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BASIC WORK AND MATERIAL ACTS: THE IRONIES, DISCREPANCIES, AND DISJUNCTURES OF BASIC WRITING AND MAINSTREAMING

ABSTRACT: *"Basic Work and Material Acts" summarizes what we have learned from mainstreaming basic writers in first-year composition at California State University, Chico. We found that "basic writing" as an institutional structure (defined by the State of California as remedial and granted no baccalaureate credit) created basic writers. Once basic writers were in the context of first-year composition, "basic writing" as a concept and as a practice disappeared. Two related principles about learning to write emerge from this experience: 1) one learns to do college writing by being in the context of college writing, not in some other context; and 2) literacy learning does not come in discrete levels. Drawing upon these insights, we go on to describe the ways that our program supports writers in first-year composition through adjunct workshops. The material circumstances of our program support students' college writing in ways that lessen the punitive nature of basic writing and are coherent with recent research in literacy studies.*

Seven years ago, we eliminated basic writing courses because of our commitment to broadening student access to the university and its ways of using language and literacy. This is ironic, of course, because twenty years prior most basic writing courses had been instituted to do precisely the same thing—broaden student access to university education. It is also ironic because conservative voices, especially in California and New York, have been arguing for the elimination of remediation on four-year campuses. Their argument has to do with

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limiting access.

Our decision to eliminate basic writing grew from our experiences with our students, by a realization that "basic" did not describe the students' practices, but operated as a construct that supported a remedial economic structure that distributed "credit" unequally. Our understandings were supported by the series of critiques of basic writing, especially those coming from the Fourth National Basic Writing conference, that questioned both the definitions of "basic writer" and the effectiveness of the programs (Bartholomae; Jones; Adams; Fox). By focusing on the material conditions—the actual, practical pedagogy of who is in what room, what credit students receive, what kinds of questions and critiques occur in what context—we hope to answer concerns that these critiques somehow ignore the realities of basic writing students' experiences. Bruce Horner sums up these worries:

> To teachers concerned with their own and their students' immediate institutional survival, however, any suggestion that "basic writing" is a construct may seem an elitist gesture from those situated to afford engagement in fine theoretical distinctions, at best an irresponsible admission, but in any event likely to provide fodder for those on the New Right attacking basic writing programs, teachers, and students. (191-192)

Our program changes, while supported by the "fine theory," were more powerfully shaped by careful attention to what students were saying and doing. The program reforms argued for in this article emerged from the ground up and made necessary a corresponding change in our theory. By doing so, we hope to initiate a dialogue with those teachers and writing program administrators who have seen the critique of basic writing primarily the concern of postmodern composition theorists. We also wish—as strongly as possible—to demonstrate that our theories and practices move in the opposite direction from those on the New Right and therefore could not easily be appropriated by them. By focusing on the dialectic between material conditions and theory, we also hope to show how careful attention to students and their concerns can produce powerful and sophisticated changes in instruction.

History of Basic Writing at CSU, Chico

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, student and teacher complaints showed that our basic writing courses had been backfiring. Instead of increasing student access, they had discouraged students by requiring them to work a year in writing courses where they accrued no credits.

The university economy of giving credit for work had commodified the activities of writing and reading in both the basic writing course and the "real" first-year writing course. Practices of writing and reading were defined by their purchase power – what they were worth in credit value was what they were. Students complained about the worthlessness of their work in basic writing; faculty complained about their failures in motivating students to invest in what students saw as "worthless" writing (see Rodby for a fuller discussion of the issue of credit).

The curriculum was fairly standard fare for the time. Many basic writing faculty worked from the notion that certain modes or types of essays such as the personal narrative or description were simpler than the exposition and argument that were done in first-year writing. Faculty felt students needed to do these simpler tasks first because they would prepare them for the harder activities in first-year writing. Further, faculty argued that in a beginning writing course students need to feel comfortable and achieve fluency. They need to write easily. This comfort and ease would be produced by asking students to write about what they knew. However, all too often students just thought the course was easy, too easy, in fact. And the course backfired.

In this environment, all too often students did not use writing and reading for gaining or making knowledge, for communicating with their instructor or fellow students, or even for expressing their multiple senses of self. Writing and reading were neither acts nor actions. Resisting any investment in basic writing courses, the students wrote very basic texts with minimal goals, purposes, topics and language. For some students basic writing courses were toxic. They said they were "sick of writing" and that writing and reading had become a punishment.

Basic writing classes had produced basic writing. And so it was not a surprise that we received frequent feedback from faculty in first-year writing that the basic writing students were not adequately "prepared" for work in their classes, even though this was also the case for many of the students enrolled in first-year writing. Frustrated with the context of basic writing (no credit and disinterested students), faculty tried to rehabilitate the scene of basic writing courses. In hopes that students would see the connection between basic writing and the demands of future writing courses, the faculty's curriculum began to resemble the first-year writing course.

In so doing, the basic writing curriculum, as it had been previously defined, began to disappear. In some cases, faculty argued that basic writing students needed to be challenged and that they would work harder and appreciate the course more if the course content were more demanding. We all thought that if we could demonstrate the rigors of the basic writing courses, we could more successfully argue

that the students' labor deserved credit. But while the basic writing courses changed, the economy legitimizing them did not. Therefore, the courses remained without credit. After all, basic writing was by definition a course without credit, no matter what was accomplished by the students.

The student opposition was not quelled or even tempered by the curricular changes. Cynicism grew as the tautology underlying basic writing became more and more apparent. To mitigate the growing discontent, we allowed students to petition to skip one or more basic writing courses, based on interviews, evidence of motivation, teacher recommendation or writing samples. And through this process we learned that many students with low test scores could succeed in first-year writing. They didn't need to learn something basic first. If basic writing was produced and reproduced by the context of basic writing courses, perhaps basic writing would disappear if students were asked to write and read in the context of a regular first-year writing course. After a year of permitting students to skip basic writing, we abolished the courses themselves. No one (but the students who no longer had to take them) really noticed that these classes were gone. By this point the courses had largely disappeared anyway. That is, already revised was the curriculum, which presumed students needed to learn "basic writing skills" before they could do first-year writing.

The relationship between "ability" and "context" has been written about in compelling ways elsewhere. For instance, Ralph Cintron, in *Angel's Town*, writes about a fourteen year old boy named Valerio who had been diagnosed as learning disabled. Similar to our sense that "basic writing" might disappear without the context of the basic writing program, Cintron writes about Valerio's skills:

> His nonverbal skills were at least average and he scored well on yes/no tests and, interestingly enough, on activities that required connected discourse. It was as if in the everyday world where discourse is largely performative and social, constructed in groups or dialogically, he did well.. . . it was almost as if Valerio's learning disabilities might vanish within a context that was not a testing ground. (101-102)

Additionally, studies of the writing process have argued that context powerfully affects what writers do. In 1985, James A. Reither argued that "writing and what writers do during writing cannot be artificially separated from the social-rhetorical situations in which writing gets done, from the conditions that enable writers to do what they do and from the motive writers have for doing what they do (621). And in 1986 Marilyn Cooper followed with her seminal article, "Ecology of Writing" that states, "all of the characteristics of any individual writer

or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems" (7).

Since we abandoned the structure and the construct of basic writing, we have enrolled all students needing to fulfill the first-year writing requirement in first-year writing. Those who enter with low scores on the English Placement Test are also enrolled in an adjunct writing workshop. We serve nearly one thousand students each year in the adjunct workshops. For these adjunct workshops, students receive one credit that can be applied to financial aid or athletic eligibility but not to graduation credits. To pass first-year writing, students must receive credit in the workshop, which they earn through attendance and participation. If they complete the quantity requirements for first-year writing and the workshop but their writing does not demonstrate the goals of the course, they may receive a no-credit "placeholder" grade in first-year writing and will repeat the course until they have passed it. Approximately 14% take the course more than once and less than 1% fail it again.

This is not the ideal arrangement. Low-scoring students are still required to attend a class for which they do not receive graduation credits, and they are still separated out from the other students taking first-year writing. Repeatedly faculty remark that they wish the workshops were available for all of their students, or alternately, that they could recommend students for the workshop based on demonstrated need after a couple of weeks of classes. But the State University's Chancellor's office mandates that we separate out the students with low test scores. So, for the time being, in this set of circumstances, this is the best compromise we can make.

Emerging Principles about Writing Instruction

Out of our pedagogical labors—our evolving curriculum and interactions with students and our structure of workshops—emerged several theoretical insights which have slowly developed into principles we have used to structure the first-year writing program:

a) One learns to participate in a particular writing practice by being engaged in that practice and not by learning some other writing practice with the idea that the latter prepares writers for the former. This insight grew out of our repeated observations that x did not lead to y. Students who took basic writing did not seem particularly prepared or unprepared for first-year writing. The basic writing students who had achieved a degree of comfort and expertise in the curriculum of basic writing (through short readings, usually multicultural, often narrative, and short papers based on the students' own life experience) did not bring that comfort and expertise with them to first-year writ-

ing. Even at the most banal level, the ability to punctuate a sentence, for example, expertise from Basic Writing courses did not appear to transfer automatically to first-year writing.

Literally, some students seemed to have learned to revise in basic writing courses and be stymied in first-year writing revision. How to explain this disjuncture? What we learned was that the term revision (as an example) refers to an array of practices. When students revised personal narrative essays, for example, they might have been admonished to provide extensive sensory detail and to work on "showing" not "telling." However, when these students revise their expository pieces, they were advised to explain more (and "tell" rather than "show"). In other words, to call an activity revision does not mean that a student will understand what revision is or means in all situations with all texts.

Our insights about the variety of practices entailed in the word *writing* (or revision, research, sources, topic, etc.) were supported by research from ethnographic studies that suggested that writing can not be conceived of as a static bunch of skills to be moved from place to place (like things in a suitcase, as Elspeth Stuckey has written). Writing is a practice, defined by Scribner and Cole as "a set of socially organized activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge" (236). In fact, different writing practices may or may not share conceptual and or procedural knowledge bases. They may have little in common, in other words. Writing practices may be so dissimilar that it is only a tool (a pen, for example) that acts as a flag to alert us that what people are doing is writing. When writing is viewed as a practice, skills may not be defined as a set of discrete and constant things that one can know or know how to do but as:

a) "[C]oordinated sets of actions, which apply knowledge to particular settings" (Scribner and Cole 236). The specific nature of the activities or literacy practices determines the kinds of skills and knowledge associated with literacy. As Scribner and Cole point out, letter writing, diary keeping, making a family album, and keeping a ledger of crop sales involve many different types of knowledge and multiple sets of skills. Whether one knows how to read and write is not an absolute value; what one knows and does changes radically from situation to situation. The insight we gained is the extent to which Scribner and Cole's claim is true even to two closely related contexts: two university writing courses taken in sequence. The contextual change comes with the fact that students construct a no-credit course much differently than a credit-bearing one.

b) As a corollary to a), we began to understand writing not as an activity that is learned (or best taught) in levels. Our tacit assumptions about the validity of discrete *levels* of instructions gradually eroded. We questioned whether or not it was possible to ascertain what would

make a writing practice more "simple" or "basic" than another or to design simple writing and reading practices that would actually be the grounding for other practices. Our conclusions are that such gradations of writing are at the very least unhelpful, and at the most misrepresent the act of writing. For instance, narrative is often placed at a level "lower" (or earlier) in the curriculum than analysis or argumentation. Such "levels" make it more pedagogically difficult to teach writing. Narrative becomes an unreflective "natural" genre, and analysis becomes an academic exercise divorced from student concerns. It makes a great deal more sense to imagine writing in actual scenes, a "narrative" emerges as the genre because the situation calls for a story. Levels of discourse, especially as they are inappropriately related to levels of ability, make little sense.

c) Writing and reading practices and second language acquisition should not be conflated. Many of the students placed into basic writing were non-native speakers of English. This placement was based on the judgment that their writing was in some sense basic when what had actually been judged was their language acquisition. Their understanding and ability to do certain types of writing – to practice writing and act through writing – was never in question. Perhaps these students could not engage in the practices of writing in first-year writing because they needed to acquire more English vocabulary and syntax, but they didn't need basic *writing* first. Alternately, some of these non-native speakers might have been able to approximate the acts of academic writing even though they would have had many errors in their English. The differences in these two understandings of non-native speakers' needs may seem so slight as to be inconsequential – but the differences in considering writing practices and language acquisition are actually quite significant. Putting non-native speakers in basic writing assumes that they need to work on their writing, and that working on simple writing tasks will prepare them for more complex writing tasks. However, these non-native speakers may be quite sophisticated in terms of writing and literacy practices. That is, they may be familiar and comfortable with a variety of writing practices while needing to work on their language correctness. Or they may need to work on both their writing practices and their language but one will not automatically or necessarily entail the other. The point is, in light of a) and b), the placement of non-native speakers in basic writing is doubly inappropriate. In our program students who needed to work on their language could take EFL classes and receive credits counted as foreign languages.

The Adjunct Workshops

We will illustrate these principles in material circumstances and focus particularly on the adjunct workshops. As mentioned above, in our restructured program (after we abolished basic writing courses) all students needing to take first-year writing courses enroll in first-year writing, regardless of test scores. We designed a structure, the adjunct workshops, to support (low-test scoring) students' learning while they were taking first-year writing.

The workshops meet twice a week for 50 minutes each time and are limited to 12 students per section, so each workshop has students from different sections of first-year writing. Because our program does not have a common syllabus, a single section of the adjunct workshop could, theoretically, have students with 12 different syllabi. Our emphasis in the first-year writing course is on so-called academic writing practices: research, entering into dialogue with sources, writing and revising papers that are idea-driven, making arguments, etc. In several sections the students are using *Ways of Reading* (Bartholomae and Petrosky) and in numerous others, the students are reading bell hooks, Ralph Cintron, and Cornel West and writing cultural critiques. The adjunct workshops do not have a curriculum that is independent of the work the students do in first-year writing. We have long abandoned the notion that we can teach writing in any generic sense. We do not think, for example, that we can productively teach "prewriting" and then ask students to do *it* on any and all writing assignments.

An Adjunct Workshop Day

To give readers a sense of how these workshops function, the following is a representation of a typical day in a workshop. Meeting in a small room on the ground floor of the English building, the students arrive one by one in the ten minutes before class has started. The instructor checks in with each student as she or he arrives. "What are you working on in first-year writing?" she asks. As the students answer, and the instructor makes notes on the board beside their names: Tim has a first draft due next week of a paper based on "The Arts of the Contact Zone" essay. He has not started writing. Jason is revising paper from his *Ways of Reading* assignment based on Patricia Limerick's essay " Empire of Innocence." He has brought copies for the class. Bu is also revising a paper and says it is going well. Marissa and Charles come in together. They are reading bell hooks. He groans and says she is a racist. Marissa concurs and makes a face. She says hooks's language is "nasty." Tina has met the instructor in the hall before class, asking if she could go over her paper draft due next week. Sean and

Autumn are in different sections of the same first-year writing instructor's course. They just got a new writing assignment, which is also based on bell hooks. They both say they don't really understand either the assignment or the reading. Autumn confesses that she wasn't actually in class and that she had picked up the assignment from her friend. Charles wants to know if Autumn and Sean agree that hooks is a racist.

When everyone is present, the instructor and the students decide on the agenda for the day. Jason has brought copies of his paper so the class agrees to go over Jason's paper, in part, because that was the agenda planned at the end of the previous class period. The instructor first asks Tina about her paper and whether it can wait for the next class period and then queries the rest of the class about their work, referring to the board while doing so. Tina says she can wait until next class period to go over her draft because she sees that Sean, Autumn, Marissa and Charles all need help with "this hooks thing."

But first the class will work on Jason's paper. From a folder, the instructor pulls out a transparency copy of Jason's assignment and puts it on the overhead projector. The class knows the routine; they paraphrase what the assignment is asking of Jason. Marissa volunteers to write this summary on the board. Next, Jason voices his concerns; he is worried that his "second primary source doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the paper." Before moving to the draft itself, the instructor asks Jason what his other primary sources are and how he is using them. Then the instructor directs the class to focus on how Jason is using this source he is worried about. They should think about how he *could* use this source. The students read the paper silently, making notes on the pages and at the end. Jason's concerns about sources are discussed at length. After a debate that the instructor moderates, the class concurs that Jason is trying to use an interview about a text as though it were the text itself and that is the problem. Several students volunteer solutions which Marissa writes on the board.

The class is impatient for the bell hooks discussion: Charles almost shouts out — can we talk about hooks now? The students reading hooks explain what they have read and why they think she is a racist. Marissa is quite expressive: "This is not what I would expect from college. Why are we reading this stuff in college? I want to leave it [some of hooks' expressions] on the streets. I am going to college to get away from this." Sean and Autumn are generally quiet, and Autumn reminds the group that they have an assignment on hooks that they don't understand. The atmosphere is boisterous—a bit rowdy even. Jason and Bu have a side conversation about hooks — Bu is confused about who she is. The instructor says "ok — let's take a look at one of the passages and try to figure out what she is saying and doing and why. We can also think about what your instructor's motives are

for assigning this reading and compare these goals to hooks's motives. Are they the same or different? Then we will move to the assignment." The class continues to be a bit rowdy as students find their books, move chairs and share copies of hooks' essay. Marissa says, "lets look at page 10 – now that's a really stupid part." And so the discussion continues.

The workshop described above is hardly unusual for composition classes. The adjunct workshop spends much of its time in large group discussion, but some workshop leaders divide the ten students into smaller groups or pairs. The students may even work individually with the instructor some of the time. One instructor, Ivory Veale, reported that he had asked students to take out a paper that had been commented on by their first-year writing teachers and to formulate two questions about their teachers' comments. Veale reports in his teaching log that he then went around the room "helped each student find ways to resolve issues in their drafts that their teachers had problems with."

These small group workshops have been successful. The students enrolled in the workshop generally pass the first-year writing course the first time (86%). And 10% of the 14% who have to repeat have had problems coming to class and doing the work rather than problems with being able to do the work well enough. One group of students who repeat first-year writing also tends to fail several other courses at the same time. These students usually have many obstacles to overcome in attending class and completing assignments, but usually not writing ability. They may lack transportation, money, or even a place to live. They may have small children, jobs, or older relatives to support. Another group of students who have to repeat consists of students who report that they did not think the course would be difficult. Their expectations of what the course was about were not accurate and they realized the mismatch too late. This second group usually does well in first-year writing when they repeat (with a B- average). When repeating the course, the first group may need additional support to finish the assignments on time – planning out strategies of time management, breaking down the task into component parts, etc. We provide this additional assistance in the workshop or occasionally through individual tutoring with an adjunct workshop instructor.

Situated Learning

Why does the small group workshop instruction work? Recent work in cognitive science provides a framework for describing how writers learn a new writing practice, as they usually do in first-year writing. They begin with limited information. The writing class may

not provide them with sufficient information about the practice they are to learn – perhaps because the teacher thinks that all types of writing demand the same basic "skills" and that these skills transfer from one context to another. Perhaps the writing teacher believes that students should already know all of these basics. But even if the teacher's intent is to explain the particular practice being taught, the writing class may not offer students models of writing practices that would enable them to know what is being expected of them. "The writing process" does not capture the ways in which real life, everyday writing practices are stretched over time and space and involve activities, tools and interactions that may not even appear to be about literacy at all. Students often cannot learn enough about literacy practices through direct observation (if there even is anything to observe).

Students need to construct a mental model of what writing is in this new context. Most likely they begin by borrowing a model from another writing practice (context), calling up a scheme that seems to match the new situation in some way or ways. Whether this abduction and modification of old mental models is successful or not is in large part determined by the social relationships and the interactive context that constitutes the literacy practice itself. Urs Fuhrer, in "Behavior Setting Analysis of Situated Learning: The Case of the Newcomer" states that the "need for understanding is aroused by perception of an incongruous event, [understanding] is developed and supported by dialogue and peer group approval and it flourishes if mental modeling is unhindered by the immediate need for a definitive solution to the problem" (11).

In an ideal workshop situation, students are able to discuss possibilities for carrying out the writing practices they are being asked to engage in: What are the goals? Why do this? What do you need to know to do this? What tools – books, computer resources, journal articles, etc. – are necessary? How can it be carried out? Some workshop leaders ask students explicitly to describe the actual practice that students will engage in, to project a mental model of that practice, and plan the time and space they will work in. In response to these questions, one student writes the following plan:

> I should probably set aside at least one hour per day in the morning to work on first-year writing in the computer lab – it is not crowded then and I can get a station and print my drafts easily. I need to print out drafts to see what mistakes I am making. I need to ask my roommate to read my drafts too.

Another student pinpoints how her living situation has affected her practices:

> I should start my homework earlier in the day because when night rolls around, I like to visit with my friends. I have to somehow learn to do this in little bits and not all at once because I do not have long periods of quiet in my room. I hate going to the library and the computers labs on campus. One more thing – somehow I need to learn not to be so simple in my writing. Maybe talking about this paper in workshop will help. I never thought being complicated was good but I keep getting some comments about that on my papers.

In the adjunct workshops interaction and dialogue among students and students and instructor is crucial to learning new writing practices. Dialogue offers students many different perspectives on the practice and may elucidate the material details of seemingly mysterious or abstract aspects of writing. The student above worried about how to write less simply and brought her concerns to the group where her process and topic were discussed at length. What did "complicated" mean? What did one actually do to make an idea complicated? In a teaching log, workshop leader Colleen Harvel reports that one of her students

> responds very positively to two things – in both he sees that I am, effectively, doing the work *with* him. He also seemed encouraged with the fact that I am struggling with the Foucault. First I showed Ricardo how to break up words and how to look up words in a dictionary. Ricardo was quite surprised when I showed him how to use a dictionary. He said something like "I didn't know you could get all of that out of a dictionary." But he was also somewhat discouraged and intimidated. He asked me if he had to do this for all of the words he didn't know. I told him that he could probably make an educated guess on lots of words.

The workshop leader also said that she and the student would explain Foucault to the others in the workshop. She paraphrased one passage and Ricardo the next.

The instructor's role in the workshop dialogue is not only to model processes and practices but to reframe questions or concerns. In the examples above, the student Jason was concerned about the form of his essay and where a secondary source would fit. The instructor reframed the question as one of motive and purpose so that Jason could begin to grasp a new understanding of the practice in which he was engaged. What is it for? The instructor points to the hooks reading and her motives and those of the teacher's before jumping into the specifics of the writing assignment that Autumn and Sean do not understand.

Productive Conflict

Recent work on basic writing has identified students' experience of cultural conflicts as a central feature of writing instruction. Min-Zhan Lu's "Conflict and Struggle: Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing" and David Bartholomae's "The Tidy House" argue that the tendency to avoid or erase conflict is detrimental to writing students. Lu argues that conflict and struggle are "preconditions for all discursive acts" (33), and are especially important for students who do not fit comfortably within the academy. Bartholomae worries that basic writing programs can "hide contestations" through a liberal desire to separate out difference so that it doesn't come in contact with the mainstream. For these reasons and others, we welcome and try to make productive use of the kind of conflict that Marissa and Charles bring up about hooks.

We think that the workshop structure particularly encourages productive conflict. Many authors have written about the ways that collaborative groups tend to produce resistance to the class. Thia Wolf's study, "Conflict as Opportunity in Collaborative Praxis" is one of the best examples. Wolf cites example after example of students resisting the teachers' directions, texts, and even critiquing her behavior in collaborative groups. Wolf also notes that these critiques rarely make it back to the teacher, but instead are denied classroom agency. Her explanation for this is that although students often "wish to assert themselves against the demands of authority," they simultaneously "wish to protect themselves" and thus, "deny the possibility of agency in their actions" (95).

The workshop has an unusual status. It is not an adjunct to a particular class or particular teacher, and thus differs from most other adjunct tutoring models. It has an important autonomy from the first-year writing class. The workshop instructor is not an extension of the teacher, nor does the workshop leader grade the students, other than for attendance and participation. Yet it is still a legitimate space in the academy (i.e. someone is paid to be the workshop instructor; it is held in a university classroom; the students are on a roll sheet, etc.).

This combination of legitimacy and separation provides the students with a space and time to take on different roles from the ones they play in the larger classroom. If, for example, they are quiet in the first-year writing class because they do not understand the purposes of the course or the ideas of a reading, they may be able to openly, even vociferously, resist the first-year writing class and its means in the workshop. The role of the workshop leader is to reframe the resistance so that the student can examine what hooks is up to, or why Foucault's language is so difficult. The workshop instructors report

that they believe that because the workshop is not graded and students are not in the workshop with others with whom they are competing for grades, they are "free" to express confusion, despair, anger, and opinions that they could not raise in the first-year writing class because it is graded. It seems that with this workshop there is the possibility that writing may not be always already a commodity, that the workshop may complement the first-year writing course as students enter into conflict and dialogue and experience agency with respect to the curriculum.

The experience in the workshop changes the nature of the first-year writing class itself. The students have a forum that is institutionally-sanctioned where they discuss the goings on in their first-year writing class with other writing instructors (their workshop leaders) and with other students from other sections. The instructors' teaching practices—down to the concrete details of their assignments, their responses, their reading choice, their grading, even their classroom demeanor—are all made public in a context where the instructor is not present.

Some instructors see this feature of the workshop as threatening, as uncomfortably undermining their authority. Sometimes tensions emerge between the workshop leaders and instructors over what's done in the workshops, or how commentaries on the first year composition class are handled. As program administrators, we don't think that this tension is necessarily a bad thing—as long as both parties behave with professional respect. Instead, the conflict between what goes on in the workshop and what goes on in the classroom is enormously helpful, provided instructors see resistance as constructively pressuring their teaching practices.

Especially in light of our primary concern for access, the discourse of the workshop offers insight into changes in our pedagogy. For instance, hooks's essay was chosen because she writes from the perspective of an African American woman, and for some students, this perspective may invite them to engage in the kind of critical writing we encourage in our program. Hooks was chosen, in other words, because we believed that she would invite students of color to make connections with her academic project. Marissa, however, also a student of color, found hooks's language to be a barrier, part of a cultural divide. The workshop leader, by asking the series of questions about hooks's language, treats Marissa's concerns as legitimate and worthy of rigorous inquiry. She models an academic critique, making it more possible that Marissa could raise the issue in her first-year writing class, and more possible that Marissa could develop such a critique into something that she could write for her first-year writing class.

In first-year writing classes, it is a common occurrence for students to begin a critique of a writing or reading assignment by stating,

"I was talking about this in my workshop. . . ." The forum of the workshop deprivatizes the classroom; the force of the teacher's authority in the closed-door room is changed by the workshop, making the students—especially the students who may feel reluctant to raise issues in the class as a whole—more likely to give critical feedback on the teacher's practice. The public nature of teaching in this program, its openness to critique from many sides, may make teaching a little more stressful, but it certainly also makes teachers more consistently self-critical.

The change in pedagogy—and especially the changes in the traditional arrangement of students in a single classroom—make visible and public the struggles and talents of both teachers and students. The workshop structure allows students to try on discursive practices of academic writing without fear of being graded, and thus make visible conflicts with texts, teachers, classrooms, assignments, and responses. This visibility allows the program and students to see a broader range of language use and provides us with more opportunities to teach. Teachers, too, are made more visible by this structure. Their failures to communicate, their misfired responses, their terrific assignments, their passion, and their unintended slights are all public, all open to comment and critique. This broad visibility, the display of a remarkable variety of responses to our first year writing class, has the ironic consequence of making basic writing disappear.

The specifics of the practices of this program, what workshop leaders say, what students struggle with, how teachers perceive and make use of the adjunct workshop, are the material practices that together are part of an effort to make our writing program less of a barrier for students who may not be immediately successful doing college writing. They add up to both an intellectual project and a political stance (they are not separate). Intellectually, we seek to understand the relationships between writing ability, context, teaching and learning relationships, and the acquisition of new skills. Politically, we do this work in order to insure that those very students who are often selected by the placement test because they do not easily slide into the academic world are not punished by their difference.

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