

MARILYN STERNGLOSS'S TIME TO KNOW THEM: A REVIEW ESSAY

ABSTRACT: *This paper critically examines Marilyn Sternglass's Time to Know Them in light of the troublesome trend in decreased funding for remedial programs that is emerging in colleges across the nation. Sternglass's work is the first longitudinal study of writing and learning at a college level that takes into account not only students' academic lives but also their personal lives. Sternglass uncovers a complex network of factors contributing to the development of students as complex thinkers and mature writers and paints a clear picture of students struggling but succeeding despite societal constraints, family and work responsibilities and decreased government funding.*

Education as Commodity

Twenty years after the publication of Mina P. Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* is the first book to comprehensively examine how the writing performance of college students is "influenced by their experiences outside the college, in their homes, in their workplaces, and in their communities" (xi). Sternglass's work is a landmark of sorts, as it is the first longitudinal study of writing and learning at a college level that takes into account not only students' academic lives but also their personal lives: "The students' subjective lives are shown to be essential components of their objective lives, so that it is impossible to comprehend the nature of their academic experience or to contemplate educational approaches that will meet their needs without understanding how integrated these aspects of their experience are" (xi-xii). Several factors differentiate Sternglass's study from other work (e.g., Emig [1971], Chiseri-Strater [1991], Lavin and Hyllegard [1996], etc.) that has attempted to gather data on the thinking and writing processes of basic writers. Sternglass looks at both writing and learning through a longitudinal lens by surveying students' papers written for various courses

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during their academic pursuits. The students included in the case studies also represent a multicultural urban population: Of the nine students remaining at the end of the six-year study, only one was White, while four were African-American, three were Hispanic-American and one was Asian-American.

Despite the comprehensive nature of her study, however, Sternglass has no hard and fast conclusions to offer her readers: "Writing development is shown to be neither neat nor linear . . ." (xiv). Ultimately, Sternglass's study, by delving into the very issues that surround the college performances of students who are written into the system as having always and already failed, exposes the troublesome trend in decreased funding for remedial programs that is emerging in colleges across the nation. Students are being denied the opportunity to succeed despite Sternglass's "central finding . . . that students with poor academic preparation have the potential to develop the critical reasoning processes that they must bring to bear in academic writing if they are given the time" (296).

We cannot help but remember Mina Shaughnessy when reading Sternglass, since it is Shaughnessy who first pointed out that the 1970 open admission policy of City College of The City University of New York was "the one available route to . . . [empower] large number of students . . . to *choose* to go to college . . ." (3; Shaughnessy's emphasis). Because most students entering City College in the 1970s were unprepared to deal with college academics in general and college writing in particular, mass education convinced many teachers that the writing problems of the students were "irremediable" (3) and that the students themselves were "ineducable" (1). But Shaughnessy attempted to persuade teachers that basic writing students "write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (5).

In light of Sternglass's findings, Shaughnessy's explanation, while seemingly simple, is inadequate, as it does not take into account the various complex social factors that affect students' lives. The multifarious nature of Sternglass's students' non-academic and academic histories makes it impossible to pin-point one factor that influences them as thinkers and writers. All of Sternglass's students "evidenced strong feelings about issues of personal and cultural identity, assimilation, stereotyping, and racism . . ." (80). Their papers demonstrated that they "grapple[d] with bringing their cultural heritage into a meaningful relationship with the academic culture" (81), and only when students learn to analyze in light of the social issues that plague them as individuals can they be successful in the academic medium.

The students in Sternglass's study were beginning writers, but they were not cognitively dysfunctional. They had to learn, write, and survive within a dominant hegemony. Patricia Bizzell points out that basic writers, particularly minority students, are often unfamiliar with the academic discourse community. But unfamiliarity does not a deficiency make. Sternglass contends that "issues of race, gender and sexual orientation, class, and ideology . . . affect [students'] approaches to undertaking academic tasks" (60) but do not limit students. These students are not frail. Indeed, their "lived-through experiences enhance their ability to assess the frequently unquestioned assumptions of the larger society" (60).

Composition instruction and institutional settings also play a role in students' academic achievements. Sternglass carefully analyzes various comments that teachers wrote on the papers of the students in her study and finds that the more pedagogically-oriented the comment, the more likely the student was to improve his or her writing. Comments that focused on both content and form were helpful, as were comments that pointed out errors but still encouraged the student to perform better. Sternglass concludes that teacher comments are important in the development of students' writing skills, and her findings regarding instructor involvement should give many a writing teacher new hope. Although many variations within an instructional setting need to be accounted for, the settings that provide "support and encouragement" (196), the very settings all of us as writing teachers should strive to create, help students mature as both writers and thinkers.

Students entering City College today have much greater financial difficulty than those entering City College in the 1970s. In the last two decades, "the poverty level increased for minority students in the New York City area [while] the costs of a college education increased substantially" (xiii). Sternglass's work, while focusing on the complex social and personal lives of the students, also unstintingly criticizes a system that sets students up for failure. *Time to Know Them* cannot be read simply as a series of personal stories about several City College students. It is certainly that, but it is also a political commentary and a cry for change. Bruce Herzberg points out that the curriculum of any particular academic institution "represents a commitment to a set of values concerning the uses of culture and the uses of people . . . the curriculum of a modern school is a battleground . . ." (97).

Sternglass justly laments the decrease in funding for public colleges and universities. She quotes New York Governor George E. Pataki who in 1996 began questioning the effectiveness of CUNY colleges' remedial programs. Only 5% of CUNY community college students graduate within two years, a dismal number, yet, as Sternglass points out, "the amount of time needed to complete degree requirements con-

tinues to grow as the economic support for poor students declines . . ." (296). The very system that decries the lack of remedial program efficiency, in light of the "problematic" student population, is, ironically, the problem itself. The less funds that are available for students to continue their education through remedial courses, the more likely it is that students will drop out of college. But Sternglass's study illustrates that students supposedly doomed to fail can succeed given the right opportunities, and student success has immeasurable "social and economic benefits" (296) to society.

One of the main curriculum problems at City College is the administrative insistence that all students successfully complete a test of writing, the WAT (Writing Assessment Test), before they take classes above the 60th credit. The problem, according to Sternglass, is that, at best, the WAT rating system is arbitrary and, at worst, it sets students up for failure by making it nearly impossible for minority students, or students whose first language is not English, to pass the test the first time around. Many students from non-mainstream backgrounds take the test four or five times, and the test, understandably, becomes a great source of fear and anxiety.

Students whose first language is not English have even more difficulty passing the WAT and succeeding in an academic setting. The writing of ESL students, instead of being rated on content and organization, is often rated on grammatical features alone. This, of course, creates an environment where students, stifled by the grammar of a language they cannot and should not be expected to control perfectly, are afraid to express themselves in writing. Sternglass convincingly argues that content is more important than appropriate grammatical forms, especially when considering a student's non-native English background. Ironically, students not allowed to enter upper-division classes (or regular freshman composition courses) because of second language interference do not have the opportunities to improve their grammar. Indeed, "the institution ignores issues of language development . . ." (160). Sternglass justly laments an establishment that forces students to "have their academic progress stifled by the appearance of language features in their writing that they demonstrate they know but do not yet control automatically. Institutional testing should be an indicator of the type of help that students need at a particular time, not a hindrance to their advancement" (161).

Time to Know Them is an important book, and its poignant and sincere presentation of students' academic and non-academic lives is commendable. Sternglass uncovers a complex network of factors that contributes to the development of students as complex thinkers and mature writers. She rightly criticizes the New York State higher education system for expecting students from minority and second language backgrounds to pass a test that truly does not measure their

ability to succeed in college. She also paints a clear picture of students struggling but succeeding despite societal constraints, family and work responsibilities and decreased government funding. With college drop-out rates at an all time high, it is admirable that any student from an environment that does not emphasize education would remain in college for any amount of time, much less long enough to graduate.

One of Sternglass's case studies, Joan, persevered despite various obstacles. She grew up in the projects with drug- and alcohol-addicted siblings, was seriously unprepared to deal with college-level reading, writing, and mathematics classes, and was disabled (having lost 70% of the vision in her left eye). Despite all this, she graduated after 6 years and was hired as a full-time counselor in a drug clinic, earning more than anyone in her family had ever earned. Sternglass calls Joan "tenacious" (265) and harshly criticizes James Traub who in his book *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* wrote about Joan under another name, calling her "uneducated." Joan was discouraged after Traub's book was published in 1994 but later realized that Traub's opinion did not matter and that she could succeed despite his statements, since "her degree would confirm her capability to herself" (68).

Sternglass effectively concludes that Joan's "difficulties and her life experiences, combined with her college learning, prepared her to contribute meaningfully in the larger society" (242). In other words, it takes time to know Joan. It takes time to know all of Sternglass's case studies. Joan, in one of her college papers, sums up Sternglass's work better than I ever could: "[O]ne can conclude [that] education was, and still remains, the key element involved in overcoming oppression. One should never forget that knowledge is the one tool that can be used to overpower the white man" (68).

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