



Journal of Basic Writing

Issues of Attitude and Access:

A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom

Catherine Matthews Pavia

"Because We Are Shy and Fear Mistaking":

Computer Mediated Communication with EFL Writers

Martha Clark Cummings

The Best of Both Worlds:

Teaching Basic Writers in Class and Online

Linda Stine

Building Academic Literacy from Student Strength:

An Interdisciplinary Life History Project

Robin Murie, Molly Rojas Collins, Daniel F. Detzner

Toward a Writing and Healing Approach in the Basic Writing
Classroom: One Professor's Personal Odyssey

Molly Hurley Moran

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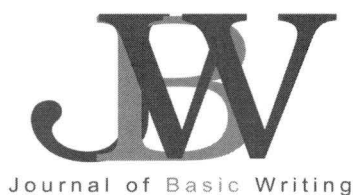
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CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 15-25 pages, double spaced, on topics related to basic and ESL writing, broadly interpreted. Submissions should follow current MLA guidelines. Manuscripts are refereed anonymously. To assure impartial review, include name(s), affiliation(s), mailing and e-mail addresses, and a short biographical note for publication on the cover page *only*. The second page should include the title but no author identification, an abstract of about 150 words, and a list of 4-5 key words. Endnotes should be kept to a minimum. It is the author's responsibility to obtain permission for including excerpts from student writing.

We prefer that contributions be submitted as Word document attachments via e-mail to: Bonne August (baugust@citytech.cuny.edu). If electronic submission is not possible, mail five copies of the manuscript and abstract to:

Professor Rebecca Mlynarczyk
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You will receive a confirmation of receipt; a report on the status of your submission will follow in about sixteen weeks.

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

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

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

EDITORS' COLUMN

Computers have transformed the way we write and the way we teach writing. At first glance, it would seem that computers can solve many of the problems our students face. Word processing programs greatly facilitate drafting and revising and help students to correct many of their grammar and spelling errors. Online courses provide the time and space for busy students to join a community of writers whenever and wherever they log on. Course management software offers a range of convenient features: students can access course syllabi and assignments, click on links to read relevant sources, “voice” their opinions on the class discussion board, and submit their essays at any time of day or night through an electronic drop box. But while we welcome the convenience that computers offer to us and our students, we are also conscious of the possible inequities that come along with them. “The digital divide” is a phrase that resonates especially strongly for teachers of “basic” writing.

The first three articles in this issue remind us that using computers to teach basic or second-language writing leads to questions and complexities as well as opportunities. The authors of these articles, each based on classroom research, emphasize the need to consider student differences and institutional contexts in deciding how to use these powerful tools to serve our students most effectively.

In “Issues of Attitude and Access: A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom,” Catherine Matthews Pavia argues that providing “access” is much more complex than simply providing machines. In a study conducted in her own basic writing class at a large public university, Pavia set out to learn more about the factors that could complicate basic writers’ interactions with technology and inhibit their ability to write with computers. For the two writers discussed in this article, who lacked typing skills and did not have up-to-date computers at home, being in a class where all writing was done on computers placed them at a disadvantage when compared to their more computer-savvy peers. The new understandings gained from this classroom research have caused the author to adapt her pedagogy in ways that acknowledge students’ differing familiarity with and reactions to computer technology.

The situation described in the next article, “‘Because We Are Shy and Fear Mistaking’: Computer Mediated Communication with EFL Writers,” could hardly be more different. In this study, conducted in a Japanese university specializing in Computer Science and Computer Engineering, all the students

are comfortable with computers but uncomfortable with English, and especially with their American professor's workshop approach to teaching writing. Martha Clark Cummings describes how she transformed her EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing course into an online writing workshop and, in the process, helped her students to experience English as a language to use for genuine communication rather than just a required subject on which to be tested.

Both the positive and negative aspects of using computers to teach writing are highlighted in "The Best of Both Worlds: Teaching Basic Writers in Class and Online," which describes a context that is quite different from the previous two. Linda Stine conducted her research in a pre-master's degree program serving mature adults who are comfortable in the workplace—all students must be employed full time in a human service agency to qualify for admission to the program. These same students, however, may not be so comfortable in a course conducted entirely online. In this context, a "hybrid" program that meets in a regular classroom with the instructor one week and online in alternate weeks seems to provide the best solution for the population being served. While these adult basic writers benefit from the convenience of an online course, they also derive important advantages from the personal contact with their teacher and classmates in the face-to-face sessions.

In the final two articles, the concern shifts from *how* we ask students to write—the technology of writing—to *what* we ask them to write about—the content of that writing. Both essays powerfully remind us of what can be gained when students are writing about subjects that are deeply meaningful to them.

In "Building Academic Literacy from Student Strength: An Interdisciplinary Life History Project," Robin Murie, Molly Rojas Collins, and Daniel F. Detzner describe a pilot project in which second-language students researched and wrote a lengthy paper based on interviews they had conducted with an elder from the local community. This semester-long, interdisciplinary project was highly motivating for students and helped them move toward successful academic writing. The authors argue convincingly that when instructors design assignments that build from student interests and strengths, "students can be brought into the real work of the academy—writing to record and make meaning of the information and the stories that are important in our lives."

In the final article, "Toward a Writing and Healing Approach in the Basic Writing Classroom: One Professor's Personal Odyssey," Molly Hurley Moran explains how her own experience of writing about a personal tragedy, the

murder of her sister, gradually led to an evolution in her teaching of basic writing. In this article, she reviews the literature on writing and healing as well as the ongoing debate about personal vs. academic writing and describes how she redesigned her basic writing course to include more emphasis on “private writing.” This private writing then became a resource from which students were free to develop their “academic essays.” Preliminary results based on the first semester using the new approach suggest that students wrote with greater enthusiasm, were more eager to publish their writing in the class electronic magazine, and gained greater control and a more authentic voice.

With this issue, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of our Editorial Review Board, a group of teachers and scholars who make time in their busy schedules to read and review manuscripts submitted to the *Journal of Basic Writing*. The vast majority of articles that eventually reach the pages of this journal undergo a process of revision and development that is guided by the thoughtful and often extensive feedback provided by the reviewers. The work done by our Editorial Review Board is truly a form of professional service and mentorship. As editors, we offer our heartfelt thanks to the distinguished professors who serve on our board.

In recent months, we have been pleased by the increasing quantity and quality of submissions to the journal, which has led to the need for additional reviewers. With this issue, we welcome seven new members to the *JBW* Editorial Board: Hannah Ashley of West Chester University in Pennsylvania; Susan Naomi Bernstein of the University of Cincinnati; Chitrakleha Dutttagupta of Arizona State University; Susanmarie Harrington of Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis; Paul Kei Matsuda of the University of New Hampshire; Geraldine McNenny of Chapman University in California; and Thomas Peele of Boise State University.

—Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Bonne August

Issues of Attitude and Access: A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom

Catherine Matthews Pavia

ABSTRACT: I conducted teacher research in a basic writing computer classroom to discover what two basic writers brought to the computer classroom that could complicate their interactions with technology and their ability to write with computers during our class. My discussion is twofold: First, I explore the writers' differing attitudes towards computers, writing, and writing with computers and the effects of these attitudes on my pedagogy. Second, in the guise of presenting opportunity, the computers accentuated the differences in the students' past technological opportunities. The computers empowered the two students by giving them access to the technology for their writing, yet the students were at a disadvantage when compared to their classmates who were more experienced in using computers. I conclude by discussing the effects that these case studies and the issues that emerged from them have had on my pedagogy.

It's Monday, 10:10 a.m., and our basic writing class begins. The twenty students start their daily ten-minute freewrite—or freetype—on the personal computers in front of them while I roam around the room, making sure that all of the computers are working. Some students already have two paragraphs typed as I walk by, and with fingers flying, are on their way to a one-page journal entry. But a few students have barely managed three sentences and sit, typing slowly and looking intently at the keyboard. I give the class an extra five minutes to write because some seem to have just started, but I know that this will only allow the slower students to type a few more sentences, while others will produce another half of a page. I wonder how I should account for students' different abilities with and knowledge of computers.

Most of the research on computer use in basic writing classrooms does not acknowledge scenarios such as this. The early literature from the 1980s on computers and basic writing students tends to present computers as a

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saving grace for basic writers. Researchers praise computers for increasing students' motivation and enjoyment of writing (Moberg 47; Rodrigues 337), for increasing the amount of text produced by basic writers (Etchison 39), and for leading students towards better revision practices (McAllister and Louth 417; Daiute 137; Dalton and Hannafin 340).

Twenty years later, research on computer use in college and the benefits of basic writing computer classes still tends to paint an idealistic picture. The recent Pew Internet and American Life Project enthusiastically portrays college students as having easy access to computers and much experience with computers. It reports that 20 percent of college students began their computer use between ages five and eight, and that 85 percent have their own computer (Jones 6). However, this portrayal of the majority's connection with and access to computers glosses over the students who did not grow up around computers because of their economic or cultural situations. Similar idealism prevails in recent literature regarding computer use in basic writing. In their nationwide survey of developmental writing teachers, Stan and Collins report that "positive evaluations of using technology overwhelmingly outweighed the neutral or negative ones" (32). And Kish presents computers as the answer to basic writing students' difficulties with writer's block.

Some research, however, has begun to question the overwhelming amount of praise for computers in writing classrooms. Gay was one of the first to argue that computers alone do not empower writers (63). Dowling similarly argues that computers do not necessarily facilitate writing (234). Moreover, Agnostina and Varone found that teachers in computer classrooms tend to intervene with basic writing students during their writing process, which is not always a positive or welcome experience, particularly if it distracts writers from their writing (46). But the caution signs raised by these articles and others like them have not been glaring enough to slow the technological bandwagon from picking up more basic writing programs and teachers in the name of progress. My own experiences teaching in the basic writing computer classroom point to the need for more research into the computer experience; attitudes; genealogies, which Sloane defines as an individual's memory, understandings, and prior experiences with writing, reading, and technology; and overall technological complexities that basic writers may bring to the computer classroom (50). More needs to be learned about this subject, particularly given the speed with which computer technology and our relationships to it are changing.

In their nationwide survey, Stan and Collins uncovered some contradictions and disparities between what writing instructors had to say about using computers in basic writing. I feel those contradictions in my own teaching: I could discuss many positive aspects of teaching in a computer classroom, among which are pedagogical variety, student interest, expanded audiences, a broader definition of "writing," and so forth. But I also need to consider individually the students in my classes who struggle with the computers. I feel that there is personal and pedagogical value in doing so and harmful repercussions for these students in failing to do so.

In an attempt to do just that and to address some of these issues in my own teaching, I began conducting teacher research with basic writers in my computer classroom during fall semester 2002. I wanted to explore the following questions: What do some basic writers bring to the computer classroom that could complicate their interactions with technology and their ability to write with technology? And how can I, as a teacher, account pedagogically for differences I see in students' abilities to write with technology?

After detailing my methodology, I present two case studies of basic writers and discuss the importance of attitude and access, two key issues that emerged from my case studies. I conclude with a reflection on three ways I have changed my own pedagogy as a result of my teacher research and case studies.

METHODOLOGY

I chose to conduct teacher research with four of the twenty students in one of my basic writing classes. Ruth Ray defines teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry" performed by teachers (173). She further defines "systematic" as research that "implies methodical data gathering, analyzing, and reporting" (173). According to Ray, teacher research differs from other composition research because of its "collaborative spirit; its emphasis on the interrelationship between theory and practice; and its interest in bringing about change. . . *from within the classroom*" (183, italics in original). I chose to conduct teacher research not only because my questions arose from my teaching but also because my purpose for conducting the research matched Ray's words exactly: I wanted to bring about change from within my classroom.

I also chose a case study approach in part because of Sloane's work in "The Haunting Story of J." In this article Sloane addresses the need for indi-

vidual genealogies of students in computer writing classrooms because our experiences with technology are always influenced by memory, learned responses, previous experiences with writing, reading, and communicative technology, and by our individual and cultural genealogies (50). As Sloane says, "Writing is also an intellectual and emotional activity of splicing together prior selves, understanding, and experiences" (52). Because of their detailed focus on individual students, case studies allow researchers to access these "prior selves, understanding, and experiences." My case study differs from Sloane's in its focus. Sloane looks at a student's genealogy to discover the motivation behind his composition choices, whereas I focus on the influence of students' genealogies on their interactions with computers and on their ability to write using computers.

The four freshmen, Valerie, Tom, Matt, and Maria,¹ who agreed to participate in my case study, were placed into basic writing based on their performance in a one-hour essay placement test, which was read and scored by a minimum of two readers. The stated goal of English 111, the basic writing class at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is to help students develop reading and writing abilities that they will need to be successful in their university careers. English 111 classes are capped at twenty students and are held in computer writing classrooms stocked with a computer for each student and a printer for the class as a whole. Each class meets twice a week for two hours and five minutes for each class period. Throughout the course, the students write three drafts of five essays of at least 750 words, numerous shorter "exploratory writings," in-class freewrites, and grammar assignments, and produce a final magazine collection of their essays.

As their basic writing teacher, I observed Tom, Valerie, Matt, and Maria throughout the semester and collected and read all of their exploratory writings, two drafts of each paper, and occasional freewrites and in-class assignments. I also spoke with each individually about each paper. In my capacity as a researcher (which does overlap some in data-gathering with my capacity as a teacher), I took notes on each student's writing and computer concerns after meeting with them for each paper, I asked them to write a letter to me about their computer experience in the class, and I interviewed each formally and extensively towards the end of the semester to ask open-ended questions about their family, class, and cultural backgrounds; their experiences with writing in general; their experiences with computers in general; and their experiences with and attitudes about writing with computers in our classroom and elsewhere.

Although I asked each student to participate in my research for different reasons (outlined below), all demonstrated aspects of their writing process with the computers that intrigued me. Tom, an African-American student, had talked with me and written frequently about his experiences growing up in a violent, inner-city environment. I suspected that Tom didn't have much access to computers in his dorm because he produced the smallest amount of writing both in class and in the final draft of each of his papers. I asked Valerie to participate because, as a hearing-impaired ESL student, she worked with two computers during class; on one, Valerie communicated with her interpreter, who typed everything that was said in class, and on the other, Valerie did class work. I wondered what kind of effect, if any, the multiple uses of computers had on her. Matt, a caucasian freshman, always came to class early to work on the computers. Only once during the entire semester was Matt not already present in the computer classroom when I arrived, usually thirty minutes before class started in the morning. I wondered why Matt would opt for computer time rather than sleep, a choice not made by many freshmen! I also observed that Matt didn't get as much writing done in class as many of the other students. Maria, a Hispanic and ESL student, was the only student who turned in hand-written drafts of her papers. I wondered if this was by necessity or by choice, and if the latter, what her reasons were for choosing to write without the computer.

Although I collected data from all four students, the findings I present in this article are based only on data gathered from Matt and Maria, primarily because of space issues in the article, but also because I gathered the most data and conducted more extensive interviews with Matt and Maria. Tom and Valerie both struggled extensively with writing in the course, and the times we arranged to discuss their papers and for formal interviews were spent working on specific pieces of writing rather than discussing writing and computers in general. As I worked with Tom and Valerie, my role as teacher took priority over my role as researcher. Plus, meetings with Valerie required a sign language interpreter to be present, which resulted in almost no informal meetings and formal meetings bound by the time constraints of the interpreter.

PORTRAITS OF TWO BASIC WRITERS IN A COMPUTER CLASSROOM

Matt

Matt was born and grew up in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in a low-income neighborhood, which he described in detail in one of his essays and in our informal discussion about the essay. Both of his parents work, but he does not know exactly what they do, although he does know that his mom works on computers as part of her job.

While growing up, Matt did not have a computer in his home; his parents got their first computer when he was in high school, but he told me that he still never used it much because he “never learned how to use a computer.” It seems that Matt’s home computer goes unused most of the time, since he reported that his parents also rarely use the home computer. Matt’s first time using a computer was on the family’s home computer. He used AOL to go online. Matt told me that his high school did have computers and that all students were required to take typing, but the school computers were “Apple and old.” Until he came to college, Matt used computers mainly to type essays for high school classes. Now he uses computers “for stuff on campus—essays, looking stuff up. I have a lot of online quizzes from classes.” He also e-mails occasionally, but said that he doesn’t e-mail or chat “like other people do.”

Matt also doesn’t have much practice with writing. In his high school, they did “a lot of oral presentations and stuff like that,” but did not write much. Matt told me that if he didn’t have to write, he wouldn’t; it’s not something he likes to do.

Despite his dislike of writing and his relative inexperience with computers, three different times in our formal interview, Matt emphasized his desire to learn how to type. He also said that writing on the computer is currently more difficult for him than writing by hand. “I like typing,” he said, “but I just think it’s easier to write something. I just want to learn how to type quicker.” This desire may stem from Matt’s feelings of inadequacy on the computer: “I know how to *use* it [the computer],” he said. “But I think I might need more time in class, just cause, . . . I type slower than I would write . . . so I think I really need a little bit more time.”

Although he feels inadequate and uncomfortable with his typing ability, Matt likes computers and wishes he knew more about them because, as he told me, “you’re going to need to learn how to use them, to use them

good when you get a job and stuff, so that's why . . . I like to use them." Matt is particularly concerned that he needs to learn how to use the computers for his future job (he wants to go into business).

Matt likes having computers in our writing classroom because they provide an opportunity for him to use computers without distraction. "At home I get distracted," he said, whereas in the computer classroom, "I get a lot more done. It's easier in class cause everyone else is doing it too, so you don't get distracted." His tendency to get distracted in his dorm is the reason Matt comes to class early to work on his papers. He also comes in at 8 o'clock in the evening to work, even though he has access to friends' computers in the dorm. "The lab's open 8 to 10," he said. "Sometimes the dorm's too loud and the library's usually packed at night." For Matt, our classroom computer lab provided him with a place he could come to write without distraction and a means of improving skills he will need in the future, even though the computers require more time for him when writing in class.

Maria

Maria grew up in the Dominican Republic, the youngest of three children and the only girl. Her aunt raised her because the family's poverty forced Maria's parents to travel. Maria's father enlisted with the Dominican air force, which required that he travel from city to city, and her mother traveled regularly to Venezuela to buy clothing that she would resell in the Dominican Republic. Maria's two older brothers immigrated to Dorchester, Massachusetts, when she was 13. In high school Maria began living with her brothers during the school year and returning to the Dominican Republic in the summer. Maria's first language is Spanish, but she speaks English well and someday wants to be an immigration lawyer.

Because of their poverty, Maria's family did not have a computer while she was growing up, but her brothers bought her a used computer when she turned 16 in response to her complaints that "there was never time to use [the school computer]." When I commented on her brothers' generosity, Maria laughed and said that they had their own motives: It turned out that they used it to play video games. "So where is the homework? They used it more than I did. They said, 'Hey, we paid for this.' I said, 'But it was for me!'" Maria told me that her parents' reaction to the computer was negative. When she showed her parents her computer, her mom said, "Get that away from me!" and she still "doesn't even touch it."

Two years later, Maria is using the same computer, which is now even more outdated. "It's sooooo slow," she said. "It takes it like 5 minutes to download a picture." The computer's speed is why she writes her essays first on paper. When I asked about her handwritten drafts, she said, "Just forget about it. I write all of my drafts on paper." She also tells me that it's too expensive to print her drafts on campus, so she waits to type them until her final draft. Plus, she said, "It's easier for me to write them down, to think, instead of just typing up whatever's in my head. . . . Computers are easier, but if you want to think about it, then it's pencil and paper I think is easier." Maria told me that she's trying to talk her brothers into getting her a new computer, but "they say they need a computer [first]."

Although she writes a lot of papers for her classes—sometimes twice a week for her anthropology class—Maria calls herself a "slacker" when it comes to writing. She doesn't write e-mails, although she thinks it's "really fun" to get e-mail. She told me, "My friends say, 'Why don't you ever answer me?' I say, 'We talk on the phone. What's the point?'" She also complained to me during one of our informal meetings about her cousin in the Dominican Republic, who e-mails because it's their only way of communicating. She gets tired of having to respond to his e-mails: "I hate writing back," she said.

Despite her dislike for writing e-mails and papers on computers, Maria feels comfortable with her knowledge of computers, with one exception: She explained that when she types, "I have to look at the keyboard. . . . I think it's so annoying. Other people type without looking at the keyboard. That's the only thing that's so not fair." And, as I noticed in class, Maria enjoys computers. She stayed after class to surf the Internet, to find "cool" sites, and to ask my advice about making online purchases. When I asked her how she feels about computers in general, Maria stopped complaining about her slow computer and the cost of printing and instead emphasized the convenience of computers for research and for presenting finished versions: "I do love computers," she said. "It's so much easier. It beats going to the library. No books. And it looks better when you type something up than when you hand it in written down. I love my slow computer!"

DISCUSSION OF CASE STUDIES

Of the many interesting issues that arose in my observations of and discussions with Matt and Maria, I've chosen the two that I see as the most

intriguing and important in their effect on my pedagogy. My observations of and discussions with Matt and Maria helped me realize that I need to provide the basic writing students in my class with a balanced perspective and pedagogy in regard to computer use. The two areas that I will discuss are students' attitudes toward computers and students' access to computers.

Students' Attitudes: "Cause You're Going to Need to Know How to Use Them"

As can be seen in the earlier portrayals, neither Matt nor Maria likes to write in general. Matt likes writing only when he can choose something that interests him or that relates to him, but told me, "I don't think of myself as a writer. If I didn't have to write, I don't think I would write. If it wasn't required . . . it's not something I'd like to do." When I asked Maria if she likes to write, she said, simply, "No." Maria calls herself "a slacker cause I just write enough to get by." She told me that she does like to write poems about things she's passionate about, like sexism and bilingual education. She often wrote poems during freewriting when I did not provide a writing prompt.

In contrast to their negative attitudes towards writing, both Maria and Matt like computers in general and like having them in our classroom. In fact, even though Maria frequently complained about her slow computer in our informal discussions and our formal interview, she ended the interview by telling me, "I love my slow computer!" Matt explained his positive attitude toward computers by referring to his future—that he'll eventually "need to know how to use them." Matt's responses seem common, according to Stan and Collins. They note that students tend to see computers as a "useful tool" and "feel they are learning the technology of the future" when they use computers (32). Matt and Maria's positive attitudes toward computers reflect society's positive and idealistic views about computers and the benefits of computer literacy. Although Sloane argues that students' attitudes toward computers echo their parents' attitudes (57), I saw society as having the biggest influence on Matt and Maria's attitudes about computers and about writing with computers. Both students' comments fit well with Selfe's discussion that society perceives computer literacy as a means of ensuring economic success.

Matt and Maria's positive attitudes toward computers do not transfer to their attitudes toward writing with computers. Neither enjoys writing with the computer—Maria even hates to write e-mails on the computer, as discussed earlier. This dislike of writing with computers seems natural, given

both students' dislike of writing in general, but it does not conform to the larger research studies on students' attitudes in relation to writing with computers. Gay found students' attitudes toward writing improved with computer use (68), and Stan and Collins report that this finding is consistent across research and "has been generally accepted as a first step toward subsequent writing improvement" (24).

Both students seem to feel empowered and positive about the presence of computers in the classroom, particularly given their perceptions about the importance technology will have in their futures, and yet both feel hesitant or inferior when it comes down to their abilities to use and write with the machines. Matt doesn't know how to type well and wants to "know more about them [computers]," and when I asked Maria if she was comfortable with the computers, she compared her abilities with those of other students, pointing out her shortcomings. When speaking with me, Matt referred primarily to "typing" when he discussed writing or composing on the computer, whereas he referred to writing with pen and paper as "writing."

Batschelet and Woodson argue that this distinction between writing with computers and computers as machines/technology is made only by beginning writers and does not exist with experienced writers (qtd. in Stan and Collins 23-24). As a writing instructor, I am used to writing with computers and see writing as necessarily connected to computers, but the students in my classes may not always connect writing with computers and may need pen and paper writing assignments until they become accustomed to writing solely with computers. As a basic writing teacher, then, I need to be aware that students may have negative attitudes about writing with computers even when they have positive attitudes towards having the computers in class. If one of my goals is to help students enjoy writing and become more confident in their writing, I need to help students overcome feelings of inadequacy and hesitation about using the computers to write.

Students' Access: "Other People Type Without Looking . . . That's So Not Fair"

For basic writers, writing is an unfamiliar and often complex territory to be navigated with caution. Stan and Collins agree, defining basic writers as lacking self-confidence and "unpracticed and unskilled in composing specific forms of texts valorized traditionally by faculty" (22, 20). For Shaughnessy, the definition of basic writers as inexperienced beginners who

“must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes,” explained many of the reasons why basic writers write the way they do: “Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin” (7). Shaughnessy’s descriptions are increasingly relevant when we add computers into the mix of basic writing classrooms. What happens in a computer classroom when basic writers, who by definition lack experience in writing, also lack experience with computers?

Both Matt and Maria’s abilities to write with a computer and their access to computers directly reflect their family, class, and cultural backgrounds. Neither student had used a computer or owned a computer until they were in high school. Even after receiving access to home computers, neither student used computers regularly or saw their parents using computers at home. Maria’s brothers used her computer, but only to play video games.²

Both Matt and Maria continue to have difficulties with computer access. Matt is grateful for the access afforded him by the classroom computer lab because “the dorm’s too loud and the library’s usually packed.” Yet, as Moran discusses, this allows Matt “institutional access,” which still disadvantages him when compared to students with “home access” (218-19). And although Maria has access to a computer, its age and speed, combined with her economic situation and inability to afford printing, limit that access to such an extent that she handwrites her papers.

I found Faigley and Porter’s definitions of “access” to be helpful when analyzing Matt and Maria’s situations. Faigley says that “information literacy” requires more than just speaking of access as equipment and technical skill (135). Porter’s definition is similar, but three-fold: access includes (1) infrastructure (money and machines), (2) literacy (education and training), and (3) community acceptance (freedom to speak online) (99). According to the first part of both Faigley’s and Porter’s definitions of access as equipment and machines, our classroom computer lab has provided Matt and Maria with more access to technology by providing them with the opportunity to use the machines for their writing, an opportunity that is harder for them to come by than for other students. In their comments to me, it’s evident that Matt and Maria both see the computers in our classroom as empowering—Matt gets to practice his typing, and Maria gets to present me with an occasional in-class draft that, because she wrote it using the computers in class, looks better than her handwritten drafts. Maria has the opportunity to use the classroom computers after class to surf the Web, and

Matt finds writing on the computer during class easier—"cause everyone else is doing it too." Many researchers claim that computers in the classroom are distractions for students because of anxiety over the text's visual appearance or because of the physical disruptions of the keyboard and computer environment (Sharples 94; Crafton 272; Dowling 232, 228), but in Matt's case the computer classroom provides him with access to computers without the distractions he finds in other places of institutional and dorm access.

However, when referring to the second part of both Faigley's and Porter's definitions of access as "information literacy" and "education and training," the "access" that the computer classroom provides Matt and Maria is more problematic. The basic writing class pedagogy at my university, as outlined earlier, does not encompass any education or training with computers until students assemble their final portfolios the last week of class. Then, they are given a handout on formatting their papers to look less like student essays. Our basic writing program pedagogy focuses instead on the drafting and revising process of writing, not on training in word processing or practice typing. Yet we usually assume students have a certain degree of this second type of computer access, education and training in computer use, which is a poor assumption when our classes include students such as Matt and Maria. Although Matt and Maria's cases may be exceptional, they do show the importance of addressing individual circumstances in our pedagogies.

For me, having computers in the classroom seems to be a "Catch 22" when viewed in terms of equity. Olson says schooling ought to be a "maker of opportunities" (204). Basic writing computer classrooms can be viewed as makers of opportunities—the basic writing classroom becomes a place to give all students the opportunity to write with technology, an opportunity students like Matt and Maria do not readily have. Yet, even as computers in the classroom create opportunities, they may accentuate differences in opportunity. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, as I roamed around the classroom each day while students wrote, the differences between those who had the opportunity to learn to write with computers early and those who didn't were very clear. Unfortunately, as Conway says, marginalization and alienation can result from "even the most well-intentioned attempts to empower 'at-risk' populations" (91).

We therefore need to be careful when we make arguments that computer classrooms provide students with more access. For example, as co-

director of a basic writing program, Grabill decided that a need of basic writing is to “introduce sophisticated writing technologies to our students for reasons of access—students could not be successful at our university without access to these technologies” (94). It’s unclear if Grabill is referring to access to the machines only or also to the information literacy and training in use of the machines. But Grabill’s conclusion is clear: “In effect, we provided our students with an advantage” (100). Yet this claim of advantage and Grabill’s justification for requiring basic writing to be taught using computers takes a more long-term approach to issues of success and access, defining “advantage,” “access,” and “success” within the context of the university, not within the context of the basic writing class itself.

For the two students I followed and interviewed, writing on computers in the classroom did not lead to more empowerment when viewed from a more short-term focus on the class itself. Both Matt and Maria struggled with writing on the computer. Matt, in particular, wrote significantly less in class than most other students. For example, Microsoft Word’s word count feature allowed me to see that Matt’s freewrites (15 minutes of writing in response to open-ended prompts) for the entire semester averaged 113 words per freewrite, compared to the class average of 190 words per freewrite. The two students who sat next to Matt averaged 224 and 273 words per freewrite, which may have contributed to Matt’s awareness of his slow typing and his self-comparisons to other students. Maria also struggled, although not to this extent, averaging 147 words per freewrite. Maria was also very conscious of the fact that “other people type without looking at the keyboard. . . . That’s so not fair.”³

In their nationwide survey of basic writing teachers, Stan and Collins found that students “just plain write more—more words, more pages” when computers were added to the basic writing classroom (33). Even if it is the case for the majority of students, those without access and extensive computer experience are further disadvantaged in the writing classroom because other students write even more, while they, in turn, write even less.⁴ Of course, Matt and Maria’s typing struggles and lower word counts may be a result of their struggles with writing in general and not solely a result of their struggle with writing on computers. But for students such as Matt and Maria, the computer may add “complexity to an already complex process,” as Crafton says (322). Crafton believes that we tend to see computers as “labor-saving” devices, but if they do complicate writing or the writing process for some students, students might actually need more time when we

ask them to write with the computer, a fact that Matt was well aware of and spoke about in our interview.

Moreover, Nichols found that writers who were unsure of the word processing system or who weren't excellent typists experienced many interventions and complexities in composing that negatively affected their short-term and long-term memory and interrupted their focus on their writing plans and goals, a focus that Perl and Flower and Hayes found so crucial in distinguishing between beginning and expert writers. Using the example of Gina, whom he defines as a "better" writer, Nichols suggests that better writers than basic writers are more likely to use a word processing system to their advantage (92). I have observed in my teaching that it's not necessarily *better* writers who can use the computers to their advantage, but in the case of producing more writing at one time, it takes *computer-experienced* writers. The extra tasks involved when writing with computers require more for some writers than what they would otherwise need to write with pen and paper.

Without knowing individual students' genealogies, we may easily overlook the difficulties that lack of computer experience produces for some students in computer writing classrooms. Stan and Collins record that almost all instructors in their survey agreed that students with minimal or no computer skills presented a problem in class, mainly because the instructors had to teach them the necessary word processing commands and uses (37). From Stan and Collins' article, it doesn't seem that many instructors recognized any long-term problems this lack of access and experience presented for students. Stan and Collins report that most instructors thought these problems disappeared as the semester progressed, with one exception: students who lacked typing skills, they found, were at a "decided disadvantage" (37). Stan and Collins conclude this section of their report with a quote and a question from one instructor surveyed: "A small handful of students . . . fall way behind. . . . Should knowledge of word processing be a requirement for entry into a basic writing course?" (34).

When addressing questions such as these, we need to remember, as Thomas says, that "before anything else [basic writers] need to learn hope and self-confidence" (59). Being enrolled in a writing class in a computer lab when they do not have much computer knowledge may lead students to doubt their abilities when what they really need is confidence. In their presentation of some of the problems and contradictions in computer use in basic writing classes, Stan and Collins argue, "Technology can serve to

alleviate or even transform a basic writer's anxiety about writing—or it can erode still further a basic writer's confidence" (22).

After struggling with issues such as these while working with and interviewing Matt, Maria, and students like them, I am convinced that "providing access" is a much more complex concept than just providing the machines. Access issues run deeper than computers, programs, availability, and use in a writing classroom—they stem from and encompass students' family, culture, and class genealogies that affect their interactions with the classroom component in the overall picture of access.

There are plenty of research studies showing that computers can help basic writing students, and I've seen this in my own classes. But in some cases, computers can also further disadvantage students, and I need to take this into consideration in my pedagogy. I therefore believe that *the option* to write with computers is a good one for basic writers. Without the availability of computers in classrooms, students with less access to machines may not be able to make the decision to write with them, while students with home access always have that option. In this sense, computer classrooms do provide students with *access to choice*. Perhaps we need to combine Grabill's long-term definition of "access" and "success" with a short-term definition based on success in the writing class. The following section outlines three ways in which I have altered my pedagogy in an attempt to balance providing access to computers without further disadvantaging some students.

ALTERATIONS TO MY PEDAGOGY

First, I have adopted Moran's and Duffelmeyer's suggestions to have students write technology narratives at the beginning of the semester. In this technology narrative, Duffelmeyer asks students about their attitudes about technology; the influences of their parents, friends, teachers, schools, and society in general on their attitudes and uses of technology; and their individual chronologies with computers (295). Moran suggests that these technology autobiographies will not only help us learn about students' connections, or lack thereof, to the technology we are asking them to use, but are also the first step in helping students become "reflective and critical users" of the technology (220). Technology narratives allow me to discover what students bring with them to writing and to computer use.

I now assign these technology narratives before establishing a firm

plan for my course so that, if needed, I can change my approach and assignments to account for individual students' access issues and genealogies. I have at times added computer instruction to lesson plans, allowed individual students more time with assignments, accepted handwritten drafts from individual students, and, most successfully, have held office hours in the computer classroom in response to technology narratives. The smaller writing class gives me a unique opportunity to tailor my curriculum for the students. Students will probably not get this flexibility and attention to their individual genealogies in larger classes.

My second pedagogical change is striving for a balanced approach to using computers in the classroom. Even in a class with computers available, I now assign writing without the computers. I require a balanced portion of the writing in the class to do be done with pen and paper for those students who aren't empowered by computers and for whom complexities added by the computer might take away from the focus and time needed to put their thoughts and ideas in writing. Despite what students may think, the existence of the machines in the classroom does not necessarily give them access to knowledge about computers, to stellar typing abilities, to future success in jobs, or to prolonged access and contact with computers in the future. What it does give is access to choice and to the opportunity to write with computers if students choose to do so. I therefore try to present the computers as a choice instead of deciding for students that all writing in the class—or even the majority of writing in the class—will be done on computers.

Third, I try to follow Kish's statement when planning assignments: "Computers are tools to aid students in the writing process; they should not subsume writing as a priority" (154). I have decided to avoid assignments in basic writing classes that might subsume writing by involving technology in the writing process in even more complicated ways than word processing does. Stan and Collins report of a variety of uses of software in basic writing classes, including Web page projects. In their article, they quote Jeffrey Maxson, who defends assigning Web pages in basic writing classes using the following rationale: "students already possess expertise in understanding and interpreting images, sounds. . . . Hypermedia authorship can thus serve to introduce them to academic literacy through means with which they are familiar" (28-29). Although I have assigned Web page writing and creation to students before, after my teacher research, I have decided not to assign Web page authorship in basic writing because producing and

supplementing writing with images and designs does add complexity, regardless of students' familiarity with reading images. Given the definition of basic writers discussed earlier, I use computers only for word processing in my basic writing classes.

Above all, as basic writing teachers, we need to avoid making assumptions about our students' computer knowledge and about the effects of computers in our classrooms and instead make active inquiries into these issues. This requires us not only to research issues surrounding computer use in basic writing classrooms, but also to get to know our students better so we can see the attitudes and genealogies that they are bringing with them to the computer classroom. We also need to carefully consider our goals for our students' learning and make decisions regarding the use of technology in our classrooms based on these goals. Let's not jump on the technology bandwagon wholeheartedly if it causes individual students in our classes to fall further behind in their journey as writers.

Notes

1. Students' names have been changed.
2. Olson says that this use of computers as a "personal video arcade" is common in lower-class homes because users are only required to know how to load the program, whereas in middle-class homes, computer use more typically involves sophisticated programming and interaction with the computer (202).
3. The computers in our classroom are not equipped with any typing tutorials. I should have looked into this possibility for Matt. Instead, I offered to be in the classroom at additional times in case he wanted to come in and type or write. He continued to come to class early and came only one additional time outside of class time.
4. Conway's study of four basic writers in a computer classroom also presents a perspective different from Stan and Collins' report, perhaps because Conway is also looking at individual students instead of conducting larger, more general research. Conway argues that computer classrooms may lead to more alienation for some students, as they did for the four students she observed, three of whom, she argues, actually became "nonwriters" in the course of the class. Like Matt and Maria, the students Conway followed did not produce more writing or become more confident in their writing as they wrote on computers in class (80).

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“Because We Are Shy and Fear Mistaking”: Computer Mediated Communication with EFL Writers

Martha Clark Cummings

ABSTRACT: This article describes an experiment in Computer Mediated Communication conducted in two English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academic writing classes in rural Japan. In this online course for EFL writers, there were positive changes in attitudes, motivation, and relationships for both the instructor and the students.

For a writing teacher who envisions herself building a safe community in a classroom where interaction and collaboration blossom and thrive, where meaningful and achievable language learning goals are articulated and enacted, where risks are taken, and time is invested in and outside the class, my first face-to-face meetings with my university students in Japan, hit me with the force of a blow to the solar plexus. I'm sure that for my students it was no less painful.

These students, university sophomores, had passed a rigorous entrance examination to gain admittance to one of the top 100 (out of 500 or so) universities in Japan. Their performance on this examination demonstrated their proficiency in English grammar, knowledge of vocabulary, and reading comprehension. However, since they had learned English through the traditional *yakudoku* (grammar/translation) method, their knowledge of English was similar to an American high school student's knowledge of Latin. They could not understand me when I spoke

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to them and, in fact, did not expect me to address them in English. They struggled to speak a few words of English and were shocked that I knew no Japanese. They had very little experience writing essays, in Japanese or in English. My course was called Academic Writing Two.

I had been warned by my colleagues that because this is a specialized university, with majors in Computer Science and Computer Engineering only, these students tended to be “geeks,” loosely defined as people who prefer working with computers and mathematical formulas to working with people. This turned out to be an understatement, as an early entry in my journal illustrates. Note that it also illustrates my extreme culture shock. I include this slightly hyperbolic description because it demonstrates so vividly how utterly unsuited for each other my students and I seemed to be, at the outset.

At this particular university, classrooms are male places. Young male places. These boys have been forced to wear uniforms and keep their hair short and uncolored and now they can wear whatever the hell they want and do whatever the hell they want with their hair and stop washing.

When the boys come to my class it is a miserable time of day for them. Sometimes I am there waiting and sometimes I come in after they do, depending how much I dread seeing them that day. They all push in at once, rushing toward their seats, the furthest from me they can find, running, some of them, to the seats in the last row, the seats near the windows. They gallop to their seats, see me, abruptly avert their eyes and sit down where they are standing, as if the sight of me has turned them to stone. Each student sits in exactly the same seat each time if he can. I know which seat they consider theirs by the horrified look on their faces when someone else is occupying it.

They are crammed, jammed into their too-small seats, their over-sized pants and untied shoes like prison wear, their hair a uniform orange—the color their hair gets when it is bleached—and hanging in slender threads across their eyes. In October, the classroom is a cold place with only the heat of our bodies to warm us.

The boys slide into their seats, shivering as the cold of the plastic seeps through the thin fabric of their jeans. They don't know each other yet, so they do not talk. They have already had two other

classes and lunch before they get to my class, so one of my biggest jobs is keeping them awake. I do this by trying to get them to talk to each other.

Even when I ask them to, they cannot turn away from the front of the classroom to face each other, as if their heads were locked in place, like cows in stanchions. "Turn your heads," I tell them, smiling. "Turn toward the person next to you." It is as if they were made of glass and their necks would snap. "Say hello," I tell them. Then say, "Listen to this," and read your freewriting aloud. They shudder. I may as well have told them to take a giant pair of pliers and start pulling out their own teeth.

What does a Western teacher do with a group of Japanese students who may very well believe that their days applying themselves to studying English are over? I had also been warned by my colleagues that my students, recently recovering from *shiken jigoku*, or examination hell, would be passive, unmotivated, and possibly resistant to studying English. In Japan, every student who attends a university must pass the university's entrance examination. High school students usually spend a great deal of time, energy, and family resources—for tutoring—to pass these examinations (Brown and Yamashita). Once they have entered a university, however, they become the teacher's responsibility. Teachers are expected to pass their students, and if they don't, they are blamed for their students' failure. To further complicate matters, students can get jobs after attending a university regardless of their grades (Hadley and Evans).

My teaching experience had been primarily ESL (English as a Second Language) rather than EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in New York and California, where there was a heterogeneous, immigrant population with a wide variety of attitudes and motivations toward learning English. In Japan, I started by considering what I *did* know about my students. They were all majoring in Computer Engineering and Computer Science. There were enough computers at the university for every student and every instructor to be working at one at all times. We were all extremely uncomfortable in each others' physical presence. Perhaps teaching them via Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) was a way to begin. This move was also inspired in part by a very positive reaction to CMC I had had previously from one very quiet Japanese student who was in a class I taught in California. She described her experience as follows:

I don't miss my turn anymore! I realized today that I don't have to worry about turn-taking when communicating online. I can finally say something in class without hesitation. Turn-taking in class has been a stressful and unpleasant experience for me since I started studying in California. I always miss my turn when I have something to say. And when I have nothing to say, I get the floor. I sometimes feel so dumb just sitting in class listening to people talking. What is wrong with me? What is it that stops me from participating like the others in class? I have been asking myself these questions even though I had known that some factors such as cultural differences, my personality, and my English proficiency level would prevent me from speaking up in class. I was thinking how many times I spoke during the first half of this class. Probably a few times. I don't know how many times I have posted my comments since the online segment started, but I feel like I am saying a lot more than before. I don't think I have missed my turn yet! (Cummings et al.)

Much has been written about intercultural clashes between Western teachers and their Japanese students, with students being described as silent, unmotivated, and hostile, and teachers as overeager to impose their values and as making inappropriate demands on the students (Akimoto-Sugimori; Cohen; Miyoshi; Paul). I did not want to fall into the trap, where, according to Baumann, "whatever any 'Asian' informant was reported to have said or done was interpreted with stunning regularity as a consequence of their 'Asianness', their 'ethnic identity', or the 'culture' or their 'community'" (1). Feeling some trepidation, I moved out of the physical classroom and into CMC, to see if our intercultural clashes and inhibitions might be reduced there.

This article describes the road toward communication through writing for a group of basic writers and their teacher in the deep north of Japan. It is action research in that I perceived and wanted to reflect on a problem in my own classroom. For whatever reasons, my students and I were silencing each other. I had one potential solution at my fingertips—I was a trained, experienced CMC writing teacher, and my students were majoring in Computer Engineering and Computer Science. The action I decided to take was to try teaching them through CMC for a semester and see if the situation

improved. My student writers were familiar with the conventions of CMC text display, could navigate using computer keyboards and mice, and understood—better than I did—the workings of software, operating systems, and web pages. They could work with different forms of texts, such as multimedia documents and hyperlinks, which they occasionally included in their submissions for the class. I reasoned that a good starting place for addressing what seemed to be a major teaching problem might be Computer Mediated Communication, since it was a place where the students felt at least as competent as I did.

REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

This review of the literature includes four strands. In recent years, much has been written about the importance of interaction in language learning in general and writing in particular, about the importance of motivation in language learning, and about the kinds of interaction available in Computer Mediated Communication and whether this interaction enhances language learning. Finally, in reference to this study, the link between literacy and CMC will be examined.

Sociocultural Theory, Interaction, and Communities of Practice

For Vygotsky, learning, even learning to think, starts with interaction. He argued that the role of schools was to help learners develop their thought processes through collaboration with others. Collaborative learning leads us to create knowledge through interaction, and writing is learned through collaboration, problem-solving, and the expression of our own ideas (Bruffee). Learning a language also entails the development of a new identity through “negotiated experience [in which we] define who we are by the way we experience ourselves through participation” (Wenger 149). Pavlenko and Lantolf suggest that we “reconceptualise L2 learning as an intrinsically social—rather than simply cognitive—process of socialisation into specific communities of practices, also referred to as ‘situated learning’” (157) (see also Lave and Wenger). In describing academic writing, Casanave uses the game metaphor to describe the importance of students' participation in the communities of practice they wish to become members of. That is, players must understand the rules of the game from the inside, as participants, rather than from the outside, as spectators. She also

emphasizes that “[f]irst-hand accounts” give us “vivid description of social practice” spotlighting “the diversity and unpredictability of individual experience” (15).

Attitude and Motivation

The literature in this domain is vast. Motivation has been studied in psychology and education (Dörnyei *Teaching*), probably because there is a commonsense relationship between student motivation and success in school (Dörnyei “New Themes”). In the field of second language acquisition, motivation has been viewed via Gardner’s socio-educational model (Gardner and MacIntyre), arguing that “Teachers, instructional aids, curricula, and the like clearly have an effect on what is learned and how students react to the experience” (9). In other words, there are things we can do in the classroom that will influence student motivation. This depends, of course, on the context in which one is working. Critics of Gardner’s model (Crookes and Schmidt; Dörnyei *Teaching*) have pointed out that it more accurately describes learners in an ESL rather than an EFL context. Dörnyei and Ottó suggest that for second-language students motivation is “dynamically changing” and “initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out” (65). This is a much more thorough definition albeit less subject to a teacher’s influence. Students in Japan, who have had English hammered into them in order to pass entrance examinations, may find themselves in the position described by Deci: “When people feel pressured, compliance or defiance results. Compliance produces change that is not likely to be maintained, and defiance blocks change in the first place” (196). That is, they may have caved in to the pressure enough to pass the exam and subsequently refuse to learn more. In reporting the findings of a number of research studies, Deci states that “students who learned in order to put the material to active use displayed considerably greater conceptual understanding of the material than did students who learned in order to be tested” (47).

Computer Mediated Communication

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), for example, using computers to facilitate interaction between people, has become increasingly common in higher education (Nunan). CMC has been credited with increasing student motivation, enhancing cooperation and collaboration between

students, and changing the nature of turn-taking in courses (Bowers; Cummings et al.). It is seen as a powerful way “to link learners” (Warschauer “Computer-Mediated” 477). CMC has been described as a bridge between speaking and writing and as an enabling and empowering tool that combines expression, interaction, reflection, problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration (Egbert and Hanson-Smith; Chapelle). In addition, CMC, accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, increases opportunities for communication (Warschauer “Computer-Mediated”; Gonglewski, Meloni, and Brant). Furthermore, CMC is interactive, promoting dialogue (Warschauer “Computer-Mediated”) while at the same time encouraging more complex language than face-to-face communication (Matsuda et al.). CMC is less face threatening than face-to-face interaction, allowing students to voice opinions more freely (Cummings et al.). According to Nunan, “good” online courses promote interaction (i.e., are student-centered rather than teacher-led), are conducted by a professor who responds rapidly and thoroughly to student needs as they are expressed online, and foster a climate in which all students are encouraged to respond.

Research has demonstrated that students express more complex thoughts and feelings in CMC than in other forms of written composition (Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni). Participation increases because pragmatic aspects of conversation such as turn-taking and interrupting are irrelevant (Cummings et al.; Sullivan and Pratt). In addition, Gonglewski, Meloni, and Brant found that motivation was higher among learners who communicated with people they did not know and whom they knew they would not meet.

Literacy, Writing Development, and Computer Mediated Communication

First, in Computer Mediated Communication, everyone has more time to work. Not everyone chooses to take advantage of it, but writers have time to compose (Sullivan and Pratt) and teachers have time to demonstrate processes (Day and Batson). CMC provides a variety of audiences for student writers instead of just one, the teacher (DiMatteo; Warschauer “Motivational”). Possibly, the CMC environment is less intimidating because the audience, including the teacher, is invisible (Cummings et al.). Students who are shy or who have other reasons for not wanting to participate in face-to-face classrooms may find CMC classes easier to participate in (Scattergood).

DESIGN AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

My goal, in moving away from the face-to-face classroom was to increase interaction and motivation, which in turn, I hoped, would increase second-language acquisition, enhancing student writing. To do this, I looked for ways to lower my students' and my own inhibitions, which included moving to an environment that was familiar to all of us, CMC. The value of Computer Mediated Communication in general and with relevance to literacy and the teaching of writing pertains directly to this study.

Nunan's description of his study could well describe this one:

The aim of the study was to generate insights rather than to test hypotheses. . . . In keeping with recent approaches to case study in educational research, this study is particularistic and descriptive, adopts a heuristic approach to data, and relies heavily on inductive reasoning. (53)

Following Warschauer ("On-line"), I set out to investigate how the use of CMC could alleviate stress and improve the quality and quantity of the written communication between these basic writers and me. In addition to our already mentioned inability to communicate aurally/orally, the stress of our time together was compounded by two other facts. First, our time together was limited. We met for 90 minutes, once a week for fourteen weeks. Second, we had so much to accomplish. In three short years (approximately 80 hours of writing instruction), students were to begin doing original research that would lead to the writing and presentation of their graduation theses in English. Granted, the thesis was only 4-6 pages. But for most of these students, it would require an effort of monumental proportions.

Through this action research, I hoped to answer the following questions: Would moving this particular group of students away from face-to-face interaction into Computer Mediated Communication do any of the following: 1) increase interaction, 2) lower inhibition, 3) increase motivation, 4) increase awareness of audience, or 5) enhance the teaching and learning of writing? Previous experience and a review of the literature had led me to believe that the answers to these questions might be yes.

I set up an asynchronous Internet classroom using <http://www.nicenet.org> and also communicated with the students through the

campus e-mail system. After the first two class meetings, we did not see each other again until the last class, in the fourteenth week.

At my university, students are required to take ten semesters of English, including two courses in listening and speaking, one in pronunciation, and two in technical reading. There are four writing courses: Academic Writing One and Two, Technical Writing, and Thesis Writing. The course described in this article is Academic Writing Two (see Appendix A for the syllabus). The obvious difference from typical academic writing courses is the online nature of the course. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of the study no one else at the university was teaching a course exclusively online.

A total of 50 college sophomores in two classes participated in this study. Most of the students (90% of them) participated actively, completing between 85 and 100% of the written assignments. Almost all of the learners were under 20 years old and 90% of them were male. The writing ability of the students was basic (see Appendix B for pretest samples). One unusual feature of this study was that the students, because of their very busy schedules, usually met together in the designated computer lab at the regularly scheduled time, but without the instructor. This is not the way online instruction usually happens (Warschauer "On-line").

Procedure and Data Collection

Students were required to read and respond to eight readings over approximately fourteen weeks. In this course I piloted materials that were later adapted for *Inspired to Write* (Withrow, Brookes, and Cummings). Students submitted their weekly assignments to nicenet.org. In addition, they answered questions in two questionnaires about their experiences with and attitudes toward English, writing in general, and this course in particular.

At the beginning of the course, students answered a set of "First Day Questions" adapted from Mlynarczyk and Haber (see Appendix C). Relevant answers to these questions include the following. In answer to question 5, "What do you hope to do after you graduate?" only three students mentioned the possibility of studying more English, and only one said he wanted to get a job using English. In answer to questions 6 and 7, asking for good and bad past experiences with writing, most of the answers were about writing in Japanese; bad experiences far outnumbered good.

In 32% of the responses, the concept of shame was included, as in “I am ashamed about mistaking word.” The students’ technological interests were reflected in other answers about bad experiences with writing. They described instances of writing an e-mail that was not sent due to technical difficulties, or pushing the wrong key on a mobile phone when trying to send an e-mail message. Several typical responses are given below. These responses indicate that students saw the value of writing as a tool for personal interaction, and a heuristic device for memorization. They also suggest that students remember what they are praised for.

In response to “Describe a good experience you have had with writing,” students wrote:

- When I was high school student, I have a girl friend. We wrote each together. It was much fun for me! I thought it was interesting to write a letter then.
- I was sometimes praised at my English writings at my English class in junior high school (though I wasn’t praised at my Japanese writings...). So I made an efforts. And my English grade was good. I think I didn’t hate English thanks to this.
- It is difficult to memorize things only by seeing. We can memorize things by writing. Moreover we can say freely by writing. Example it is Email and so on.

Bad experiences with writing mentioned by students included failing the English section examination (although there is no writing required on the examination), disliking writing in general (even writing in Japanese), experiencing difficulty mastering Chinese characters (one of the three alphabets used in Japanese writing), and being perceived as a messy writer (I think that we can safely translate “dirty” as “messy” and that possibly messiness is considered proof of incompetence):

- I failed in the entrance examination at twice because I had no knowledge of English writing and reading.
- Basically, I don’t like write. I couldn’t write a Japanese essay well. So my Japanese test score with essay was generally low. Homework of a composition also worried me.
- When I was 10 years old, I was punished by teacher. And that teacher forced me to write KANJI 3600 words. I don’t want to remember it.
- Because I often mistake to write a character, I was got angry by parents. When writing an English sentence, I am worry. I mistake a character in Japanese or English.

These sample responses suggest, that for these students, writing is an activity that leads to punishment, shame, and revelations of incompetence.

One salient difference between face-to-face classes and this online class is that the online students asked many more personal questions and offered more personal information than in face-to-face classes, where most students wrote “Nothing” in answer to questions 13 (“What questions do you have right now?”) and 14 (“What else would you like to tell me about yourself?”). A few students in the face-to-face course asked questions about my grading policy and why there were no final exams, but most had no questions and nothing to tell. On the other hand, at the beginning of the CMC class, it seemed that students were responding to the lack of restraint and possibly emboldened by reading one another’s responses. For whatever reasons, the quality and quantity of the responses were different.

In answer to question 13 (“What questions do you have right now?”), I received responses like the following.

About language learning:

- Have you ever studied foreign language? If so, would you tell me a key to making progress quickly?
- Aren’t you studying Japanese? And if you are studying Japanese, how are you studying?
- When I will be able to feel actually I make progress?

About American culture (not always entirely serious, I think):

- I heard that Manhattan’s people don’t have umbrella. Any shop sales no umbrella. Is it really?

About places where their lives and mine might intersect:

- Nowadays I exercise with my friends in SRLU (University weight room). Don’t you exercise with us?

Questions like these gave me the sense that the students were genuinely interested in improving their English skills and saw me as someone who might be able to provide them with guidance on how to proceed. But amid these friendly voices came one anxious voice:

- I’m afraid why do you use this online lecture system? Does the system completely safe? I’m afraid do you really read all sent documents by students? Can the system identify students completely?

This response shows a mix of knowledge and distrust of the computer mediated world we were entering. I responded to this student by

reassuring him with what I did know about the system and asking questions in order to allow him to demonstrate his expertise.

In response to question 14 ("What else would you like to tell me about yourself?"), students told me what they liked:

- I like the movie. The most favorite movie is "Brave heart". Please see, if you like a movie.
- I like punk rock. But I can't play electric guitar. I want to play, but I think that I can't. And I like movie. I like actor - Michel Douglas, Robert De Niro, Jodie Foster, Tea Leoni-

And also expressed their fears:

- I am very afraid of writing because I don't have confidence my grammar power. I am afraid of getting bad score in writing test.

I reminded this student that there were no tests in my course, and that if he did his best, he would pass. The point is that in a face-to-face class no student had ever expressed such a fear.

During the course, because of the students' previous experience with studying English through rote memorization for the sole purpose of passing an examination, it seemed important to make the transition to using English for interaction with native speakers of English. Therefore, the key assignment of the course was to interview, via e-mail, a native speaker of English in their chosen field who lived outside of Japan and to write an essay describing that person. This assignment was based on what I learned from Mlynarczyk and Haber as well as Rafoth. In order to prepare for the interview, students worked in teams, investigating websites that described professions, finding appropriate interviewees, and then writing lists of possible questions. To begin the assignment, they read and responded to two essays based on interviews, "The Model Medic" and "No Laughing Matter," both now published in *Inspired to Write* (Withrow, Brookes, and Cummings). In reading these two example essays, I wanted the students to see that other people's writing could be used as a model without resorting to plagiarism. I strongly support Pavlenko and Lantolf's notion that "the initial step toward . . . reconstruction of a self [in a new language] . . . is the appropriation of others' voices. . ." (167).

One of the convenient features of many Internet classrooms, including nicenet.org, is that hyperlinks may be created, allowing students to access interesting and appropriate web pages with one click of the mouse. Setting up the links took quite a bit of time, but eventually I had a page of hyperlinks that I thought would be helpful to the students and could be

re-used the following semesters (although links to web pages must always be checked to make sure they are still active).

The steps in the interview assignment, which were conducted by teams of four students, were as follows:

- 1) Investigate one or more websites describing careers until you find a career that interests you (for example, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/oco1002.htm>).
- 2) Investigate one or more of the websites describing companies that employ people in the career you are interested in (for example, <http://www.allgraphicdesign.com/jobs.html>).
- 3) Find the name and e-mail address of a person doing the job you are interested in.
- 4) Find out all you can about the person by studying his/her homepage and/or looking him/her up on Google.com or a similar search engine.
- 5) Write a list of questions you would like to ask this person.
- 6) Post your questions to our website and ask another team and Professor Martha to comment on your questions (Are they interesting? Clear? Grammatically correct?).
- 7) Send a very polite and apologetic e-mail explaining the assignment to your prospective interviewee, including a tentative deadline for his/her response. [I provided a template for this message, then decided that in future semesters I will ask students to compose this politely intrusive message themselves as it is a useful writing task.]
- 8) Wait one week. If you do not get a reply, politely remind the recipient of your request.
- 9) Wait two weeks. If you still have no reply, go back to the hyperlinks and choose another potential interviewee. Start the process again.
- 10) When you get a reply, draft an essay modeled on one of the two examples.

The reader may cringe at the thought of these e-mail requests for interviews going out into the world, both for the sake of the students (What if the students don't get a reply?) as well as for the sake of the recipients (Imagine receiving such an e-mail request from a group of students in another country. How tempted you would be to delete it! How guilty you would feel if you did!)

Once the assignment was fully understood, it created considerable tension in our CMC classroom, but it was the tension of anticipation rather than anxiety. The high point of the semester was when the first team of students posted the message, "We got a reply!" with the details of who they had written to and what the person had said. For most of these students, this was their first contact with a native speaker of English they didn't know personally. While two teams never received replies from anyone, ten others had thoughtful and generous replies from computer scientists all over the world, providing them with material from which they were able to compose enjoyable and well-written essays (see Appendix D for an example).

Results of the Online Course

I cannot state that the students' written work was measurably better during and after the 14-week CMC course compared to similar courses I was teaching and have taught face to face. Their essays were not longer, more developed, more unified, more coherent, or generally more free from error than those of their face-to-face counterparts. What did seem to change, however, were the students' attitudes: toward writing, learning English, accuracy, and communicating with each other, their instructor, and native speakers of English in general.

By the middle of the semester, in response to my assignments, students were beginning to write more than was required of them. When I asked them to react to what one person had written in response to a reading, often an online conversation would ensue, as in the following example:

Student A: When I read your essay, I remember some thing. My family proceed one year to eat "sukiyaki," not to eat "tosikosisoba," this tradition is success from my grandfather to my father, but . . . I don't like it so much, before it, would I have a familly?

Student B: I want to eat sukiyaki too. I think sukiyaki is very very delicious!! Specially saying, I want to eat sukiyaki which my father cook. My father is master of coffee lounge. So my father is very nice cook. This writing makes me hungry too!! How about your father's cooking?

Student C: I wanna eat them too. I agree with your theory that the meal which is made by one's family is very delicious. I wanna eat my mother's dishes too.

Student D: I want to eat my mother's dishes too. When I was my home, I thought I can cook dishes more good than my mother. But

it was wrong. Nowaday, I think that my mother's dishes may be best deshes for me. Someone said the most important thing of cooking is love. I didn't agree it, but I can agree it now. How do you think, A?

Student A responded and the conversation continued. I was delighted. This may not seem like much to those who are used to working with native speakers of English, but for these students, engaging in this kind of banter in English was accomplishing two enormous tasks. First, it was transforming English from a dead language to be memorized for the purpose of passing examinations into a communication tool it was possible to have fun with. Second, it was transforming the students, in my eyes, from sullen, silent, frightened, non-communicative young men and women into real people with whom I had a great deal in common.

In addition to communicating with each other, these students began to communicate with me. Again, keeping in mind that not once in two years did a student ask me a question in a face-to-face class, I was surprised and pleased to be receiving e-mails like these:

Hello! I'm X from your Academic Writing 2 class. I have some question. The homework that was written in your Email "The Model Medic." I don't know what to do. Your e-mail told me to write the first draft of my interview and use "The Model Medic" as a model for this essay. I think "The Model Medic" is an essay. And this 200 words homework makes me easy to think I should write an essay. Should I write the first draft of my interview or an essay? Could you tell me detailed what to do?

I was even more gratified to receive this request:

I'm in your Thursday, third period, Academic Writing student. By the way, I have posted free writing in Conferencing Topics "Freewriting 4/22 - 5/6" about twenty times. These days I have had a question. Would you tell me if the box of "Freewriting 4/22 - 5/6" have limit to be posted, or not? And if there is the limit, Could I continue to post my free writing? See you.

I quickly replied that there was no limit, and that the student was welcome to write as much and as often as he liked, reassuring him that I would respond to all of his freewriting. During the second half of the semester,

this student and another challenged each other to freewrite every day, and this one actually succeeded.

The net result of these interactions was twofold. The students realized that knowing how to use English to communicate in writing got them results. I realized that the students were eager to participate in the course, fulfill the requirements, and communicate with me and with other native speakers.

At the end of the semester, the students completed two questionnaires, one for me and one for the University, evaluating the course. I was particularly interested in what they perceived as the benefits of CMC versus the benefits of face-to-face instruction, so I asked them to comment on each. To keep the process completely anonymous, I created a new Internet classroom for the sole purpose of completing these evaluations. The students, overloaded with preparation for final exams in their computer courses and realizing that I would have no way of knowing who had responded and who hadn't, answered briefly, if at all. Based on these anonymous responses, the benefits of computer mediated instruction can be divided into three categories:

Learning from each other:

- I read other student writing! I learned much diversity of grammar and words. As we are beginner, we tend to use the same words and the same grammar again and again. That is not a good thing. If you don't force us to give a feedback to partners, maybe we will not read other's writing, so this is good assignment.
- Each people have diferent opinion. So, from this I notice that I don't ever notice things. [Meaning, I think, I noticed things I hadn't ever noticed.]

Communicating with native speakers:

- We can learn a great deal ONLINE. The way of writing a letter and contacting with a foreigner.
- There will not be differentiation between Japanese and foreigner in future. I will have to use English. Then, it will be useful what I learned in this class.
- I don't have experience to send a foreign man E-mail. I was very excited.

Communicating with the instructor:

- By writing E-mail, I asked to professor question or displeasure that I have. It was pleasure for me that I could communicate with professor.

On the other hand, students seemed to be saying that they missed some of the benefits of face-to-face instruction such as companionship, seeing others' facial expressions, and the motivation of having a "live" person to be accountable to:

- I don't want to not meet Professor Cummings.
- I would like to be able to discuss with people face to face.
- It has good tension.
- We can tell our opinion in direct.
- We can see people's expressive.
- We will take the course more serious.

In the students' anonymous evaluations of the course required by the university, in addition to giving the course the highest numerical evaluations one of my courses at this university had received so far, 4.6 and 4.8 out of 5, on a scale from 1 to 5, some students wrote optional comments. Most did not. Perhaps they felt they had already commented enough. However, to the question, "Would you recommend this course to your friends?" one strongly negative comment appeared here and nowhere else: "I don't think this is a class. Are we in the deep mountain? You should explain this in advance. I have been discouraged."

This was certainly a justifiable complaint. This gregarious student felt cheated of the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with his peers and teacher. After reading what he wrote, I went to the head of my program to ask if the course could be listed as a Computer Mediated Communication course in the university catalog, but he was quick to remind me that students at this university do not have the opportunity to choose which section of a course they want to take, but are assigned to courses in alphabetical blocks.

Despite this one negative voice, in this online course for EFL writers, attitudes, motivation, and relationships changed. Students learned from each other, communicated with each other and native speakers of English, and grew to see English as a tool for communication with the world. As the instructor, I learned that behind the silent façade in the face-to-face classroom, there were people with the same yearnings for fulfillment and for a sense of competence that I had. Perhaps this is enough.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING

There is much to discover about ways that EFL writers can change their perceptions of English writing from being a boring school subject, a

trap, a tedious chore imposed from the outside to becoming a tool for international communication. If the size of the sample had been larger, surely the findings could be stated more persuasively. If different groups of EFL writers from different settings were compared with these native speakers of Japanese in rural Japan, we could learn still more. Also of interest would be a longitudinal study of EFL writers involved in Computer Mediated Communication designed to study how their attitudes and actual writing abilities evolved over a period of several years.

One unexpected outcome of the study was the impact that it had on me, the instructor. I found out things about my students that I would not have learned in the face-to-face classroom, causing my attitude toward them to change. I learned that they were in fact motivated, lively, curious about me and my culture, eager to share their culture, as well as their hopes and dreams, with me. These were not passive, unmotivated survivors of grueling entrance examinations with no energy left to give to learning to write in English. Knowing this gave me back my own motivation to interact and collaborate with these young, enthusiastic, vulnerable student writers.

Since this was a case of action research involving my own students and me, I would be interested in studying other instructors teaching groups of students they found particularly stressful to deal with face to face, to see if working with them in a CMC environment relieved some of the stress and/or gave the teachers a different perspective on their students.

Perhaps one of the most promising avenues for further research that emerges from this study is the need to analyze the ways in which CMC allows teachers and students to develop relationships with or attitudes toward each other that they would not otherwise have developed and to find out if these attitudes are maintained toward the next groups of students or instructors they meet.

This inquiry confirms what we already know but often forget. There is more to EFL writers than meets the eye. They have a lot to say and great difficulty in saying it. Computer Mediated Communication, standing half-way between speech and writing, might provide a place for interaction to begin.

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APPENDIX A

Course Syllabus

Course Goals

This course will help you improve your fluency in the kinds of reading and writing that will be required at this University. Reading and writing are not discrete skills, studied and learned separately. They are linked and best learned together. Through this course, you will become a more proficient reader and writer in English and you will learn to enjoy reading and writing more.

In this course we will review the basic components of good writing, that is, prewriting, planning, writing and revising drafts, paragraph structure, unity and coherence, kinds of logical order, and patterns of organization. We will also study and apply the techniques of professional writers, both fiction and non-fiction, to make our writing more powerful and meaningful to our readers.

In this course you will learn to write, critically evaluate your own writing, then get feedback from both your classmates and from your instructor. In addition, we will cover how to use outside references and how to use the Internet to do research. Depending on the needs of the group, we may also review sentence-level grammar.

Instructional Procedures

Each week, you will receive your assignments and submit them via the Internet. After the first class meeting, we will meet online only.

Here is the website for our course. Please go to <http://www.nicenet.org> and click on "join a class." You will go to a window where there is a box that says "Class Key." Please enter this number in the box:

[Number deleted; the course still exists.]

Go to the next window and give yourself a username and password. Don't forget your password! Please fill in your email address and your name. I have posted the first assignment under "documents." Please post your answers to the First Day Questions in Conferencing: First Day Questions. I strongly recommend that you write your responses in your favorite word processing program first, then cut and paste them into the response box in the conference.

Sometimes you will have short reading assignments selected by the professor. You will find these in the "Documents" section. You will read the assignment and write in response in the "Conferencing" section.

Evaluation and Grading Policy

Your writing will be evaluated on how much time and effort, how much thought, and how much care you put into it.

You will get a B in this course if you:

- Submit each assignment by the day and time the class would normally meet
- Participate in class by completing all tasks and assignments
- Help your classmates with their writing (I will show you how)
- Read and write all required reading and writing, giving the task your full attention
- Proofread and spell-check all final drafts

If you make an exceptional effort and do excellent work, you will get an A.

If you do less than everything on the above list, you will get a C.

If you do less than half of the work, you will fail the course.

APPENDIX B

Academic Writing 2: Pretest

Prompt

“Recently the quality of life has been improving in Japan.” Write an essay agreeing or disagreeing with the above statement. You have 30 minutes to complete your essay. Do not use a dictionary.

Student One

I disagree this statement because it have been increasing some people which can not work. So, the quality of life has not been improving in Japan. And, Japan became dangerous by war and BSE [mad cow disease]. So, life didn't become safe in Japan, and I afraid future. I hope peace in the world.

Student Two

I disagree with. What is the quality of life? I think it decides on that how much stress we feel. We have studied and worked to be happier, more productive, more intelligent, and more peaceful. But we have made new many problemes, so human beings

Student Three

I disagree recently the quality of life in Japan. I think president Koizumi is fool. He said, Now Japan better than that Japan, but Japan is NO CHANGING! I don't say “Recently the quality of life has been improving in Japan.” I'm disappointed. Recently, Japan is poor, therefore decrease jobs. Can not work, therefore can not get money, people are hard. The Japan is little chaos now.

APPENDIX C

First Day Questions

Spring 2003

Academic Writing Two

Post your answers in the Conferencing Topic called "First Day Questions."
Write at least 4 sentences for questions 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

- 1) Name and number
- 2) E-mail address
- 3) Place of birth
- 4) What do you hope to learn in this class?
- 5) What will you do after you graduate?
- 6) Write about a good experience you had with writing, in English or in Japanese.
- 7) Write about a bad experience you had with writing.
- 8) Have you ever done any writing for yourself only—journals, diaries, poems, stories? If so, explain how this writing was different from the writing you did for school.
- 9) What is your image of a person who likes to write a lot? In other words, close your eyes and picture someone who loves to write. What do you see?
- 10) What suggestions would you make for how to teach writing to a class like this one?
- 11) What do you think is good about your writing? (Don't say "nothing." There is something! Think!)
- 12) What do you think is bad about your writing?
- 13) What questions do you have right now?
- 14) What else would you like to tell me about yourself?

APPENDIX D

Sample Student Essay Based on an Online Interview

Lindsay Shippee is Systems Analyst in the University of Arizona. We got interested in the fields of computer science and information technology, and took contact to him this time.

A Systems Analyst is responsible for designing, building, testing, and implementing computer systems. This includes analyzing client business requirements, writing system specifications, programming and unit testing application programs, system testing, putting systems into production, and training system users. Sometimes a large project can take several years to complete, and involve hundreds, even thousands, of programs. Lindsay once worked on a five-year systems project with a team of 186 programmers and analysts.

He became a systems analyst by accident. He attended college to become a history teacher, but when he could not find a job. So he studied for a year at a technical college and learned several computer programming languages. When he applied for work, his first employer thought he would make a good systems analyst, and offered him a job. That was how it began.

The most fun he ever had programming was when he wrote a series of complex mathematical programs for a large insurance company. They were at the heart of a big system Lindsay and other building, but nobody else on the team wanted to write them. They were too difficult. So he worked a lot of extra hours to make them work properly, and he was very proud when they were finished.

Recently, he helps maintain about 400 desktop computers and servers for the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona. He loves working in a university environment. Because, it is fun to work with professors and students, and he is learning a lot.

We got a message from Lindsay, most programmers in large business corporation work in team. When we become a senior programmer-analyst, we are often offered the position of team leader, and we must coordinate and plan the work of other team members according to the project. We are responsible to getting the work done on time, yet most of the work is being done by other people. It is not easy to be a good leader. But it is a very challenging job. We thought we are the University of . . . student studying some programming and high level computer sciences. So we will be team leader of programmers. We should get more skills of computer science to success our futures.

The Best of Both Worlds: Teaching Basic Writers in Class and Online

Linda Stine

***ABSTRACT:** Basic writing students and online learning are not necessarily an ideal match. In hopes of stimulating more conversation and research on how technology can best advance the basic writing curriculum, this article first classifies the problems students and faculty encounter when a basic writing class moves online and discusses the pedagogical questions these problems raise. It then presents ten categories of arguments for making the move despite the problems involved. The article concludes with a description of how and why a hybrid model, one in which students meet with their instructor in a classroom on campus every other week and work online during the off weeks, provides one means of minimizing potential problems while maximizing learning opportunities for basic writers.*

Computers and Basic Writers: The Issue

In a 1994 ERIC Clearinghouse summary on computer-assisted writing instruction, Marjorie Simic noted, "Writing researchers have long advised that the key to fluent writing is to write as much as possible. The key to exact writing is to revise repeatedly" ("Revising," par. 1). Basic writers, so much in need of increased fluency and exactness, have from the onset seemed ideal candidates for a writing course featuring word processing, precisely because of the computer's promise in these two areas. It is now the rare developmental course that does not, at least minimally, incorporate computer use into its curriculum. In a remarkably short time, the computer has evolved from being a tool with potential to improve student writing to being the tool with which people write, and if Peter Elbow is correct that "the best test of a writing course is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives" (136), then most writing teachers today would

***Linda Stine** is a professor in the Master of Human Services Program at Lincoln University (PA), where she has taught computer-mediated writing courses for adult students since 1986. For the past two years, she has been using Web-CT to teach a semi-online basic writing class. She has presented papers on technology and writing instruction at CCCC and NCTE, and has published several articles on this topic. Her most recent publication is Classroom Resources for Instructors Using Foundations First, published by Bedford/St. Martin's.*

have to agree that it is hard to justify a basic writing course that does not explore and exploit the advantages of word processing.

Agreement is harder to find, however, on the question of whether *online* instruction is equally justifiable for basic writers. The following article describes a hybrid option, in which students meet on campus every other week and work online during the off weeks, as one possible means of minimizing problems encountered in fully online writing classes while still allowing students to gain access to learning experiences unique to online instruction. This particular hybrid is, to be sure, only one of many possible variations. Richard Straub, considering how faculty can best comment on student papers, once acknowledged that "different teachers, in different settings, with different students, different kinds of writing, different course goals, and alas! with different time constraints may do different things with their comments, and do them well" (2). The same applies to teaching with technology: one size does not fit all. Nevertheless, the more options we consider, the more likely we are to find the match that best fits our students' needs, our institutional resources, and our own individual teaching strengths. And, if we are lucky, that match may turn out to involve neither expensive equipment nor extensive technology skills on the part of teachers and students. In "From Pencils to Pixels," Denis Baron reminds us, "Researchers tend to look at the cutting edge when they examine how technology affects literacy. But technology has a trailing edge. . ." (32). With so many overworked and under-supported basic writing teachers feeling fortunate if they can grab hold of even the trailing edge of technology, it is worth noting that a hybrid course like the one described below can double the number of students who can use a school's scarce computer laboratories and, at the same time, halve these students' commuting costs.

Basic Writers Online: The Problems

A number of arguments can be made to explain why developmental students and online learning might not, in general, make a good match. One group of arguments raises societal issues. There is, for instance, the obvious problem of accessibility. As Charles Moran has stated, "The issue of access is easily and quickly framed: in America wealth is unequally distributed; money buys technology; therefore technology is inequitably distributed" (207). A 2000 report from the United States Commerce Department on Americans' access to technology tools, *Falling through the*

Net: Toward Digital Inclusion, concludes that while people of all ethnic groups and income and educational levels are making gains, noticeable divides still exist between those with different levels of income and education, different racial and ethnic groups, old and young, single and dual-parent families, and those with and without disabilities. Basic writing students, typically older, poorer, less apt to come from stable, highly educated families, and more apt to have learning disabilities, are still less likely than the average student to have easy access to the kind of technology that distance learning requires, both in and out of the classroom. Are we justified in requiring basic writing students to work online, given the hardships that may cause for some?

Also troubling is the homogeneous culture into which our disparate students are asked to fit. As Richard and Cynthia Selfe have warned, “Students who want to use computers are continually confronted with . . . narratives which foreground a value on middle-class, corporate culture: capitalism and the commodification of information; Standard English; and rationalistic ways of representing knowledge” (494). They encourage teachers to recognize, and help their students understand, that the computer interface is “an interested and partial map of our culture and . . . a linguistic contact zone that reveals power differentials” (495). How should our pedagogy reflect this concern? Is it enough just to remind students of the limitations of grammar and spell checkers or do what we can to make sure that the physical layout of our classrooms does not reinforce a hierarchical structure? Or should we, who teach those students most likely to be marginalized, also make technology itself—its potential for liberation as well as oppression—the subject of more discussions and essays? How actively should we be working in our basic writing courses to raise student consciousness about the power of symbols and the politics of the technological contact zone?

A third set of worries for teachers of basic writers is related to technological issues. Distance education requires students to learn writing while often at the same time learning the relatively advanced computer skills required to produce writing online (for a discussion of this problem, see “Issues of Attitude and Access: A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom” by Catherine Matthews Pavia in this issue). Most of the adult students I encounter know how to use their computer for a few clearly defined tasks but have not developed a broad range of technology skills. Stuart Selber argues in a recent CCC article that students must be

able to *control* a computer—that is, possess what he calls functional literacy, not just computer literacy—in order to work with it effectively (470-503). If students lack this type of functional literacy, how much does it interfere with an acquisition of writing proficiency? A related problem, which Lauren Yena and Zach Waggoner term “muting,” occurs as a result of either an *actual* lack of technological literacy on the student’s part or the anxiety that he or she experiences about a *perceived* lack of computer expertise (“Student Muting”). Will efforts to offset this problem double the responsibilities of the teacher, who must provide directions not only for what students are expected to say but also for how to navigate through the technology comfortably enough so that they are able to say it? Another technology-related problem, which applies whether students are writing online or off, is the tendency for developmental writers to put too much faith in the computer’s authority. Might an online class tempt students even more to obey without question the dictates of those red and green “squiggly lines” produced by the computer’s spelling or grammar checker (Whithaus) or to accept the largesse of their browser’s search engines blindly, without the type of useful reflection that leads to linguistic and cognitive growth?

Another set of questions focuses on pedagogical issues. Chris Anson writes of “our basic beliefs about the nature of classroom instruction, in all its communal richness and face-to-face complexity” (263). Does the Internet—though undoubtedly rich and undoubtedly complex—provide such an atmosphere? And what might be the effect of the reduced cues environment in which distance learning functions? Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker have characterized this environment as “text without voice, voice without body language, class attendance without seating arrangements.” They point out that the very same environment that reduces the fear of *negative* feedback—when writers type something silly or inappropriate online, they cannot see the readers rolling their eyes, so they feel free to keep typing—also reduces *positive* feedback. In such a setting, individuals do not know if they are saying the “right” thing. How much might this add to the writing anxiety basic writing students struggle with in the best of situations?

Additional pedagogical issues of concern grow out of changes that the Internet and widespread computer use are bringing about in composing and reading processes. Leslie C. Perelman, director of the writing-across-the-curriculum program at MIT, describes the difference in the way people com-

pose today by explaining that writers normally think out the entire sentence before they start writing it on paper; otherwise, things get too messy because everything is crossed out. “But on a computer,” Perelman explains, “people just start a sentence and then go back and move things around. The computer screen is elastic and therefore the composing process has become very elastic” (qtd. in Leibowitz, A67-68). While such elasticity could prove liberating for basic writers, could it not just as easily reinforce bad habits for students who often lack a sense of the shape or boundary of a sentence or are not sure where they are going with an idea when they start?

A related question can be asked about online reading. According to James Sosnoski (161-78) good hyper-readers possess the following “positive” skills:

- Filtering (selecting out only details of the text that they want to read)
- Skimming (reading less text)
- Pecking (not reading in linear sequence)
- Imposing (constructing meaning by one’s self more than from the intent of author)
- Filming (paying more attention to graphical than verbal elements to get meaning)
- Trespassing (plagiarizing code, cutting and pasting and reassembling)
- De-authorization (following links, losing sight of the author)
- Fragmenting (preferring fragmented texts because such texts are easier to reassemble)

Basic writing teachers, who struggle continually with their students’ tendency to read selectively and thus miss main arguments, read only parts of a text and not get the underlying meaning, read with a limited range of internalized schema that would help them gather meaning, find only those meanings they want rather than ones that the author presented, and misunderstand the boundary between paraphrasing and plagiarizing, might well question whether requiring basic readers to do much or all of their reading online could inadvertently reinforce poor print reading habits. The hypertext reading “skills” Sosnoski applauds seem remarkably like many reading weaknesses we try to help our students overcome. Similar misgivings emerge because of differences between the writing

conventions appropriate to e-mail, chats, and online discussion postings and those conventions that teachers encourage in the classroom. The different rhetorical situations call for different styles; the writing displayed in a chatroom would not be acceptable in an academic writing assignment. Can we be sure that any increased fluency and confidence students gain by participating in a variety of online writing tasks will prevail over the “bad” habits such online writing might foster?

Yet another set of reasons that developmental writers sometimes fare poorly in online courses involves student-related issues. Online courses require self-direction, but basic writers, while often highly motivated, frequently have not developed the structured study habits and time management essential to success in distance education. When family, work, and other personal problems interfere, students can easily—and invisibly—fade away. Another worry is the possibility of overloading, with time spent on developing necessary technology skills getting in the way of a focus on writing skills. K. Patricia Cross has described what she calls the Chain of Response model of learning. One tenet of this model is that higher order needs for achievement and self-actualization cannot be realized until lower order needs for security and safety are met. If students do not feel safe online, secure in their technical abilities, will they be able to move on to the next writing challenge? An additional student-related problem arises because distance learning, unlike the face-to-face classroom, requires a basic writer to function in what is predominantly a text-based environment, even allowing for the multimedia options that the Internet enables. Will that demand play to the weakness rather than the strength of many developmental students? Furthermore, as Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker warn, “Participants in net courses, even those who don’t consider themselves new to the digital world, seem to lose their usual set of problem-solving strategies in the new environment. . . . [E]ven when instructions are provided, some participants still need help interpreting the directions to the discussion area or a particular thread” (52). No matter how many hours teachers spend creating detailed step-by-step directions—in words and pictures—to show students how to log on and respond to an online discussion list from home or where to post an essay draft for online review, some students will still call in a panic because the directions “aren’t working” and they cannot complete their assignment.

Finally, having to anticipate all the potential problems described above and address those that may materialize later adds to the demands placed on

faculty members who must find the time to create, maintain, and teach an online class. In one of the modules of Teaching Composition, a faculty listserv run by McGraw-Hill, J. Paul Johnson concludes that online writing courses work “only for faculty with expertise and experience.” How do we gain this needed expertise and experience when faculty time and institutional budgets are so limited? Teaching online requires more up-front planning, more detailed course design, and often as many, if not more, contact hours with students than traditional classroom-based courses require. Furthermore, teachers have to keep up with the pace of technological change. In a recent *Computers and Composition Online* article, Evan Davis and Sarah Hardy likened faculty using technology to “travelers on sightseeing boats, hugging the coast while priding [themselves] for venturing into the ocean.” Writing teachers in general, basic writing teachers in particular, rarely have the time and institutional support to explore the depths of the ocean of technology. Thus, the result Kristine Blair and Elizabeth Monske note: “In the rush to meet institutional pressures and curricular demands to create effective distance learning environments, as teachers we may be the ones who benefit *least* within these new virtual communities” (449).

Basic writing instructors must, at the least, carefully consider how they will address problematic issues accompanying online instruction, both in their pedagogy and with their students, before jumping on the technology bandwagon.

Basic Writers Online: The Potential

All these legitimate cautions and concerns notwithstanding, however, many features of online learning still seem made to order for basic writing students. Advantages of Web-enhanced courses fall into ten general categories. First comes what I think of as the “Can You Hear Me Now?” argument. Unlike class discussions, in which timid voices may go unheard, online learning—at least when using asynchronous features such as discussion lists—greatly extends possible reflection time: it lets students participate at their rate of speed and skill, think through a question, and polish up a response as long as needed before posting it.

Then there is the “Ken Macrorie” argument. In *Twenty Teachers*, Macrorie’s book profiling the kind of teachers who enable students to learn, a basic assumption is that students learn by doing something worth doing. Rightly or wrongly, the Internet is considered “worth doing.” Even something as mundane as practicing subject/verb agreement—should you

want your students to do that—gains authority simply by being on the Web. Paradoxically, writing done virtually seems more “real.”

A third consideration is expressed in the “Only Game in Town” argument. The vast majority of adult basic writers have no option other than online learning if they want to carve a few precious hours out of their busy week to go to school. Many single parents with jobs and families simply cannot get away to attend class, even when classes meet on evenings and weekends. They are also unlikely to be able to spend extended periods of time conducting library research or meeting face to face with other students for group projects, so even if they are able to make it to campus, their participation and, thus, their learning opportunities, are limited.

Related to this issue is the “Time Management” argument. When teaching online, faculty can provide their overworked adult students with a wealth of resources just a mouse click away rather than requiring a long ride to a library or a campus. Using software like *CommonSpace* or Bedford St. Martin’s *Comment*, for instance, teachers can link a problematic phrase in a student draft to a rule and examples in an embedded handbook or enable online peer review. They can provide a list of useful URLs through which students can access the riches of all the OWLs (Online Writing Labs) on the Web, or download helpful tools like *ReadPlease*, a simple and free voice recognition program that helps with proofreading by reading students’ essays back to them.

A fifth set of reasons focuses on the “Academic Skill-Building” argument. Davis and Hardy, describing their experience teaching with Blackboard course management software, suggest that such software is useful because “students need the skills that it foregrounds: organizing and tracking documents, participating in a community discussion, sharing work with peers, claiming a voice through writing.” Basic writers, it can reasonably be argued, need precisely these skills and thus should be exposed, if at all possible, to a learning environment that fosters them.

Less concrete but no less important is the “Virginia Woolf” argument. Paul Puccio, pointing out that “the setting in which we meet with our students is a factor in the composition of student-teacher relationships,” compares his feelings about his computer classroom at the University of Massachusetts with Virginia Woolf’s desire for a room of her own. His thesis is that teaching writing in a room set up to teach writing, with all the modern amenities, has a positive effect on his students’ intellectual work as well as on their sense of community. “Schools,” claims Puccio, quoting

nineteenth-century educator F. W. Sanderson, “should be miniature copies of the world we should love to have.” I would argue for extending this analogy to the virtual classroom and making even disadvantaged students welcomed guests online, with full run of the house.

Once students have a room of their own, of course, they tend to invite company over. That leads to the “Howard Dean” argument. A February 22, 2004, *New York Times* article about Howard Dean’s presidential campaign strategy and the social impact of the Internet quoted Cass Sunstein, author of *Republic.com*, as saying, “If you get like-minded people in constant touch with each other, then they get more energized and more committed, and more outraged and more extreme” (“So What Was *That* All About?” section 4, 3). Though not necessarily wanting outrage and extremism, teachers of basic writers do continually look for ways to energize students and keep them committed to the learning process. Web-based communication has the potential to create some Deaniac-type energy otherwise difficult to engender among socially and geographically isolated basic writing students.

This, in turn, leads to the “John Dewey” argument. Beatrice Quarshy Smith, in a thought-provoking article about what she calls the colonial pattern that permeates our use of technology, points out the fact that her community college students by and large have inadequate access not only to the technologies but also to the literacies of power. Arguing for a *transactional* conception of technologies, Smith writes of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, “For them knowing was a process of learning though reflection on experience and through the exchange of ideas with others” (5). Developmental writers typically have such sadly limited time and opportunity to participate in person in that sort of reflective conversation that the opportunity the Internet opens for virtual idea exchange, be it through chatrooms, e-mail, blogs, listservs, or simply Googling a concept, is in itself a powerful argument for moving classes online.

For teachers of adult students, the “Nike” argument holds special merit. The most effective learning occurs, experts agree, when students follow Nike’s advice and “just do it.” Active learning, important for students of all ages, is essential to adults. Arthur Wilson contends that. . . adults no longer learn from experience, they learn in it as they act in situations and are acted upon by situations” (75). Online courses, at least those that are well designed, force students to play an active role in the learning experience—posing questions, voicing opinions, engaging in discussions,

spending as much time as necessary on weak areas, and self-testing their knowledge when and as appropriate.

Finally, and perhaps most generally persuasive, is what might be termed the “Can We Talk?” argument. As Sharan Merriam points out, “Critical reflection and awareness of why we attach the meanings we do to reality . . . may be the most significant distinguishing characteristic of adult learning” (9). The “persistence” of online communication enables and encourages this critical reflection. Thomas Erickson, from IBM’s T. J. Watson Research Center, describes “persistence” in the context of online communication as follows:

Persistence expands conversation beyond those within earshot, rendering it accessible to those in other places and at later times. Thus, digital conversation may be synchronous or asynchronous, and its audience intimate or vast. Its persistence means that it may be far more structured, or far more amorphous, than an oral exchange, and that it may have the formality of published text or the informality of chat. The persistence of such conversations also opens the door to a variety of new uses and practices: persistent conversations may be searched, browsed, replayed, annotated, visualized, restructured, and recontextualized, with what are likely to be profound impacts on personal, social, and institutional practices. (par. 3)

Gaining access to the “persistence” of the communication on the Internet—talk going on 24 hours a day, around the world, accessible at least as long as the web site lasts—can be profoundly important in helping basic writers view themselves as writers and participate in the sort of critical reflection Erickson describes.

We need to help our students become part of that persistent conversation, as skilled listeners and as persuasive speakers, if we are indeed going to help them find, and value, their own voices. Last semester, one of my students who works for campus security at a neighboring university, whose essays generally consisted of short, underdeveloped paragraphs, wrote a lengthy, thoughtful, fully developed response to an online discussion topic. Answering my e-mail complimenting her on both the writing and the content, she replied:

Message no. 713: Thanks, Professor. This is the first time, in a long time, that I get to express my opinions without being accused of being insubordinate. Having a good old time!

Although I try to make all course work relevant, assigning essays that ask my adult students to explore issues they know and care about in their work and personal lives, this student did not feel comfortable expressing ideas and defending her opinions until she left the classroom environment, where she had defined herself, narrowly, as a student, and moved online, where she was free to redefine herself as a writer.

The Best of Both Worlds: Teaching in a Hybrid Environment

Instructors' assessment of the relative pros and cons of an online basic writing class will differ, of course, depending on their own personal and institutional conditions. The students I teach at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania are predominantly African American (Lincoln is a historically black university), range in age from about 25 to 64, and must be employed full time in a human service agency as a condition for admission. The Pre-master's Program, as this developmental writing course is informally called (the official name is the Pre-graduate Semester in Writing and Critical Thinking Skills) was created to help students improve their basic academic skills so as to be eligible to enter Lincoln's non-traditional Master of Human Services (MHS) Program, a graduate program in which applicants may qualify for admission based on years of work experience in the human service field without having first earned a bachelor's degree. Most applicants, employed in a field in which talking and listening skills learned from life experience are more important than academic writing proficiency, come to the MHS Program with little or no college training; they tend to be uncomfortable communicating in Standard Written English and inexperienced at meeting the demands of academic writing. Depending on their score on the writing portion of the entrance exam, students may be assigned to the Pre-master's Program before entering the MHS Program for a 15-week semester, an accelerated 8-week semester, or a "stretch version," which extends the one semester's work over two semesters. It is this last option, the two-semester program, which we offer in the hybrid form described in this article.¹

Students in this program are all commuters, some traveling considerably more than 100 miles to attend once-a-week classes, which are held either in the evening or on Saturdays. These students fit neatly into Mina Shaughnessy's description of basic writers as students who tend to produce "small numbers of words with large numbers of errors . . . restricted as writers but not necessarily as speakers, to a very narrow range

of syntactic, semantic and rhetorical options, which forces them into a rudimentary style of discourse that belies their real maturity or a dense and tangled prose with which neither they nor their readers can cope" (179). Hoping to widen the range of options for our adult students as much as possible in as short a time as possible, we chose to design the writing course around computer-mediated teaching and learning. The setting in which classes are taught has evolved steadily since its 1987 beginnings in a basement room equipped with 15 Apple IIs, moving first to faster, stand-alone Windows-based PCs, then to a networked lab, next to a networked lab with Internet access, and finally to a networked lab enhanced with WebCT course management software. In 2002, after weighing the advantages and disadvantages of distance education, we decided to take the next step and add a distance component to the writing program. Students enrolled in the second semester of the two-semester "stretch version" of our basic writing course² now have the option of meeting in the campus writing lab only every other week, working from home using WebCT on the off weeks. The class is still evolving, but in general in-class meetings are used to introduce grammar and writing issues and describe assignments; in these sessions students also work in groups for idea generation and take all quizzes and exams. During the online weeks, students practice the grammar and composition issues discussed the previous week, respond to discussion topics, write and revise essays, and participate in online peer review. We initially saw the hybrid version of the course simply as an interim step towards a totally online program, but our experiences with both the difficulties and the successes of online learning over the past two years have led us to believe that it is the hybrid experience itself that offers our particular students the best of both pedagogical worlds.

It has been fifteen years since the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" were first published in the *AAHE Bulletin* as a model for best teaching practices (Chickering and Ehrmann). Although articulated well before the Internet had begun to change the way learning and teaching took place, these seven principles still provide a concise overview of effective pedagogy. In the final section of this article, with hopes of stimulating further conversation on models that other instructors have found useful and encouraging more research about the ways technology could or should advance the basic writing curriculum, I group the "value added" aspects that I have begun to experience from my hybrid writing class

around these seven principles, describing how a hybrid approach has offered us a means of lessening the negative effects of many of the problems described in the first part of this article while still allowing students to benefit from the advantages listed in the second.

- **Good practice encourages student/faculty contact.** The opportunity for unlimited office hours via e-mail or chatrooms is a clear advantage in online courses, which frequently cater to commuting or geographically distant students. Students get used to sending off an e-mail or setting up an online chatroom meeting when a problem arises rather than letting it go unquestioned. Teachers can provide the needed information promptly, preventing student frustration and lessening the chance for a late or incorrect assignment. A study by Robert Woods and Samuel Ebersole has found instructor immediacy in feedback to be “the strongest predictor of learning—both affective and cognitive learning—among students.”

The benefit that comes from having my online students in my physical classroom as well, on alternate weeks, is that I can follow up on e-mails, deal with new or remaining problems, and give the students a chance to explore their issues in more depth. E-mailed requests and personal conversations seem to be used for different purposes, with e-mails being more task-oriented (asking about assignments, due dates, technical problems, etc.) or else reserved for the kinds of problems students are embarrassed to bring up in person. Face-to-face discussions typically involve working through academic problems thoroughly, as well as following up e-mailed comments on life events as needed. An e-mail can give an answer; a face-to-face meeting can show how the answer was obtained. Students are not forced to rely solely on text-based communication for their questions and answers.

- **Good practice encourages cooperation among students.** Online access to e-mail, discussion lists and chatrooms clearly expands collaborative opportunities exponentially. For one thing, despite the potential harm to our collective egos, writing teachers in this Internet age are, as Gail Hawisher and Cynthia

Selfe point out, experiencing Margaret Mead's concept of "pre-figurative cultures," that is, cultures in which the adults are trying to prepare children for experiences the adults themselves have never had. In such a world, students have no alternative but to bond with and learn important lessons from each other (4). This benefits both the teacher and the learner.

What a hybrid class adds is the chance to strengthen the personal ties so important to effective collaboration. Caroline Haythornthwaite, in a paper presented at the Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences, notes that, because of the "reduced cues" environment, online communication is less appropriate or useful for emotionally laden exchanges, for the delivery of complex information, and for creating a sense of "being there." This presents a problem for classes conducted entirely online, since obviously, these factors are essential to an educational setting. She found, however, that strongly tied pairs, with their higher motivation, eagerness to communicate, and desire to include more intimate and varied communications, manage to modify this "lean" environment to support their needs, while weakly tied communicators do not. Maintaining connectivity among both the strongly and weakly tied members of a group, Haythornthwaite argues, requires a means of communication that reaches all group members, yet requires little effort or extra work from them. A schedule that allows students to meet face to face in class every other week satisfies that criterion. If students do nothing more than show up in class, the weak ties required for basic connectivity after they leave the classroom are established. At the same time, the personal bonds which classroom interactions create should encourage the development of stronger ties and therefore lead to more proactive communication outside of class, resulting in less chance of muting and, ideally, better participation and retention of students.

- **Good practice encourages active learning.** Stronger interpersonal ties lead communicators to seek out the means and opportunities for exchanges that support their relationships. This results in a more active learning experience. In online discus-

sion group assignments, for instance, students can satisfy their desire for interaction while at the same time applying the principle of “write to learn/learn to write” (Mayher, Lester, and Pradl).

I had initially planned for discussion to take place solely online until student evaluations after each of the first two semesters consistently requested more time afterwards to explore the issues in the classroom. When students discuss a topic online one week and carry that discussion over into the face-to-face class the next, the best features of both activities apply. Online, the students have time for thoughtful, reflective response; in class, the follow-up discussion allows for the serendipity that perhaps only occurs in the rapid give and take of face-to-face conversation. Additionally, any meaning missed because of the “reduced cues” environment online can be regained in the oral classroom setting.

- **Good practice gives prompt feedback.** In addition to getting prompter teacher responses, students can take quizzes or do practice exercises online and get immediate feedback. Course management tools like WebCT and Blackboard allow teachers to post their own practice quizzes, adding with relative ease personalized explanations for the correct options as well as explanations of what makes the wrong choices incorrect. I have found that students will work much longer at online exercises than they do on the same exercises in their workbooks. The tasks are more visual and more fun. Working online also strengthens students’ on-screen proofreading skills and can be done at the point of need, with slower students being required to do more tasks or allowed a longer time to finish an assigned task.

When a face-to-face meeting follows an online experience, students get the added benefit of going over things together after the fact and hearing others’ questions, thus reinforcing what they had learned on their own. Students take charge of their own learning needs, noting the places where they require additional instruction and profiting from the realization that they can sometimes answer questions raised by others.

- **Good practice promotes time on task.** Course management software like Blackboard or WebCT has several features that enable teachers to model ways to structure time effectively. The calendar tool can remind students each week what is due when. The content module feature allows all the materials needed to write a given essay—preliminary reading, planning tools, essay directions, peer review questions—to be assembled in one place, available wherever the student has access to the Internet, eliminating the “I lost the reading assignment” or “I didn’t have the essay directions” excuse. Nevertheless, those features and all others work only insofar as a student is motivated to use them; that is where the face-to-face class comes in, students know that they will have to face their instructor’s wrath in person if they are not prepared while enjoying positive reinforcement when they are. They can drift away in the anonymity of cyberspace for no more than a week.
- **Good practice communicates high expectations.** Because of the convenience of the Web, students can reasonably be expected to read more, write more, and do more group projects. Even students with limited time can do research through online academic data bases. The “Dean effect”—the motivation engendered by persistent conversation—can also be counted on to improve performance. Moreover, as Alvan Bregman and Caroline Haythornthwaite explain, “When we approach persistent conversation, we are faced with communication that inherits genre from both speech and literary practices. The learning environment inherits the speech genres of the traditional classroom, such as how to participate in class, communicate with an instructor, or carry on a discussion with fellow students, as well as the literary practices of academia, such as how to write a term paper, complete a homework assignment, or present a written argument.”

When students have the opportunity to discuss both online and face to face, to submit an assignment in print form or as an online posting, to argue a point in person or via e-mail, many more of the possible communication modes are used, practiced, reinforced, and made visible. This can help to make up for

any actual or perceived lack of “richness” in the online environment, and enables us in a sense to teach the students a double lesson: how to function effectively as members of two different and equally important academic discourse communities, the virtual and the actual classroom.

- **Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.** One student told me toward the end of last semester that she really likes and uses all the online resources available to her via WebCT. She can do her homework faithfully, do all assigned practice exercises, view explanations in the PowerPoints I have posted, and study the reading selections. But it is not until she comes to class and participates in a discussion reviewing the concepts that it all comes together for her. For many students, directions, demonstrations, and explanations—at least at some point in the learning process, whether as preview or review—need to take a form other than print. Even Murray Goldberg, the “father” of WebCT, acknowledged in a 2001 column for the *Online Teaching and Learning Newsletter* that variety provides the spice of academic life: “We all know by research or intuition that some people simply learn better when they can see a person’s face and converse in real time with a peer or instructor. My own research shows that students perform best when they have access to lectures in addition to a web-based course as opposed to the web-based course alone.”

When given the opportunity to learn both online and in class, students, whatever their preferred learning style, are affirmed and stretched. They also find skills other than writing—graphical, technological, organizational, group-building—being evaluated and valued, so more opportunities exist to acknowledge strengths instead of simply identifying weaknesses.

Conclusion

It has been my experience that adult basic writers arrive in class with a curious and difficult-to-deal-with mixture of dependence and independence. A number of years ago we tested our students—slightly more than 150 at that time—on the Grasha-Riechmann Student Learning Style Scales,

an instrument developed in the 1970s that categorized student preferences with respect to classroom interactions with peers and teachers along six dimensions: cooperation/competition, participation/avoidance, and independence/dependence. We were not surprised to see how our students fit clearly into the expected profile of adult learners: more *cooperative* than *competitive* and much more *participant* than *avoidant*. What did at first surprise us was that they strayed from the adult norm by emerging as more *dependent* than *independent* in their learning preferences. Further research showed us that this conflict was not unusual. Robert Sommer, for instance, points out that adults returning to school “may regress to the conditioning of early education and past roles of dependence and submission to the authority of teachers and institutions” (9). We realized that a vacillation between independent and dependent learning preferences was to be expected from our student population, whose lack of traditional academic experience created a sense of uncertainty that was at war with their adult sense of independence. Given this ongoing conflict, the current structure of this basic writing course, with one week online and one week face to face in a classroom, seems to offer our students the best of both worlds: the infinite freedom of the Internet enhanced and made manageable by regular classroom interactions.

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Notes

1. Anyone interested in more specific information about either Lincoln University’s Master of Human Services Program or the Pre-master’s Program is invited to visit our website at <http://www.lincoln.edu/mhs> or contact me directly at stine@lu.lincoln.edu.

2. We chose to offer only the second semester in hybrid form, wanting to be sure that all students had a semester of WebCT use in a Web-enhanced face-to-face class so that they could become comfortable with the software. We hoped in this way to prevent technological concerns from distracting from or impeding writing instruction when students moved out of the familiar classroom setting.

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Building Academic Literacy from Student Strength: An Interdisciplinary Life History Project

Robin Murie, Molly Rojas Collins,
and Daniel F. Detzner

ABSTRACT: U.S. high school graduates for whom the home language is not English run the risk of inadequate preparation for the rigors of higher education. Whether this poor preparation is the result of disruptions caused by the transition to a new country/language/culture, or of a watered-down high school curriculum that reacts to language error but does not always help the student develop a rich academic literacy, there is a need for courses and assignments that acknowledge the strengths of multilingual writers and that build fluency and academic literacy in ways that allow students to make meaningful connections with the college curriculum. This article describes a pilot ethnographic research course, life history project designed in collaboration with a professor in Family Social Science and two ESL basic writing instructors.

Throughout my life, I had thought that writers were naturally gifted with the ability to write, but my thought was far off from the reality. I learned from my life history project that anybody can be writer if they dig into the writing process, and commit to writing.

— First-year student (writing in his third language)

Much has been written recently about the academic needs of multilingual students who find themselves at the intersection between ESL and basic writing as they enter college (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Murie and Thomson; Portes; Roberge; Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix). The term “generation

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1.5” has been used recently to describe students who are not fully first- or second-generation immigrants, students who were born in one country but now reside (and go to school) in another country. More broadly defined, these are students for whom the home language is not English but who are graduating from U.S. high schools. Unlike the more traditional international student, whose native-language literacy has been more fully developed in the home country through secondary and post-secondary schools, a “generation 1.5” student may have a disrupted education, a less developed native language literacy, and may have learned English more through exposure than through systematic, disciplined study of English as a foreign or second language. On the positive side, compared to the more traditional international student, a “generation 1.5” graduate from a U.S. high school is likely to enter college with more idiomatic fluency in English, wider experience living in U.S. culture, and a greater investment in education and career placement. Nevertheless, this resident (generation 1.5, immigrant/refugee, language-minority) student is more likely than an international student to end up in a basic writing program, for many of the same reasons that other basic writers are there: less experience with academic reading/writing, non-standard features of writing, an uneven high school preparation for college, and lower placement test scores. Like other basic writing students, these are students who need courses that are rich in literacy and offer ways for them to develop a sense of self and voice in college. For these students, it is not enough to review features of English in preparation for college writing, there is a critical need to build academic literacy (Adamson; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Kutz; MacGowan-Gilhooly; Murie and Thomson; Spack; Zamel “Acquiring,” “Strangers”).

This article describes a Life History Project developed to engage multilingual students in extensive writing for real purposes. Through this project, students developed an extended biography, or life history, of an elder in their community, based on data collected from six hours of interviews. Students interviewed the elder three times, drafting and revising the life history to create a final document to be presented to the elder as a gift. This assignment plays to the strengths of the writers, positioning them not as “language deficient” ESL students, but as bilingual, bicultural experts engaged in a significant writing project that documents the life of a family member or acquaintance in the community.

DISRUPTED ACADEMIC LITERACY

It is easy enough to position “generation 1.5” students as deficient—in fact, the label itself has come to imply deficiency. Students who move to a new country early in their lives, switching languages mid-stream, often experience disrupted education, making it difficult to develop full literacy in their native language. A Vietnamese student who leaves Vietnam in second grade has fewer opportunities to become a proficient reader and writer of Vietnamese. At the same time, it takes some years before that student has reached grade level in coursework in English, creating potential difficulties in both languages. For families entering the U.S. as refugees, there can be additional disruptions caused by displacement during the resettlement process. For the Somali students we are currently seeing at the University of Minnesota, for example, there has typically been a four- to six-year stay in refugee camps in Kenya, often with limited access to schooling during that time. For Hmong students a generation ago, this disruption was even more extreme, with seven to twelve years in Thai refugee camps, where instruction, if available at all, was in Lao or Thai, and families generally had no written materials in Hmong. Even with continuous education, a student who arrives in a new country will face the disruptions caused by a switch to another language and a different education system. Thomas and Collier’s extensive research on language-minority students demonstrates that for students switching to a new language in their schooling, it takes five to seven years to be on a par with other students at that grade level; for students with limited schooling in their first language, this increases to seven to ten years. Across all groups studied, the most significant variable predicting how much time students need to reach grade parity is the amount of formal schooling they had in their first language.

Once a student has entered public schools in the U.S., the “catch-up” game begins. One problem is the lack of consistency in approaches to teaching English, which Mark Roberge characterizes as “a bewildering variety of programs, classroom placement options and instructional approaches, e.g. bilingual, ESL, immersion, two-way immersion, sheltered content, remedial/developmental, pull-out, and mainstream” (116). For a mobile population, this means repeated shifts in how English is taught, inconsistent guidelines for mainstreaming in the schools, and a lack of coherence in the overall education. Premature mainstreaming or mainstreaming based primarily on oral proficiency may mask deeper weaknesses students have with read-

ing and writing. Long-term ESL placement, on the other hand, may deprive students of critical college-preparation coursework. Students who are adjusting to a new language, making up for disruptions in education, and coping with all of the questions and concerns of any first-generation college student, have numerous reasons for finding the transition to higher education difficult. In high school, these students may well have missed out on important academic training: how to read extended academic texts, how to analyze information, how to pull from different sources in developing a paper, how to cite references, how to read critically. In short, many of the resident students graduating from U.S. high schools, unlike the academically trained international ESL students, need developmental work in acquiring academic literacy.

GENERATION 1.5 MEETS COLLEGE

This is not to say that for many second-language students graduating from U.S. high schools, the academic preparation is not excellent and the transition to college relatively smooth. For under-prepared multilingual students, however, the impact of this under-preparedness on academic progress can be significant. Some students are denied access to higher education altogether because entrance test scores are compared to scores of native speakers of English or because of legislation that restricts remedial course instruction (Smoke). Other students are placed into ESL courses with foreign international students, whose needs are often very different (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Still others are placed into basic writing or developmental reading courses, where the instructors may or may not have expertise in working with second-language students.

Under-preparedness at the college level can lead to a perpetuation of the kind of deficit instruction students received in high school. If a student has not mastered English, it is tempting for teachers not to demand large reading loads nor to engage in lengthy discussions, and so students in pre-college ESL programs are again likely to have more limited assignments and short readings, when regular college students must be able to read, for example, two chapters of a challenging anthropology textbook every week. Writing that contains language errors is often met with hostility and discomfort about “standards” and grading (Zamel “Strangers”). Teachers may be reluctant to demand much extended writing if that writing is error-ridden, leading again to a diminished literacy development. Students who have not done much extended writing, performed research tasks, or read much academic text, may flounder in college.

If the need is to acquire college-level literacy, then we must move beyond traditional ESL skills-based courses that focus primarily on grammar and language learning. Recent literature on ESL writing calls for this shift. Instruction must move away from what Vivian Zamel refers to as a “static notion of language” as separate from knowledge where “language must be in place and fixed in order to do the work of the course” (“Strangers” 6). Rather than a limited, skills-based model of language and learning, second-language writers need “multiple opportunities to use language and write-to-learn, course work that draws on and values what students already know, classroom exchanges and assignments that promote the acquisition of unfamiliar language, concepts and approaches to inquiry, evaluation that allows students to demonstrate genuine understanding” (Zamel, “Strangers” 14). Disrupted or inadequate high school preparation results in students needing coursework that assists them in building academic confidence and competence—coursework that includes source-based writing, that helps students to develop a writer’s voice and to find a legitimate place in the curriculum. Trudy Smoke calls for “curricula that stress communicative discourse, ethnography, and multicultural perspectives to give diverse groups material they can identify with and find relevant” (210). Eleanor Kutz urges us to build courses that acknowledge students’ prior knowledge and “underlying competence” to “provide a base for their participation in academic communities” (92).

THE LIFE HISTORY PROJECT

The Life History Project described here is our response to this need for assignments that build academic literacy in ways that also allow students to create a place for themselves and their own history in the curriculum. The project calls for extensive writing, with a rich data-gathering phase and the synthesis of historical and personal stories, and it acknowledges the expertise that students have as bilingual, bicultural writers.

It was important to us to create a project that moved beyond the arena of ESL writing instruction to connect with other academic fields at the University. Daniel Detzner, in Family Social Science, had for years used life history projects in his Families and Aging course at the University, and in his research on Southeast Asian families. A grant from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing on campus funded the collaboration. During the pilot year, Robin Murie and Molly Rojas Collins, instructors of the two courses, gave the assignments, worked with the students on their writing,

and offered writing and editing advice. Detzner visited the classes weekly, offering training in how to interview elders effectively, holding class discussions on the impact of aging and life course development, sharing his own research and writing process, and talking about how one fits pieces of a life puzzle together to create a life history. Detzner's expertise and social science training gave an added academic legitimacy to the project. Moreover, by serving as an additional reader of these life histories, Detzner broadened the audience for the papers to include a professor outside the field of ESL. Although the grant that funded Detzner's participation has run out, he still volunteers to visit the class several times a semester to talk about his research with life histories and to offer students advice on developing interview questions and putting a life history together. In addition, we have developed a collaboration with the Immigration History Research Center on campus, whose library has begun an archive of these student-written life histories. Collins and Murie, ESL writing and literature instructors, adapted this project to fit the needs of two different courses in the Commanding English Program on campus: one, an immigration literature course and the other, a basic writing research course.

The Commanding English Program, now in its twenty-fifth year at the University of Minnesota, is designed for resident first-year students for whom English is not the home language and who, based on entrance tests, demonstrate a need for continued language support. Unlike an intensive ESL program for international students, Commanding English builds language and academic skills into a curriculum constructed of courses typical of the freshman year. The program is mandatory, but offers a supported first-year curriculum that is credit-bearing and fills many of a student's distribution requirements (social science, science with a lab, humanities, literature, writing). Students take a two-semester basic writing sequence, immigration literature, college speech, and reading classes that are connected to courses in humanities, social science, and lab science. Students take one linked pair each semester. The reading instructor uses textbook material from the course with which he or she is linked, so that students are both developing reading skills within the context of an academic field and, at the same time, receiving supplemental support for the content course—sociology or biology, for example. (For a full description of the program, see Murie and Thomson. The program website is: www.gen.umn.edu/programs/ce.) The goal of the program is to support students in their acculturation to academic coursework: reading 100 pages of sociology a week; annotating

and responding critically to readings; drafting and revising literature essays; developing and writing up a research project. The Life History project fit naturally into this framework of improving English language mastery by doing real college coursework.

The project was piloted successfully in two different courses in our curriculum. The first pilot of the project was offered in a section of Literature of the American Immigrant Experience that had a companion Writing Workshop, where much of the drafting could take place. This paired combination was being taught in a high school outreach program that offers college courses to academically motivated second-language high school students. The high school juniors in this course, offered during the first semester, came from a variety of countries: U.S.-born Hmong whose families were from Laos, students from Mexico, Ecuador, Somalia, the Ukraine, and Pakistan. Many of them had not read full novels or written extensively in English before. The focus of the project, in addition to helping students build fluency and ease as writers, was on exploring literature from the inside out. Students were asked to consider how writers make choices on what story material to include and to notice what techniques writers use to make a story interesting. Students drafted the project in the Writing Workshop and turned it in for a grade in the literature course.

The second pilot of the project had a more deliberate research component so that it fit as a topic choice for the second-semester research writing course. Students in the program were given the choice of three research topics: international human rights, leading to extended research on a human rights issue of the student's choosing; topics of race, class, and gender, relating to a sociology course in the program; and the third topic, described here, writing a life history of an elder. The section of writing that offered this topic was deliberately scheduled at the same time as one of the other sections, so that students were choosing the section for its content, not because of the time schedule. Not all immigrant students care to highlight their status as newcomers or to engage with others in their community as part of a graded writing course. Identity is important, particularly for adolescents negotiating between cultures (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Students who may be striving to fit in on campus should not be required to position themselves as members of an ethnic or immigrant community, and so it was important for us to make this particular topic of research a voluntary one. In the research writing course, the focus of the project became more academic. Students read articles on the life process, cross-cultural studies

about aging, and social science articles about life history writing and remembering. A sampling of readings included: “Vietnamese War Widow” (Freeman); a chapter from a text on aging entitled “Aging in Other Cultures” (Barrow), and Detzner’s article “Conflict in Southeast Asian Refugee Families: A Life History Approach.” Students were also asked to do library and web research to broaden their focus beyond their interview material.

Components of the Life History Project

In both the literature and the research courses, the project had similar components. We began by asking students to locate an elder whom they would interview at three different times during the semester. Students were told about the importance of doing ethical work with human subjects and given clearance forms for both the elder and student to sign. Human Subjects clearance during the pilot year was obtained in a way that protected the privacy of the elder: the final projects were returned to the student, who gave a copy to the elder, but no portion of the biographies was kept by anyone at the University. Currently, Human Subjects documents have been rewritten to give the elder an option to have their life history archived at the University’s Immigration History Research Center, or to be shared as an example in future classes. Not all students chose to interview an elder from their own ethnic community, and this was fine. In fact, it was important to all three of us that the students not be made to define themselves as refugees or be held to interviewing an elder in their own community. Interestingly, even a number of those who chose to interview someone from outside their immigrant community ended up telling an immigration story—but from a much earlier time in history.

Both courses began with an introduction and discussion of what a life history is. Students read articles about immigrant elders, thought about whom they would interview, and arranged the mechanics of setting up interviews, locating a tape recorder, etc. (See Appendix B.) Students in the research writing class began with a short paper defining the concept of an elder, based on both their individual and community definitions. The class discussed these definitions, and the potential of differences across cultures. As a way to begin thinking about how to ask questions and do follow-up probing, students were asked to bring in a biographical object—an artifact or treasured possession that holds an important place in the owner’s life. The instructors modeled this process by presenting biographical objects of their own and responding to follow-up questions from the class. Students

then brought in their objects, answering questions as the others in class probed for the object's importance. This preliminary assignment helped students to develop interview skills and observational techniques and to notice the richness that one detail can bring to a story. In the research-writing course, students wrote a short paper on the history and meaning of their biographical object, including important details. One goal of this writing assignment was to practice the detailed writing and storytelling they would be doing later in the course.

The core of the project consisted of three separate interviews with the elder, focused on youth, middle age, and old age. Each of the three interviews took one to two hours and was written up as a five- to seven-page prewriting, so that by the time students were working on the final project, they had gathered impressive amounts of material. Each of these three prewritings was not simply a transcription of the interview, but the first attempt at writing up the story of this part of the person's life. At the beginning of each life stage interview, the class reflected on that particular stage of life, discussing what life experiences they might anticipate hearing about and, as a group, composing interview questions to elicit information. Sample questions are included in Appendix A. At the end of each interview phase, students debriefed as a class: addressing such questions as what was going well, what were the frustrations, how does one draw out information without being intrusive, and so on. Students in the research writing class had the additional task of finding library and web-based sources to give context to the life history at each stage. Throughout the semester students worked on research methods and strategies, building a bibliography of material relevant to their subject and learning to make appropriate transitions between individual stories and wider historical perspectives.

Feedback on the three prewritings focused on the content and typically included requests for more detail, comments about particularly interesting passages, and suggestions of ways to extend the writing and to work on the organization and pacing of the story. Comments also looked ahead to the next interview and prewriting cycle. The prewritings allowed the instructors to identify problems that students might be facing early on—a student without the first prewriting, for example, might be having difficulty accessing or communicating effectively with the elder—and then could offer advice on strategies to elicit better interviews or on selecting a different person to work with. While our focus was on content, we gave feedback if a persistent pattern of error was observed (control over past/present tense, for

example) or if language problems interfered with basic comprehension. The prewritings comprised the bulk of the writing in the first half of the course and were spaced in such a way as to provide students with continuous feedback and to ensure that they were completing the work in a timely manner. (During the pilot year, Collins and Detzner shared the task of providing feedback to students. Currently, this is done by the writing instructor alone.)

During the final weeks of the course, students compiled their draft material into a coherent narrative. Here class discussion centered around how to put the “puzzle” together from the prewritings, and students worked on what information to include, what information to add, how to organize, what sub-headings to use, how to introduce the project, whether to include photographs, illustrations, family tree diagrams, maps, poetry, and in the case of the research course, how to incorporate the outside research done on aspects of the history that this person had lived through. Students wrote two drafts of this final project. On the first draft, they received feedback on content and organization, and on the second draft, on language and form.

As a final piece, students in both pilots were asked to write a short reflection paper, expressing their own thoughts on the project. During the last week of the semester an oral reading was arranged, with invited guests, who responded to the projects. At one of these, the dean of the college, himself an expert in African-American History, spoke as one of the guests, about the importance of gathering oral histories, encouraging the students to continue this kind of writing. A representative from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing also attended, expressing enthusiasm for funding further projects of this nature.

Strengths of the Project as a Writing Assignment

The Life History Project allowed students to build academic literacy in multiple ways. It asked the writers to connect the story of the elder they interviewed with more academic conversations about human development, cultural practices, historical contexts, international policies, and the situation of the elderly, and in particular of elderly immigrants, in the U.S. This combination of substantial amounts of drafting and revising and of connecting personal and academic writing made this an effective assignment for the bilingual, bicultural writers in our program. It was clear to all three of us from the onset that students were receptive to this assignment and willing to write, and all of the students in both courses completed their projects on time, with energy, and rated their experiences highly.

Success was measured informally in numerous ways: through class participation, by what students said about the project to the guests at the final reading, in course evaluations, and in comments written in the reflection papers. None of this gave us the kind of quantitative data that could be used to formally evaluate the project. This must be left to a future study. However, the measures that we did have all pointed to a project that was highly successful. Course evaluations were as high as any in the program. In the high school literature course evaluation, students were asked whether they would recommend this project to future students: all but one said yes. Two of these high school students went on to win Gates Millennium Scholarships their senior year (out of the 1,000 given nation-wide), and all but two of the students are in college now. Surely, the college coursework they took with us while in high school played a part in this success. Perhaps most telling were the comments students made in their reflective papers, some of which are incorporated in the discussion that follows.

The final project, based on the three interviews and interview write-ups, was long: fifteen to twenty-three pages. But how did the project serve to build academic writing proficiency? It seemed to us that there were a number of strengths to the design of this project.

Audience and purpose were real. While the life histories were submitted for a course grade and returned to the student, the ultimate goal was to create a document that could be passed on to the person who had been interviewed. This concrete audience and purpose added meaning to the project and also guided revision decisions. For example, when one student wondered whether the project should include specific names on the family tree, she decided that because this was being written as a family document—history being recorded for this family's archives—that, yes, specific names and dates would be more useful.

For many of the students, the Life History Project became much more than a course assignment, a theme expressed frequently in the students' reflection papers. A Hmong student wrote of his deepened appreciation of what his father had gone through to get the family out of Laos. Another student described the honor of being able to give her paper as a gift to her aunt, writing: "To me this was the most important paper that I have ever written because I have given all the effort I could give to a paper and it is more than a paper to me." This outside purpose, to create a polished document for the elder, became more and more important as the course progressed, and many of the students requested extra time and additional editing feedback to polish the paper.

Data collection was extensive. One of the difficulties novice writers have is generating enough material to work with, something that can be even more of a constraint for those writing in a second or third language. As a result of doing three long interviews, students had pages of stories, descriptions, and commentary. Each interview segment was drafted, so that students had at least fifteen pages of notes to work from as they put the final project together. Students in the writing course had the additional research component, with teacher feedback on various summaries of their research findings along the way. As one student wrote in the final reflection paper:

Having the prewriting due with enough time has totally helped to build and stabilize the whole life story. . . . [T]he hardest part of the paper was at the end when I had to convert three prewritings into one big writing about twenty pages long. This process took me days because each prewriting contained different information that fit in many ways in this paper. . . . [T]he harder the paper, the more interesting it was becoming because it was sort of like a puzzle that connected.

Many of the students expressed satisfaction with the amount of information they had to draw upon in writing the final project.

Research was contextualized. Students enrolled in the research course were given the task of extending the personal story of their elder with research from written sources. This proved to be a challenging but productive task. Students first had to identify places in the life story of the elder where the reader would want or need more context—this could be historical, cultural, or even theoretical. Because they had the life history as a foundation, students were able to discard unrelated sources, but faced challenges in finding research that gave the information they needed. This generated fruitful discussions about the audience and purpose of research in academic writing. It changed the assignment from telling one person's story, to creating a more academic, research-based document that explored historical and cultural forces in the life of an individual. Students read historical documents, conference proceedings, anthropological studies, web documents, articles, and visited the archives of the Immigration History Center on campus. By having a clear context, students were better able to pull out information from the research, choosing what was important for their subject's life and finding ways to incorporate the information into the life history.

This context helped novice researchers to move away from the problem of what to include from the sources they read. As one student noted: “Research methods make big papers more extended and it gives more ideas and new shades. When researching, it is very important to know what exactly you are looking for.” The research component was one area where the writers consistently described themselves as being stretched and challenged.

Student work was connected to literature. In the Immigration Literature course, this history research component was not required. Instead, as students read works of immigration literature, they asked questions about how the piece was written, whose life story was being told, what information was included, and how they thought the writer crafted the story to create literature. Students looked at the use of metaphor in *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (Lum McCunn), the use of dialogue to create dramatic effect in *Bread Givers* (Yezierska), the use of description and specific detail to create imagery in *Farewell to Manzanar* (Wakatsuki Houston and Houston), and considered how some of these techniques might work in their own pieces. Writing a life history as part of this course gave students an inside view of literature and the process of creating stories. Students enhanced the life histories with family photographs, maps, illustrations, poetry, and artistic cover designs. One writer began her father’s life history with Hmong creation stories, as a way into the thinking and belief systems of Hmong elders. To produce a life story, all of the writers had to sequence and create narrative out of the information they had from their interviews.

Writing was seen as a creative process. In their reflection papers and in discussions at the end-of-term oral reading, students in both the literature and research courses commented that through this project they felt they were being asked to become writers: making choices about what to include, what to delete, how to present information, whether to write in the first person or third person, when to add direct quotations and when to summarize the story. Their responses reflected an appreciation of the choices they were given autonomy to make: “I feel like I am a real writer now.” As one student wrote: “I found out that telling a life story is very complicated, more like a puzzle than real life. If you don’t tell the story in order, it wouldn’t make any sense to anybody.” Another student summed it up this way: “I learned how to become a descriptive writer which is a enjoyable work and elaborating things for the reader. I learned as a writer you have to be sincere when telling a story of a person, but at the same time you are the author and you decide what part of the story you want to tell and how will you use the research.”

Extended drafting and reader response created a safe place to develop fluency. If one is to build confidence and voice as a writer in another language, it is important to have a place to write safely. Students drafted three interview prewritings without having to worry about a writing teacher's typical focus on errors, thesis statements, and other features of writing that often elicit judgmental response. Commentary, instead, focused on meaning: asking for clarification, for more detailed description, responding to particularly moving passages, suggesting areas to focus on in the final project. Editing comments were reserved for global patterns (past/present tense shifting) or places where meaning was unclear. The sheer volume of writing was impressive to both the teachers and the students: three interview prewritings, description, history notes all leading to the final fifteen- to twenty-page project. The effect on students' English was also visible to us. In one student's words: "At first, I was satisfied by the ideas that I have put for my paper but I had problems with some grammar. Later on I have noticed that my grammar has improved and had less editing to do." Another student wrote: "As a writer I changed a lot over the semester. I had lots of problems with editing, tenses, and articles. At the end of the semester I didn't have that many problems with tense. . . . When I finished each part, I felt like I had accomplished a lot." Interestingly, this perceived improvement with verb tense and articles came more from the push toward fluency than from focused grammar editing. The other noticeable effect was related to students' confidence as writers: over and over students told us that they were impressed that they had written such a long paper.

Students were able to find themselves in the curriculum. As a writing project, this assignment demanded that students write extensively, synthesize information from research and interviews to build a life history, make decisions on what to highlight and what to reduce or cut; it asked for creativity, and it demanded serious attention, since the end result was a gift to an elder as much as a grade. But beyond developing writing skill, the project also created a place within a school assignment for students who often must struggle to find themselves in the curriculum, and in so doing, generated important learning that was genuinely connected to students' lives. In many cases, this assignment connected the writer to the elder in new ways as well. The students' reflection papers spoke to this:

If I go back to the person I interviewed, who was a neighbor and a best friend of my dad . . . I knew this man for about fourteen years, but the knowledge I had from him was far from what I learned about

him after conducting an interview. . . . I was able to feel and see how life went to this old man. I was able to see how he believed in me and decided to share with me his life history. Through his experiences I learned that one can make a person from himself if he/she has confidence in himself/herself.

The most interesting part of the project was interviewing the elder because when she was telling her story, I felt the same feelings that she was expressing. For example, when she was talking about her house, she was showing me the pictures of the house and also the pictures of the bombed house. She used lots of sad words when she was talking about it. I could feel the depth of her sadness from her face.

Connections to elders may be particularly important in families undergoing a cultural shift. Intergenerational tensions may be part of an inevitable dynamic within most families; conflict between generations is inherent in immigrant families because of the very different historical, linguistic, and social experiences of youth, parents, and grandparents in the original and the adopted countries (Detzner "Conflict"). Although we do not have conclusive evidence for a positive change in the attitudes of the students engaged in the life history project, we noted a considerable empathetic response among students as the life story unfolded during the semester. Students recorded the courage, strength, determination, and sacrifice that parents and grandparents needed over many years as they sought a safe haven for their families. One student expressed a new admiration for the resilience and power of her Somali aunt, who had left home to get an education, had built up several business ventures in Somalia, Kenya, and now in Minnesota, and had clearly persevered against formidable odds. We did not survey elders' perceptions of the assignment; however, other researchers indicate that the life review process that occurs when an elder brings to consciousness the experiences of a long life has a positive, therapeutic impact (Butler; Baum).

When the life history project was extended with library research, students were asked to find themselves in the curriculum in more academic ways. At the University, outside of a few Global Studies or African History courses, there are not many places in the curriculum where a Somali or Oromo student is likely to see a reflection of her own history or experiences.

The research students did for their projects led directly to information about why the family had chosen to emigrate, to specific information about historical conflicts in the home country, to articles about cultural practices such as bride price or nomadic life, to political discussion of colonialism that had shaped conflicts that brought families to the United States. Students were researching the forces behind their own family history. Some had emigrated when they were too young to understand what was happening, others later in their teen years when assimilating to the new culture may take on more importance than listening to an elder. Parents are sometimes reluctant to discuss the traumatic and humiliating events of their family life with their children, hoping to shield them from the pain of adult life. Or they may assume that the children understand these experiences implicitly. As a result, some refugee children find themselves cut off from their homeland, native language, and friends without really understanding what happened or why the parents were forced to leave (Detzner et al.).

Not all of the students chose to interview an elder from their community. Several students selected U.S.-born elders (librarians, former high school teachers), and in so doing gained access to information about American family values, religious views, struggles for education and employment, worries about the future of today's youth, and so on. Nor were all of the interviews face to face. One student purchased a phone card to interview her grandmother in Ecuador, and from the write-up, it was clear that these phone conversations had created an important link between them.

This project rejected the deficit model of “remediation.”

One of the real strengths of this project, it seemed to us, was that it positioned the writers as experts, calling on the expertise of students who are bilingual and bicultural and building on the students' access to several languages and cultures. These students are the ones who can speak both languages, who can capture the story and write it in English so that future grandchildren might also read it. Several students did talk about the difficulty of doing the translation work between languages, feeling that important nuances were lost in the transition to the English language; nevertheless, they were able to complete the life histories in English, the language in which the next generation in these families will be more conversant. Beyond language, the students also know enough of the home culture to be able to interview an elder with the appropriate deference and intuition about what questions to ask, or not to ask. One Vietnamese writer described the strategies he planned to use if the Cambodian elder he was interviewing did not want to talk about his experiences under the Pol Pot regime. He explained

that he would politely ask a gentle question, but if he sensed reluctance, he would move to a different question. As it turned out, the elder did want to tell his story, but in all likelihood, the cultural sensitivity of the interviewer was the key to setting up a comfortable space for the story to be told. As a Southeast Asian himself, the student had insights on how to work with this elder, gaining a trust that an outsider might not have. (Through an undergraduate research grant, this student has continued to compile life histories of other Southeast Asian refugees.)

FINAL REFLECTION

The students, in their final reflection papers and in the presentations at the end of the semester told of the importance of gathering the stories they included in their life histories. The trip to the Immigration History Center on campus had demonstrated the dearth of materials written about recent immigrant families and also showed that there was a place in the archives for family documents, memoirs, and oral histories. In addition to sensing the importance of doing this type of writing, students also clearly felt they had learned a great deal about writing, which was reflected both in their writing over the course of the term and in their comments in response to the question: "What have you learned in the course?" Sample responses to this question included:

This class helped a lot and I learned a lot because my writing has improved. I can research anything I want.

I have learned how to do an interview and using research to support the paper.

I believe that my writing has not only changed in this class, but it has also improved in my other classes. For instance, I learned how to be specific and explain things in the order that they happened, so that the reader would know the main theme of my paper without any confusion.

It helped me learn a lot about Somalia.

Students wrote that they had learned how to interview, to ask good questions and follow them up; they had learned how to incorporate research and how to organize a long project: "In my first draft, I repeated a lot of

information, had long paragraphs, didn't do good editing, but as I continued with my writing, I learned how to not repeat the same information, shorten the paragraphs and explain them, how to edit and also how to use sub-headings."

Were the papers perfect? No. They were written by novice writers. Not all of the elders were equally forthcoming in their accounts of their lives, not all of the writers were able to produce strong writing. However, the papers were interesting to read and all three of us left the course wishing there had been ways to keep copies for ourselves. We will remember the Hmong writer who described his father's boyhood in the mountains of Laos in vivid detail—the chicken feast for a large, hungry family, the games boys played, and the more meager meals of salt and rice and hot pepper. There were odd parallels with a Mexican family across the globe in a paper that described similar poverty and meals of tortillas with salt, rice, and hot pepper. This assignment challenged the top writers in the class, who produced detailed, crafted pieces. The project also seemed accessible to the less accomplished writers, helping them to build fluency and tell a worthwhile story.

The Life History Project was the result of collaboration between two departments, with partial funding from a grant from the Center for Interdisciplinary Writing on campus. For us, the legitimacy of a social science researcher combined with the expertise of second-language writing instructors was important to the success of the project. Students responded positively to the "visiting professor" and to the serious attention their writing received. It took extra resources to team-teach the course in this way, but the initial pilot project is now ready for further dissemination.

It is our impression that the students in both the literature and the research course left with an appreciation for writing and a confidence that comes from writing a major project that is well received. The project resulted in education that connected students to real learning and substantial literacy growth. Our primary goals were to empower students as writers to use their own voices and histories in an academic context and to give them confidence as researchers working with complex issues. If the assignment also enhanced harmony between generations that are frequently at odds over the Western values and "strange ideas" that young students bring home with them from college, then it had additional benefits not easily measured by the number of pages written or the final grades given. There may be lessons here for basic writing instructors of both immigrant and non-immigrant students and for those who seek to strengthen the curriculum

with multicultural content. Basic writers—whatever their native language or dialect—do not need to be restricted to a deficit curriculum of paragraph writing or short, formulaic essays. Even when English has not been fully “mastered,” it can be used for meaningful writing that is significant for the student authors. By so doing, students can be brought into the real work of the academy—writing to record and make meaning of the information and the stories that are important in our lives.

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APPENDIX A

Prompts to Elicit Interview Questions for the Life History Project

Early Years:

These questions focus on getting description and stories from childhood.

- Where did you grow up?
- Describe your home/house/village/city/block.
- Who lived in the house with you?
- What rules did your family have?
- Were rules different for boys than for girls?
- What were the consequences of breaking the rules?
- What responsibilities did various family members have? What were your responsibilities as a child?
- Did you go to school? What was it like? Describe the school.
- Did you play any games?
- What type of family or community celebrations did you have?

Middle Years:

These questions focus on major life events and experience of adulthood.

- Is there an important object or photograph from adulthood that tells a lot about you at that stage of life?
- Where were you living during this period of life and what was going on in your village, region, or country at that time?
- What are 2-3 events or experiences from your middle years that are important memories to you?
- Did you face any serious difficulties, obstacles, or barriers at this time in life? Were you able to overcome those barriers?
- Did you get married? If so, how did you meet and what was the ceremony like?
- Did you have children? If so, describe each one briefly.
- Who lived in the house with you during these years? What were the responsibilities of each?
- What was the work that you did to help support the family?

Later Years:

These questions are focused on later life and the reflections and advice about life.

- What does it mean to be an elder in your culture and family?
- How is life different in the old world and the new?
- What do you miss the most about the old world and what do you like most about the new world?
- What are your hopes for the next generation?
- What have you learned in your life that you want future generations to know?
- What values do you believe are most important for the children to remember and practice in the future?
- What does it mean to be a strong family?

APPENDIX B

Tips for Interviewing

This list is a compilation of some of the advice students were given before they did the interviews. Each interview was followed by a class debriefing of the process.

- Set up a date and time for the interview.
- Having a tape recorder will free you up from notetaking so that you can interact with the person you are interviewing. Make sure the tape recorder works, has batteries, etc.
- An elder may need you to speak loudly enough, articulate clearly. Try to avoid distractions in the room (radio, television, other people) if you can.
- How long should the interview be? An hour and a half should be enough. Don't overstay your welcome, but let the person say what needs to be said.
- Is it appropriate to bring some food or a small gift to the interview?
- Plan ahead and write down the questions you want to ask. Before you do the interview, it is a good idea to tell the person what you want to talk about in the interview so they can prepare.
- Ask good follow-up questions. Probing for details is a key.
- Expect both joys and sorrows from someone who has had a long life. The joys are easy to hear; the sorrows may become difficult. You are not a counselor and if you sense that the elder has painful memories, you can back off and move to a new topic. On the other hand, you don't need to run away from a tearful moment if the elder still seems to want to talk. This is something that you need to judge sensitively. When in doubt, back off.
- End each interview with a positive question so that the conversation finishes on an upbeat note. "What was your favorite memory of . . .?"
- Always thank your informant at the end of the interview and ask if they have questions for you.

Toward a Writing and Healing Approach in the Basic Writing Classroom: One Professor's Personal Odyssey

Molly Hurley Moran

ABSTRACT: The author's therapeutic experience of writing a book about a personal tragedy led her to investigate the fledgling interdisciplinary field of Writing and Healing to see if it holds implications for the teaching of basic writing and also to revisit the debate about personal versus academic writing in the introductory composition class. The result was her redesigned basic writing course, in which students do extensive private writing on personal and sometimes painful issues. This private writing forms the basis for all their essays, beginning with personal narratives and moving toward more academic genres. The author's initial experiment with this approach suggests that it has the potential to improve students' attitudes toward and confidence in their writing and to help them develop a stronger prose style and more authentic voice.

Six years ago I took a large professional risk: I decided to write a book about a personal tragedy, knowing that this project would be a full-scale commitment that would preclude time for research and publication in my professional field—basic writing—and hence would stall my progress towards promotion. But I had to do it; my emotional and creative energies were inexorably pushing me in this direction.

Three and a half years earlier I had experienced a nightmare that turned my world upside down. In August of 1994, my older sister disappeared after going to the home of her estranged husband, whom she was in the process of divorcing and with whom she had had a violent relationship. For the next two-plus years, until Susan's remains were discovered in November

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1996, I lived the surreal, limbo-like existence peculiar to those who have a loved one missing, vacillating between the certainty that Susan was dead and the tiny, nagging hope that she was alive and out there somewhere.

During this period, I kept finding myself shaping stories about the situation in my head; the idea that I could channel my pain into a narrative comforted me in a way I found hard to explain. It had something to do with my intuition that if I could frame the experience, I could thereby control it. It also had something to do with my sense that writing a story about a personal tragedy connects one with others who have gone through a similar trauma and thereby universalizes it. These thoughts soothed me. I also found myself surging with creative energy when fragmentary images and themes for a prospective story would flash through my mind. I hadn't written a personal narrative since grammar school; the books and articles I had published during my career had been conventional academic ones. Personal writing, I thought, was not supposed to be the domain of academics. But the prospect of tapping this long neglected creative spring and transmuting my suffering into art inspired me.

I didn't begin the book proper until 1998, however, because I couldn't decide what genre it should be. Then one night I experienced one of those moments that fascinates composition scholars who are interested in the domain beyond the cognitive (see Brand and Graves, eds.). I was taking a shower and not consciously contemplating the genre problem, when suddenly the title *Finding Susan* popped into my mind and I envisioned the form the book would take: it would be a true-crime memoir, encompassing the themes of both the literal finding of Susan—the search for and discovery of her body—and the figurative finding of her—my exploration of the forces in our family and in her childhood that caused her to end up in these tragic circumstances. The next day I began to write.

I wrote the book mainly during summers, because my heavy teaching load allows little time for writing during the academic year and because I thought of this project, at first, as something separate from my job-related activities. But then something unexpected began to happen: the line between my book and my profession, between the personal and the academic, began to blur. As I was working on the book, I found myself thinking more and more about my basic writing students and identifying with them. Much of the time that I was writing, I was struggling with feelings of inadequacy and foolishness, thinking that the personal things I was so interested in and so deeply engaged with writing about—my family, my love for my sister, my

guilt about not having saved her—were not appropriate for a book by an academic. Certainly, I thought, no university press would want to publish it. It struck me that many of my students feel a similar kind of conflict. In the beginning-of-term questionnaires or literacy biographies I usually have my students complete, time and again they indicate that they used to love to write in elementary school, when they were assigned personal narratives, but that they began to dislike it and to lose confidence in their writing ability in junior high and high school when they encountered teachers who eschewed personal writing and forbade the use of the pronoun “I.” Similarly, many say that they avidly wrote in a journal or diary during their high school years but had difficulty writing papers for English class. It occurred to me while I was experiencing my own insecurity concerning the significance of the personal matters I was writing about that perhaps the inflated style characteristic of some freshman writers, which I used to attribute to their attempt to pad their sentences so as to eke out a longer paper, may actually be an attempt to make their writing sound academic. The stiltedness of this style may be an indication of how hard they are straining to drive the personal underground.

These insights, coupled with the engagement and emotional healing I was undergoing while writing *Finding Susan*, caused me to begin to rethink my approach to teaching basic writing. I wanted to design a course that would allow my students to have the kind of meaningful, personal involvement with their writing that I was having. Consequently, in 2002, when my book was finished and accepted for publication (by a university press, to my gratification and encouragement), I turned my energies to investigating theories upon which to build such a course.

Research on Writing and Healing

A creative-writing friend who runs writing workshops for cancer patients had told me about an exciting new interdisciplinary movement—encompassing the disciplines of psychology, neuroscience, and composition—known as Writing and Healing. I began my research by looking into the work of psychologists in this field, especially that of James Pennebaker, whom many consider the founder of the movement. In his pioneering 1990 book, *Opening Up*, Pennebaker describes a series of experiments he conducted at Southern Methodist University in the 1980s. In the first of these, he divided 46 student volunteers into four groups and had them each write continuously for 15 minutes a day for four consecutive days while alone in a

small cubicle. The control group was given a trivial topic to write about each day. The other three groups were all told to write about a traumatic, painful, or shameful experience. But one of these groups was instructed just to describe their emotions, then and now, about the experience, not to narrate the facts; the second group was instructed to describe only the facts of the experience, not the emotions; and the third group was instructed to narrate the facts *and* describe their emotions, then and now, concerning the experience. Immediately following the final day's writing session, Pennebaker and his assistant questioned the participants individually about how they were feeling. Then four months later the participants completed a questionnaire about their current outlook and state of mind. In addition, the students' visits to the student health center in the months before and after the experiment were tallied.

The immediate post-experiment questioning revealed that those who had written about trauma—all three groups—felt worse than they had before the writing experience, no doubt because the writing had recalled the original painful feelings, while there was no change in mood for those who had written on trivial topics. However, four months later, those in the group who had written about both their feelings and the facts concerning the painful experience revealed an overall improved mood and a more positive outlook than they had had before the experiment, while the reported feelings of those in the other three groups—those who had described only emotions, those who had described only facts, and those who had written on trivial topics—were virtually the same as before the experiment. The tallies of the health center visits showed that in the months before the experiment the students in all four groups went to the health center for illness at the same rate, but during the six months following the experiment there was a 50% drop in visits for those who had written about both feelings and facts, while the rates were the same as before for the other three groups (30-34).

In the years since this seminal experiment, Pennebaker and other psychologists have conducted refinements and variations of it, trying to determine exactly what is going on psychologically and physiologically when one practices what Pennebaker calls "disclosure" writing—so called because volunteers are usually instructed to select something that has been too painful or shameful for them to write or talk about before now (see Pennebaker; Lepore and Smyth, eds.). These psychologists have looked at such factors as heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductivity, left and right brain hemisphere activity, and immunological functioning. In addition, they have tried to

determine whether there are certain personality types that are more susceptible than others to the healing effects of this kind of writing. The overall findings strongly suggest that for most people, exploring in writing one's feelings and thoughts about a painful or shameful personal experience results in improved mental and physical health. The findings also suggest that, contrary to a widespread notion, it is not the catharsis of expressing pent-up emotion that is responsible for the healing—such venting at best gives only temporary relief, at worst exacerbates the distress. Rather, other factors appear to be responsible. These include 1) the habituation response, whereby confronting a fear or a painful memory habituates one to it and thus robs it of its power; 2) the fact that naming an emotion or a trauma legitimizes it—that is, if there is a word for it, it is something society has recognized and hence the sufferer is not alone; 3) the fact that the act of writing objectifies the trauma and makes one regard it from different perspectives, in effect helping one to resolve it; and 4) the fact that constructing a narrative about an event is a way of finding coherence and meaning in it.

Rethinking My Approach to Teaching Basic Writing

This growing body of evidence pointing to the healing power of writing about personal issues holds strong implications, I began to think, for the teaching of basic writing, for I had long noticed that basic writing students seem inordinately burdened with emotional difficulties: not only the usual range of issues and post-traumatic stresses so many young adults arrive at college with today—divorced parents, death of a high school friend in a car accident, eating disorders, and so on—but the additional distress of having been stigmatized and marginalized because of academic failure or a learning disability. Further, a number of my basic writing students have grown up in violent or impoverished circumstances. If I could get my students to explore the way these experiences have affected them, I thought, they would gain control over their disabling feelings, enabling them to engage more fully in their academic life. As I contemplated such a pedagogical approach, I found myself thinking about how helpful it would have been for me to have been encouraged to write about personal issues in a university class my freshman year of college. Although not a basic writing student, I was hampered by personal problems—an alcoholic, unpredictable mother; an emotionally chaotic home life; a sense of inferiority about my Irish-Catholic background spawned by having attended a WASPy boarding school and now being at an Ivy League college where everyone, I thought,

was smarter than I was. To have been able to write about these issues in an academic setting would probably have helped me achieve a sense of coherence and control, an integration of my personal and academic identities.

The idea that I could help my students achieve this kind of psychological integration excited me. But one nagging question kept returning: Would writing about personal matters and painful experiences cause the students' writing to improve? I reminded myself that my profession is composition teacher, not therapist, and that my primary mission is to help my students become better writers. In search of an answer to this question, I decided to turn from the field of psychology to that of composition studies. Personal writing in the freshman English class, of course, has been largely out of favor since the 1970s, when the expressivist theories of Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie enjoyed popularity,¹ and so for the past two decades I, like most composition teachers, had been emphasizing "academic" genres—exposition, analysis, and argument—over personal essays. Occasionally I would assign a personal narrative for the first paper of the term, under the assumption that it was an easier kind of writing, but then would quickly move on to the real business of the course: the presumably more rigorous, more mature academic modes. I didn't question these assumptions, even though I always secretly enjoyed reading my students' personal essays much more than their conventional academic ones. I guiltily attributed my enjoyment to some kind of voyeurism on my part, never bothering to consider that its cause might be the greater vividness and authenticity of such essays. But after my experience of writing *Finding Susan*, I found myself questioning my bias and was motivated to explore the arguments made by those in the field who still believe personal writing should play a role in freshman composition and basic writing.

The Personal vs. Academic Writing Debate

Although social constructionist and cultural studies theories have increasingly dominated the field since the early 1980s, articles advocating personal writing appear sporadically in the major journals, with an occasional special issue devoted to revisiting the personal vs. academic debate. Most who defend personal writing argue not that it should replace academic writing but that it is an effective bridge to the latter kind of discourse for students new to the academy. In one of the first articles to challenge the backlash against 1970s expressivism, Jerrold Nudelman and Alvin H. Schlosser assert that personal writing can help inexperienced writers "over-

come the all-too-prevalent feeling that their ideas are not worthy of being included in a college essay" (23). The authors describe specific methods teachers can use to lead students from this kind of writing to abstract, academic discourse. A few years later, Robert Connors argues that while the proper goal of freshman composition is extrapersonal, academic writing, "[l]earning that one has a right to speak, that one's voice and personality have validity, is an important step—an essential step. Personal writing, leaning on one's own experience, is necessary for this step" (181). In a 1995 published exchange with social constructionist David Bartholomae, Peter Elbow says he agrees with the goal of having students master academic writing, but feels this should be put off until upper-level courses, with the freshman composition course being devoted to helping students find their own voice ("Response" 87).

Most scholars who argue for using personal writing to lay the groundwork for academic writing do so not because they feel the former is *easier*, however. Rather, it is because they believe that abstract thinking and writing are necessarily grounded in subjective experience. Irene Papoulis, for example, asserts, "Every college student, of course, must assimilate disciplinary conventions, but unless students learn to articulate their subjective responses to the thoughts they encounter, they will be crippled when it comes time to generate their own ideas" (133), a remark that echoes Robert Brooke's view that "[l]earning to write meaningfully in our culture requires developing an understanding of the self as writer, as someone who uses writing to further personal thinking and to help solve problems. The development of such a role, such a self-understanding, is more important than developing any set of procedural competencies" (5).

Many personal-writing advocates contend that critics have set up a false bifurcation between academic and personal writing. Donald Murray, for example, argues that *all* writing, even "impersonal" writing such as reports and newsletters, is autobiographical in that it stems from "the questions that itch our lives" (214), the seeds of which obsessions were sown in our youths. Kathleen Dixon and Norbert Elliot, in separate essays published in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, argue that narrative and expository writing are really two sides of the same coin, for every piece of writing has a personal story behind it (the story of how the author came to be interested in the topic) and all knowledge is experiential. Elliot bolsters this argument by pointing out that many scholarly articles in our composition journals—ironically, even some that argue against expressivist pedagogy—use personal

anecdotes to show how the author arrived at his or her theory (just as I am doing here). This same point is driven home by Nancy Sommers and other scholars who contributed to a 1992 special issue of *College Composition and Communication* revisiting the question of personal writing: they self-consciously interweave personal anecdotes with theoretical discussion in essays arguing that the personal and concrete cannot be divorced from the abstract. This same basic argument is made in many of the contributions to a 2003 special issue of *College English*.² Amy Robillard, for example, points out that although many scholars do not allow their students to write personal narratives, they themselves use narrative in their journal articles, thereby tacitly acknowledging the integral relationship between personal experience and abstract thinking. Robillard feels we should openly acknowledge this relationship in our classes: rather than treat narrative as a transitional, “easy” step to the privileged forms of analysis and argument, we should show students how narrative and academic discourse interanimate (her term) one another.

Some scholars advocating personal writing attest to its efficaciousness at improving students’ overall writing. For example, Jim Cody describes a series of six-week writing workshops he ran for students having difficulty writing papers in other courses (they were referred to his workshops by professors in these courses). He noticed that students who had written stilted, clichéd academic papers often wrote rich, original expressive pieces in response to the exercises he gave them. One student had been referred by a legal studies professor because of the poor writing in the student’s draft of a paper about Malcolm X. During the course of the workshop this student did freewriting about his own experiences with racial injustice, linking these to Malcolm X’s, and as a result was able to write a much better developed, more engaging final draft of his legal studies paper.

Guy Allen has written about a series of experiments he conducted over several semesters using varying proportions of personal writing assignments in a course entitled Effective Writing. He found that students given extensive practice in writing personal essays before being assigned expository essays produced better expository writing—in terms of “technical quality, honesty, vividness, and originality”—than did students given little or no practice in personal essays but instructed in the principles of expository writing (255, 278). Furthermore, there was a correspondence between the amount of personal writing students did in Allen’s course and the extent to which their writing improved in other courses, including science, math,

philosophy, and survey law courses (255). Allen's findings made him conclude that "all writing roots somehow in experience and observation" (254) and personal writing makes students "search themselves and their experience for meaning" (281); therefore, "when students learn to take responsibility for meaning, they become better writers of standard-form writing, like research reports, business letters, or the academic expository essay" (281-82).

Lad Tobin arrived at similar insights to those of Cody and Allen. In his composition course he has students write about public issues but encourages them to do so in a personal way, using their own voice. One student wrote her final essay on the relationship between thought and language, with her thesis being that "a writer can only think clearly when she is allowed to use a voice and a style that she has mastered" (23). Tobin sums up her support for her argument:

She felt that in my course, she had been able to think through important issues in original ways; however, in her humanities class, she had trouble developing and organizing her ideas about Homer, Cicero, and the prophets. She accounts for the difference not by the difficulty of the material—she took on complicated problems in my course—but rather by the encouragement I gave her to explore the ideas that mattered to her in personal and informal language. Her humanities professor, she complains, had denied her this access by insisting on numerous references to the text and "impeccable English prose." (23-24)

This student's argument confirmed Tobin's sense that treating academic writing as though it is divorced from subjective experience causes students to be disconnected from their real thoughts and hence to produce empty, stilted papers.

The findings of these composition scholars mirror findings in another one of James Pennebaker's psychology experiments. Pennebaker arranged with the political science department at his university to conduct an experiment on students enrolled in a course entitled Social and Political Institutions from 1854 to the Present. This course had traditionally been disliked by students because of its heavy reading load and its large, impersonal lecture format. Weekly breakaway discussion groups that were intended to engage the students in lively debate about the course topics usually fell flat, with students having little to say. Pennebaker's experiment involved imple-

menting a new format for these discussion sessions for one semester: at the beginning of each session, the instructor would give a brief overview of the main ideas of the week's readings and lectures and then instruct the students to write continuously for ten minutes about their "deepest thoughts and feelings about the topic" (187); after ten minutes, the writings would be turned in (but not graded) and the discussion would begin.

The results were astonishing: the discussions became rich and vigorous, with students contributing insightful, intelligent comments on topics they previously would have found obscure. Pennebaker concludes, "Their writing had forced them to assimilate ideas from a variety of sources, as well as from their own experiences. All of a sudden, topics such as the British East India Tea Company or the plight of the Mosquito Indians in Guatemala became relevant to their own lives" (187). Further, not only did the students' discussion improve but their writing did as well, as attested by the higher grades on essay exams during the experimental semester.

I think Pennebaker's findings probably ring true to most of us who write. I have long noticed that the only way I can get into and sustain a writing project is to connect to it personally or to see its relevance to my own experience. I can remember how in graduate school when one of my friends or I was working on a paper, we would become obsessed with the topic, suddenly finding connections between it and everything else in our life—movies we saw, magazine articles we read, conversations we found ourselves in. So often what had begun as a dry, abstract assignment evolved into an exploration of deep personal engagement. But most college freshman writers—especially basic writers—have not had this experience. As Guy Allen observes, speaking about the attitude of his students before he began the personal-writing approach, "The students had no idea that writing could be part of life. Life for them resumed *after* they got their essays in" (251).

Possible "Academic" Benefits of Personal Writing

The findings of Pennebaker coupled with those of the composition scholars surveyed above make a strong case for the academic benefits of having students new to the university—especially basic writers—do personal writing in their composition course. Additionally, work being done by writers and composition scholars associated with the Writing and Healing movement has special implications, I believe, for basic writers, because they often arrive at college with emotional scars. Many of these authors—especially Louise DeSalvo, Susan Zimmerman, and Gabriele Rico—describe how

through writing about a traumatic experience they were able to better understand it, gain control of their lives, and experience the joy of creativity. Some authors address the empowering effect expressive writing can have for particular populations of sufferers, such as victims of sexual abuse (Payne), domestic violence (Julier), AIDS (Nye), and multiple sclerosis (Rinaldi). Two articles make the case that this kind of writing leads not only to emotional health but also to improved prose style. Marian MacCurdy observes that “the methods which produce good writing are the very ones that facilitate healing: iconic image rather than voice-over narrative is the core of both processes” (159) and “[t]he same thing that helps us recover from traumatic experiences—describing images in detail to another—produces writing which is alive with sensory description” (167). She demonstrates how students in her upper-level writing course who had formerly written bland, generalized essays were able to produce vivid, engaging prose in their trauma narratives. Similarly, Jeffrey Berman, in an essay he co-authored with one of the students in his Literary Suicide course, which focused on literary works reflecting their authors’ preoccupation with self-inflicted death (Berman and Schiff), reports that students’ writing improved when he began requiring them to keep a diary recording their personal responses to the literature. Once a week, students could voluntarily and anonymously turn in diary entries to be read aloud by the professor. Although Berman had implemented this assignment mainly to help raise students’ consciousnesses about the problem of suicide, he discovered that it also helped students to write better: their diary entries, which tended to describe their own painful suicide-related experiences (suicides of friends, their own attempts, their contemplation of suicide) were usually more eloquent and detailed than the formal papers they turned in.

Redesigning My Basic Writing Course

Convinced, then, by both my research and my own experience that if I were to focus on personal writing, including writing about trauma, this would have psychological and academic benefits for my basic writing students, I decided to re-design my course. In making this decision I knew I was taking a risk because my program is under pressure to ready students for English 1101, a conventional freshman composition course requiring strictly analytical and argumentative essays. Papers that contain a certain number of major errors are automatically failed. I feared that if I asked my students to do personal writing, they might feel I wasn’t preparing them for fresh-

man composition. After all, they enroll in a basic writing course³ because they've been told their writing skills are weak and they need to catch up on what they didn't get in secondary school; they therefore expect a more rigorous version of their high school English class, that is, with a heavier focus on grammar and academic modes and a stronger injunction against using the pronoun "I." But I thought the risk was worth taking, for I had been growing dissatisfied with my teaching approach over the last few years. While my students' writing generally improved, it did so by becoming more correct and better organized, but the content usually remained uninspired or clichéd and the students didn't seem to like writing any better at the end of the semester than they did at the beginning; they still saw it only as something they had to do to get through school. I reminded myself of the richness of my experience of writing *Finding Susan*, and then went ahead and took the plunge: I re-designed my course during the summer of 2003 and offered the new version in my three sections that fall. What follows is first an overview and then a detailed description of my new approach.

Superficially the new course resembled the kind of basic writing course I'd always taught: students read and discussed essays in a reader, studied grammar rules from a handbook, and wrote several essays. But I made four important changes: I implemented a private writing component; I held off assigning grades on essays until the end of the semester; I did away with grammar quizzes; and I "came out": for the first time, I shared with my classes the personal trauma of my sister's murder.

The heart of the new course was the emphasis on private writing. For almost every homework assignment, students read an essay in the reader and then wrote for at least 15 minutes. They could either write a personal response to the reading selection or explore their thoughts and feelings concerning a personal issue. I gave them this choice because I didn't want to make this exclusively a writing-and-healing kind of exercise since not *all* basic writing students are dealing with personal crises or want to explore personal problems in writing. But I did want to offer the possibility for those who had been scarred by painful experiences to write about them. Of course, it's important for instructors to understand that writing may unleash painful feelings, and writers may find that they need the support of skilled professionals to handle these feelings. Instructors should be prepared to make appropriate referrals if the need arises. It's also important for writers to feel safe to explore these painful experiences in privacy. In my course, I assured students I would not read what they wrote but would just briefly glance at

their notebooks at the end of the semester to make sure they had done the private writing. The grade on their private writing—15% of their course grade—would be holistic and would be based on volume: if they wrote more than the minimum volume or wrote extra entries, they would receive a correspondingly higher grade.⁴

In addition to the private writing done for homework, the students did 10 minutes of private writing at the beginning of each class in response to a prompt I put up on the overhead. This would be a word or phrase designed to elicit a memory or an emotion, for example, “first disappointment,” “first day of school,” “a time I felt jealous,” “loneliness,” “moment of pure happiness,” “snowfall.” They could begin writing right away, or if they felt stuck, they could do clustering until they reached what I called an “aha” moment—a moment when they suddenly felt compelled to begin writing. The students were familiar with clustering because it is a popular invention method taught by high school teachers today, but I explained that they would be using it to discover feelings and memories rather than to generate material for a paper. I demonstrated briefly, by clustering on the blackboard in response to the prompt “rainy day” that one class gave me (I used the same demonstration in the other sections): after a few dead-end initial associations—each summed up in a word or phrase, circled, and connected by a line to the circled prompt—I came up with a memory of joyfully “swimming” in a rain puddle as a tiny child, and that led to a swarm of related memories about that long-ago day, illustrated in my demonstration by branching-off clusterings. Just after I circled the phrase “in trouble,” I stopped and told my students I was having my “aha” moment and that if this were not just a demonstration, now is when I would begin writing. I explained that I was remembering that event so vividly—the exhilaration of “swimming” in the middle of winter followed by the stinging guilt when my mother subsequently punished me for getting my woolen clothes all wet—that I was itching to explore that memory in detail. A couple of weeks into the semester after I’d told them about my sister and my book (I decided to wait until after we’d gotten to know each other better to share this personal information), I gave them another example of an “aha” experience: the moment when the phrase “finding Susan” popped into my mind and inspired me to begin my book.

We who are seasoned writers are familiar with this kind of experience; we have learned to heed images, intuitions, and other emanations of what Sondra Perl, in a phrase she adapted from psychologist Eugene Gendlin, calls

“felt sense.” We know that these are often the seeds for our best writing. But beginning and inexperienced writers are unfamiliar with this experience; they don’t trust that their instincts and personal images can spawn meaningful writing. My approach, then, was designed to help my basic writing students develop this trust. It took a couple of weeks, however, before most of them began to experience the “aha” feeling and to engage with the in-class private writing. At first, they were resistant: they would take their time pulling out a sheet of paper and a pencil, fidgeting and looking at their watches during the 10 minutes, and stopping as soon as the time was up. But gradually their attitude began to change as they realized I wasn’t going to spring a surprise check on their writing folders and as they started seeing the writing as something they were doing for themselves, not me. Soon they were pulling out their folders the minute they arrived at class, and the fidgetiness was replaced by an atmosphere of deep absorption. Peter Elbow, in talking about freewriting, has noted how different this kind of silence is from the resistant, sullen silence of a group of students in an exam (“Silence” 15). I felt this difference palpably, and when I would announce that the ten minutes was up, usually at least half of the students would continue writing until I repeated the announcement.

The five essays required in the course grew out of the private writing. Although instructions were tailored for each assignment, in general each time the students went through the following process. At the start of each new essay cycle, they read through their recent private writing entries, putting a check mark at the top of any that particularly stirred them. They then selected one of these and expanded upon it in freewriting. Then over a period of two weeks they drafted the essay and revised it several times, with the help of feedback from me in conference and from peers in their small groups. They turned their final draft in to me, and I returned it a week later with comments but no grade. Following the fifth essay assignment, they each selected their three favorite essays, spent two weeks revising and polishing them, and turned them in the last week of class to be graded. I graded the essays on the basis of their substance, development, support, coherence, clarity, and grammatical correctness. The average of each student’s three essay grades constituted 60% of his or her course grade (the final exam, a three-hour in-class essay with a choice of general-interest and readings-related topics, counted 25%, and the private writing, as mentioned earlier, counted 15%).

Before I explain about the essay assignments in greater detail, let me

say a few words about the small groups and about how grammar instruction was handled. Approximately every three weeks students were arranged into new groups, each consisting of three or four members. Within groups they discussed the readings and gave each other feedback on their drafts. Because students sometimes wrote about sensitive personal topics, they were always given the option of bypassing their group during feedback sessions and instead receiving their feedback from me or joining an *ad hoc* group of students who had all written on sensitive topics. Only one student ever took this option, choosing to receive feedback from me on the drafts of his first essay. The reason more didn't take the option, I believe, is that group members tended to be very respectful of one another and sensitive to each other's feelings when they gave feedback. And so fears about disclosure were not a problem.⁵

The small-group sharing of drafts helped students not only with development and audience awareness but also with surface features of their papers. Much of the grammar and mechanics editing occurred when students read their next-to-final drafts to their group, for they would often catch errors and stylistic infelicities when they read aloud, and their peers would often point out sentences or words that didn't "sound right." When the latter happened, the group would usually put their heads together to try to figure out what was wrong with the sentence or word, and this kind of analysis was much more fruitful than my lecturing on grammar rules would have been. (I would, though, circulate during these discussions and make myself available for questions.) I encouraged students to develop individualized error logs based on the types of errors they discovered in these sessions as well as errors I pointed out in their returned papers, and in conferences I showed them how to consult the handbook for grammar help. Very little formal grammar instruction was given; it was limited to the two classes following the return of each essay, and was focused only on the types of errors that had prevailed in the current batch of essays.

The essay assignments were designed to move students from exclusively personal writing to more academic writing. The first two were personal narratives. Although my interest in Writing and Healing made me want to encourage students to narrate traumatic experiences, I was wary of pressuring them to do this. I didn't want them to get the impression that papers about trauma would be more highly valued or would receive higher grades than those describing less extreme experiences. Nor did I want to encourage sensationalist writing, in the vein of television talk-show confes-

sions. My instructions, therefore, were to select from their private writing a personal experience they'd touched on, possibly a painful one, that they would like to explore so as to understand it more deeply. The result was narratives ranging from extreme experiences, such as a relative's suicide, to more common ones, such as parents' divorce or not making a sports team.

The third and fourth assignments were thesis-support essays, in which students connected a personal issue or experience to a generalization about life or about American society. I pointed out to them that most of the essays we'd been reading in our reader presented theses that grew out of personal experience. For example, we looked at Barbara Ascher's essay "On Compassion" and noted how her close observation of and visceral response to the homeless people she encountered every day on the streets of New York caused her to develop a theory about the nature of human compassion. Again, students perused their private writing entries, this time for the seeds of an extrapersonal generalization.⁶ For example, one student, an African-American male who had written about being treated suspiciously by clerks in a department store, developed a thesis about the harmfulness of racial profiling.

The fifth essay was an argument. First students read sample arguments in the reader (Kennedy, Kennedy, and Aaron, eds.), such as Gore Vidal's argument for legalizing drugs and H. L. Mencken's argument against abolishing the death penalty, and discussed the rhetorical strategies the authors used. Then students looked for a private writing entry of their own that could be developed into an argument concerning a controversial issue. For example, one student who had written about the experience of having her parents go through a bitter divorce when she was young wrote an essay arguing that couples considering divorce should be required to first attend counseling if they have young children.

When the students turned in their three revised essays at the end of the semester, they could indicate if they wanted one of these to be "published" in the class magazine. I compiled a separate magazine for each of the three classes. Students gave me their submissions on disk, and I had the magazine available online for them a couple of days after the last class. I had tried class magazines in the past, but hadn't had much luck. Usually only a handful of students submitted essays, and these were usually limited to A-range essays. In the fall semester, however, virtually all of my students submitted a piece for the magazine. I attribute this change partly to the fact that the essays grew out of private writing and so the students were person-

ally invested in what they had written; they wanted to publish their essays not because they'd received A's on them (they didn't know any of their grades at this point) but because they had written about things that truly mattered to them.

But I think the bigger reason students were inspired to publish their work is the example of my own writing experience. The third week of the semester I had opened up to them about my sister's murder, my reaction to it, and my need to write about it. Although I had been nervous at first about revealing my personal life—I feared I might risk losing authority with my students—doing so proved to enhance my teaching and my relationship with students: they trusted me more and took my feedback on their writing more seriously. I shared with them what I had learned about writing and healing, from both my research and my personal experience, and when I would talk about the importance of writing, they really listened. Because I had discussed my own experience with the students, I wasn't like some adult telling children that broccoli is good for them although she doesn't eat it herself. Fortunately, my book was published in the middle of the semester, providing students with tangible evidence that personal and painful experiences can give rise to successful public writing.⁷ The result was that almost all of the students were motivated to publish their own work in the class magazine. Approximately half of the submissions were personal narratives and half thesis-support essays. Approximately a fourth of the total submissions grew out of private writing that focused on a traumatic experience or troubling circumstance in the student's personal life.

Many students stopped by my office during exam week and told me how much they liked the magazine or how much better their essay seemed when they saw it published. Some said they planned to print the magazine out, have it bound, and give it to their parents for Christmas or show it to their former high school English teachers. One student, a young man who had immigrated with his family from Mexico to the United States when he was eight years old, came back to see me at the beginning of the current semester and told me he had taken the magazine with him on his visit to relatives in Mexico over the holidays; they had all sat around his grandmother's kitchen while he read them his submission, a poignant essay about his terrifying first day of school in America. The pride on his face when he recounted to me the awed reaction of his relatives convinced me more than almost any other evidence that my new approach to basic writing was effective.

Results of This New Approach to Basic Writing

As the previous remark suggests, my criteria for concluding that my fall course was a success are largely qualitative and impressionistic: the absorption I could feel when students were doing the in-class private writing, their seriousness and involvement when they were giving each other feedback in small groups, the fact that during the semester only one or two out of my 46 students ever asked me what grade an essay would have received if I'd been assigning grades, and the fact that at the end of each cycle when students turned in their essays, many volunteered to read theirs aloud to the class, whereas in the past students had been extremely reluctant to do this.

But I also have some quantitative criteria, although I didn't run a concurrent control group for comparison purposes. At the beginning of most semesters I have students fill out a questionnaire that includes an item asking them to rate their attitude toward writing on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) and then to briefly comment. My entering fall semester students' attitudes towards writing were similar to those of students in the past, with the preponderance of students circling 2 or 3 and with typical comments being that they didn't like writing because they weren't "good at it" or weren't "good at grammar." Fall semester I had students fill out another questionnaire at the end of the term containing the same item, and I asked them to comment about any change in attitude they had experienced. The majority indicated an attitude improvement: 56% circled a higher number than they had at the beginning of the term, most of them two points higher. Many attributed their improved attitude to having developed confidence in their ideas and their ability to generate writing topics, with some expressly linking this new ability to the private writing requirement. Some said that not being given grades on their essays during the semester decreased their anxiety. And some said the small-group feedback made them realize their writing was interesting to others and therefore increased their confidence.

The course grades revealed that not only the students' attitudes but also their writing had improved. Whereas the average grade in my basic writing course for the previous three academic years had been 80, the average for fall semester 2003 was 86.⁸ Although the abolishment of mandatory placement into basic writing at my university may be part of the reason for this increase (since students now have the choice whether to enroll, those who do so might be more motivated), I attribute the improved grades mainly

to the fact that students were writing about issues that truly mattered to them and hence produced richer essays—essays containing more original content, more vivid prose, and a more authentic voice.

While more research needs to be done—using control groups, more precise quantitative measures, longitudinal studies, and perhaps different sub-sets of basic writing students—my findings are promising. They suggest that emphasizing personal writing in a basic writing course and encouraging students to explore painful personal issues can launch them on a journey toward psychological integration and academic success. My greatest hope is that my new pedagogical approach will make life-long writers of my students, that they will come to see how writing can help them make sense of their lives and can help to heal their emotional wounds—the very benefits I reaped from writing *Finding Susan*. What began, then, as a personal project, seemingly unconnected to my professional life, has proven to have profound implications for my teaching of basic writing.

Notes

1. Ken Macrorie's *Uptaught* (1970) and Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers* (1973) launched the expressivist movement in composition in the United States. Throughout my essay I use the terms "expressivist writing" and "personal writing" interchangeably to refer to writing that gives significant attention to the writer's experiences and feelings.
2. I didn't actually read these articles until after I'd done my preliminary research for a theory to base my course on, since this issue didn't come out until fall 2003.
3. My university recently did away with mandated placement. Students with low scores on the writing placement test are now merely advised to enroll in basic writing.
4. Students kept their private writing in a folder, with each entry dated and indicated as "homework" or "in-class" at the top of the first page. In individual conferences in my office at the end of the semester, I checked each student's folder by glancing quickly at each entry and noting on a record sheet for each student the number of missing entries, the number of skimpy entries (less than a page), and the number of long entries (at

least two pages). A's on private writing were assigned to students with no missing entries and with a preponderance of long entries, B's to those with no more than three missing entries and no more than three skimpy entries, C's to those with four to eight missing entries and/or four to eight skimpy entries, and D's to those with more than eight missing entries and/or more than eight skimpy entries. F's would have been given to students who didn't do any of the private writing assignments. The majority of students received B's; a small number of students received D's; the remaining students were almost equally divided between A's and C's.

5. For a good discussion of the kinds of confidentiality and ethical issues that can arise in a classroom when students write about personal topics, see Dan Morgan, "Opinion: Ethical Issues Raised by Students' Personal Writing."

6. I did not read my students' private writing, but many of them would talk about it when they conferred with me about ways they were thinking of using this writing in an essay.

7. I did several campus and local readings and book signings during the month following publication, and several of my students attended these and purchased copies of my book. In addition, I was interviewed on national television (MSNBC Live) and was invited to give readings and speak before domestic violence, criminal justice, and literary groups in different states. I shared all these developments with my students, and many of them watched or taped my television interview.

8. I assign letter grades to essays, but when I compute the end-of-term averages, I convert letter grades to their numerical equivalents using the conversion table that is standard in my academic unit: A = 95, A- = 92, B+ = 88, B = 85, B- = 82, and so on down to F, which equals a 59 or lower (depending on the instructor's assessment of the severity of the essay's problems). An essay's grade is based on its content (i.e., substance, development, and support), coherence (organization and clarity), and adherence to grammar and mechanics conventions. I do not assign points or weights to these categories but rather grade holistically, with A-range grades indicating superior, B good, C adequate, D poor, and F unacceptable.

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The 2005 CBW Pre-Conference Workshop will focus on “Models for Student Success: Learning from Award Winning Basic Writing Programs.”

Presenters: Carolyn Young, Kelly Belanger, April Heaney, and Joyce Stewart of the University of Wyoming, on “Opening the Golden Gates’ to Basic Writers: Building a Successful Learning Community.” Helen P. Gilotte-Tropp, Sugie Goen, and their program team from San Francisco State University on “Literacy Unleashed: An Integrated Approach to Reading-Writing.”

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Rhetoric, composition, writing, and literacy scholars have long spoken of the need to take our arguments public in order to gain better support for our work, both within our own institutions and in our local and national communities. Unfortunately, contemporary debates about student writing and language and literacy education are not driven by scholarship in our field, but by popular texts (i.e., *Cultural Literacy*, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and *The Language Police*) and media reports, which are often politically partisan or simply ill informed. *Johnny Can Write: Exposing Myths About Literacy, Language and Culture* will inform a general audience of educated parents, students, educators, administrators, policy makers, and citizens about our theories and practices that complicate and challenge circulating texts and common perceptions about literacy and language education.

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