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# FAILURE: THE STUDENT'S OR THE ASSESSMENT'S?

*Abstract: This study of an African American female who participated in a pilot project for underprepared college writers reveals the ways in which current assessment models fail to evaluate adequately the performance of socially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students. The analysis demonstrates the mismatch between the portfolio assessment practices in place and the texts the student produced. Assessment criteria are unable to acknowledge the blurring of genres that is evident in much writing today, and the controversies over the role of personal voice and the privileging of linear forms of organization in academic writing.*

The issue, then, is not who misses the mark but whose misses matter and why.

Bartholomae (Margins 68)

Being in an college english class I felt I was final going to learn something about this word call english....I knew I was going to learn everything I always want to learn it made me feel good.

Mica

## Overview

In some ways, Mica was like other underprepared, basic writers who enrolled in the pilot program for developmental writers at our midwestern state university. Acknowledging her checkered academic

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past and resolved to start afresh, Mica was attracted to our pilot program. Instead of taking the traditional sequence of a three-hour, non-credit, basic writing course followed by a two-semester freshman writing course, students like Mica, whose placement essay exam indicated the need for developmental work in writing, could enroll in our program, which combined the developmental and the first semester freshman English courses. The pilot provided intensive support through increased contact time with faculty, collaboration with peers, and tutoring from upper class students who focused on improving students' writing and on assisting the freshmen in negotiating their ways into the university community. We used Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* as a focal text to foreground issues of language and learning, access and denial, power and education, supplemented by brief articles from local and national sources.

The pilot program gave another option to students like Mica, a young African American, nineteen years old, and a single mother of a young child. Her high school performance garnered a 2.7 GPA but was interrupted by the emotional and physical demands of a pregnancy during her junior year. She scored in the fourth percentile on the Nelson-Denny reading test (equivalent to an upper elementary student) which placed her in the university's developmental reading course. She felt unsure about herself and her writing, and, in her own words, went through high school worried that "someone knew my secret and they were calling me dumb behind my back." She was a student "at risk" whose success at the university was a gamble. In addition, Mica found herself at a preponderantly white university, where 300 African American students often feel isolated in a university population of about 7,000. The university's demographics were mirrored in our pilot population; Mica was one of three African Americans out of a total of 45 enrolled in the Fall 1992 pilot.

However, Mica stood apart from her peers because she was a student whom our best teaching and assessment strategies did not serve. She forced us to rethink just about everything we did. Her writing continually challenged our expectations and ways of reading. Mica was also often vocal and forthright, letting us know what she was thinking, and not afraid of challenging us: "Why are you teaching us this?"; "What do you mean?"; "You said this yesterday and today you're telling us this!" Then, increasingly as the semester wore on, she became sullen and silent, defensive about our response to her writing. We had often praised her writing for its strong content and lively voice. At the same time, however, we would note the structural and grammatical problems that plagued every draft. She seemed confused about what she perceived as our ambivalence toward her writing.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the semester, Mica failed the pilot program. We, however, asked ourselves how we had failed Mica, specifically in our as-

assessment of her work. With over 80% of the students passing the combined course with a "C" or better, it became particularly important to analyze reasons for Mica's failure.

The assessment practice we used is widely considered one of the best to date in the discipline: a holistically scored portfolio, judged pass/fail by English faculty both within and external to the pilot. Nonetheless, as we've reflected upon our assessment of Mica, we have come to believe that a mismatch exists between our portfolio criteria and the texts Mica produced, even texts that had been revised over the semester with our criteria in mind. We now doubt that current assessment criteria and practices can "read" Mica's work adequately, or the work of other culturally diverse students whom our institutions are publicly committed to educating. Jay Robinson and Patti Stock in "The Politics of Literacy" have written, "if we would be literate, and help others to become so, it is time for thoughtful listening to those voices that come from the margins; it is time for reflective reading of texts that inscribe those voices as centrally human ones" (313). While many of us have made progress in learning to listen to others' voices, this progress is not embodied adequately in our assessments.

While the profession discusses writing as embedded in a context, we represent writing in our assessments as uniform and monolithic. We may call for multiple samples by which to evaluate performance, but during the portfolio evaluation itself, we read each paper largely as an isolated text, not contextually or intertextually. And while we may specify different genres, the criteria we use for evaluation fail to acknowledge the blurring of genres that is evident in much writing both within and outside the academy today. Further, our criteria fail to recognize the current controversies over the role of personal voice in academic writing and argument. They also privilege of linear forms of organization. In short, our assessments penalize students for "missing the mark" in ways that may be incompatible with our profession's evolving notions of the socially contextualized nature of writing and discourse.

This paper, then, explores what we now see as our failure in assessing Mica's work and speculates on how we might reconceptualize the assessment of writing, particularly the writing of culturally diverse students.

### **Assessment and the Pilot Program**

Briefly, our assessment required the students to submit a portfolio of four pieces selected from writing they had done during the course. While we urged students to incorporate ideas or examples from early papers in later ones or revise versions of early ones as their thinking on issues was deepened by the reading, writing, and discussions in

the course, the requirements for the portfolio didn't describe or reflect this. Rather they read quite conventionally:

- a. Personal Reflective piece: This essay should demonstrate your ability to use details effectively to narrate/describe; it should have a focus, a point.
- b. Expository piece: This essay should demonstrate your ability to create a thesis and support it with evidence – personal examples, examples of others, material from the coursepack or Rose.
- c. Synthesis paper: This essay should demonstrate your ability to synthesize (make connections between) ideas from the coursepack, Rose, and your own thinking about education and work, to focus them in a thesis, and to present them in an organized and coherent fashion.
- d. In-class/Impromptu paper: This essay should demonstrate your ability to write a clear and organized essay under timed conditions and without the opportunity to revise.

The criteria we shared with students and used as a department in the pass/fail evaluations of student portfolios also reflected traditional rubrics.

A Pass portfolio should demonstrate the ability to:

- a. write fluently
- b. grapple with a topic; develop and explore the implications of ideas and insights
- c. provide a focus, generally through an explicit thesis statement
- d. support ideas with reasons and/or examples from personal experience and/or outside sources
- e. organize ideas into clear paragraphs
- f. avoid multiple grammatical mistakes, particularly sentence boundary problems.

### **Challenges of Reading and Assessing Mica's Writing**

The following essay, Mica's first of the semester, illustrates the difficulty we had in assessing her writing. The assignment asked the students to describe an experience or moment in their lives in which they learned something. By establishing a clear focus and drawing upon sensory details, they were to narrate the experience so that their readers could relive the moment with them and reflect upon what that experience taught them. Mica decided to write about the birth of her child. The first two paragraphs of her essay, entitled "Ready or Not," are reprinted below:

Waking up saying good-bye to everyone "Bye Mama, Beebee, and Chris". Oh well I'm left here in this empty house again no one to talk to. Don't anybody care that I'm 9 1/2 months pregnant and my stomach is as big as a beach ball, and that I wobble like a weeble when I walk.

I remember whimpering as if I was a two years old. Mica get a whole to yourself stop whimpering for your eyes get puffy. Baby, why don't you come out. All my friend have had their babies. What are you waiting on to come out of there; sweetie your mama is tired of being pregnant. I can remember being so angry that if anybody would have came over here I would have chewed them up alive. Oh! I got to get out of here before I go crazy. Running up and down the stairs, I figure if I jiggle you up then maybe you will come out. Doing this for five minutes and nothing happen. Just huffing and puffing like a dog sitting in the hot summer sun. Well, I guess I'll take me a shower. Getting undress and guess what the telephone rang, Oh, Oh, somebody cares about me. The Mrs. Know-it-all-mother-in-law, the bat. Hello, "Mica what are you doing?" "I replied, "nothing, I was about to get into the shower, can you call me back?" Yeah, bye bye. Wicked witch I never thought she cared. Oh well back to the shower. In the shower the water running on my stomach I can feel you in there come out of there my stomach began making the gesture like the baby was trying to really come out.

For most readers of freshman English essays, this paper misses the mark. It isn't "correct." Yet, we want to argue, these notions of "correctness" — correctness not only in terms of surface features but also of acceptable styles, genres and organization — though deeply embedded in our thinking and assessment criteria are often unstated and not fully examined. Mica's paper jars and challenges, yet it handles language in complex ways. It shifts from direct to indirect discourse; from Mica as narrator, to Mica as a character thinking aloud, to Mica speaking directly to other characters or her unborn child. But we dismiss this complexity and judge through the lens of "error." The direct discourse is often unmarked. Sentences are sometimes fragmented or fused. Tense shifts occur seemingly at random. The missing tense markers, particularly "d" or "ed," and copula ("to be") deletions reflect Black English Vernacular (BEV). Further, her organization contains nothing explicit.

Mica's writing did not include any of the distancing and reflecting that were part of our expectations for a personal reflective essay. In "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," Peter Elbow explores how academic discourse assumes

"that we can separate the ideas and reasons and arguments from the person who holds them" (140).<sup>2</sup> Mica was unable or refused to squelch the personal – to separate the message from the messenger – to adopt a disinterested, objective stance. Her preference for situating her ideas in personal terms is seen in several other essays discussed later in this paper.

Rather than reading Mica's text for what it doesn't do, it can be read for what it is achieving. Robert Yagelski, for example, suggested in his 1994 CCCC presentation that we might evaluate a student text like this as personal testimony. Mica's writing does render the immediacy of her experience of labor with her first child. It is filled with strong details. The storying patterns, oral resonances, and rich rhythm give the piece its poignancy and power. These reflect a mode of discourse prevalent in Black English that Geneva Smitherman in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* defines as tonal semantics. One feature of tonal semantics, Smitherman notes, is the use of repetition, alliterative word play, and a striking and sustained use of metaphor, something seen throughout Mica's work (134). Mica writes about a jumbled, chaotic, and intensely personal time that demands a strong emotive voice. That Mica has achieved such a voice is a mark, not of a basic writer, but of an accomplished one.

Features similar to those in Mica's personal essay appeared in all of her subsequent writing in the course, including her summaries and explanatory essays. More clearly in those papers did we see how personal anecdotes are acceptable in academic discourse only when framed by generalizations. It is the framing that appears indispensable, for if a student like Mica offers a personal example without a corresponding generalization, the personal doesn't qualify as support.

David Bartholomae has noted that all errors are not created equal.

The errors that count in the work of basic writers have no clear and absolute value but gain value only in the ways that they put pressure on what we take to be correct, in the ways that these errors are different from acceptable errors. The work that remains for the profession is to determine the place of those unacceptable styles within an institutional setting, within an institution with its own styles of being right, its own habitual ways of thinking and writing (Margins 68–69).

Mica's paper challenged our habitual ways of assessing writing and left us questioning whether the "unacceptable" in Mica's writing might have a rightful place in a freshman writing course and in academic discourse more generally. Can the boundaries of academic discourse be broadened so that "personal testimony" or an "emotive voice" or "tonal semantics" might find a place? In suggesting this, we are not

suggesting that a student like Mica cannot or should not learn the dominant academic discourse, including what some describe as the “superficial features” of grammar, style, and mechanics. Nor are we suggesting that our job as teachers is not to help all students to do so, giving them access to many voices and styles. Nonetheless, we are suggesting that the writing of students like Mica may also call us to transform academic discourse and the assessment practices which support it.

### **Unpacking Metaphors of Exclusion: Deficiency, Foreignness, and Monogeneric Papers**

Bartholomae demonstrates that we sort out and label “on the assumption that basic writers are defined by what they don’t do (rather than by what they do), by the absence of whatever is present in literate discourse: cognitive maturity, reason, orderliness, conscious strategy, correctness” (“Margins” 67). While we immediately recognized a power and immediacy in Mica’s writing, our early diagnoses of her work focused on deficits—the lack of reason, orderliness, conscious strategy, and correctness that Bartholomae (and our assessment guides) enumerate. These quick notes made for ourselves, for example, focus on what Mica failed to do in an expository essay exploring the distinction between child abuse and discipline, a paper that drew upon a time when she was accused of abusing a toddler at a day care center at which she worked:

—problems framing the experience and/or moving between her frames/generalizations and her examples—movement is a key problem, transitions—abruptly inserts dictionary definitions of discipline and child abuse—moves directly into 1st person narrative example with no lead in and a complete shift in style—ends with question posed to reader rather than re-statement (or even direct statement) of main point of paper—multiple tense marker errors and other BEV features—

While these notes exemplify error analysis and try to move beyond a simple recording of errors (“her moves show an awareness of what is needed”), they nonetheless show that we read Mica’s essay primarily in terms of its deficits: it lacks conventional features of academic prose.

Here is the opening of the essay:

Ten years ago if you told your child “don’t do that,” and they did it any way you would spank them for not listening to you. Back then the way you discipline your child was your business. Now days its everybodys business the way you discipline your child.

### *Child Abuse vs. Discipline*

When do you know its child abuse? And when do you know it simply discipline.

DISCIPLINE is defined as training especially training of the mind.

CHILD ABUSE is defined as mistreatment of a child by parents or guardians.

It's Thursday, I said to myself, I have one more day before I can rest, rest, rest. Dealing with 20-5 kids a day really takes a lot out of you....

It was 10:05 and all the kids had arrived. We sang good morning to each other then split up in groups. We had a full load and that was about 25 kids so that made us have five kids a piece. As the day went along it was time for coloring. I caught one of my kids putting crayons in his mouth. "David get the crayons out of your mouth. They're not to eat, but to color," I said. He didn't have anything to say back. But as soon as I turned my head he had them back in his mouth. We went through this about four times. The fourth time I got up and tapped him on his hand—Not hit, or smack but tapped him on his hand. He didn't cry, he just took the crayons out of his mouth and continued coloring.

If, instead of assessing Mica's essay in terms of its deficits, we set it alongside some of the reading we were doing and asked students to do, Mica's style does not look so foreign or lacking. Her abrupt shifts and lack of transitions are not altogether dissimilar to those of Mike Rose in his opening of *Lives on the Boundary*, the book used in our course.

Rose moves from description of students and of the university campus, to a carefully recorded observation of a teacher drawing out students' knowledge about the renaissance, to a pictorial image of the medieval goddess Grammatica which then functions metaphorically, to statistics about changing enrollment patterns in American universities—all of which create a rich and multifaceted collage. No explicit transitions mark the movements, only white space on the page.

Rose's style is quite different from directly stated thesis and support pattern that guides much of our instruction and assessment of basic writers. He interweaves precise objective description, vivid image, significant anecdote, personal experience, quotes from official documents, general statement, and reflection. Mica's child abuse paper parallels Rose in significant ways. Her essay is full of ideas and



passion as she explores the damaging consequences of mistaking discipline for child abuse and the difficulties of clearing your name, particularly if you are a single mother from a minority group, when charges of abuse have been leveled. She offers personal testimony, clearly conveys the events/examples, includes detail and dialogue to place the reader in the scene, and writes with a strong sense of conviction. While not using many of the devices of academic argument, she is nonetheless making a claim: that discipline should not be mistaken for child abuse. She elaborates upon her points and shows the harm that mistaking discipline for child abuse can cause. She writes to effect change.<sup>3</sup>

To take another example, David Bartholomae has demonstrated how a careful look at the writing of Patricia Williams, an African American legal scholar and author of *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, can cause us to question the way we read the prose of basic writers. Williams, like Rose, upsets our conventional expectations of academic prose. "Williams' writing is disunified: it mixes genres; it willfully forgets the distinctions between formal and colloquial, public and private; it makes unseemly comparisons. In many ways, her prose has the features we associate with basic writing, although here those features mark her achievement as a writer, not her failure" ("Tidy House" 11). We do not, Bartholomae suggests,

read 'basic writing' the way we read Patricia Williams' prose, where the surprising texture of the prose stands as evidence of an attempt to negotiate the problems of language...She is trying to do something that can't be conventionally done. To say that our basic writers are less intentional, less skilled, is to say the obvious...It is possible...that when we define Williams-like student writing as less developed or less finished..., we are letting metaphors of development or process hide value-laden assumptions about thought, form, the writer, and the social world. ("Tidy House" 19)

### Errors in Our Expectations

Two papers Mica wrote later in the course again show her defying our expectations about the appropriate form and content. In one, we had asked students to select an article, summarize it, and respond. Mica chose a collection of brief interviews concerning women and work entitled "Is Success Dangerous To Your Health?" She opens as follows:

In reading the interview article, "**Is Success Dangerous to your Health,**" none of the three interviewees in their interview explain or answer the question ask in the title of the interview, Is

Success Dangerous to your Health? I couldn't grasp what the author was try to do however, what I did find in the article is "RESPECT". All of the three interviewees felt they were not respect. The title of the article pull me right into the paper. However, I was very disapointed not to find what I was looking for. Will my career affect my health in anyway.

Mica had written guidelines, model opening sentences, and class assistance on how to write a summary and response. However, she sets these aside (perhaps largely unconsciously) to pursue her own frustration with the title, a point she returns to in her conclusion where she unabashedly makes suggestions to the author about how to answer the question the title posed. Her "back talk" to the author is a significant rhetorical move, yet it and her use of first person belie the expectations for an objective summary. Again, our immediate response to Mica's summary/ response is to dismiss it as not meeting the terms of the assignment. And, indeed, it does not. However, her gutsy move in challenging the author surely demonstrates critical thinking as well as a critical engagement with the text, something our assessment practices sometimes overlook in favor of acceptable genre features. Consider, for example, the "safe" and predictable but totally unengaged five paragraph theme that passes without question. The paper passes, no doubt, because it can demonstrate the surface features and stylistic conventions of academic discourse: the clear structure, the explicit signposting, etc. But content—which we continually maintain is the most important feature when assessing any kind of prose—is often overlooked. Is this a "fair" and accurate assessment of either writer?

The last assignment of the semester was a synthesis paper which asked students to bring together their thinking about education or work, the two themes of the class. Students were to create a fresh look at the topic by making connections among the different readings from the course and integrating those with their views, experience, and writing done in earlier papers and in their journal.

Mica chose to write about education, specifically her experience in the pilot project. Our initial assessment of Mica's paper was that it failed to do what was expected. In our minds it did not "read" as a synthesis. The paper never established a focus in the form of a thesis statement, it failed to smoothly link specific examples and personal experience to generalizations, and it made little use of quotations from the reading as support. Instead, Mica recounted her experience from the beginning of the semester to the end with no immediately apparent synthesis or reflection, as these first two paragraphs suggest:

It's first day in college, and I'm excited I drove around the hold campus to find a policeman so, I can get direction to my

class. Finally I found one he and looked like he was hiding behind the trees waiting to give someone a ticket. I drove over to him, and rolled down my window. "Can I help you?" He said, Yes you can I need help trying to find my class the room number z204. "O.K. young lady you keep straight on this street we one and turn right, Then you see this building a lot of people will be coming in and out of it." Thank you very much sir. I seen this big building about as half big as a major hotel like the Marriot Hotel. I entered the building, Everyone was walking so fast like they were in a marathon.

Finally, I found room z204 I walk in; it was pretty full. I sat by the window so I could look out of it since no one was talking. Being in a college English class I felt I was final going to learn something about this word call english. All through high school I felt so insure about writing, I always felt someone knew my secret and they were calling me dumb behind my back. I felt a little dumb but, I knew someday I will learn were to put a period, comma, and a semicolon without feel unsure about it. So, in college I felt this is when every thing is going to change. I knew I was going to learn everything I always want to learn it made me feel good.

The paper adopts a narrative stance from which it never departs, thus defying our expectations for a synthesis paper. However, if we temporarily put aside those expectations to read differently, the paper does synthesize Mica's experience in the pilot course. She captures the confusion and anxiety of a new student coming to a college campus for the first time, likening the campus buildings and the policeman's behavior to the closest thing she knows: the city. She compares our modern buildings to a Marriot hotel. That comparison, coupled with her admission of her "secret" about feeling "dumb," suggests how much strength it actually took to walk in the doors of our institution.

The paper shows Mica as a beginning writer, new to the university and its expectations, negotiating her way into academic discourse, just as she seeks to find her way physically into the academic campus. She explores issues of anxiety about writing, the pitfalls of peer response groups, and power relations in the classroom. This reading acknowledges a focus, which our initial reading could not because, limited by predetermined portfolio requirements and paper features, it linked focus with thesis. Now we realize that the focus was there: it was Mica's — her story of her first semester college English experience. The narrative mode was her way of shaping her experience, of telling her story.

Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life* discusses the ways female literary figures write to organize and make sense of their lives.

While Heilbrun is discussing works of fiction, not academic discourse, Jane Tompkins and other scholars writing academic discourse do directly call upon their personal experience to enrich and organize their understanding of professional concepts. If Tompkins, why not Mica? Certainly the profession is expanding its notion of what is acceptable in its own academic discourse. And while Mica's writing is far from model prose, and she does not have conscious control over the strategies she uses, her writing has made us realize that the time is ripe for a reconsideration of what is "acceptable" in student discourse as well.

### **Locating Oneself in the Privileged Discourse of the Academic World**

Clearly, Mica is a student whose style betrays her and sets her apart from the mainstream at our — and most — college campuses. Perhaps, then, we need to assess Mica's work as her attempt to locate herself in the privileged discourse of the academic community. This would lead us to view her writing problems not as internal or cognitive, but rather as ones of appropriation. Mica's work throughout the course was marked by styles that clashed with our deeply embedded notions of academic discourse represented in our assignment and evaluation constructs. In assessing her, we judged these as deficits. Consistently rich in details, we said, but she could not control them. Our assignments called for the person, the details, yet our assessments demanded that these be "controlled," that specifics be framed, that thesis and generalization be tied to example. If her status in coming to the university is deeply divided, fragmentary, how can we expect a central point, a main idea?

David Bartholomae suggests

if we take the problem of writing to be the problem of appropriating the power and authority of a particular way of speaking, then the relationship of the writer to the institutions within which he writes becomes central (the key feature in the stylistic struggle on the page) rather than peripheral (a social or political problem external to writing and therefore something to be politely ignored). ("Margins" 70)

Our assessment criteria didn't allow us to read Mica's prose as an attempt to negotiate the problems of language. Rather, the assessment criteria were presented as objective and uniform. Such criteria may protect us and the university community at large from looking critically at the mismatch between the rhetoric of our policies and programs for ethnically under-represented and academically underprepared students and the realities of their struggles to make sense of an unfamiliar social dialectic.<sup>4</sup>

## Grammar Is Not Neutral

Mica describes quite poignantly her purpose in voluntarily enrolling in our pilot program: "I was final going to learn something about this word call english." She suggests an academic history fraught with insecurity, afraid that someone would find out her "secret." Interestingly, Mica views that secret and the solution to her problem as a mechanical one: "I knew someday I will learn were to put a period, comma, and a semicolon." This characterization of writing in terms of grammar, of course, is not unusual. Many writers (and teachers) conflate the two. (Consider the numbers of people who, when told that you are an English teacher, respond with a comment about "watching their grammar.") As we continued to study Mica's writing and reflect upon our work with her long after the semester ended, we began to understand how strongly Mica held to her belief in the power of punctuation. We realized that learning correct grammar *was* Mica's agenda. As Mina Shaughnessy noted, "grammar still symbolizes for some students one last chance to understand what is going on with written language so that they can control it rather than be controlled by it" (11).

Carolyn Hill discusses how grammar is a political issue to basic writers: "Grammar is not a neutral 'thing' to them, rather a completely socialized representative of those authorities who *seem* to students to be outside themselves" (250). Later in her synthesis paper, Mica constructs her instructors' point of view and appears suspicious of our motives in not focusing dominantly upon grammatical issues. She writes:

I enjoy every bit of writing I did in the class but, I felt disap-point cause I didn't learn what I want to learn in the class....I really felt that we should have discuss more of what I believe she saw going on in the class. Since, she mentioned it herself that she was having a problem with gammer, fused sentence, tense sentences, and fragments. We did work on this for a couple of days but i felt it wasn't enough.

In saying "we should have discuss more of what *I believe she saw going on in the class*" Mica seems to feel that we were unjustly withholding information that she believes could solve her writing problems and eliminate her "secret." That intensive one-on-one tutoring from peers and instructors, diagnostic analyses of her patterns of error, comparisons of her own patterns to typical nonstandard patterns of Black English Vernacular, and extensive opportunities for revision did not help Mica gain greater power over spelling, punctuation, and syntax remains one of our greatest puzzles.

Mica's sentence points to power relations in the classroom. Mica frames the teacher/student relationship as a struggle between two

people with two competing solutions to her writing problems. She is indignant (perhaps rightfully so) that her solution, more grammar instruction, is being ignored. In retrospect, we suspect that our actions are well described by Hill: "Ostensibly I wanted to give up authority, help students to be self-starters. Covertly, the institution and I collaborated to see to it that students be quickly notified if that start did not place them in the proper arms of Standard English, focused and controlled" (78).

Mica wanted to gain control over her writing and her errors; she wanted access to the social power identified with academic discourse. Yet neither she nor her instructors confronted this agenda centrally. Her relationship to the institution within which she wrote, her very placement in a basic writing course, the value placed by the university and those exercising influence in the society on copy editing, correctness and conventional styles were peripheral concerns. Correctness was thought of as context-free. That is something the English profession can no longer afford to assume. Perhaps that is why we saw such little change in these areas of Mica's writing.

### **Rethinking Assessment**

Reexamining and questioning our assessment of Mica's portfolio has left us with more questions than answers. As we now critique our portfolio assessment we see that we inadvertently worked to keep intact the boundaries and borders by which basic writing is institutionally defined, ironically the very boundaries our pilot project meant to collapse.

Thus, while we endorse and encourage more courses like ours, courses which collapse borders and work to eliminate notions of basic writers as "foreigners,"<sup>5</sup> we realize that our assessment practices must evolve significantly as well.

First, we need to understand that assessment is complexly situated, and different audiences may require different evaluations. In reviewing our guidelines for a passing portfolio we would now ask, "For whom are we evaluating Mica's work?" During the portfolio reading, who is the primary audience? Is it Mica? Is our purpose to reveal to her where she has succeeded or failed in meeting the standards set for an introductory university writing course? Is the primary audience her future college instructors? If so, what do they need to learn about writing as a deeply embedded cultural and social act, about the time needed to acquire new discourse practices, and about current challenges to hierarchical patterns of organization if they are to determine what should constitute "passing" work in an introductory writing course which enrolls culturally diverse students? Or is the audience the local, state, or national community? The needs and interests of these groups differ; our assessments need to reflect this.

In addition, we need to devise ways to read student texts contextually and intertextually not only in the classroom setting but in evaluation sessions. Our prespecified portfolio requirements pressured us into reading each paper as an individual entity. What we now want to strive for is a more intertextual reading of the portfolios, an assessment practice that views the essays in a portfolio as interrelated and recursive. Read as a whole, Mica's papers have a surprising unity, both in content and approach. We wonder what would happen if during the portfolio evaluation we actively read Mica's work as her ongoing exploration of the issues that were central to her views of education, work, and mastery of written English. All of them contain strong narrative elements; all have a directness in confronting the issues she's chosen as her topics; all fail to clearly and explicitly link example to generalization, provide direct transitions, or follow a linear order; and all demonstrate a lack of control of surface features including spelling, word ending, person and tense inflections, and punctuation.

We need to resist (or read against) our unconscious notions of academic discourse as monolithic and standard. It's a myth that all synthesis papers will look like some imagined prototype of a synthesis paper. Yet, when evaluating portfolios holistically, we often operate under this myth. Papers that contain the expected features of a particular assignment pass without question, while quirky papers that don't easily correspond to a genre or mode—even if particularly rich in content—are often failed. Narrative strategies are undervalued, even when they are deeply reflective. In professional conferences and articles, we repeatedly remind ourselves to avoid false dichotomies, yet too often we fall back into simplistic either/or formulations in evaluation. Our assessment criteria suggest an essay is either personal reflection or exposition, either narrative or argument. The language is either academic discourse or not. The thesis/generalization is either directly stated or it cannot be credited. We need to immerse students in a variety of discourses, being careful not to limit students like Mica to only one voice. We do well to remember the frustration of feminist writer, bell hooks, with teachers who "did not recognize the need for African American students to have access to many voices" (qtd. in Delpit 291).

Finally, we need to understand errors, not as deficits, but as attempts at appropriating the discourses of other communities. This shift would allow us to recognize and extend rather than automatically penalize these attempts at appropriation. Matters of syntax and usage are not neutral as our portfolio criteria imply. We need to become sensitive to the power relationships implicit in all language use and to the political implications of judgements of error as "nonstandard," particularly as higher education opens itself to an increasingly diverse student body.



We have no clear answer to the question raised in our title. Was the failure Mica's or that of our assessment procedures? We suspect the failure rests on both sides. We did fail Mica: we failed to read her texts contextually; we failed to assess her portfolio in light of her attempts to appropriate a new discourse; we failed by oversimplifying the nature of academic discourse; we failed by setting her work against some constructed "mythical" portfolio demonstrating competence; we failed by not seeing the power relations involved in any attempts to work on nonstandard usages. The answer, however, is also complex — as complex, perhaps, as Mica's writing and as Mica herself. At times she appeared evasive and angry; at times bewildered; at times fiercely proud and determined.

Would we pass Mica's portfolio today? No. However, Mica's writing has challenged our notions of what is good and acceptable written discourse in introductory academic settings, and we think it should challenge others in the English profession, the university, and society.

Mica did not meet our expectations. Her writing continues to intrigue and frustrate us. Yet it may be the Mica's — those students who do not meet our expectations — who shed the strongest light on our practices.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Some ambivalence was undoubtedly present, both on our part and on Mica's. In working with Mica, we probably at times exemplified "a certain sense of powerlessness and paralysis" that Lisa Delpit has described "among many sensitive and well-meaning literacy educators who appear to be caught in the throes of a dilemma. Although their job is to teach literate discourse styles to all of their students, they question whether that is a task they can actually accomplish for poor students and students of color. Furthermore, they question whether they are acting as agents of oppression by insisting that students who are not already a part of the 'mainstream' learn that discourse" (285). Mica also may have been deeply ambivalent, caught in the conflicts between her home discourses and the discourses of the university, and feeling torn between institutions and value systems in ways that Keith Gilyard documents. Thus, she may have been choosing to resist or "not learn" as Herb Kohl describes it, rather than learn that which she perceived as denying her a sense of who she was. While issues such as these are important to our thinking, this paper looks more specifically to the implications of current assessment practices.

<sup>2</sup>Elbow makes the good point that "it's crazy to talk about academic discourse as one thing" (140). However, we often teach and



assess academic discourse as if it were. We believe that many teachers of writing (perhaps unconsciously) hold a collective, monolithic view of academic discourse, which poses problems to assessment, particularly the assessment of students at risk. This monolithic view of academic discourse is defined primarily by its stylistic and mechanical surface features, features such as mapping or signposting, explicitness, objectivity, and formal language (Elbow 144-46).

<sup>3</sup>Smitherman discusses a characteristic use of narrative as a persuasive tool in Black English: "The relating of events (real or hypothetical) becomes a black rhetorical strategy to explain a point, to persuade holders of opposing views to one's own point of view, and in general, to 'win friends and influence people'" (147-8).

<sup>4</sup>Anne DiPardo explores this issue in *A Kind of Passport* when she examines the "patterns of tension" in an institution's commitment to educational equity, looking particularly at the "good intentions and enduring ambivalence" embedded in the language of the basic writing curricula.

<sup>5</sup>See Bruce Horner for a recent discussion of this and other metaphors used to characterize basic writers.

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