu/Laurence interchange is important for what it reveals about the significant place of narrative in the scholarly discourse of basic writing. Both Lu and Laurence use the narrative mode to support their positions. Lu, for example, uses Lionel Trilling's short story, "Notes on a Departure," to analyze his position on initiation into the university as a process of submission. Lu also identifies Peter Rondinone, an English professor at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, as a "new generation of minority educators" ("Conflict" 908). Her analysis of his position of deracination (a position she rejects) employs him as a character in her narrative. In her story, there are "good guys" in composition (David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, Tom Fox, Carolyn Hill, Bruce Horner, Glynda Hull, Elaine Lees, and Mike Rose ["Symposium"]) and "bad guys" (Mina Shaughnessy, Patricia Laurence, Peter Rondinone, Mary Epes, and Ann Murphy ["Conflict"]). Amazing is Lu's use of value-dualism in which she forces the reader to *either* accept her position of teaching conflict *or* accept a position of complacency. Such value-dualisms—disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as exclusive rather than inclusive—are themselves mechanisms of patriarchy. In her narrative, Lu seeks to oppress teachers of basic writing by forcing them to make choices that are badly nuanced (at least) and hierarchically organized (at worst). Lu's use of the tools of paternalism in her narrative suggests the flaws of her position.

Laurence's narrative employs symbols—verbal units—which, as defined by Northrop Frye, "conventionally and arbitrarily, stand for and point to things outside the place where they occur" (73). For Laurence, 1970 was a year of fire: "Initiated in

1970 because of student takeovers and the shutting down of the campus, Open Admissions was propelled by the virtual shutdown of the college campus, including the barring of gates and the burning of rooms (the beautiful music room in Finley Student Center) and buildings. Open Admissions began on the campus of City College with a virtual revolution" ("The Vanishing Site" 23). Laurence employs neither characterization nor value dualism; rather, she uses images to lead the reader to conclude that the City College faculty negotiated not error but the "rage and frustrations of minority students in New York City" ("Symposium" 882). Laurence's point, made narratively, follows Frederic Jameson's: ". . . there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political (Jameson 20). Shaughnessy's work, a response to a political situation that is itself vanishing, is an artifact that emerged "from the turmoil of an institution, a city, a society" (Laurence, "The Vanishing Site" 27). While Lu sees Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as an archetypal symbol of human action as a whole, Laurence insists that Shaughnessy's book exists in a literal and descriptive phase, as a motif and as a sign of someone whose life and untimely death changed American educational history.

The impulse to narrate is an impulse to seek legitimation. While Lu and Laurence differ in their narrative strategies, both use this discourse form to declare publicly the important place of basic writing in American higher education. Ultimately, this use of narrative as a form of legitimation is central to narrative in the scholarly discourse of basic writing. Through narratives, basic writing teachers find ways of relating our work to public interest. By narrating, we counter the charges leveled by David Bartholomae that "most basic writing programs marginalize students" and "preserve them as different," while basic writing teachers merely "satisfy their liberal reflexes by making students into more complete versions of themselves in courses that don't work" (qtd. in Greenberg 65). Through narrative—the sequence of stories and their manifestation in discourse—we sanction our acts before those who would dismiss us with a formulated phrase.

Narrative is one of our major rhetorical strategies as writers. Why, then, don't most of us use narrative in our basic writing classrooms? Do we theorize about the value of narrative in the same way that we have readily embraced cognitive theories? A perusal of seventeen years of issues of the *Journal of Basic*

Writing reveals but one article explicitly devoted to narrative by Kathleen G. Dixon. "Listening to what our students say about their preference for narrative," Dixon states, "may help us help them and simultaneously teach us more about human differences and development, intellectually and otherwise" (16). True, indeed, but have we done so?

Mike Rose and the Use of Narrative

Mike Rose's two case studies—*Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* and *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*—demonstrate that for many teachers, narrative has no place in the composition curriculum. In the earlier book, Rose identifies and analyzes the behaviors that characterize students' writing blocks. Rose conducted careful case studies in which students with writer's block composed essays on specific expository topics. In Rose's opinion, expository essay topics represent the kinds of assignments most frequently required across the university curriculum (28). Rose gave students a three-page case history of Angelo Cacci, a 32-year-old lonely clerk in a large insurance company who was visiting a counseling center with complaints of depression. Students were to interpret the patient's narrative in reference to a passage from Karl Jaspers' *Man in the Modern Age*. Students with "low" writing blocks did quite well on this topic, whereas the "high" blockers could write only about forty-five words in sixty minutes.

Three points are important to make about Rose's widely praised study. First, Rose assumes that exposition best represents university assignments. He thus operationalizes a position he first stated in a 1983 essay in which he called for less narrative and more academic writing in basic writing classrooms. Second, research has shown that tasks such as the expository topics used by Rose greatly inhibit the fluency of writers (Ruth). Rose demonstrates no knowledge of these studies. Third, Rose draws conclusions about students' writer's block without considering whether it was the task itself that caused the block. Indeed, subsequent research has demonstrated that narrative tasks provide the best reflection of basic writing ability (Breland, et al.,; Ruth and Murphy; Elliot, Plata, and Zelhart).

Moreover, Rose missed the significance of his student's interpretation of his assignment. In an interview with Rose, the student focused on a passage from Karl Jaspers' book: "I've heard this type of argument before, and they say, 'Farmers, oh,

they grow. They have such a wonderful life.' And it's not true. They can be real, real, you know, just as unhappy and miserable and a lot worse off than we are" (46). For this student, the Jaspers' quote is itself an essay prompt, an occasion for meditation on what Gilligan calls "a fracture of human relationship" (31). The student's response reveals a subtle understanding of the intricacies of life's relationships, intricacies that would have been best captured in a narrative mode. Rose did not allow this writer that vehicle of expression.

In his own writing, however, Rose is highly autobiographical. For example, in *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose is still stymieing students with quotes from Karl Jaspers (143), but his own technique is narrative. There are stories of students: Laura, the first character in the book, who has dropped Rose's course four times (*Lives* 1). There is Rose's own history: the down payment on his childhood house, paid for with his mother's engagement ring (*Lives* 12). And there is dialogue to make Mike Hammer blush: the ex-con Willie Oats tells Rose, "You, You—are— teaching—the—f_ _ _—outta me! (*Lives* 146). Yet Rose, it seems, does not allow his students the same freedom to choose the discourse form that he employs so well.

Like Rose, the academy holds the expository essay as an implicitly democratic form of communication. With its origin in Montaigne's *Essais*, the essay appears to incorporate the values of American democracy. Nevertheless, as Joel Hafner urges, we should see the essay as a cultural product, as an encoded system of ideology (131). Because it incorporates the values of the academy, exposition is often understood as the sole vehicle for analysis. An embodiment of academic ethos, it appears to ensure objectivity, distance, and critical thought. Upon closer examination, these values are in reality the manifestation of paternalism; or, as Gail Stygall finds using Foucaultian analysis, evidence that power and privilege have been incorporated into the basic writing curriculum. Basic writing students are moved too rapidly away from their experiential responses. By denying students the power of narrative, we cut our basic writers off from their deepest way of knowing.

The rules of expository writing are themselves evidence of the subservient role that is forced on students. They learn that an introduction must precede the subject, that a thesis must be stated, that two or three points must be made about that thesis, and that conclusions must be drawn. Personal opinions, they are taught, must not influence analysis. An undeveloped the-

sis, a superfluous example, a speculative conclusion, overuse of the first-person-singular pronoun—failure in these areas could cost students a lower grade. Rose's two works, published five years apart, reveal his consistent prejudice against narrative in the composition classroom, despite his unfailing use of it in his own writing. One of Min-zhan Lu's "good guys," Rose's own practices suggest an irony that is implicit in both theorists: neither appears to look very hard at those who are unfortunate enough to be the targets of their attention.

There is, nevertheless, hope. Richard C. Gebhardt recently noted the composition field's growing interest in personal writing and literary nonfiction. More open-ended and provisional than the traditional academic model of argumentative exposition, personal writing and its use of narrative is part of the framework advocated by composition instructors such as Wendy Hesford to help bridge "the chasms which alienate students from one another, from teachers, and from the learning process" (14). There is also Nancy K. Miller's excellent argument for personal criticism, a type of analysis that "entails explicitly autobiographical performance within acts of criticism" (1). And there are two superb models of narratives which should be read by all teachers of basic writing: Lynn Z. Bloom's "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice: A Writing Teacher Teaches Writing Teachers" and Elizabeth A. Flynn's "Composing as a Woman." In decentering the shallow appearance of comprehension and the combative authority implicit in much exposition, we can help basic writers discover ways of negotiation and mediation that are more humane than the egocentric drive to prove a point.

The Significance of Narrative for Basic Writers

The controversy over Mina Shaugnessy's supposed conservatism is an example of how "experts" in the field of basic writing use narrative discourse in their own writing. Many of these experts—including Mike Rose—use narrative in their own writing but refuse to provide tasks for their students that allow for the use of that mode of discourse. Implicit in this analysis is the fact that, for the basic writer, narrative is an aim, not a mode, of discourse. Prematurely buried by Robert J. Connors in "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," narrative has never been, nor will ever be, merely a limiting and restrictive rule-bound system for invention. Narrative is, to use James Kinneavy's famous term, an aim: the reason for the existence of

discourse itself. However, Kinneavy is mistaken in placing narrative among the modes; rather, narrative belongs with expressive, referential, literary, and persuasive discourse—"all of which exist so that humans might achieve certain purposes in their use of language with one another" (38).

What are the reasons—the "certain purposes"—that make narrative indispensable to basic writers? If we define the basic writer as one who is unable to play upon ideas and who has "difficulty with framing or holding on to a central or organizing idea" (Shaughnessy 236), then narrative aids in the development of these desired characteristics. First, narrative can provide legitimacy. Just as the use of narrative provides legitimacy for the profession of basic writing in the articles of Min-zhan Lu and Patricia Laurence and for literary theory in the article of Bruce Robbins, so too narrative provides a sense of authenticity for basic writers' lives. The past ten years of the life of Richard Rodriguez have been spent in justifying the ways of the academy to his Mexican heritage. Perhaps as much time needs to be allowed to each of our basic writing students to examine their nontraditional backgrounds and their place in the highly structured literate society to which they seek access during and after college.

Second, narrative can provide metacognition. I have defined narrative in this paper as a sequence of stories and their manifestation in discourse. Gérard Genette warns us to avoid convention and not define narrative as simply "the representation of an event or sequence of events, real or fictitious, by means of language and, more particularly, by means of written language" (127). To define narrative in this fashion, Genette warns, is to "give credence, perhaps dangerously, to the idea or feeling that narrative tells itself, that nothing is more natural than to tell a story or to put together a set of actions in a myth, a tale, an epic, or a novel" (127). Or an essay. The reason that narrative is so difficult is that it asks the writer to make a distinction between the story—"a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse" (Culler 169-70)—and the presentation of these events. To write a narrative, a basic writer must select and edit events, must think about the process of thinking. This process, often referred to as metacognition, is one of the higher-order thinking skills that we so prize in the academy as evidence of exceptional cognitive development (Dixon, Riegel).

Third, narrative can provide access to the numinous of human consciousness. Just as the rational tradition stresses the

formation of concepts that can be grasped by the intellect and analyzed through systems—metacognition is a byproduct of rationality—the nonrational tradition emphasizes the awakening of the spirit, the feeling of awe, the idea of mystery, the sensation of fascination, the association of feelings, and the contemplation of the holy. This concept of nonrational understanding is delineated by Rudolf Otto in his 1923 classic, *The Idea of the Holy*. Merging the Latin word *numen* (literally, a nodding of the head in an expression of consent) with the word *omen* (not only a sign but also a good wish), Otto defined a category of *a priori* thought to offset the bias we find in our Western culture toward the rational. The possibility of exploration with the numinous is possible through narrative. As Otto recognizes, a means of direct expression of the numinous—itself a complex web of nonhierarchical visions of human connection—rests in narrative.

Stories, as Leslie Marmon Silko writes in the opening pages of her novel *Ceremony*, "aren't just entertainment. / Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don't have anything / if you don't have the stories" (2). By accepting the nonrational along with the rational, teachers of basic writing allow the power of narrative to provide legitimacy and metacognition, and—perhaps most significant of all—to foster the magic of stories. Through narrative, students discover and create the metaphors for their lives.

Conclusion: Richard Rodriguez Meets Robinson Crusoe

In the final chapter of Richard Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, Rodriguez quotes the opening passage in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in which Crusoe's father counsels him against going abroad to seek his fortune. Rodriguez then recalls his own father's voice when he was fourteen and his father was fifty. "Life is harder than you think, boy." "You're thinking of Mexico, Papa," the teenager replied. "You'll see," said the father (202). All basic writers are Crusoes, hurling themselves into the void. Like Rodriguez, all decide to leave the safety and security of the world they know best, and all find themselves marooned on a desert island as a reward for their initiative. As Martin Green demonstrates about the legacy of the Crusoe story, wanderers survive by means of work, "of cunning and luck and skills and tools" (22). If basic writers are successful, they do more than survive: they prosper.

Yet there are darker parts of the Crusoe story. Do the wanderers survive when they meet alien cultures only by killing and enslaving others? Is the Crusoe story a justification of a morally justified imperialism? If we are not careful, our students may find themselves victims of an academically justified imperialism. As teachers of basic writing, we de-emphasize the darker parts of the story; we must help our students explore the relationships between their lives and their ideas.

If we are to ensure these explorations, the field of basic writing must privilege narrative discourse. In the success of this group of students, more than any other, lies the truth about our allegiance to the values of participatory democracy. Mina Shaughnessy told us seventeen years ago that as we improve the quality of college education and allow for the entitlements of basic writers, we move deeper into the realizations of a democracy (294). In a keynote address delivered at the first Shaughnessy Memorial Conference in 1980, Virginia Smith noted that Shaughnessy's "three beliefs were that teaching makes a difference, that the individual is important, and that literacy is power" (19). Mina Shaughnessy's vision of democracy was articulated in the success of her basic writers. Because they and they alone are most likely to provide fresh perspectives on both knowledge itself and the ways that students acquire that knowledge, our future is tied to theirs. If we turn them into expository imperialists, we and they are lost.

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Sarah Coprich Johnson

MAKING A PLACE FOR MUSIC IN BASIC WRITING

ABSTRACT: *Recent communication research indicates that music helps listeners construct the meanings of social, personal, and cultural events. This essay examines the use of music as a springboard for writing and provides an explanation of how basic writing students can use music-writing activities to discover meaningful topics and ideas, to develop specific supporting details, and to understand the connections between purpose and audience.*

> In sweet music is such art,
> Killing care and grief of heart
> Fall asleep, or hearing die.
>
> —William Shakespeare

For centuries music has had a tremendous impact on the human spirit. King David used his harp to cure Saul of "evil spirits." Sirens lured unwary Greek sailors to their doom with sweet melodies. Both the Greek Orpheus and the Scandinavian Odin are said to have been able to move inanimate objects with the beauty of their music.

Recent communication research and theory tell us that music stimulates thinking. Listening to music involves processing in-

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© *Journal of Basic Writing,* Vol. 14, No. 2, 1995

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.04

formation, analyzing sounds, and framing perceptions (Lull 141). Cultural theorists suggest that music also has a social context. Music provides security in foreign environments; it also provides topics for social discussion (Lull 149). Listeners also construct the meaning of social, personal, and cultural events through music (Lull 151).

Communication researchers also suggest that music plays a central role in the cultivation of personal and social goals. Simon Frith contends that young people use music to cope with authority figures (quoted in Lull 152). George Lewis's work on the sociology of popular music and culture emphasizes the power of music as a rallying cry, a protest around which we gather to do something about social conditions, or as a badge of identity—a means of showing others (and ourselves) to what group or groups we belong or aspire to belong as members (199).

Like the written medium, music enables people to mark their membership in—and make comments on—a shared world. Social relationships govern the ongoing dialogue between composer and audience in both writing and music. To help students better understand the important links between composition and music and to engage students through the use of this familiar genre, I integrated music and writing activities in my basic writing course this past Spring. My purpose was to provide basic writing students with an opportunity to explore important links between the composing process in music and the composing process in writing. Using a variety of musical selections as springboards for writing, I asked students to listen carefully, to analyze the various selections for meaningful topics and ideas, and to develop supports for paragraphs and essays. I hoped that students would discover that the creation of a piece of music and a piece of writing embody many of the same processes: keeping an audience in mind, using a variety of strategies to persuade and stimulate the audience, and finding ways to engage the audience. My goal was to use music to stimulate thinking, provide topics for discussion, lessen inhibitions in the unfamiliar college setting, and enhance the construction of meaning in writing.

Eleven students enrolled in my basic writing course, which is a noncredit prerequisite for Freshman Composition. (Students are placed in basic writing based on their scores on the required writing placement examination for first-year students or as a result of having failed the course before.) The class met two days a week for two hours each day. Of the eleven students

enrolled in the class, three were African American and eight were white. There were seven men and four women in the class. Their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five (except for two thirty-five-year-old students who were coming back to school after working full-time).

During the first week of the ten-week term, we discussed the historic and universal role that music has played in human communication and the powerful impact that popular music (in its various forms) plays in the lives of young people. Students were asked to explain the social and cultural meanings of their favorite music and to consider the ways in which musical selections might be used as springboards for the writing of paragraphs and essays. Students were asked to bring in instrumental tapes which we used as part of the context for each day's in-class writing. In addition, each student was required to bring to class a favorite musical selection on tape for use in a ten-minute oral presentation. I suggested that the musical selections contain lyrics. Students were expected to introduce their piece of music, play their tape for three minutes during the presentation, and use the remaining seven minutes for class discussion. Each presenter would be expected to lead a class discussion and to answer questions regarding the musical selection he or she had played for the class.

To prepare students for this assignment, I presented the following questions for consideration:

—What kind of music is being played?
—Who is the artist?
—How many artists are performing?
—What is the role of each performer?
—What is the basic message of the selection?
—Which lyrics communicate this message?
—How does the music communicate or reinforce this message?
—What audience do you think the composer of this piece had in mind when he or she or they composed it?

To help students understand how to respond to these questions, we practiced answering them together. I played a variety of my own musical selections, and we discussed the significance of each piece by answering each of the questions above.

Students also learned how to introduce a piece of music by giving the name of the musical selection, the composer's name(s), the name of the artist(s), and summary information regarding

the tape such as the release date of the tape and the way the music has been received by various audiences. Through simulation exercises, students learned how to lead a group discussion and how to ask and answer questions about a musical selection.

While students in the audience listened to their classmates' tapes and oral presentations, they were asked to take notes in response to the following questions:

—What was the main idea, theme or basic message of the musical selection?
—What supporting ideas did the speaker give regarding the significance of the tape?
—How would you rate the presentation in terms of musical selection, delivery of presentation and organization of presentation ("excellent," "good," "fair," or "poor")?
—What suggestions do you have for helping the speaker improve his or her presentation?

In addition to writing up their presentations and their analyses of classmates' presentations, I provided students with a variety of writing assignments. They were asked to record their feelings and reactions to each musical selection they heard during the course of the term in a daily journal. They also used their journals to develop topics based on their responses to the music they were hearing and on their responses to classmates' presentations. Finally, students used their journal entries to develop longer paragraphs and essays.

As they listened, spoke, and wrote, students learned to look for the main idea and supporting details in musical and written compositions. They also developed a keener awareness of the audience's role in the creation of dialogic meaning and a clearer understanding of organizational structure through listening to the musical selections. Most importantly, they began to use a variety of writing strategies and styles to engage an audience and achieve their purposes.

Midway through the term, I invited a guest musician to play his own music in our class and to share his perspectives on the similarities between the processes of composing music and composing writing. Students asked about how composers manipulate sounds to achieve different meanings and effects. They took notes about the musician's answers; these notes formed the basis of a composition about the connections between the composing process in music and the composing process in writing.

Throughout the term, I asked students to record their thoughts and feelings about the ongoing activities of the course. Their response was overwhelmingly positive. Most commented that they appreciated the opportunity to bring their favorite musical selections to class. They also said that they felt more confident and relaxed as writers because of their success in doing the activities presented in the course.

At the end of the term students were asked to write an essay analyzing their reactions to the music-writing activities. Their essays revealed that I had achieved many of my goals for the course. Students wrote that they were more confident as writers, that the integration of writing and music made the class enjoyable and interesting, and that they were able to see meaningful connections between music and writing. One student commented that "the way in which music was used in this class has helped me conquer my fear of writing." Some students emphasized that the music-writing helped them develop strategies for generating ideas and helped them modify these ideas to fit their audience's expectations. Others mentioned that they were able to develop ideas for their in-class papers more quickly because the various musical presentations gave them something interesting to think about. Several students noted that they were able to develop more specific supportive details for their ideas based on the lively discussions that followed the presentations.

Many students indicated that they liked the feeling of community that the music-writing activities inspired and suggested that these kind of activities be integrated in the English 101 and 102 (freshman English) courses. Students wrote that they were somewhat uncomfortable with the structure of the course at first, but "as the course progressed, things came together and the class was fun," "it was great being able to relax in a class that most of the time caused fear," and "the music-writing activities were an excellent way of getting everyone interested and involved with the class."

My reactions were also positive. I felt that the students genuinely enjoyed making presentations on musical selections of their choice. I noted increased confidence on the part of students as they wrote about the various musical selections. Indeed students who wrote only a few lines on the initial writing sample generated pages of text as the term progressed. Further, I was pleased with the increasingly fine quality of student work. A significant number of the portfolios turned in

at midterm and at the end of the term reflected improvement. One student, Lewis, could manage to write barely a paragraph at the beginning of the term; by the end of the term, he was writing two-page essays. At the final conference, Lewis said that he felt afraid and nervous about the class at first, but when he discovered that he could discuss and write about musical topics, he felt more confident and comfortable.

The two major improvements that I observed were in students' organization of paragraphs and essays and the development of substantive ideas in the various drafts they submitted. I was pleased to find that students had made meaningful connections between the musical presentations and their own writing. For example, one student who brought a rap tape to the class on the subject of police brutality wrote several brief essays about strategies for citizens to use to make police officers more accountable for their actions. Later, this student expanded these ideas into an essay about ways in which the police department can strengthen recruitment standards and application procedures.

For many basic writers, composing in written sentences is a process of creating and defining their identities and their voices. Often, these students need to make social and cultural leaps to contend with a different language system, differing ideologies, and differing ways of analyzing and synthesizing information. As Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola have pointed out, "In recent years we have become increasingly aware that all students do not bring the same kinds of knowledge, language habits and strategies for learning to school, and that school is an institution that must take responsibility for presenting all students with a range of options for organizing knowledge and using knowledge and using language. . . expansions of language uses in school will bring a student closer to the competencies that will meet the communication needs of work opportunities and lifelong learning" (14).

It is not enough for teachers to lead basic writers to an understanding of paragraphing, organization, punctuation, and outlining. Teachers must use familiar social and cultural genres (such as music) to stimulate writing and to assist students in moving past the margins of self-doubt to positive and authoritative identities in the writing process. As Tom Fox says, basic writing teachers "must understand the cultural forces that shape their students" and "understand how their students are accommodating, resisting or reproducing these forces in the classroom" (81).

The music-writing activities presented here offer no solution to the many difficulties encountered by basic writers. However, music is a familiar social and cultural genre that can draw students out of their silences in basic writing classes. Music is a productive medium through which basic writers are able to enlarge their uses of language and rebuild the world around them.

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Mary T. Segall

EMBRACING A PORCUPINE: REDESIGNING A WRITING PROGRAM

ABSTRACT: *An evaluation of Quinnipiac College's precollege course for basic skills developmental students revealed the following inadequacies: poor student motivation and resistance, reductive cognitive opportunities, and fragmentation of reading and writing processes. This essay explains how faculty reconceptualized developmental English and designed a new program that provides additional instructional time within the regular freshman English course. Program assessment results indicate that developmental students are better motivated and achieve growth in reading and writing commensurate with students who had a prior semester of precollege English.*

"Why can't English be more than parts of speech? I know the instructor tried to make it interesting, but I wish I could have been in English 101. Even though my English skills are weak, at least give me a chance." The student who voiced this complaint was enrolled in English 100, a developmental reading and writing course at my school, Quinnipiac College. Here, writing program administrators and teachers are challenged to meet several demands beyond individual student complaints: improving student reading and writing, motivating students, upholding academic standards, and maintaining faculty morale, all the while being accountable to administration. Through careful site-specific evaluation, we have redesigned our program to satisfy all these demands.

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© *Journal of Basic Writing,* Vol. 14, No. 2, 1995

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.05

Quinnipiac College is a private four-year college with approximately 1,000 new freshmen placed in English courses based on their Verbal SAT scores, Nelson-Denny Reading Test reading grade level, and a holistically scored placement essay (adopted in 1991 to replace a standardized multiple-choice test). Students who fall below 390 on the SAT, who have a reading grade level of 12.9 or below on the Nelson-Denny, *and* have a combined score of 4 or below (out of a possible 8 on a four-point holistic ranking scale) are placed into developmental sections of freshman English. Our developmental English students have a mean SAT of 340, an eleventh-grade reading level, and a mean holistic score of 3.14. Typically, only eight percent of this developmental group have reading grade levels below tenth grade. In our original program (which ended three years ago), these students were required to take English 100, a noncredit course comprised of two components: (1) a two-hour reading lab with SRA. Rate Builders and a programmed vocabulary book and (2) a three-hour component of composition instruction with a basic grammar text and a rhetoric reader. Students who passed this course must then take our required sequence of English 101 and 102. When English 100, 101, and 102 were created in the early 1970s, much thought and effort went into designing a program that would meet the needs of underprepared students. However, as Mike Rose cautions, such courses can go awry:

> Many of our attempts to help college remedial writers, attempts that are often well-intentioned and seemingly commonsensical, may, in fact, be ineffective, even counterproductive, for these attempts reduce, fragment, and possibly misrepresent the composing process. ("Remedial" 318)

From several vantages, our English 100 course cried out for revision. A year-long evaluation (which included student and faculty surveys, follow-ups on graduating seniors, grade analyses, research, and consultation) led us to the following conclusions:

1. The syllabus and pedagogy for English 100 reflected a reductive, fragmented approach to reading and writing.

2. Little opportunity was provided through instruction or assignments to integrate reading and writing.

3. Students were often reluctant to participate in class and to complete their writing assignments.

4. Anonymous end-of-semester course evaluations revealed student resentment at not receiving academic credit for the course and at feeling like they were in "bonehead English."

5. Full-time faculty avoided teaching the course; one out of seventeen sections each semester was taught by full-time faculty.

6. Students argued vehemently against placement in English 100.

Life under the reign of English 100 caused administrative headaches, classroom apathy, and nagging questions about the mismatch of theory and praxis.

Justification for reconceptualization of our developmental writing program was abundant, and the literature in both reading and composition studies supported our perceptions. For example, Judith Irwin identifies the processes in which readers engage, illustrating the complexity of the reading process. Perhaps more pertinent, though, is Irwin's emphasis on what she terms the "interactive hypothesis" that reading processes "do not occur separately . . . that they occur almost simultaneously in no prespecified order, and that they interact with each other" (6). The complexity and the recursive nature of the composing process is well attested to in the writings of Bartholomae and Petrosky, Peter Elbow, Linda Flower, and Mina Shaughnessy, to name only a few. Our evaluation of English 100 illustrated a basic conflict between what we expected of our students in their academic reading and writing and what we were teaching them in our developmental course. A collegewide review of writing assignments indicated that faculty expected students to be able to synthesize, analyze, and criticize course readings and to position themselves and the readings in relation to the discipline. Our developmental classes were teaching students that reading and writing are unrelated, that vocabulary is not dependent on context, and that structure takes precedence over content in writing. Our old English 100 reinforced a tendency already present in incoming students to conceive of reading and writing as discrete formal tasks, which we further decontextualized by attending exclusively to surface and structural features.

I realize that the position I have taken so far is not a revelatory one for most readers, but the issues and debates that larger, open-admissions institutions have grappled with for years may be seen as radical by some smaller private colleges, such as mine. Perhaps one explanation can be found in Barbara Gleason's concession that while she finds most basic writing instructors emphasize invention and revision, the prevalence of such instruction is difficult to assess, since the more formal skills instructors are "less likely to publish than those with more progressive ideas" (888). Perhaps this is a result of housing writing programs within English departments whose literary specialists are, "pleasantly ensconced" and retain control of the "floating bottom" faculty who teach lower-level composition (MLA Commission Report 71), thus inhibiting progressive pedagogy from replacing the more traditional teaching modes. In 1992, Min-zhan Lu found "limited influence on basic writing instruction which continues to emphasize skills," and that "this view persists among basic writing teachers in the 1990s" (889). Lu focused on the usefulness of the anxiety generated "when reading and writing take place at sites of political as well as linguistic conflict" (888), but her position is applicable, regardless of student profile. Whether they come from differing cultural backgrounds or are culturally homogeneous, incoming developmental students all face the dissonance resulting from encountering academic discourse. How then to redesign developmental English programs to meet institutional and student needs, to support a better marriage of theory and praxis, to introduce underprepared students to academic discourse, and to achieve these aims in an atmosphere of respect and dignity for both student and teacher?

The Intensive Model

During our 1991 departmental evaluation, we reviewed descriptions of other freshman English programs and came upon one that seemed to meet the academic and social needs of our students. The program we found most admirable was the program at Illinois State University, in which developmental students enroll in a regular college-level English 101 composition course, but meet for additional instructional time in specially designated "Intensive" sections (Youga, et al. 58). This model seemed preferable to ours in several different ways. It allows students to stay abreast of their peers; through additional in-

structional time, weaker students have the support they need to succeed; and the typical English 101 syllabus is much more in keeping with actual academic demands. In addition, the Intensive course alleviates many administrative problems. Obviously, any blanket adoption of a program from one institution to another is unwise, but after careful consideration of institutional needs, resources, expectations, and student-competency levels, we found the Illinois "Intensive" program very appealing and adopted a modified version of it in 1992.

Our new syllabus for English 101 (three hours of instructional time) and for English 101 Intensive (five hours of instructional time) were the same, allowing students who passed the Intensive course to receive college credit and to enroll in English 102. We have found that student attitude and motivation have improved tremendously since the stigma of "bonehead" English has been removed. Further, students do not need to take English 102 over the summer in order to make up credits, nor do they need to pay additional tuition for a noncredit course. Our model differs from the Illinois model, which employs teaching assistants for the extra two hours in the Intensive course. We do not have graduate programs from which to draw teaching assistants, and our experience with team-teaching the reading and writing components of our old English 100 course was less than ideal. Moreover, we wanted to assure that the full five hours were used to the maximum by the same Master's-level professional who would be instructing and grading the students. Currently, our faculty uses the five hours in a flexible manner as the needs of the students dictate, varying from scheduled workshops, to individual conferences, to whole group instruction.

In contrast to our old English 100 syllabus, our English 101 syllabus is closer to reflecting the actual demands of academic discourse. By asking developmental students to engage in the same college-level discussions, to read from the same texts, and to respond to the same assignments as our three-hour 101 students, we provide rich opportunities for cognitive growth. To illustrate the contrast between our English 100 syllabus and the English 101 syllabus, the first asked students to study isolated vocabulary words while the latter invites students to define and to debate the meaning of words within the context of an essay from a college-level text. English 100 asked students to complete grammar and punctuation exercises from a handbook, while English 101 employs student drafts as texts for instruction in word choice and syntax. Perhaps the most salient con-

trast between the old and new syllabi is that the old one required students to read and write on unrelated topics, while our new one organizes reading and writing assignments selected for their thematic unity (e.g., power and control, censorship, campus issues, or self-esteem). The thematic approach of our new syllabus allows us to create an environment of sustained inquiry into an issue and to build reading and writing skills within the context of that inquiry. In this way, developmental students are invited to participate in synthesis, analysis, and critical debates missing from our old basic writing course.

Administrative Benefits

The Intensive model has administrative benefits as well. With a large adjunct faculty, we adopt the same text for all sections of English 101 and English 101 Intensive, to facilitate changes in staffing. Text selection is thus simplified since all sections of English 101 (whether regular or Intensive) use the same text. I do not mean to suggest that the time and consideration spent in text selection are any less important; in fact, they become more significant since the same text is used in all sections, and as such must contain readings and instruction that can be useful to all students. Since both groups use the same text, we can better assure comparable levels of instruction for both groups, that students can change sections more easily, that we have only one order to submit to the bookstore, and that faculty can teach both the three-hour and five-hour 101 sections without double preparation. Another administrative benefit is that staffing is further eased: We offer paired sections of English 101 (one section of three hours and one section of five hours) for which faculty receive additional compensation for the extra two hours. This pairing itself is useful to guard against grade inflation, a tendency when one teaches only Intensive sections. Lastly, students and parents are content with the possibility of college credit for English 101 Intensive and are generally grateful for the additional academic support. Complaints about placement testing have gone from dozens per semester to only a few.

Faculty Development

The adoption and success of any new program is dependent in large measure upon the support of the faculty and administration. To that end, faculty development and a sense of owner-

ship in the new program needed to be nurtured. The following efforts proved useful in achieving both ends: Faculty workshops on collaborative learning helped to familiarize faculty with alternatives to the traditional presentational mode of teaching. In *Research in Written Composition,* George Hillocks refers to the "environmental mode" which we found does indeed "bring teacher, student, and materials more nearly into balance" (247). Also useful were individual faculty-coordinator conferences (with full- and part-time faculty) for dealing with reservations about the new program, whether due to lack of familiarity with methodology or general resistance to change. Another way to smooth the transition between programs was to make available sample syllabi with various thematic approaches keyed to the selected text. These ready syllabi were often welcomed by novice faculty and by others who felt pressured by their own professional activities. Lastly, involvement of key administrators in the holistic scoring sessions for pre- and post-testing served not only to foster a sense of institutional investment in the new program, but also broadened our conversations about student writing. Through these scoring sessions, participants saw firsthand that developmental students could be very insightful but have problems with grammar, could turn a fine phrase but have nothing to say, or could see the complexity of an issue but could not organize their thoughts. In short, scorers began to rethink their notions of developmental writers and to appreciate the "rich and varied" nature of human cognition, as Mike Rose has illustrated ("Narrowing" 297).

Program Assessment

This past Spring, the end of the third year of our Intensive program, our evaluation indicates that the Intensive program has met, and in some ways, exceeded our expectations. We have tracked student grades, administered post-tests, and conducted student/faculty surveys, but before I wax euphoric about our assessment results, I believe a cautionary note on writing assessment is necessary. Assessment expert Edward White reminds us:

> Writing is in itself too complex and multifaceted to be measured in such a way [norm referenced exams or first draft essays]. The amount of improvement that can occur in so complex a skill in a few months is likely to be submerged by such statistical facts as regression to the mean or less than ideal reliability. A carefully designed

> essay test ought to be part of any composition program design: The more careful it is, the more likely it is to show the effects of instruction. But everyone involved in the evaluation should be aware of the strong odds against obtaining statistically meaningful results from this one instrument. Therefore, a simple pre-test/post-test model using actual writing scored holistically should never be the entire evaluation design. As part of the design, such a test has many beneficial effects and just might document the improvement that has taken place; as the whole design, the test is asked to carry more weight and more responsibility than it can well bear. (119-200)

Our post-essay exam did show progression in scores: .20 points for the non-Intensive group and .48 points for the Intensive group (on our four-point scoring scale); however, our exam is criterion-referenced and site-specific to Quinnipiac. Since we changed our testing instrument from a standardized multiple-choice exam to an essay exam, a statistical comparison of test scores is not possible; however, a comparison of English 101 grades of prior English 100 students and current Intensive students shows that the majority of Intensive students earned a grade of C or better in English 101. This is equivalent in grade distribution to prior English 100 students who were required to take English 100 before enrolling in English 101.

Table A, below, represents the grade distribution analysis for developmental students only. The 1991 and 1992 columns represent developmental students who had a prior semester of English 100 (the noncredit course). The 1993 to 1995 columns represent developmental students in English 101 Intensive with **no prior** English 100 course. We controlled for grade inflation by having coordinators score randomly selected exams and by assigning both an Intensive section and a non-Intensive section of English 101 to each instructor.

In a follow-up study of all student grades in English 102, we found that of those students who failed English 102 or who withdrew from the College, 44% were prior Intensive students, the remaining 56% nondevelopmental students.

Concluding Comments

The simultaneous implementation of the various components is necessary for a successful Intensive freshman writing

Table A
Grade Distribution Analysis
Developmental Grades in English 101
(Percent)

Grade	Academic Year				
	1991	**1992**	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**
	{N=186}	[N=146]	[N=274]	[N=231]	[N=314]
A	.5	.7	3.6	.4	1.9
B	21.4	24.6	22.2	19.0	23.8
C	57.7	57.5	53.3	54.5	52.5
D	4.8	10.9	6.5	10.3	7.6
F	0	.7	0	0	0
Incomplete	0	0	12.4*	12.4*	12.4*
Withdrew from the College	13.4	2.7	1.8	3.0	1.5

* Note that beginning in 1993, the College adopted a new policy allowing any English 101 (both three-hour non-Intensive and five-hour Intensive) student not passing the course to receive an Incomplete and to repeat the entire course in the subsequent semester.

program: thematic curricula, faculty development, additional instructional hours, and a student population at a minimum level of competency. While I cannot claim that the Intensive program is a panacea, I can report that it has exceeded our expectations in addressing problems that so plagued us for years. Our students have shown significant improvement in motivation and output. Our faculty, though still not clamoring to teach developmental students, has demonstrated improved morale. Finally, without lowering institutional standards, we have observed student growth in reading and writing at least equal to the old program. Perhaps most significant, though, is the new sense of dignity with which the students approach their studies in freshman English.

Note

[1]The "environmental mode" is one of three modes defined by George Hillocks to describe approaches to teaching composition: The "presentational mode" relies on lecture and traditional teaching methods, and the "natural process mode" em-

ploys epistemological approaches including freewriting and student-centered activities. In his meta-analysis, Hillocks finds the environmental mode the most effective of the three modes because it "uses activities which result in high levels of student interaction concerning problems parallel to those they encounter in certain kinds of writing" (247).

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Eric Miraglia

A SELF-DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT IN THE BASIC WRITING COURSE[1]

ABSTRACT: *Self-diagnostic assessment offers basic writing teachers the opportunity to begin their course by engaging students in a dialogue about writing. Unlike traditional diagnostic assessment, self-diagnosis explicitly acknowledges and values the rhetorical expertise of the student writer. In this study, two students' responses to a self-diagnostic prompt are analyzed for their effectiveness both as articulations of the students' concerns and as diagnostic tools for the writing instructor. Through form and content analyses of the students' self-diagnostic writing and through interviews with the students and their teacher, the essays are revealed to be effective in allowing the reader to perform an accurate "diagnosis" and in allowing students the opportunity to articulate their own interests and concerns about their writing.*

The Problem of Where to Begin

"Begin with where they are," advises Ann Berthoff (9).[2]

Wise words, most basic writing teachers would agree. But, as is so often the case with adages and aphorisms, we can ask ourselves a myriad of "where" questions: where our students are as students, where they are as writers, where they are as growing and changing people, where they are within the complex matrices of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, where they are (as Berthoff would have us ask) as "language animals" (9). None of these questions is frivolous; if answered with any richness of detail, each would provide valuable infor-

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© *Journal of Basic Writing,* Vol. 14, No. 2, 1995

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.06

mation relevant to a writing teacher's task. In one sense, however, they might all be expected to provide similar answers to the question of "where they are." We would inevitably discover that they are from different places (socially, economically, academically), that they are moving at different speeds and going in different directions, that each has his or her assets, insecurities, goals, and fears. Instead of locating a point at which we can begin, we would discover many points, all in motion, dispersed across a multidimensional space.

A traditional and popular way to begin confronting this complex collage in the basic writing course is with a diagnostic essay, which digests complexity by subordinating all possible first questions to a single overarching one. As Charles Cooper explains, diagnostic assessments are meant to answer that most crucial of all questions: They "tell us *how to help* students" (13-14). More specifically, Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn recommend the diagnostic essay to teachers as a way to "see your students' work immediately, to gauge the level of writing each is capable of as the course begins, and to calculate your own pace in teaching them as individuals and as a class" (32). Whatever the question a diagnostic prompt asks, the ultimate purpose is the same—to locate students as writers, to identify and evaluate important characteristics of their use of written discourse. However, even if diagnostic essays share this comparatively consistent purpose, the means by which they achieve their end are broadly divergent, running the gamut from the hackneyed genre of "tell me how you spent your summer vacation" to prompts which call for sophisticated textual analysis. Any of the "where" questions suggested by Berthoff's maxim can be construed as a diagnostic project; almost any written assignment is in some way diagnostic because the term itself is so ambiguous, so open to varied interpretations of what is to be diagnosed and how such diagnosis is to be arrived at. This complicates the already complex process of writing an essay prompt, for as Edward White explains, "The extraordinary compression of form, the need for clarity and exactness of communication, [and] the requirement that the assignment elicit a response from students with disparate interests and varying levels of creativity" all contribute to this difficulty (21). Given the challenges faced by the designers of diagnostic prompts, it is hardly surprising that critics have found cause to complain about the way diagnostic essays are frequently shaped. In "The Writing Autobiography: Where to Begin in a Two-Year College

Writing Course," John Sandman and Michael Weiser criticize the typical diagnostic essay which solicits responses to such prompts as "write an essay about a significant person in your life," or "describe a place that is particularly special to you."

> The essays teachers receive in response to this kind of assignment often cause them to underestimate students' abilities, or to become overly concerned about students who, given a longer time and more practice at composing, turn out to be very able writers. Therefore, these essays are, at best, unreliable indicators of students' writing abilities. Most importantly, these essays are a very indirect way to assess students' strengths and weaknesses. (2-3)

In the first week of a basic writing class, such prompts are likely to generate, in Anne DiPardo's words, "a batch of . . . essays [which] is comparable to a summer's stroll in the Sahara" (46). In my view, there are at least three fundamental problems which contribute to the failure of such diagnostic prompts to provide desirable results:

1. **Masked intentions:** Most diagnostic essay prompts ask one question when in fact they are designed to answer another. The student may be writing about visiting his Aunt Bettie in the hospital, but the teacher, in looking for rhetorical strengths and weaknesses, is likely to be more interested in diagnosing the student than in reading sensitively about the doctors' diagnosis of Aunt Bettie. And the student *knows*, even as he is writing about Aunt Bettie, that the teacher's agenda is hidden somewhere beneath the overt language of the prompt. The result is that student and teacher begin their basic writing journey facing in different directions.

2. **Magical thinking:** Such prompts embody what Janet Emig calls "magical thinking" (135). That is, they operate under the assumption that the teacher can clinically diagnose problems, and that their students will learn because (and only because) they address these problems in their teaching (135).

3. **Assumptions of expertise:** In a typical diagnostic essay (even those which ask sophisticated questions), rhetorical expertise is assumed to reside only with the teacher. The student is the expert on his Aunt Bettie; the teacher is the expert on writing and the discourse surrounding its evaluation.

In the project detailed here, a study of two students' responses to a self-diagnostic assessment prompt, I explore one alternative to the indirectness and covertness of ineffective

diagnostic essay prompts, an alternative which seeks to address each of these three problems. The students were asked to begin the semester by assessing, in writing, their abilities as writers. Such an approach differs from the diagnostic prompts criticized by Sandman and Weiser in the following ways:

1. **Unmasked intentions:** The question being asked is precisely the question the diagnostic essay is designed to answer. Because the agenda is explicit, the first assignatory gesture of the course engages the student and teacher in a collaborative project; they begin their journey facing the same direction.

2. **Nonmagical thinking:** Gone is the assumption that the teacher must teach for the student to learn. This approach invites the student to actively participate in the articulation of her own rhetorical strengths and weaknesses. As Mary Beaven suggests in her work on individualized goal-setting, such participation may be crucial to the student's ultimate success: "Only when a student is free to decide upon his or her own goals for improvement or experimentation," Beaven suggests, "will he or she be able to explore those elements which impede progress—elements which a teacher or peers may know nothing about" (145).

3. **Assumptions of expertise:** Rhetorical expertise is assumed to be shared between student and teacher; the discourse surrounding the evaluation of rhetorical concerns is constructed at the outset as a dialogue. As Richard Beach argues, the writing student's entrance into this dialogue is fundamental to her long-term progress as a writer; beyond the short-term goals of helping students "revise and improve a particular paper" is the "ultimate, long-range goal" of "help[ing] students learn to critically evaluate writing on their own" ("Showing" 127). And in order for students to engage in that critical evaluation, they must have the linguistic tools which make metadiscursive reflection possible. According to David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, "the purpose of this reflection is to enable revision, to enable students to reimagine the roles they might play as readers and writers. A course in . . . writing must, then, provide students with place to begin, and it must do this in the first week of class" (7). It is Bartholomae and Petrosky's version of "where to begin" that this project attempts to locate.

The challenge, then, was to design a prompt which would represent a reasonable beginning point (as suggested by Berthoff's maxim), while simultaneously resisting the criticisms offered by Sandman and Weiser, operating under Emig's nonmagical assumptions, and meeting the mandate implicit in the advice of

Beaven. And a self-diagnostic assessment seemed, in theory, to answer each of these concerns.[3]

A Prompt and a Project

The diagnostic instrument in this study was tested in practice by examining case studies of basic writing students to determine whether or not their self-diagnostic essays early in the semester provided an accurate picture of their writing abilities. The essays were examined for both content (*what* was said—students' assessment of their needs) and form (*how* it was said—teacher's assessment of student needs). The content analyses were tested against interviews with the students, whereas the form analyses were tested against late-in-the-term interviews with the instructor. We assumed that if the content analyses were accurate, the implication would be that the prompt was an effective instrument for these students to articulate their writing goals; if the form analyses were accurate, the prompt could be considered effective as a diagnostic measure.

To this end, the following in-class writing prompt was distributed to a class of basic writing students in the Spring semester of 1993 at a large land-grant university in the Northwest. Seventeen students responded to the prompt the day it was distributed, taking the full fifty-minute period to respond; two students who were absent responded to the prompt a week later during the instructor's office hours.

> *Compose a personal essay which answers the following questions:*
>
> 1. What do you feel are your strongest attributes as a writer?
> 2. What are your biggest concerns about your own writing?
> 3. What are the skills you would most like to learn or improve upon in English 100 [basic writing]?

Whereas Sandman and Weiser propose an instrument which is much broader in scope, one that will elicit a literacy narrative rather than a self-diagnostic, this prompt asks the students to focus directly on the questions a diagnostic essay is designed to answer.

The Case Studies: Scott and Jeline

From the group of seventeen who initially wrote responses to the prompt, four were invited to participate in the project

based on a subjective evaluation of their potential to be "representative" of the rest of the group; in other words, their responses were generally consistent in content and form with the responses of the class as a whole. Of these four, two (Scott and Jeline, both of whom were native speakers of English) agreed to be involved. These two became the subjects of our case studies.

Scott went to a suburban high school in the Northwest, graduating in 1986. After high school he worked in a gas station, eventually doing work as a mechanic, then progressed to managing a wrecking yard, and finally went to work in construction. Now, at 25, Scott is a freshman pursuing a degree in construction management. His last experience in academic writing was his sophomore year in high school, a class he "snuck out of" with a C-. After that he avoided English by taking music classes, physical education, and weight lifting, and graduated from high school without ever seeing the inside of another English classroom. Since then, his experiences with writing have been sparse; what little he has done has consisted of brief notes to jobmates during the workday and three or four letters to his grandparents. Scott is currently being treated for an ulcer, which has caused him to miss class frequently during the course of the semester and has made it difficult for him to focus on any lengthy academic task.

Jeline, 33, dropped out of high school at age 15. Fifteen years later, a single mother of one, she has decided that she needs to do more to ensure the future of herself and her child; thus, her return to school after more than fifteen years. Since high school, Jeline's experiences with writing have been largely vocational. In working as a secretary she learned the fine art of changing a few words around in an old letter in order to produce a new one, a responsibility she recalls performing at a rate of about one per month; she relied on friends and coworkers to proofread her business writing, never sending out a piece of writing that hadn't been checked by "a good writer." Infrequent letters to close friends or relatives represented the balance of her writing experience since leaving school.

Our goal was to evaluate how well the diagnostic prompt fulfilled its mandate of outlining student goals and providing the instructor with a clear window into the more technical rhetorical aspects of the students' writing. The first steps in this analysis were suggested by Rose, who writes that "students' literacy narratives [and in this case their self-diagnostic essays] may be understood to represent their authors' experiences not only in their content but also by their form" (246).

The suggestion here is that such essays be examined in two ways: first by *what* the student says (content), and second by *how* the student says it (form). The content and form analyses were independently validated through interviews. In order to check the content analyses, Scott and Jeline were interviewed and asked to respond verbally to the same issues solicited by the prompt. In order to check the form analyses, the subjects' instructor (Paula) was interviewed late in the semester and asked to discuss the specific rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of the subjects. By comparing results from the first tier of inquiry (the content and form analyses) with results from the second tier (the interviews), a diagnosis of sorts was performed on the self-diagnostic prompt.

Scott's essay

Below is Scott's essay. This is a self-diagnostic essay written during a fifty-minute class session in the first week of a basic writing course; the prompt Scott received was identical to the one reproduced above.

> [no title given]
>
> I have lots of concerns about my writing skill. In school, elementary thur high school it was my worst subject. I din't really have any english classes from fourth grade to sixth grade. Then in seventh grade I failed english the whole year. I was given no specail attention by the teacher and she was really strict about the way we wrote. Being at a new school I didn't want to draw attention to my self.
>
> Well I continued to go to class thur ninth grade until my teacher called my parents. Well I still rescieved no help from school just my parents forcing me to do extra work the rest of the year. By the end of the year I pulled my grade up to a C-. The in high school we only had to take one semester of English and I got another C-.
>
> Now I in college after being out of school for over six years, and I concenerd about this. English effects every class that I'm taking right now and I the teach can't understand my writing. I would like to leave college with writing skill that will help me in the future. I think even if I a smart, if I can't write I can't show it.

To the evaluator of this essay, with no prior experience with Scott's writing nor any personal knowledge of him, the first

item of interest would be the self-portrait the writer paints. Recall the prompt to which Scott is responding: he has been asked to detail his strongest attributes, his concerns, and the skills he wishes to acquire during his semester in basic writing. Scott responds by essentially ignoring the first part of the prompt, the question about attributes and jumping straight into his concerns about his writing. From his final sentence the perceptive reader might make an inference that he does in fact see himself as being intelligent; but otherwise he wholly involves himself in explaining his concerns. What Scott writes, in fact, is the literacy narrative that the prompt was designed to free him of; rather than abstractly analyzing his writing acumen, he opts to tell his story and let the reader (his teacher) make of it what she will. This more personal result was neither unexpected nor undesirable, as long as it was volunteered and not demanded. His story isn't terribly intimate, but it does trace a history of open helplessness as he traverses the byways of academic writing.

The finished product fails only on the surface to address the prompt. Admittedly, for this student, the narrative form does not adapt well to the tripartite reckoning of the essay's instructions. However, the reader can derive much from what is said—and is not said—in Scott's essay. For example, the following list of inferences, categorized along the format of the prompt, might be compiled simply from a close reading of the content of this piece.

Attributes
- intelligence

Concerns
- unanimously negative responses of past writing teachers
- desire throughout schooling to avoid academic writing situations
- deleterious impact of poor writing skills across the curriculum
- inability to communicate effectively in writing
- inability to represent true-level intelligence in writing

Desired skills
- ability to succeed in academic writing situations across the curriculum
- ability to communicate more effectively in writing
- ability to demonstrate true level of intelligence through writing

- ability to write at a level that will contribute to professional success beyond college

Despite Scott's overwhelmingly self-deprecatory narrative, most writing instructors would discern and appreciate his attributes. The structure of his piece is, if not creative, at least eminently logical in its linear progression, with one paragraph devoted to presecondary experience, one to secondary experience, and one to his current status as he begins college. Further, his instinct for punctuation appears to serve him well: nearly every sentence is grammatically sound, and his syntax is modestly varied. Clearly, Scott has some substantive strengths.

On the other hand, a pair of lawyerly eyes could fault Scott's performance here on a number of levels. He departs substantially from the prompt by producing a narrative rather than an abstract assessment, a transgression that was anticipated but not one that should automatically be forgiven. As Scott's writing takes him on interdisciplinary voyages to other departments, the ability to stay focused on an explicit writing task will become increasingly important. So he might be faulted for straying off-topic. More seriously, Scott's lack of control over surface features indicates an abiding discomfort with written discourse—spelling errors and other surface inconsistencies seem to proliferate toward the end of the piece, particularly in the final paragraph, indicating that his task focus deteriorated toward the end of the hour. A final concern might be his fluency of expression; the academic tasks he faces in future courses will require the ability to produce longer texts in shorter periods of time (Scott's essay was only 212 words).

In the form analysis, parts two and three of the prompt can be condensed into a single step; part three is the *student's* invitation to set his *own* goals. The following list, then, reflects a form analysis designed to parallel the content analysis performed above:

Attributes

- logical linear structure
- sound instinct for punctuation
- high level of sentence grammaticality
- moderate level of syntactical variation

Concerns

- inattention to assigned topic, judged according to conventional academic standards
- erratic spelling

- surface inconsistencies
- deterioration of task focus
- lack of fluency

The two lists differ substantially. The student's list (on the preceding page) is general and personal, whereas the teacher's list (above) is specific and impersonal. Mismatches derive from differing emphases. As a result, the two lists do not stand in conflict, but rather complement one another, providing an accurate and fairly complete perspective on Scott's writing.

Jeline's essay

Responding to the same prompt given Scott and working under the same time constraint of a 50-minute session, Jeline produced the following piece:

> In-class Essay #1
>
> Being a good writer is not what I would call myself. I don't spell well and putting ideas together in an organizxed form is diffecult for me. I don't speak in an organized fashion, so writting that way is very hard. I do feel that I speak well, given that quality there may be hope for my writting ability.
>
> I have many concerns about my writting skills one of which is fear. Fear of not ever being able to get my point accross on paper. What if I didn't have my voice and the only way to communacate was to write it down. At this point I think I would be in big trouble.
>
> Writting skills are important to me. I would like to learn to get my point accross to the person, reading my writting without boring them to death. I also would like to learn proper sentence structure. Writting letters is a skill that I truely would like to master. At this point in my life I only write to people who know me. They know I switch gears in conversation so only they understand my letters.

Jeline begins with a categorical indictment of her current abilities as a writer: "Being a good writer is not what I would call myself." The prompt, designed to nurture an organizational hierarchy that would place attributes *before* concerns, has been circumvented here to lend stronger emphasis to the importance of this statement. Jeline conjures up an image of herself stricken

without voice, forced to rely solely upon the written word for communication, an image that for her is nothing short of nightmarish. The reader can hardly help but make the inference here that Jeline's self-image as a writer is quite low and her level of writing anxiety is high.

It is also evident that Jeline, unlike Scott, has a great deal to say about the specific deficiencies she perceives in her writing. She alludes to spelling, organization, focus, and sentence structure as either concerns or desired skills; she also mentions a desire to write letters more successfully and to be able to write so as not to "bore [readers] to death." Like Scott, Jeline has nothing overtly positive to say about her writing; however, writing teachers may interpret her endorsement of her speaking abilities as a tentative foray into positive self-analysis and an awareness that she possesses some valuable language skills.

Jeline's list of attributes, concerns, and skills-to-develop are as follows:

Attributes

- strong verbal skills, which might eventually have a positive impact on writing skills

Concerns

- fear of being dependent on writing for communication
- poor spelling
- organization
- "getting my point across"
- writing "boring" texts
- sentence structure

Desired skills

- organization
- spelling
- get point across more effectively
- sentence structure
- producing interesting text
- writing effective letters

Jeline, like Scott, leaves the reader to come to conclusions about where her strengths as a writer might lie; thus, the category of attributes again seems a logical point from which to embark on a parallel form analysis. And Jeline, like Scott, gives herself rather short shrift in her assessment of her abilities as a writer. Despite struggling with written conventions, she most certainly "gets her point across"; she paints a reasonably thorough picture of how she perceives the current state of her

writing skills. In doing so, she demonstrates a certain degree of comfort with the metadiscourse of the composition classroom, throwing around phrases such as "sentence structure" and "organization" with relative ease, though perhaps not with perfect accuracy. Furthermore, after detouring around the first part of the prompt by neglecting to mention any significant attributes, Jeline's essay does effectively organize itself around the structure of the question—not an insignificant accomplishment during the first week of a basic writing course. Another substantial success in this essay is its thoroughness of details in support of its thesis, "Being a good writer is not what I would call myself."

A more subtle attribute here is one suggested by Richard Haswell in his analysis of the writing of "lean" writers: "verbal wit" (275). This is suggested in a number of passages in Jeline's essay: the grim humor of "there may be hope for my writing ability," the colloquial candidness of "at this point I think I would be in big trouble," the hyperbolic self-deprecation of "without boring them to death." Jeline likes to "tell it like it is," to talk the straight talk rather than jazzing up her writing with academic jargon.

Switching back to our lawyerly mode, a quick diagnosis of Jeline's error patterns leads the reader to affirm a number of concerns discovered in the content analysis. Inconsistent spelling is abundant, noteworthy perhaps only in that it suggests concomitant discomforts with other conventions of written language. Jeline is still developing her instincts for punctuation and sentence grammaticality, and she is still learning how to transfer her verbal language skills to the written page. Moreover, Jeline's 189-word production is insufficient for comfortable academic survival across the disciplines. Fluency seems a problem, a concern that is also implicit in the allusion Jeline herself makes to her high degree of writing anxiety.

A teacher's analysis might find the following characteristics to add to Jeline's own comprehensive list:

Attributes

- familiarity with some of composition's metalanguage
- follows, at least loosely, the organization of the question
- supports "thesis" with abundant details
- "verbal wit"

Concerns

- punctuation
- sentence grammaticality
- lack of fluency

Once more, the student's list and the teacher's list appear to be complementary and potentially complete. Combining the two provides a thorough and useful tool for developing strategies for this particular student's instruction.

Talking It Out: The Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to move away from the limitations of the time-constrained diagnostic, to invite a fuller and more accurate representation of Scott and Jeline's self-perceptions as writers and their goals as writing students. In this way, the accuracy of the inferences made above could begin to be judged. Each subject was interviewed twice. The first interview was comparatively informal and served merely to lay down a biographical foundation and to establish a personal conversational relationship between researcher and subject. The second interview was more formal in nature, and it was during this session that a thorough verbal response to the questions from the essay prompt was pursued.

The objective in interviewing Paula (their instructor) was to determine whether the form analyses had provided accurate representations of the subjects' abilities. In other words, would Paula, after reading their work for ten weeks, agree that the form analyses performed on their diagnostic essays had accurately pinpointed the major attributes and weaknesses in their writing? This question was significant, as it would tend to reveal whether or not the proposed prompt was eliciting writing capable of revealing the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of the subjects—the central goals of traditional diagnostic assessment.

Scott's interview

Scott talked at length during our second interview about his concerns as a writer and about the skills he desired to cultivate in basic writing; he even suggested a few characteristics which he considered to be attributes. From a forty-minute discussion which roughly paralleled the structure of the essay prompt, the following list of characteristics in each of the three areas was compiled:

Attributes

- gets to the point
- directness and honesty in writing
- enjoys writing about interesting things

- enjoys creating things
- learns from experience of writing

Concerns
- thinks more about what's wrong than what's right
- spelling
- sentence structure
- unity
- transcription of pretext to written text
- insecurity about mechanics prevents use of some available skills
- used to hate writing
- writing about personal issues
- interference of external stresses in writing process

Desired Skills
- ability to write interesting, enjoyable text
- increased creativity

There are no contradictions between these lists and the ones derived from the content analysis of Scott's essay. There is, however, a major difference in emphasis: in his essay, Scott emphasized academic concerns and expressed a desire to write more successfully for a specifically academic audience, while in our interview his reflections seemed more personal and more introspective. Still, the two lists complement one another. The information generated by the interview is more specific, more personal, and more complete. In the place of an earlier sense of "poor writing skills," there are now specifics such as "spelling," "sentence structure," and "unity," (the latter two of which were already either added or alluded to in our form analysis of Scott's essay). Further, the list now reflects personal concerns, such as his difficulties in shutting out affective interferences and staying focused on an academic task.

In evaluating the form analysis performed on Scott's essay, Paula was limited to discussing work performed in the first six weeks of the course. Scott's ulcer had, apparently, kept him from attending the basic writing class for the three weeks preceding the teacher interview (of interest here is Scott's expressed concern that outside pressures dramatically interfered with his writing process). In regard to the four attributes and five concerns diagnosed in the form analysis, however, Paula was able to agree enthusiastically that they represented an accurate and thorough prediction of the salient characteristics she had observed in Scott's writing throughout the semester.

With only one minor reservation (that his punctuation was a sporadic strength, not a consistent one), Paula endorsed the form analysis's diagnosis.

In his interview, Scott affirmed the goals he had set forth in his essay. While he was able to build upon the essay's framework and present a variety of additional personal goals, he was happy enough to let his essay stand as an accurate indication of where he wanted to go as a writer. Moreover, his teacher verified that Scott's diagnostic essay had provided excellent information.

Jeline's interview

During our second interview, Jeline had the opportunity to elaborate thoroughly on the essay prompt to which she had responded in writing during the first week of the semester. The following table is a condensation of the information generated during that interview:

Attributes
- imagination
- life experiences
- audience awareness

Concerns
- overstressing things
- getting point across
- not being able to use gestures, inflection, etc.
- punctuation
- grammar
- focus
- staying private
- measuring self against peers
- negative reader response

Desired Skills
- organization (focus)
- audience awareness
- ability to write more colorfully
- ability to communicate through letters

A comparison between this list and the one produced by the content analysis of Jeline's self-diagnostic essay reveals no glaring contradictions. During the interview, Jeline, like Scott, shifted emphasis slightly (the concerns were more interpersonal rather than technical) and the list generated by the interview is more elaborated. There has been a move, comparable to

the one described above, toward greater specificity, toward a higher degree of personalness, and toward completeness. The form analysis of Jeline's essay achieved similarly satisfactory results. In our tenth-week interview with the teacher, she agreed without qualification to the four attributes we had observed in Jeline's diagnostic essay. She demonstrated particular enthusiasm for Jeline's comfort in the metadiscourse of composition: Jeline had become part of a study group that met regularly outside of class, where students "would take the classroom out of the classroom and use it amongst themselves." Paula also confirmed two of the three concerns diagnosed in Jeline's essay, dissenting only in regard to the predicted lack of fluency, a problem which had manifested only during timed writing situations.

Jeline's interview, like Scott's, confirmed the goals set forth in her diagnostic essay, coupled with an ability to elaborate verbally on those goals in order to paint a more personal and complete picture. Moreover, our first-week "form analyses" of both students' essays agreed substantially with their teacher's tenth-week analysis of their writing skills.

Some Lessons Learned

Much can be learned from self-diagnostic assessments by studying both their form and their content. In these two cases, the content analyses were verified by interviews with the subjects and the form analyses were verified by interviews with the instructor. The interviews suggested that the students had communicated their goals effectively in their written responses to the prompt (and could communicate them even more effectively and completely in interviews); the interviews with the instructor appeared to confirm that the writing samples generated were sufficient to provide a cogent glimpse of the students' strengths and weaknesses. On the whole, the prompt appeared in the case studies to have performed its duties well.

However, some qualifications are in order:

- Of the three weaknesses of typical diagnostic essay prompts, the alternative explored here seems to have resolved at least one—that is, its intentions are unmasked. However, this approach only *begins* to address the two other principal weaknesses (magical thinking and the assumption of the teacher's evaluative expertise).
- The importance of dialogue and verbal communication between teacher and student is underscored by the dis-

crepancies between the goals outlined by Scott and Jeline in their essays and in their interviews. The goal-setting process that begins in the diagnostic essay must be continued in conference, where metadiscursive dialogue (so important to students' growing ability to envision and reenvision their own texts) can develop.

- In formulating this prompt, we tried to create a writing task that would not demand a large measure of personal revelation. Thus, it is interesting that both subjects of the case studies indicated in interviews that they were deeply concerned about exposing too much of themselves in their writing. Both expressed a desire to be able to communicate on paper in such a way that only their ideas, not their personality, would be transmitted. What percentage of basic writing students feel the same way is unclear; why Scott and Jeline feel the way they do is equally oblique. However, their testimonials lend some credibility to the notion that a focus on writing rather than on writers might be (at least for some students) a good way to start.
- Among the issues neglected in this analysis is that of affect. Implicit in the argument made here is that students ultimately are the ones who must deal with their affective processes, and that we as teachers/facilitators can only help *them* achieve resolution of difficulties which derive from affective origins. As Susan McLeod suggests, the teacher's own affective state, when projected energetically toward his or her students, is one of the most powerful tools she has in addressing affective processes which interfere with writing processes. If the affective processes of basic writing students are as heterogeneous as this evidence suggests, a self-diagnostic prompt which helps illuminate the relations between students' affective processes and their writing could be of immense value.

These case studies suggest only the beginning of the complex process of individualistic student growth. They do, however, reveal that the problem of where to begin does have viable solutions. Beginning a basic writing course with self-diagnostic writing invites students to begin searching out names for the moments of problem and promise they find in their own world of discourse. It helps them reflect on what they are doing and why, moving them toward a growing awareness of their rhetorical behaviors. It is this goal, this figurative "end" to a process which has no true ending, that makes the question of where to begin so important.

Notes

[1]I would like to thank Susan McLeod, Susan Wyche-Smith, and Richard Haswell for their thoughtful and patient advice at various stages of this project.

[2]This maxim has been propounded by many scholars, including some whose interpretations of it are quite different than Berthoff's. Janice Hays, for instance, employs this adage in defense of a developmental approach to learning—an approach, she argues, that "Berthoff deplores" (17).

[3]The practical use of self-descriptive and self-analytic writing has been explored from many different perspectives in recent research. Sandman and Weiser recommend the "writing autobiography," more commonly referred to as the literacy narrative, as a point of departure for the two-year college's composition course; Shirley Rose examines students' literacy narratives as a window into gendered aspects of student writing; Beach has studied the self-assessments of extensive revisers and nonrevisers, the pragmatics of self-assessment, the self-reflective narratives of students and teachers, and strategies for modeling self-assessment in student-teacher conferences; Dipardo advocates the use of personal narrative as a means for basic writing students to "perceive continuity between the people they have been and those they are becoming" (45); Janet Marting discusses practical self-assessment strategies that "encourage an awareness of writing as decision making" (128), arguing that "it is the understanding of the self as a writer and the development of the discerning reader in the writer that help transform students into writers" (132). Susan Miller, in her study of "How Writers Evaluate Their Own Writing," perhaps sums up most concisely the benefits of self-evaluation: "those who do not evaluate their own writing," she concludes, "do not gain from *having written*" (181). There is evidence, too, that the study of writers' self-evaluative practices is gaining momentum. In the Winter 1993 issue, the New Directions for Teaching and Learning series published a collection of six articles devoted to student self-evaluation. This volume (*Student Self-Evaluation: Fostering Reflective Learning,* edited by Jean MacGregor) explores a specific self-evaluative practice aimed at outcomes assessment. While this approach differs considerably from the one used in the present study, the collection represents a significant step forward for scholarship on self-evaluation.

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Thomas L. Hilgers

BASIC WRITING CURRICULA AND GOOD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES: WHENE'ER SHALL THE TWAIN MEET?

ABSTRACT: *The construct of* basic writing *initially led to new and better instructional strategies. But in practice, basic writers move in a world that is often determined by inappropriate assessments. Guides to better practices are found in the recent national Elementary and Secondary Education Act and in the new CCCC Position Statement on assessment. Together, these point educators in the direction of enlightening assessment practices that will be particularly useful to basic writers and their teachers. This essay summarizes the implications of these guidelines for basic writing instruction and assessment.*

How do basic writers come to be? Consider this tale, recently told me by one of my graduate students about her daughter:

> Except for the visibility Gwendolyn gained by acting in three high-school productions, she was a typical high-school student. Her freshman grades weren't high for the college-bound track, and Gwen admits that she cruised through four years of health education, math, English,

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DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.07

> and history. Because theater grabbed her attention during her last two years, she never gave much thought to what she would do after graduation. When she discovered that many of her classmates would be going to a local community college, she decided she should go too. So in late August, after a summer of work with the local Theater for Youth, she headed to the college to register for her classes. There, she spent more than half a day taking so many different tests that by day's end she couldn't remember what she had been tested for. When she returned to register the next day, she was told she'd have to register for English 11. "What's that?" she asked. "Basic writing," they told her. "Why?" she asked. "You had a 10.4 on your Nelson-Denny," they told her. "What's that?" she asked them. "The reading test. You've got to get at least 11 on this test to take English 100."

From Gwen's perspective, assignment to English 11 had less to do with invisible societal forces than it did with the "Nelson-Denny." Gwen, and thousands like her, become "basic writers" through the agency of a midwife called "The Test." Most unfortunately, the assessment midwife is often the cheapest attendant available, and the midwife's certification is in something other than midwifery. The incubatory curriculum into which the basic writer is placed is usually designed to improve students' scores on the test that put the student into the curriculum in the first place. Rebirth as a "regular writer" is often possible only through using the same midwife (in Gwen's case, the Nelson-Denny reading test) again.

It is my belief that bad assessment is what gets most students labeled as "basic writers." Bad assessment drives the curriculum and the evaluation of most basic writing courses; and bad assessment keeps educators from devising paths of learning that will increase the likelihood of success for all student writers. Essentially, bad assessment is the use of scores from a test such as the SAT, ACT, or Nelson-Denny for purposes other than those for which the test scores were designed. Bad assessment is also the use of unvalidated indicators or of only some of many indicators, or of indicators with the wrong weights attached. Bad assessment can also be the use of indicators that are culturally and economically biased.

Do good assessment practices exist? Ironically, some of the best ones are found in the work that defined the construct of

basic writing—Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy's process of identifying problems that seemed "basic" involved an incredibly elaborate assessment strategy, grounded in relevant theory and research. She studied the syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and organizational strategies of individual writers via the products of multiple tasks designed not to evaluate them, but to reveal the patterns that reflected the rules and decision-making processes their authors had followed. I have used *Errors and Expectations* several times in my teaching to illustrate effective assessment practices. My graduate students' typical reaction is: "You mean we have to go through all of that if we are going to help people become better writers and if we're going to evaluate their writing more effectively?" I never had the privilege of meeting Mina Shaughnessy, but I can imagine her reply: "Well, isn't the task important? Of course you'll need to learn how to do all that."

Why is "all that" so seldom learned or done? Gwen's assessment is far more common than assessment designed to discover a student's "basic" needs. It was cheap and easy (even though it was only marginally relevant to her writing): an almost cost-free, brief, easy-to-administer-and-score test. Many colleges don't even have placement tests; students are placed into writing courses on the basis of their scores on the SAT or the ACT. These tests are usually little more than updates of the IQ tests taken by students' parents or grandparents, with all of the gender, cultural, and socioeconomic biases associated with "intelligence" tests[1] Indeed, most colleges do not require a student's writing sample as part of their placement procedures: Brian Huot found that 49% of American colleges and universities use something other than samples of student writing to place students into English courses, including basic writing. If such inadequate instruments are used to do something as consequential as placement, it is doubtful that decisions about the content of basic writing courses in these schools are guided by the needs of individual students in the courses.

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on two endeavors that can improve basic writing instruction. The first is the statement on the assessment of writing recently adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The CCCC Position Statement on assessment of writing describes practices that research and experience have shown to have a positive impact on learning. The Position Statement should

become the basis for constructive discussion among all professionals who deal with writing instruction. Since the Position Statement appears in *College Composition and Communication*, I will not summarize it here. Instead, I draw attention to two points of particular relevance for those who deal with basic writers: (1) valid, comprehensive assessment should guide decision making and (2) assessment should be used only for the purposes for which it was deisgned. Here is what the authors of the Position Statement have to say about these points:

> Any individual's writing "ability" is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties. Consequently, one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high-stakes decisions. Ideally, writing ability must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences and evaluated by multiple readers. (432)

Placement in a basic writing course or sequence is indeed a high-stakes decision with potentially far-reaching consequences. If it is to have positive consequences—if it is to increase a student's likelihood for academic and professional success—the decision must be based on a representative sample of what a writer can do, not on some presumed indirect indicator or on a "written-on-demand" unrevised sample. There is simply no way around this.

The CCCC Position Statement accepts that "assessment tends to drive pedagogy." Further, the statement notes that "assessment is defensible primarily as a means of improvement of learning": assessment and instruction are inextricably linked. For these reasons, composition professionals must make assessment an ally in helping students to discover effective ways of learning:

> Assessment...must demonstrate "systemic validity": it must encourage classroom practices that harmonize with what practice and research have demonstrated to be effective ways of teaching writing and of becoming a writer. What is easiest to measure—often by means of a multiple-choice test—often corresponds least to good writing, and that in part is the point: choosing the correct response from a set of possible answers provided to one is not

> composing. As important, just because students are asked to write does not mean that the "test" is a "good" one. Essay tests that ask students to form and articulate opinions about some important issue, for instance, without time to reflect, to talk to others, to read on the subject, to revise and so forth—that is, without allowing for what good writers need—encourage distorted notions of what writing is. They also encourage poor teaching and little learning. (432-33)

Tens of thousands of college-bound students are "placed" into writing classes on the basis of an assessment of something other than writing. Even those schools that use direct measures of writing typically employ 30- to 40-minute samples of impromptu writing. The Position Statement indicts most of these current practices. It must make us rethink our placement practices. It has already been a force for change at my school, The University of Hawai`i, where incoming students draft and revise two essays during five hours. The CCCC Statement has made us consider the inclusion of writing samples created under different circumstances and for different audiences (Hilgers & Marsella; Brown, Hilgers, and Marsella; Despain & Hilgers).

The Position Statement should be read as a guide to how prevailing—even frightening—practices for the assessment of writing can be transformed into enlightening practices. And assessment can be enlightening. In the process of growing up and staying alive, for example, all of us experience moments of enlightenment when we engage in self-assessment—when we look at how we have behaved because we wanted to change our behavior to improve our skills and better our lives. As professionals, we are enlightened when research demonstrates the value of pedagogical strategies that we use in our classrooms.

The CCCC Position Statement gives us grounds for hope that we are on the way to adopting modes of enlightening assessment. Our best hope, however, would be the discussions that will result from the Position Statement and the efforts to reform practice that should result from such discussions. The same is true of the second endeavor that will greatly affect basic writing instruction and assessment: the reauthorization of Chapter I funds of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to support educational remediation ("Legislative Update"). The basic outlines of the reauthorization represent a refreshing change in emphasis. Where current practice is to set different lower standards for students covered by Chapter I, the

new authorization under Title I calls for the same high standards for all students. Where current practice provides separate remedial instruction for children in need, the new legislation provides for enriched instruction within regular classrooms (although there is still debate about whether programs that pull students out of their regular classrooms will or will not still be allowed). Where current practice provides monies for student instruction but not for faculty training, the new legislation invests in professional training programs for currently employed instructors. And where current practice requires multiple forms of accountability for expenditures, the new legislation emphasizes assessment of and accountability for educational results.

I have been a teacher now for twenty-five years, and I know better than to get too excited over prospects. But I believe that the CCCC Position Statement and the revised ESEA Title I emphasis can guide effective reform. Enlightened assessment and "education for excellence" can improve educational delivery and opportunity. The effects of the new Title I legislation and of new assessment practices will have major ramifications for the labeling of "basic writers" in college and for how *all* future writing instruction will be provided. The CCCC Position Statement and the Title I reauthorization are evidence that the language of enlightened practitioners is more powerful than the language of those who would turn us back to a vision of America made idyllic by denial both of what was "back then" and what has happened since. Who would have ever predicted that the language of teachers who see assessment as a tool for empowerment would overpower the language of those who use assessment as a vehicle for punishment and privileging? Who could have predicted that the metaphors of holistic education might one day overpower images of education as component delivery?

By no means am I suggesting that we do not need careful investigation of how our society of "equal opportunity" creates adults who in great numbers need remedial instruction. I applaud those who bring questions of ethics, canonical assumptions, and colonialism into the discussion. But I also know that assessment practices, especially those that remain unquestioned, can keep basic writing from mediating effective action. We must examine prevailing assessment practices in all arenas that involve writing. If we question, study, and change them, we may improve writing instruction for all students.

Note

[1] There may be something beyond placement officers' dreams behind the reliance on such tests. In an article for Knight-Ridder Newspapers, read while I was writing this article, Joanne Jacobs points out that the notion that multiple-choice questions are "objective and hard" while open-ended questions are "subjective and soft" is peculiarly American. European countries typically use "essay" questions—intended to test mastery of a subject rather than accumulation of facts—exclusively, and in large numbers, when student performance is to have important consequences. ("Upgrading test standards," Honolulu Advertiser, 4 July 1994: A-6.)

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Edward M. White

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACEMENT AND BASIC STUDIES: HELPING STUDENTS SUCCEED UNDER THE NEW ELITISM

ABSTRACT: *A new elitism and its (however unintended) theorists, the new abolitionists, seek to abandon the required freshman composition course and the placement tests that help students succeed in it and in college. This paper argues for placement into the course and is based on two sets of studies: a series of follow-up studies of Fall 1978 First-Time California State University Freshmen and a series of reports analyzing a four-semester overview conducted by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council, Fall 1984 to Spring 1989. As the data show, the effect of a placement program, followed by a careful instructional program, is to allow many students who would otherwise leave school to continue successfully in the university.*[1]

American education is subject to two contrasting underlying motifs: egalitarianism, the argument that everyone should have opportunities for success, and elitism, the restriction of opportunities to the most "deserving"—which often means to those from a relatively privileged home. At different times, one or the other motif is dominant. The social forces of the 1960s, which

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© *Journal of Basic Writing,* Vol. 14, No. 2, 1995

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1995.14.2.08

led to open enrollment at The City University of New York and to the establishment of this journal, produced a generation of egalitarian policies in higher education in general and in writing programs in particular. As we move through the 1990s, we seem to be cycling back into a time of elitism. Those of us concerned about preserving the opportunities newly opened to the poor and to racial minorities had best prepare arguments to defend these gains against both well-meaning academics and less-well-intentioned legislatures and governing boards.

The signs of what I am calling the "new elitism" are everywhere. Budget cuts are the most obvious, and public higher education has been suffering these cuts for several years. In California, the legislature has resolved to make up the decline in state support for public higher education by raising tuition gradually to one-third of the actual costs of instruction—a move which has caused a sharp drop in student enrollment. Every state has its own horror story, with education perceived by political bodies as an expense rather than an investment, as a personal privilege rather than a public good. Faced with declining enrollments along with tightened budgets, many faculties react, by seeking to restrict enrollments to the best-prepared students, further limiting the chances of the underprivileged, who are already hurt by the increased costs. Thus largely liberal and well-meaning faculties seeking to preserve institutional quality wind up allied to governing bodies intending to restrict the hesitant welcome that has been offered to those whom Patricia Cross has called the "new students."

College and university writing programs are on the front lines of this conflict, since their basic purpose is to induct entering students into the discourse community of higher education. These programs have served both egalitarianism and elitism in their turns. Since the first English Placement Test and required freshman course were developed by Harvard in the 1870s, English programs and assessments have been used to winnow out the "undeserving," often defined as those lacking the right dialect. During the 1950s, the huge freshman English programs of some public universities served in effect as a wing of the admissions office, eliminating those who could not measure up to standards. But during more liberal periods, and during times when sufficient funding could be found, these tests and programs served to help underprepared students succeed instead of washing them out. Thus the California State University English Placement Test, offered for the first time in

1978, was explicitly separated from the admissions process (only admitted students could take it) and directly connected to a basic writing program with special funding.

Among those attacking placement tests and required freshman writing programs these days is an influential group of writing specialists who call themselves "new abolitionists." A sympathetic history of abolition by Robert Connors appears in *Composition in the 21st Century* (Bloom, Daiker, and White); powerful arguments for it by Sharon Crowley in *Pretext* in 1991 and in *JAC* in 1995 summarize the modern case. Less prominent writing program administrators on the WPA e-mail computer network are widely sympathetic with abolitionism, despite its implications for their jobs. Neither Connors nor Crowley (nor most writing program administrators) consider themselves elitists; Crowley in particular shudders to think herself associated with them. Her 1995 article problematizes the concept of student "need" partly on the basis of lack of clear definition and empirical evidence: "It is very difficult to contest it without being written off as either an elitist, a troublemaker, or an insensitive curmudgeon. This is particularly frustrating because support for the claim is virtually unarticulated: no empirical studies have ever been done to test it, and historical research reveals reiterated but unsubstantiated statements of it" ("Composition's Ethic" 234-35). Arguments for abolition are based on genuine curricular concerns, sympathy for students forced to take "the universal course" for vague reasons, and deeply felt faculty interests, whereas arguments for maintaining the required course have been muted. Unfortunately Crowley is right about the claim that freshman English meets students' needs. Up to now there has been little published evidence to show that the course does any good for students or that placement, with its negative labeling of those with low scores, actually helps students succeed. Meanwhile, the required course leads to detrimental labor practices on the part of many universities, creating a subclass of teachers with few privileges, low pay, and no chance of tenure or advancement. The new abolitionists argue that it is better to make the whole business elective, so that students will be motivated to learn and the course will lose its curse as a dreary place for teachers and students to put in wasted time.

There are, of course, many claimed advantages for the required freshman course: the need to induct first-year students into the higher education discourse community, the discussion

and attention to student performance that are common in relatively small classes, the improvements every teacher observes in strong as well as weak students, and so on. And there are also many claimed advantages from placement testing designed to allow students to enter the composition program in a course that will give them a good chance of success.

Those arguments, seem unconvincing now, under the sway of the new elitism and its theorists, the new abolitionists. Nonetheless, if faculty and administrators could be persuaded that the required course and placement testing do in fact help underprivileged students succeed, they would be less likely to join those seeking to limit opportunity for them. These are the students for whom required placement and the required freshman course are necessary, for they are most in need of guidance and support and most unlikely to take writing courses they fear will confirm their inadequacy (if the program is not required).

This paper focuses specifically on the role of placement testing and instruction for students with the weakest preparation in writing, those low-scoring students most likely to disappear from higher education as we move through the elitist 1990s. By summarizing hitherto unpublished studies showing their importance for students most likely to drop out of higher education, I am replying to the argument that placement and basic writing instruction have little effect. I believe that we must preserve these programs if we are concerned about keeping the "new students" in colleges and universities.

This paper is based on two sets of studies: a series of follow-up studies of Fall 1978 First-Time Freshmen, produced by the Institutional Research Office of the California State University (CSU) from March 1980 to March 1982, and a series of reports analyzing a four-semester overview conducted by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council, Fall 1984 to Spring 1989. As the data show, the effect of a placement program followed by a careful instructional program is to allow many students who would otherwise leave school to continue successfully in the university.

The California State University Studies[1]

The last of five studies prepared by the Division of Institutional Research of the CSU Chancellor's Office is dated March 1982; it presents data compiled two-and-a-half years after the study population of Fall 1978 freshmen entered the multicampus system. The report notes "that marked differences in continuation exist among groups of students depending upon their par-

ticipation in the testing program and their resultant test performance" (2). As Table I shows, of those who did not take the English Placement Test (EPT), despite much urging, only 78.7 percent remained in school the following Spring; the basic writing group, those scoring at or below 150, continued at a 90.0 percent rate. When the data are compiled in Spring 1981, two-and-a-half years later, this difference increases: EPT non-participants continue at only 37.8 percent, while 51.8 percent of the basic writing group are still at the university. The continuation difference between the basic writing group and those scoring above 150 is much smaller.

Table I
Continuation by CSU EPT Participation
Fall 1978 to Spring 1981

	Non-Participant	Score <150	Score >150	All Students
Fall 1978 N =	1412	1156	1203	3771
Percent Continuation				
To Spring 1979	78.7	90.0	92.9	86.7
To Fall 1979	57.0	73.1	78.3	68.7
To Spring 1980	50.0	65.7	72.1	61.8
To Fall 1980	40.2	55.4	60.7	51.4
To Spring 1981	37.8	51.8	57.8	48.5

There are several ways to interpret these data. We could hypothesize that students who do not participate in the placement program are less motivated and hence more likely to drop out of school than those who do participate. There are, of course, many reasons for students to leave school besides inadequate writing ability. Nonetheless, it is striking that the basic writing students, those with low EPT scores and hence weak preparation for college writing, continue at only a 6 percent lower rate than the high-scoring group and at 2.7 percent *above* the average of all students. Placement program participation is clearly a significant factor in continuation in college for students with low EPT scores.

Even more startling is the relation between participation in the EPT and participation in a basic writing instructional program. I should note here that until the placement program began, the CSU was not authorized to offer writing courses below the regular freshman level. This did not mean that no

help was provided to students with writing difficulties; rather, whatever help that was offered informally by a sympathetic and socially aware faculty had to be disguised and bootlegged. With the inauguration of the placement program, special funds became available to support such programs. My perception of the curricular results of this historical oddity is that it had strongly positive effects. No entrenched low-quality "remedial" programs were in place, no undertrained and overworked teachers of such courses were on hand, and few bad rumors of "bonehead" courses existed on the student grapevine. Thus, the English faculties of the CSU campuses were in a position to institute a wide variety of enterprising and useful basic writing programs, including intensive coursework, [supplemental] mini-courses, and computer-assisted tutorials in a newly supportive environment in 1978. One sign of this vigor is that an estimated 146 students of those participating in the program who *passed* the placement test nonetheless took a basic writing course (Table IV, October 1980 CSU Report); this group, represented by 25 in the 1981 study sample, had the highest persistence rate of all: 96 percent in Spring 1979 and 64 percent in Spring 1981.

Table II
Continuation of Fall 1978 First-Time Freshmen Who Took a Remedial Writing Course
Fall 1978 to Spring 1981

	Non-Participant	Score <150	Score >150	All Students
Fall 1978 N =	82	209	25	316
Percent Continuation				
To Spring 1979	87.8	93.3	96.0	92.1
To Fall 1979	69.5	78.0	92.0	76.9
To Spring 1980	59.8	67.9	84.0	67.1
To Fall 1980	43.9	54.1	72.0	52.8
To Spring 1981	39.0	52.6	64.0	50.0

Campus differences in the data are significant but difficult to interpret. They relate in part to differences in the quality and efficacy of the basic writing programs, but many other reasons cause students to drop out or transfer from one institution to another (and the study does not distinguish between these two different kinds of events). One campus of the CSU showed a

decline of over 46 percentage points in the continuation rate of nonparticipants from Spring 1979 to Spring 1981, while a different campus (in a much more attractive geographic location) showed a decline of only 29 percentage points. On four large campuses (Fresno, Long Beach, Pomona, and San Francisco), the five-term continuation rate for the low-scoring group after completing basic writing instruction actually exceeded that of the high-scoring group.

The New Jersey Basic Skills Council Study[2]

New Jersey began its assessment and remedial/developmental programs about the same time California did and in part modeled its assessment design on the California program. But there are some important differences between the dimensions of the two statewide programs. Whereas the California program was limited to students admitted to one of the (then) 19 CSU campuses (the middle tier of public higher education, bracketed by the University of California and the California Community Colleges), the New Jersey program encompassed all public colleges and universities and included reading and mathematics as well as writing. Thus the New Jersey program evaluation considers 115 different programs at 31 different institutions, ranging from small county colleges to the flagship state university.

Despite these differences, the findings of the New Jersey studies are remarkably similar to those of the California studies. The three most recent reports are dated December 1988 (*Effectiveness of Remedial Programs in Public Colleges and Universities: Fall 1984-Spring 1986*), November 1991 (*Effectiveness of Remedial Programs in Public Colleges and Universities: Fall 1987-Spring 1989*), and January 15, 1992 ("Memorandum to Members, Board of Higher Education"). The most recent memorandum states that "the outcomes data indicate that on a system-wide level, remedial instruction is clearly providing the opportunity for thousands of underprepared students to succeed at college level work" (2).

The reports deal with many areas of statewide concern (such as policy administration and placement criteria) that are not directly of concern here. But the researchers also report on what they call "Remedial Program Outcomes" and "Subsequent Academic Performance" at the system level, issues exactly parallel to those of the California studies. The data show a high

level of compliance with placement testing and of acceptance of what the report calls "remedial placement": 95 percent of the designated full-time students were "enrolled in needed remediation by their colleges within two semesters" (1992, 6) and 74 percent completed all such requirements. Thus the New Jersey data do not have much to say about nonparticipants in the program but rather compare those defined by testing as "remedial" and "nonremedial"—groups parallel to the low- and high-scoring groups in California.

The four-semester study of the Fall 1987 cohort shows that "66 percent of the full-time students who completed remediation were retained compared with 71 percent of the students who did not need remediation" (6)—a 5 percent difference, very close to the 6 percent difference in the California data. Again, as in California, the comparison between those who did and did not complete the basic writing program was dramatic, a 43 percent difference: "For students who did not complete writing remediation, however, the fourth semester retention rate was only 23 percent" (6).

The most complete data on writing placement are contained in the study of over 10,000 Fall 1984-Spring 1986 students. At the county colleges, 37 percent of the full-time students (5,700) and 31 percent of the part-time students (2,055) were identified for "writing remediation" (1988, 178). At the state colleges, 31 percent of the full-time students (2,226) and 29 percent of the part-timers (367) were identified for remediation. At the Rutgers colleges, 15 percent of the full-timers (789) and 13 percent of the part-timers (14) were so identified. Almost all of these students were enrolled in the basic writing courses provided for them, and about three-quarters of them completed the sequence. When the researchers compared the retention rates of the low-scoring group that completed the course work to the high-scoring group not required to take this course work, they found that "students who completed remediation exceeded their nonremedial peers by one percentage point (64 percent vs. 63 percent) statewide" (178). As in California, identified students who do not complete the basic writing courses leave school at a much higher rate; their 19 percent retention rate was more than three times lower than the nonremedial students. The conclusion is compelling: "There is a clear, positive relationship between completing remedial writing and staying in college" (178).

Conclusions

We must be careful about generalizing from the California and New Jersey programs, both of which have similar well-designed placement instruments and an energetic faculty committed to assisting low-scoring students with their writing. In e-mail conversations on the WPA (Writing Program Administrators) computer network, informal reports on this subject show that we can expect variation in persistence data depending on variations in campus, testing, and instruction. For example, William Condon (26 Sept. 1994) noted that students in a foundational course in composition at Arkansas Tech "persisted at a higher rate (roughly 75 percent as opposed to the norm of 65 percent for other students)." But on the same day, Frank Sullivan wrote about a study at Temple University of the 1978 cohort which found that "placement into basic writing, on average, does not seem to affect student retention" (26 Sept. 1994). All placement instruments are not created equal, nor are all basic writing programs equally effective. Nonetheless, the California and New Jersey studies provide compelling evidence of what can be done to help low-scoring students remain in college. The remarkable similarity of the persistence findings despite vast differences in scope, geography, and level of institution suggests some stability of data and potential replicability.

At this writing, both of these programs are under attack, with the very survival of the New Jersey program in doubt. Expensive placement testing—and good placement is not cheap—is an inviting target for budget-cutting, and expensive basic writing instruction—which requires small class size and trained faculty—has few powerful defenders in the administrative meetings allocating less and less money for teaching. As in other political settings, the largely unrepresented underprivileged become an easy mark, and the resurging elitism in the faculties would just as soon be rid of the troublesome students that basic writing programs keep in school.

Those of us concerned about preserving the hard-won higher education opportunities for the new students may not be able to stem the elitist tide, at least not immediately. But we can present the data and the arguments for basic writing programs and force those opposing them to confront the social biases they are endorsing. The argument that our programs do not work is baseless, as the California and New Jersey data show; given adequate support, we can help most low-scoring students succeed.

Notes

[1]The divisions and offices that produced the data used in this article no longer exist so it may be difficult for researchers to obtain copies of the reports cited in this text. For the California reports, one can write to the Office of Analytic Studies, California State U., 400 Golden Shore, Long Beach, CA 90802-4275 or to the Office of Systemwide Testing, California State U., Fresno, CA 93740-0354. The New Jersey data may possibly be found at the Board of Higher Ed., 20 W. State Street—CN 542, Trenton, NJ 08625. If these efforts fail, write the author at the English Dept., California State U., San Bernardino, CA 92407 and he will have the requested reports duplicated and mailed at cost.

[2]See Note 1 above.

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NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

March 8, 1996. 8th CUNY Writing Centers Association Conference (an affiliate of the National Writing Centers Assn.) will be held at the seaside campus of Kingsborough Community College/CUNY in Brooklyn, NY. Conference workshops, presentations, panels, and discussions will feature innovative, interactive practices and theories that support traditional and nontraditional students in writing centers. The keynote speaker, Ann Raimes, will address "Cultures, Contact and Cuts: Can the Center Hold." Professor Raimes of the English Department, Hunter College, is well known for *Grammar Troublespots: an Editing Guide for Students* and *How English Works: a Grammar Handbook with Readings.* Two new publications are *Keys for Writers: a Brief Handbook* and *Identities: Readings from Contemporary Culture.* The deadline for proposals *was* November 10, 1995. **Information:** Lucille Nieporent, co-chair, (718) 369-5405.

April 22-24. RELC Regional Seminar on Language Classrooms of Tomorrow: Issues and Responses will be held at the SEAMEO Regional Language Center in Singapore. The Seminar's aims: to examine the role of language classrooms of tomorrow in the light of changing societies with a view to reconciling vision with present-day reality; to survey trends and developments in language theories and language education and relate their relevance to classrooms of the future; to report on projects and research findings in language education that have bearing on classrooms of tomorrow. Deadline for proposals *was* November 15, 1995. **Contact:** The Director, (Att.: Seminar Secretariat), SEAMO Regional Language Centre, 30 Orange Grove Rd., Singapore 1025, Republic of Singapore.

June 28-July 26. 1996 Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators will be held at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC. The intensive four-week residency portion includes: a living/learning environment of informal networking and information sharing; workshops on current topics and state-of-the-art strategies for efficient operation of developmental and learning assistance programs; faculty of recognized experts; optional credit leading toward the M.S. or Ed.S. in Higher Education; recreation amidst the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains. The residency is followed by a supervised

practicum completed at the participant's home campus. **Contact:** Director, Kellogg Institute, National Center for Developmental Ed., Appalachian State U., Boone, NC 28608, (704) 262-3057.

CALL FOR PAPERS: ***The AEPL Annual,*** journal of NCTE Assembly on Expanded Perspectives on Learning, invites submissions for its Winter 1996-97 issue. Contributions may take the form of reflections, essays, research, theory, personal accounts of teaching experience, professional articles, or bibliography. Possible topics include (but are not limited to) intuition, inspiration, insight, imagery, meditation, silence, archetypes, emotion, values, spirituality, body wisdom and felt sense, and healing. Use APA style for references. Maximum length of articles is 12-15 double-spaced pages. Accepted articles will require word processing format compatible with IBM equipment. **Submissions:** in triplicate by February 28, 1996 to Mary P,.Deming, Division of Learning Support Programs, Georgia State U., Suite 700, One Park Place S., Atlanta, GA 30303-3087 (404) 651-3360. Enclose a manuscript-sized SASE, with postage for mailing 2 copies to reviewers.

A planned volume of essays on the nature of composition studies, ***Composition Research as Critical Practice,*** is being developed for publication in the MLA series, Research and Scholarship in Composition. While the deadline *was* November 10, 1995 for submissions of proposals, would-be contributors may want to contact the editors to see if an extension is possible. Essays will focus on refiguring the relationship between composition teaching and composition research in ways that reconsider the dichotomies between theory and practice, examine the relationship between composition and other specialties, reflect the call for greater connections between research and teaching in higher ed., and suggest avenues for inquiry that have transformative consequences for research subjects, the classroom, and the curriculum. Contributors should request a full description of the volume prior to any submission. **Contact:** Christine Farris, English Dept., 442 Ballantine Hall, Indiana U., Bloomington, IN 47405; tel. (812) 855-1430; fax (812) 855-9535; e-mail crfarris@indiana.edu. Or Chris M. Anson, Prog. in Composition, 306 Lind Hall, 207 Church St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455; tel. (612) 625-4846; fax (612) 626-2294; e-mail umcomp@maroon.tc.umn.edu.

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