



## Journal of Basic Writing

Personal and Academic Writing:

Revisiting the Debate

**Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk**

The Synergy Program:

Reframing Critical Reading and Writing for At-Risk Students

**April Heaney**

Basic Writers and Learning Communities

**Rachelle L. Darabi**

In the Service of Writing and Race

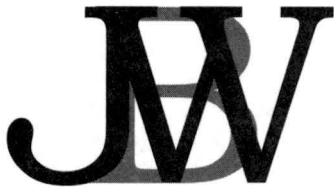
**Angelique Davi**

(Re)membering Basic Writing at a Public Ivy:

History for Institutional Redesign

**John Paul Tassoni**

**SPRING 2006**  
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The *Journal of Basic Writing* publishes articles of theory, research, and teaching practices related to basic writing. Articles are refereed by members of the Editorial Board (see overleaf) and the Editors.

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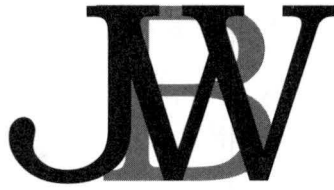
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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

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: [baugust@citytech.cuny.edu](mailto:baugust@citytech.cuny.edu). If electronic submission is not possible, mail five copies of the manuscript and abstract to:

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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.

# Coming in the Fall 2006 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*

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In celebration of *JBW*'s 25th volume, leaders in the field of basic writing address some of the key questions we face as we move into the future:

- What are the politics of basic writing today, and how can we participate most productively in those politics?
- What constructions of student identity have dominated basic writing in recent years?
- What are the needs of multilingual students as they move from ESL or BW into courses across the curriculum?
- What types of courses are being developed to meet the needs of basic writers in the twenty-first century?
- How can master's degree programs most effectively prepare teachers of basic writing?

## EDITORS' COLUMN

Recently, one of the *JBW* co-editors attended a workshop for administrators of programs focusing on college access and success. During the discussion, a workshop leader observed, "You don't use the term 'remedial' do you?" "No," the *JBW* editor responded, "but politicians do." At about the same time, a query appeared on the listserv of the Conference on Basic Writing, asking if anyone had a source for the representation of open admissions students entering the university as "barbarians at the gates." In the flurry of responses, it became clear that, whether or not one could locate an exact source, this was a view of their students that early advocates of open access were forced to confront on many campuses.

If politicians, elitist academics, or others choose unflattering terms for basic writers, this is not surprising. They select the vocabulary that most closely conforms to their other concerns. Those whose agenda, whether for philosophical or budgetary reasons, requires exclusion speak of basic writers needing "remedial" or "high school" work. They express concern about lowering "standards" for entrance to higher education and about "diluting" instruction for all, should too many "deficient" students be admitted. On the other hand, those whose agenda leans toward inclusion speak of "opportunity" and of "working from students' strengths." If they speak of standards, it is standards measured after instruction, after the "developmental process" has had a chance to work, to add value. The students remain the same; it is the lens through which they are viewed that changes.

Knowing that the research offers evidence that students respond to the expectations—even when not expressed—of their teachers, we understand that terminology has power to shape the students' response and their ultimate level of achievement. Terminology also reflects where the speakers or writers locate their primary interest. If the focus is primarily institutional or disciplinary, the student is more likely to be viewed as "remedial." When students are the focus, they are more likely to be termed "developmental."

The endless debate and discussion in our field about the terms "basic writing" and "basic writers," provides another illustration of the power of terminology and of connotation. The fields of basic writing/composition and ESL are atypical disciplines in having a dual focus: on disciplinary knowledge and on pedagogy. Or to state it another way, the material of these disciplines always includes the "who" and the "how"—who is the learner and how will that learner achieve competence?—as well as the "what." These signature questions thus locate students centrally in the enterprise.

Rebecca Mlynarczyk, *JBW* co-editor, leads off this issue with a new take on a related and long-contested set of terms in "Personal and Academic Writ-

ing: Revisiting the Debate.” The discussants her title refers to—Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae—touched a quandary that continues to perplex and to elude resolution. Is the student, in basic writing or composition, to be seen primarily as a person approaching the act of writing or is she to be seen primarily in terms of the task to be learned—academic writing? By reframing the discussion in terms offered by Jerome Bruner and James Britton, Mlynarczyk is able to situate herself *between* these two positions. Combining psycholinguistic theory with findings from her qualitative research, she is able to locate herself meaningfully between the student and the task and to recast this long-standing but still meaningful distinction in a useful way.

In “The Synergy Program: Reframing Critical Reading and Writing for At-Risk Students” April Heaney also engages in redefinition. Noting the common perception of “at-risk” students as lazy or intellectually less capable, she proposes an alternate interpretation: “not as a deficiency in writing structure or mechanics, but as a deeply held attitude of un-investment in the writing process.” Heaney links that attitude on the part of students to their perception of the distance between the world represented by academic writing and their home culture. From the perspective of these students, an investment in the writing process and a consequent increase in proficiency offer the prospect of widening that distance from their home culture even further. In describing the Synergy Project at the University of Wyoming, she explains how the faculty construct a learning community experience that focuses on the students, helping them to explore their anxieties about acculturation and giving them space and support in coming to terms with these concerns.

Heaney’s “at risk” students at Wyoming represent a small proportion of the university’s student population. Rachelle L. Darabi examines “Basic Writers and Learning Communities” at her institution, Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), an open admissions college. “Underprepared” is the term she uses to describe them. Referring to the issues we have been discussing, Darabi says, “Thus, we find ourselves at a point of tensions, wedged between the need for an educated society, the need of universities to uphold standards but at the same time educate those whom they admit, and the pressures on and from government to show greater effectiveness (that is, to retain and graduate more students) at lower costs. Such tensions have caused changes in basic writing programs at many universities.” Like Heaney and her colleagues in Wyoming, Darabi and her colleagues have found in the learning communities model a way to increase retention through increasing student success and engagement, and she presents findings of a promising research study.

In her article “In the Service of Writing and Race” Angelique Davi offers perhaps the most oblique description of basic writers: “Students in this course are accepted into the university through the Contractual Admissions Program (CAP), a program designed for students whose academic profile might otherwise

impede their access to higher education.” They also tend to be students of color, often economically disadvantaged, and in both of these ways they are in the minority at the college. Davi’s title highlights the mix of factors that comprise the CAP program at Bentley College—an augmented basic writing course that incorporates service learning and engages students in reading, writing, and deep, critical discussion of issues of race, class, and gender. She argues that the service learning helps students develop confidence and enables them to identify and take pride in the role they play in the community. The reading and writing assignments build proficiency in academic literacy and critical thinking. Moreover, they help the students address issues that present obstacles to their formation of an academic identity and their success at the college and beyond.

John Paul Tassoni in “(Re)membering Basic Writing at a Public Ivy: History for Institutional Redesign” raises many important questions about how we write the history of basic writing and how we situate ourselves institutionally in participating in or reacting to this enterprise. Tassoni’s institution, Miami University of Ohio, in staking its claim to be considered a “public ivy,” had trouble reconciling this identity with the existence of basic writing on its campus. The faculty and administration had effectively, and largely unwittingly, screened the existence of a basic writing course, even from themselves. Because its value—and even existence—went unacknowledged, Tassoni argues, the basic writing course “was merely retrofitted to an English Department’s goals, rather than integrated into its mainstream business.” In other words, the institutional self-perception, rather than a study of the needs of the students, underlay curricular decisions. In uncovering the defensive amnesia of his university, as well as the true history of the basic writing students and course, Tassoni offers a powerful analysis of the place of basic writers in the university.

Several of these writers have noted the current challenges to basic writing. Their commitment both to the student writers and to their home institutions are vital to ensuring continued support for this still much-needed effort. Keeping both the needs of the students and integrity of the institution clearly in view also probably offers the best hope for the success of the students since it forces us to define both the learner and the task in terms of one another. At the same time, the terminology we use to describe basic writing (as well as basic mathematics and reading) remains an issue of concern. The language that is used in conversations between practitioners and those who fund or provide institutional support for basic writing may, as John Tassoni details so compellingly, in the end drive the enterprise. Maintaining the integrity of the work while communicating effectively with those who see it with different eyes presents a critical challenge to those of us who work in basic writing.

—**Bonne August** and **Rebecca Mlynarczyk**

# Personal and Academic Writing: Revisiting the Debate

Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

*ABSTRACT: More than ten years have passed since the widely publicized debate about personal and academic writing that played out in the 1990s between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. But the question of the relative merits of these two different types of writing for student writers continues to be an issue of concern for teachers of composition, especially teachers of basic writing. In this article, I take another look at this important question. Using the psycholinguistic theories of Jerome Bruner and James Britton as the basis for analysis, I reconsider the Elbow-Bartholomae debate. Then, using data from a qualitative study of reflective journal writing I conducted, I argue that all students—and especially basic writers—need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse.*

*KEYWORDS: personal writing, academic writing, expressive language, reflective journal writing*

More than ten years have passed since the widely publicized debate about personal and academic writing that played out in the 1990s between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. But the question of the relative merits of these two different types of writing for student writers continues to be an issue of concern for teachers of composition, especially teachers of basic writing.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is still not widespread agreement about the most appropriate type of writing to assign in composition courses. In a 2005 article reviewing the changes and trends in composition since 1990, Richard Fulkerson makes it clear that both personal and academic writing continue to have strong adherents among faculty teaching composition. Fulkerson identifies “expressivism,” which is closely connected with Elbow’s concept of personal writing, as “the enduring category which seems to be going strong, despite the groundswell of cultural critical pedagogies” (666). Bartholomae’s views, according to Fulkerson, are reflected as a subset of “rhetorical approaches,” which emphasize helping students to acquire academic discourse. In May 2006, years after the process movement, with which Elbow was closely associated, had

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been dismissed by some as passé (see, for example, Thomas Kent's edited collection *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*), Robert Yagelski validates Elbow's approach as "especially compelling in our time of educational conformity and intellectual rigidity" (539). According to Yagelski, Elbow's ideas, along with those of Donald Murray and Paulo Freire, may actually seem "radical" rather than outmoded to teachers working in the current climate of mandatory testing and educational standards. Thus, long after it seemed that Bartholomae, with his emphasis on academic writing, had "won" the debate, teachers are still facing the question Elbow and Bartholomae considered in the 1990s: What types of writing (and reading) to assign in the first-year composition or basic writing course?

In this article, I will take another look at this perennial question. First, I will address the problem of defining "personal" and "academic" writing by referring to several psycholinguistic theories that help to shed light on these terms. Then, using these theories as the basis for analysis, I will reconsider the Elbow-Bartholomae debate. Finally, using data from a qualitative study I conducted, I will illustrate my own perspective on this question. Over the past decade, I have increasingly come to realize the importance of going beyond personal writing to help basic writers to acquire academic discourse, to read and to write intelligently about their reading. At the same time, I have also come to believe that all students—and especially basic writers—need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse. Students first need to explore ideas encountered in academic work in language (whether spoken or written) that feels comfortable, not strained, in order to work toward the goal of being able to write convincingly about these ideas in more formal language.

## **Background and Definition of Terms**

What do we actually mean when we speak of "personal" and "academic" writing? Although the forms are often blended or overlapping in college writing, most composition teachers would agree that there is a fundamental difference between a personal account of living through one's parents' divorce and an academic essay arguing to end the system of no-fault divorce in the United States.

In attempting to understand what is meant by personal and academic writing, I have found it useful to refer to several scholars whose work I drew upon in an article published in 1991 ("Is There a Difference"). One of these is the psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner. Bruner's 1986 essay col-

lection, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, begins with an epigraph taken from William James that sheds light on the difference between personal and academic writing: “To say that all human thinking is essentially of two kinds—reasoning on the one hand, and narrative, descriptive, contemplative thinking on the other—is to say only what every reader’s experience will corroborate” (qtd. in Bruner xiii). Bruner, like James, categorizes all cognitive functioning into two distinct modes, which “(though complementary) are irreducible to one another” (11). He refers to these differing forms of thought as the “narrative mode” and the “paradigmatic (or logico-scientific) mode.” According to Bruner, the two modes differ in several respects: The goal of the narrative mode is to be evocative, to convince by being true to life, to achieve verisimilitude. The goal of the logico-scientific mode, in contrast, is empirical truth or verifiability; this mode strives to convince by using procedures for formal and empirical truth. The narrative mode takes delight in the particular whereas the logico-scientific mode seeks to transcend the particular in order to make valid generalizations. The narrative mode often takes the form of stories whereas the logico-scientific mode takes the form of arguments (11-43).

Another scholar, the linguist and educator James Britton, drew on the work of the linguist Edward Sapir, in developing his theory of language use. Sapir, like Bruner, classified all language into “two distinct orders” (11, qtd. in Britton 166): “expressive language,” exemplified by everyday speech; and “referential language,” exemplified by scientific discourse. Although Sapir saw the categories as distinct, he acknowledged that they are “intertwined, in enormously complex patterns” (11, qtd. in Britton 166). Britton expanded this view of language to include a third category, which he characterized as “poetic language” (169). Furthermore, unlike Bruner and Sapir, who classified language into separate and distinct modes, Britton represented the varieties of language use along a continuum (174).

The “expressive language” of ordinary speech—language that is most private and closest to the self—appears in the center of Britton’s continuum. As language becomes more public, it moves outward in one of two different directions. Moving in one direction, speakers and writers produce “transactional language,” the language of scientific reports; with this type of language the goal is to convey meaning in explicit ways. But as speakers and writers move away from expressive language in the other direction, they produce “poetic language,” the language of stories, novels, and poems; rather than seeking to be explicit, poetic language usually conveys its meaning implicitly (166-80).

The three theories of language use—Bruner’s, Sapir’s, and Britton’s—resonate and overlap with one another in interesting ways as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Juxtaposition of Three Theories of Language**

<b>Bruner</b>		
<b>Narrative</b>		<b>Paradigmatic (or Logico-Scientific)</b>
Goals: to be evocative, to convince by lifelikeness or verisimilitude		Goals: empirical truth, to convince with formal and empirical proof
Delights in the particular		Seeks to transcend the particular
Example: story		Example: argument

<b>Sapir</b>		
	<b>Expressive Language</b>	<b>Referential Language</b>
	Example: everyday speech	Example: scientific discourse

<b>Britton</b>		
<b>Poetic Language</b>	<b>Expressive Language</b>	<b>Transactional Language</b>
More public	Most private	More public
Meaning is implicit	Close to the self	Meaning is explicit
Example: story or poem	Example: everyday speech (and earliest forms of written language)	Example: scientific report

Although the terms used in Table 1 are generally not the ones used in the composition literature (with the notable exceptions of Bruner’s “narrative” and Britton’s “expressive” language), these linguistic terms can be helpful in discussing the differences between personal and academic writing. Clearly, academic writing, which strives to convince through logic and hopes

to arrive at supportable generalizations, is more closely allied with Bruner's logico-scientific mode, Sapir's referential language, or Britton's transactional language. Personal writing is closer to Bruner's narrative mode or to Britton's expressive mode, which is private and close to the self. More polished (and more public) forms of personal writing fall into Britton's poetic mode.

Bruner's theory is descriptive in that he looks at finished products—novels or scientific papers—rather than focusing on the thought processes that resulted in those products. He does, however, hint at a more basic level of thought when he states that each of his two modes could be a “transformation of simple exposition, by which statements of fact are converted into statements implying causality. But the types of causality implied in the two modes are palpably different” (11). Perhaps this “simple exposition” is akin to Britton's expressive language. However, Bruner does not go on to clarify this concept or to explore how the possible “transformation” could take place—and specifically how teachers might help it to take place. Britton, whose research is often rooted in the classroom, does address this question in greater depth. I will return to Britton's ideas on this subject later.

### **Personal and Academic Writing: Perspectives from Composition**

The two scholars whose names are most closely identified with the discussion of the merits of emphasizing “personal” or “academic” writing in first-year composition or basic writing courses are Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. Their public conversations took place at the 1989 and 1991 meetings of CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), and their remarks were reproduced and further developed in the February 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Much has happened in the field of composition since the publication of this widely read conversation. And Elbow's and Bartholomae's views on this question have undoubtedly changed and evolved in the years since the debate was published. Nevertheless, this well-publicized conversation remains a kind of defining moment in composition studies, often referred to in journal articles, conversations among colleagues, and on Internet discussion boards and composition websites.

Thus, it seems appropriate at this time to take another look at the positions Elbow and Bartholomae staked out in their 1995 debate. Interestingly, although this exchange has often been characterized as a debate over the merits of personal versus academic writing, Elbow never uses the term “personal writing,” preferring the more generic term “writing.” In “Being a

Writer vs. Being an Academic,” Elbow describes his priorities in designing a composition course for first-year students. He explains his decision to place the students’ own writing “at the center” (75) of his course, devoting more time and attention to writing than to reading and using student writing as the key text via a class magazine. He justifies this decision by explaining that “virtually every other course privileges reading over writing—treats input as central and output as serving input” (75). As a writing teacher, Elbow sees one of his main goals as “understanding” student texts. He assumes that his students have important ideas to express, and he encourages them to express their meanings more completely in subsequent drafts. In contrast with teachers of academic writing, who (according to Elbow) teach students to “distrust language,” he wants his students to “trust language” or at least “to hold off distrust till they revise” (78). In general, Elbow does not encourage his students to see their writing as part of a larger discourse. Instead, he invites them “to pretend that no authorities have ever written about their subject before” (79). He encourages them “to write as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe” (80). Finally, Elbow tries to set up writing situations in which the student/writer knows more about the subject than does the teacher/reader. He sees this as crucial if we want to keep students from equating writing with “being tested” (81). Elbow ends with a plea addressed to his own audience: “If academics were more like writers—wrote more, turned to writing more, enjoyed writing more—I think the academic world would be better” (82). He acknowledges that some of the ideas expressed in this essay may seem “romantic” (82), but he maintains his allegiance to “writing” as the proper goal of the first-year composition course.

In “Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow,” Bartholomae assumes a very different stance. He argues that “there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing” (63). For Bartholomae, all instruction is influenced by the social context in which it takes place, and he wants students to become aware of the dynamics of college classrooms, where teachers have more power than students and where students’ texts are “defined by all the writing that has preceded them, writing the academy insistently draws together: in the library, in the reading list, in the curriculum” (64). Rather than viewing the teacher as a “frontier guide” in the “open” space of the classroom (64-65), Bartholomae sees teachers as managers, “people who manage substations in the cultural network, small shops in the general production of readers and writers” (66). In Bartholomae’s courses, students read key texts and write critically about their reading. In

the process, they practice the academic “skills” of paraphrasing, quoting, and citing sources. In contrast with Elbow, who wants students to trust their own language, Bartholomae encourages students to recognize and push against the cultural commonplaces that sometimes pre-determine how and what they write. In concluding, Bartholomae asks some difficult questions about the choices he faces in designing a writing course and justifies his ultimate decision to reject what he refers to as “sentimental realism” (69-71). Instead, he feels that composition “should be part of the general critique of traditional humanism” (71). He ends by stating that he “would rather teach or preside over a critical writing, one where the critique is worked out in practice, and for lack of better terms I would call that writing ‘academic writing’” (71).

In assessing this dialogue, it is important to point out that the written and face-to-face debates between Elbow and Bartholomae were collegial. The two men clearly respect each other. But a close reading of the written exchange reveals that their values as composition instructors differ dramatically. Some of the salient differences between Elbow’s and Bartholomae’s views, as set out in their published conversation of 1995, are highlighted in Table 2.

**Table 2. Areas of Difference**

	<b>Elbow</b>	<b>Bartholomae</b>
<b>Writing</b>	Privileges [personal] writing	Privileges academic writing
<b>Reading</b>	Uses the students’ own writing as the key text (class magazine)	Emphasizes critical reading of key texts
<b>Students</b>	Sees students as individuals	Sees students within a social context
<b>Teachers</b>	Sees teacher as “coach,” not “test evaluator” (Elbow’s metaphors)	Sees teacher as “manager,” not “frontier guide” (Bartholomae’s metaphors)
	Feels teacher should get students to “trust language” (be comfortable)	Feels teacher should get students to “distrust language” (be critical)
	Feels teacher should encourage students’ “credulity”	Feels teacher should encourage students’ “skepticism”

Elbow draws attention to these differences at the beginning of his essay:

I don't mind high or distant goals. But I'm troubled by a sense that they conflict with each other—that progress toward one [academic writing] could undermine progress toward the other [writing]. A distant mountain is a good guide for walking—even if I know I won't get to the top. But I feel as though I am trying to walk toward two different mountains. ("Being" 73)

Elbow's metaphor here connects in an intriguing way with Britton's continuum of language use (see Table 1). The student is standing in the center, working from the comfort zone of expressive language. Based on the positions Elbow and Bartholomae staked out in the 1990s, they *would* have students walk in different directions along this continuum. Elbow would like them to move toward Britton's poetic language, to write well-told stories, effective narratives, drawing on their own experiences, developing their own "voices," finding power within their "own" ideas. On the other hand, Bartholomae would have the students move toward Britton's transactional language, constructing sound arguments based on culturally significant texts, acquiring power as they move closer to the language of their instructors, the language of the academy.

In their debate neither scholar made an explicit connection with the role of expressive language in helping students move toward either end of Britton's language continuum. It seems significant, though, that at the end of his response to Bartholomae, Elbow brings in the idea of freewriting, which he had done so much to promote in the 1970s (*Writing*), as a way to be both "real" and "utopian" in the composition classroom (89). In just ten minutes of classroom time, Elbow explains:

Students discover that they can write words and thoughts and not worry about what good writing is or what the teacher wants, they discover that their heads are full of language and ideas (and sometimes language and ideas they had no idea were there), and they discover they can get pleasure from writing. (89)

In this essay, Elbow does not go on to explore how freewriting, which clearly is a written form of Britton's expressive language, can be used to help students move toward either of the two mountains he sees looming

in the distance.<sup>1</sup> Britton, however, does emphasize this connection when he writes:

Expressive language provides an essential starting point because it is language close to the self of the writer: and progress towards the transactional should be gradual enough to ensure that “the self” is not lost on the way: that on arrival “the self”, though hidden, is still there. It is the self that provides the unseen point from which all is viewed: there can be no other way of writing quite impersonally and yet with coherence and vitality. (179)

I agree with Britton on this point. If students—especially basic writing students—are to acquire academic language in a meaningful, powerful way, the emphasis on exploring ideas in personal, expressive language cannot be neglected. Clearly, Elbow was more attuned to these values than was Bartholomae. However, while rereading the conversation between Elbow and Bartholomae from the perspective of 2006, I am struck by how much closer the entire field of composition has moved to Bartholomae’s position, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of writers, students, and classrooms, and stresses the importance of critical reading in the writing class.<sup>2</sup>

By stating his position so strongly, however, Bartholomae has left himself open to critique. In his widely read article “Inventing the University,” first published in 1985, Bartholomae states that students, and in particular the basic writers he works with at the University of Pittsburgh, “have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language” (443). Bartholomae’s defense of this position is nuanced, and he acknowledges how difficult the process will be for basic writers: “The writer must get inside of a discourse he can only partly imagine” (454). While recognizing the difficulty of the task, Bartholomae insists that it must be done:

The movement toward a more specialized discourse begins (or perhaps, best begins) when a student can both define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a “common” discourse, and when he can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the “common” code but his own. (453)



In order to succeed at academic writing, according to Bartholomae, basic writers must work at appropriating their professors' discourse while relinquishing their own

Richard Boyd, among others, has criticized this stance. In his critique, he focuses on "the problems engendered by Bartholomae's endorsement of a mimetic relationship between student and teacher." As Boyd explains:

And it is with the way that the mimetic situation necessarily entails the message that the subject must put off and ultimately despise the "naïve, outsider" language he or she brings to the university that the emulation theory of teaching becomes especially problematic, especially if it occurs in the culturally diverse classroom. If we establish the teacher as the model member of a discourse community who must be mimicked by all students, are we not setting up a situation that specifically encourages students to reject whatever cultural past and distinctiveness they may have that makes them "outsiders" to our world?

I doubt whether Bartholomae would answer this question with an unqualified "yes." However, he does not adequately address this issue in developing his approach to promoting academic discourse among basic writers.

Despite the undisputed significance of Bartholomae's work,<sup>3</sup> I, like Boyd, differ with his views on how to help students acquire academic discourse. It does not seem feasible that the students I teach, basic and ESL writers in a CUNY community college, will really be able to "invent the university" without using the primary resource they bring with them to college—their own expressive language, language that is private, not public, language that is close to the self, to use Britton's terminology. For this reason, I ask the students in my classes to write about their reading first in informal reading response journals. Students need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse and not just a pale imitation of their professors' language. This does not mean, however, as Elbow argued, that the main text in the first-year writing class should be the students' own writing. Students need to learn to write about other texts, but they come to do this most powerfully when they first explore ideas, often connecting with these ideas in a personal way, by writing about them in expressive language before being asked to write more traditional academic essays.

## **The Role of Expressive/Personal Writing in the Acquisition of Academic Discourse**

To illustrate this point I will draw upon examples from one of the students who participated in a qualitative study I conducted on the journal writing of multilingual students (Mlynarczyk *Conversations*). Because my research focused on journal writing rather than essays, I have not previously analyzed the data in terms of how students acquire academic discourse. But in reviewing the Elbow-Bartholomae debates, I was reminded of the experiences of Roberto, one of five writers in my study (all student participants are referred to by pseudonyms). Roberto was born in Colombia and immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of thirteen. He attended and graduated from a public high school, where he was initially placed in the lowest level of ESL. At the time of the study, he was eighteen years old and was a college freshman enrolled in an ESL writing course I taught in a four-year college. He had been placed in this developmental course because he had failed the university's test of minimum competence in writing. During the semester, I asked students to keep an open-ended journal in which they would write about themselves as readers and writers. I encouraged them to write regularly and required that they write at least five pages a week. I collected the journals every two or three weeks and wrote letters of response—individual letters at first and later group letters to the whole class.

From the beginning of the semester, Roberto's journal writing demonstrated the development that can occur when students use expressive language to write about their reading, writing, and course material in language that is comfortable and close to the self. The following is an excerpt from Roberto's first journal entry, which was written in class:

I've been writing for three year in English. I know for a fact now that you can use writing as your best friend. Writing how you feel can make you realize many things. You can develop a lot of knowledge and open mind thinking. No one will listen to you as a notebook can. No one will listen [to] your thoughts about politics, problems, love, faith as a good diary can. A piece of paper never lets you down. (qtd. in Mlynarczyk *Conversations* 55)

Roberto's journal that semester, all sixty-five pages of it, epitomized what I hoped students would get from this "extra" writing assignment. It's important to point out that not all of the students in the two ESL writing

classes I taught that spring were as convinced of the value of journal writing as Roberto was. But many students in my classes that semester and in the years since then have used their journals in similarly productive and creative ways.

One advantage that Roberto had over most of his classmates was that he had been convinced of the value of journal writing during his high school years, when one of his English teachers encouraged the students to keep a journal. Roberto explained to me during the interviews that in high school he was made to feel “uncool” by the other students because of the way he spoke and the way he dressed. So he concentrated on his schoolwork to prove what he could do. By the time he reached his last semester, he was placed in the advanced English class. But even there, he explained during an interview, the students were afraid to honestly discuss their reactions to the books they were reading. They were afraid “if they say something, they will be looked as uncool or stupid or something,” so “you just kept it to yourself” (69). As the only immigrant in this advanced English class, Roberto felt vulnerable and explained his reaction, “I found myself being very quiet in that class, not talking to anyone, while they would just be cursing everywhere, like doing their thing” (69-70).

Today we often talk about the socially constructed nature of classrooms and the importance of helping our students join “the academic community.” Based on what Roberto told me in the interviews, it was clear that in high school, he did not feel part of a community of peers, something he revealed by the way he always referred to his high school classmates in the third person, as “they” rather than using the first person, “we.” Instead of identifying with his classmates, he directed his energy into the writing he did for the advanced English course and was gratified by the teacher’s positive reaction. He explained during the interviews: “She thought I did the best, that lady. . . . She used to tell me, like, ‘I don’t believe it. You know, you don’t speak in class, and you come out with this writing’” (68).

Given this past history, it’s not surprising that Roberto welcomed my journal assignment. For the first six and a half weeks of the course, he wrote only about his responses to the book we were reading, *A Place for Us*, a memoir written by Nicholas Gage, a Greek immigrant. The following entry is typical of the forty-four pages of Roberto’s journal that were devoted to this book:

Chapter nine brought me old memories of my early years. How nice it was to be with boys of the same condition and talking in the same manner. Being wild. This was an unforgettable part of life. Playing

the innocent but being the bad boys in the street. Trying hard to be the gangsters of the moment. Risking your bones just so a girl can pay attention to you. I think we all get to a point where you feel ready to be self sufficient or, put in another way, uncontrollable. This is where the old conflict starts. Your old folks trying to keep you out of trouble don't get nothing but hostile looks. You feel like the street corrupted boys are your family and your own family is the opresor. . . . You don't realize they are the bad guys until something puts a stop. For Nick [the author of the memoir], it was that beating that he got in his old neighborhood. For me it was my family (my father's side). (57)

Thinking back to the linguistic theories discussed earlier, this excerpt is clearly an example of Britton's expressive language. Written in the first person, this is language that is close to the self and influenced by the rhythms of everyday speech. Usually in his entries about the book, Roberto empathized with the narrator, Nick, comparing their experiences and looking for life lessons that he could draw out of his reading. A natural question that arises then is whether this was just a special book for Roberto because it so closely mirrored his own experiences. Would he have been motivated to write in expressive language about reading that was more distant from his world and his personal concerns? In his case, the answer is a definite "yes." After the class had finished reading *A Place for Us* and begun preparations for the University's writing exam, Roberto began to write reflectively about a classics course he was taking that semester. One entry began with Roberto speculating about "the pagen Gods and how this stories became part of the Greek culture wich later influenced our world greatly." The entry continued:

I wonder what I'd be like being under the existence of this gods, all they do is fool around with mortals. It'd be wonderfull to make a sacrifice to Cupid or Aphrodite so she could make the girl of my dreams fall in love with me. How nice it'd be to ride Helius' chariot and see everything from far away. . . . How different my house would be if Hestia (God of hearth) lived there. I bet my parents would let me go everywhere I want at night. (79-80)

No matter how far academic material was from his own experience, Roberto seemed to have no trouble using expressive writing to speculate and make connections.

By the end of the semester, Roberto had re-gained confidence in his abilities as a writer, which had been shaken by failing the University's placement exam. Although my study was focused on the students' journals, not their essays, Roberto did well on all the assigned essays and passed the writing assessment test—a requirement for passing the course. By the time I interviewed the students during the summer session, Roberto's one developmental course had been completed, and he was enrolled in summer school. In the interviews we talked a lot about the philosophy course he was taking at the time. Writing was an important part of this course, and Roberto received an A on his first paper. Secure in his own ability to think, an ability that he had nurtured in his previous education by writing freely in the expressive mode, Roberto was not bothered by his philosophy professor's injunction to keep his own opinions out of his essays. He explained to me in an interview, ". . . there is not much time to spend [referring to his philosophy course, where the professor felt the need to cover a lot of material]. . . . So what I did is, I did my best in studying those theories. I did my best on knowing them, and then on my own I can think" (82). Although Roberto wasn't asked to write a journal for the philosophy course, he was in fact keeping an ongoing reflective journal in his head. As he explained it:

I took the class as something interesting to know, how these people used to think and how they came out with explanations for things that we still ask ourselves. But I have my beliefs. You know, I believe in God. I believe a lot of things. And it would be really hard to get me out of those things. (81)

Here Roberto shows how he continues to process ideas mentally in his own terms while at the same time remembering his professor's straightforward advice to the whole class: "This course is not about your opinion" (81).

Roberto thrived in this philosophy course and respected the professor. He was an example, perhaps a rare one, of a student who made a seamless transition from the developmental writing classroom to the academic mainstream. As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I noticed a change in the way Roberto spoke about his learning, which seemed significant to me. When he talked about his high school or even my own ESL writing course, he described himself as a "loner," someone who held back, who didn't want to expose himself or his ideas in the public space of the classroom. Without exception, he referred to his classmates as "they," "the others." He spoke about the summer philosophy course in a very different way:

It was great; I mean this class was great. We started with Plato. We all sympathized with Plato. Then we moved to Descartes, and we were surprised by his thoughts. He denied matter. It's like, "How do I know that I'm not dreaming right now?" . . . And we all, we didn't actually sympathize with him. We just said, "He could be right, but I don't like it." And then we moved to Hume, and we were surprised also. Like this is true. But how can he not have God? Cause most of us believed in God. And most of us were thinking the same thing. I know I was. It was like, "He's right." He gave us an excellent study on the naturalistic view of morality. . . . but how can he not have God around? And then at the end with Immanuel Kant, we all sympathized, "Yeah, he's the mind of reason that discovers that there is always a universal truth about morals that we have to follow." . . . So I guess they all have a good point. You just sympathize with all of them. (82)

It's exciting to me, as someone who cares about developmental education, to observe Roberto's development as a writer, a thinker, and a college student. He has acquired academic discourse, the language of philosophy. This last interview excerpt also shows a change in how Roberto sees himself in the classroom: the other students are no longer "they," the ones who curse and think of him as "uncool." In this class, the other students are "we," and Roberto clearly sees himself as part of the group. I believe that, at this point, Roberto has succeeded in achieving the goal advocated by Bartholomae. He has invented a university in which he is free to speak and write. He sees himself as part of an academic discourse community. However, he has accomplished this change not by memorizing theories and spouting them back in imitation of his teachers' language, but rather by exploring ideas from his courses using Britton's (and Elbow's) expressive language—whether in the form of journal writing, discussions with peers, or dialogues in his own mind.

### **Some Caveats and a Conclusion**

I do not wish to argue that expressive journal writing is a panacea, that it will automatically transform basic writers into comfortable and creative writers in the realm of academic discourse. Even in my own study, this did not occur. All five of the students I interviewed passed the University's test of "minimum competence in writing" at the end of the course, but only

three of them had what they and I would characterize as positive and/or “transformative” experiences sparked by the reading/writing journals. Even these numbers—three out of five—are misleading. My study was qualitative and small in scale, intended to provide “thick description” of the students’ differing experiences with the journals rather than evidence for a generalization about the efficacy of journal writing for basic and ESL writers.

We can, however, learn much from considering the detailed portraits of student writers that emerge from qualitative studies such as the one I conducted. In Roberto’s case, for example, there were many factors that helped him to make the most of the expressive journal writing assignment: his own interest in reading and writing, his positive experiences in his most recent high school English class, and his ability to connect in a personal way with academic material. For other students in the study, the journal writing was less productive. Maribel, for example, was similar to Roberto in being a native speaker of Spanish (she was from the Dominican Republic), having lived in the United States about the same amount of time, and having attended high school here. But her journal writing seemed forced and unreflective, just a response to a school assignment, not an exploration of ideas using personally felt, expressive language. It was only toward the end of the semester, when in frustration I urged Maribel to use the journal to write about what she really believed, that she began to write entries that I judged to be reflective and personally meaningful.

Kiyoko, an international student from Japan, was quite a different story. I loved reading her journal, which I felt was poetic and highly reflective. I did not learn until the interviews after the semester ended that this required journal writing had made her extremely uncomfortable. She did not enjoy the process of freewriting that I had recommended for the journal since she felt she could not reread and correct her writing. In my analysis after the interviews were completed, I concluded that the unrevised journal writing had made Kiyoko feel a deep sense of shame—an observation that was supported by the fact that she threw her journal away before the second interview even though she knew it was an important data source for my study.

Another caveat relates not to the student participants but rather to some of Britton’s terms which I used in analyzing the data. According to Britton, expressive language is “private” as opposed to the “public” language of academic writing; in its relationship to everyday speech, it is language that is close to the “self.” Notions of private and public, of a discrete “self” have been called into question by more recent theories emphasizing the socially

constructed nature of language and identity.

In my own analysis of the students' journal entries and interviews, I have had to acknowledge that the journals, which I originally had considered to be "private" and close to the "self," were in fact "public" documents, not written only for self-expression but in fact a required writing assignment turned in to—and read by—a teacher. Ironically, Maribel, Kiyoko, and Lan, another student participant, were more aware of this than I was.

Throughout the semester, Maribel had written journals that were largely summaries of her reading, and I had been stymied in my attempts to encourage her to be "more reflective." In an entry she selected as the most important one in the entire journal, she explained that reflecting on her reading in a personal way violated her sense of family privacy. Responding to a passage in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, she agrees with Rodriguez's mother, who felt he should never have written about the "private" aspects of his family's life in the "public" space of his autobiography: "I think that Richard's mother has all the right to tell Richard not to reveal the things that happened to the family. . . . I'm always saying that something that happened to a family, nobody has to know it. Because is no their problem" (125). The type of personal connections with reading that I had appreciated in Roberto's journal would have seemed like a violation of family privacy to Maribel.

Kiyoko was also uncomfortable with keeping a journal for my class but for a different reason. During the interviews, she told me that she had not enjoyed writing in her journal because "even if I didn't have any ideas, I have to write" (148). She often postponed this assignment until all her other homework was completed, and sometimes, she confessed, even did it while watching television (149). I apologized for not recognizing Kiyoko's discomfort and trying to adapt the assignment to better meet her needs, but she reminded me that students are used to this type of uncomfortable situation: "It's usual . . . in school system in Japan" (147). Clearly, both Maribel and Kiyoko saw the journals as "required" and "public," characteristics that caused them a certain amount of discomfort.

In contrast, Lan, a Chinese student who had immigrated to the United States two and a half years earlier, was very enthusiastic about journal writing and felt that it had led to a breakthrough that enabled her finally, on her fourth attempt, to pass the University's test of minimum competence in writing. However, Lan's response to the journal, like Maribel's and Kiyoko's, was influenced by the public nature of a journal that was turned in to a teacher. During the interviews after the semester had ended, Lan explained to me that a few weeks after the course began, she decided to start a second English-



language journal ("another freewriting book") just for herself. Surprised to learn of the existence of this second journal, I asked Lan if she would bring in one or two entries so that I could see how this private writing differed from the writing in her class journal. Politely but firmly, she refused. She explained, "I wrote some secrets in that book. That's why I don't want to turn it in" (136). Lan said that she actually found this private journal "more helpful" than the one she wrote for the class "because I can write more freely" (144). Perhaps Lan's understanding of the difference between "public" and "private" writing and her ability to clearly separate the two help to explain why she felt so much more comfortable with journal writing than did her classmates Maribel and Kiyoko.

As any experienced teacher knows, no one technique or writing practice is equally successful for every student. Nevertheless, I am increasingly convinced that, for many students expressive journal writing—whether done on paper or online—can provide an important link in the process of becoming proficient, authoritative writers of academic prose. Writing in 1996, Jim Cody makes a strong case for encouraging basic writing students to use expressive language as a way in to the language of the academy:

Writing workshops enable my students to tell their stories in a discourse that has its roots in a language they can call their own, a language that survives when the entire process of writing is complete. The language that is closest to their own is the language of their thoughts and their intimate conversations with friends and family. Expressive language, therefore, must be encouraged when teaching basic writers if they are to see that writing is a form of communication that has space for their intimate thoughts and ideas to take shape. (109)

Not everyone, however, has been convinced of the arguments Cody presents about the value of personal or expressive writing for basic writers. Deborah Mutnick calls attention to the irony inherent in the fact that notions of self, the "I" of personal writing, are being called into question just as members of marginalized groups are becoming better represented in colleges and universities, as well as in multicultural literature: "... the poststructural critique of the self is ironic for those whose voices have historically not been heard" (84). In her essay validating the use of autobiographical and ethnographic writing for college students, Mutnick argues for grassroots work "giving ordinary people the opportunity to 'write' themselves" (81) rather than being defined by others.

Students in composition courses have much to gain from exploring ideas not only in autobiographical or ethnographic forms, as Mutnick suggests, but also in expressive journal writing that precedes the writing of formal academic essays. Despite the caveats expressed here, I am convinced that Britton's concept of expressive language at the center of language (and writing) development remains fundamental—particularly so for basic writers. The chance to write from a deep personal core is especially important for students from previously marginalized groups—women, immigrants, students of color, working-class students. Mutnick explains:

For students on the social margins, the opportunity to articulate a perspective in writing on their own life experiences can be a bridge between their communities and the academy. Such student writing is also a potential source of knowledge about realities that are frequently misrepresented, diluted or altogether absent in mainstream depictions. To an extent, this view of college composition as a cultural repository is true of all students, regardless of social background. But the stories of subaltern students are comparatively scarce. In the context of the explosion of autobiographical writing, the personal narrative as an instructional mode is especially important in that it can give voice to these new nonwriters, making the classroom a more dialogic space and inserting the "I" of ordinary working people and their everyday struggles into public discourse. (84-85)

In this essay Mutnick advocates opening up the types of writing acceptable in college to include student autobiographies and ethnographies. I would add expressive journal writing to the list. Mutnick, however, is not urging a return to the type of "personal" writing advocated by Elbow in the 1990s. Rather, these new forms are rooted in the social; they are "a cultural repository" that becomes part of the "public discourse." The types of writing suggested by Mutnick and the freewheeling engagement with texts and ideas that Roberto practiced in his journal serve to broaden the academic conversation, bringing other voices into the dialogue.

I am not naïve enough, however, to believe that these more personally engaged forms of writing will replace the thesis-driven argumentative essay based on sources—the type of writing espoused by Bartholomae—as the default form of academic writing in U.S. colleges and universities. And students in basic writing courses will continue to need help learning how to

produce this type of writing. A basic writing course that focuses exclusively on helping students move toward Elbow's mountain—crafting powerful personal narratives using poetic language—will not adequately prepare them for the traditional assignments they will face later on. Nevertheless, I believe that students cannot write a strong and convincing argument unless they have first grappled with their subject in a deeply personal way. This belief is strongly echoed by Frank Cioffi, the author of a recent composition textbook entitled *The Imaginative Argument*. In his preface, Cioffi addresses the students who will use his book as he explains how to write powerful argumentative essays:

You . . . need to imagine what does not at present exist: a response that truly emerges from within yourself, and that would therefore be different as each individual is from every other. And further, if such a process takes place, you will acknowledge and take into account the viewpoints of others. This process, I'm arguing here will advance knowledge as it promotes your own understanding. (Cioffi xi-xii)

This textbook, which is published by Princeton University Press, is not intended for use in basic writing courses. But I would argue that basic writers, even more than students at elite institutions such as Scripps College, where Cioffi teaches, need to connect personally with the ideas they are asked to write about in order to produce “a response that truly emerges from within [themselves].” Some students arrive at college already able to produce convincing—and engaging—prose in the academic mode. I suspect that many of them acquired this ability around the family dinner table or in discussions and writing assignments in challenging high school courses. Most basic writers do not yet have this ability. Roberto's experience of exploring ideas in expressive language in his reading/writing journal—followed, as it was, by his success in the academic mainstream—suggests one way that teachers of basic writing can help students move closer to this goal.

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## Notes

1. Elsewhere, in his many books and articles, Elbow does elaborate on the uses of freewriting or expressive writing, explaining in clear and often memorable language the rationale underlying these practices. Beginning with the groundbreaking *Writing Without Teachers*, originally published in 1973, Elbow's ideas have literally transformed the way writing is taught in the United States—and probably in other countries as well.

2. It seems significant to note that the City University of New York (CUNY) has encouraged teachers and students to focus more on academic reading and writing with the CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE), which was developed by CUNY faculty after wide consultation and became a requirement for students who entered the University in Fall 1999. All CUNY students take this exam when they've earned between 45 and 60 credits and must pass it in order to graduate from a two- or four-year college in the system. The CPE assesses academic literacy by asking students to read and write critically about two related texts—one of which is distributed in advance. Students' exam essays are expected to: (1) provide a coherent written response appropriately focused on the topic; (2) demonstrate understanding of the readings; (3) use the readings appropriately (and with proper identification of sources) to support their own ideas; and (4) communicate ideas clearly and in accordance with basic linguistic conventions ("CUNY Proficiency Examination"). The abilities needed to pass this exam are obviously those privileged by Bartholomae rather than by Elbow.

3. Bartholomae has done a great deal to improve the teaching of "academic discourse," partly by helping us to see just how difficult and time consuming it is for basic writers to acquire this type of language. He has also helped to promote the importance of reading in composition courses both in his scholarly work and in his widely used textbook, *Ways of Reading*, co-authored with Anthony Petrosky.

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# The Synergy Program: Reframing Critical Reading and Writing for At-Risk Students

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this description of a learning community for “at-risk” and basic writing students at the University of Wyoming, I outline the reasons our students resist academic writing prior to their entry into college—reasons largely unrelated to typical perceptions of at-risk students as “lazy” or intellectually less capable. For students who come from family or community cultures that are far removed from academic discourses and hierarchies, accepting a new form of writing—and therefore thinking—is akin to widening a rift between them and their home cultures. Because of this tension, faculty in the Synergy Program approach basic writing not as a deficiency in writing structure or mechanics, but as a deeply held attitude of uninvestment in the writing process. In an attempt to help students overcome this attitude of uninvestment, particularly toward writing projects involving research and clear thesis structures, Synergy faculty in the Composition and Critical Thinking courses collaborated in melding two courses that give students room to develop not only writing, but also reading and critical thinking literacies in a context that does not presuppose their investment in the process. The Synergy Program includes three courses in the fall and one course in the spring. In addition, students attend a one-day, six-hour summer orientation during which they gain an in-depth introduction to the program and form initial connections with faculty and peers. This article presents a learning community model for encouraging academic literacies that foregrounds students’ anxieties about acculturation into academic modes of thinking and inspires ownership of course projects through ethnographic research and a capstone web portfolio.*

**KEYWORDS:** *at-risk students, learning communities, student ethnographies, critical reading, web portfolios*

It’s probably not an over-generalization to assert that at the secondary and college level, high-stakes writing assignments (and most low-stakes writing assignments) are modeled after a scholarly or professional research process. The details of professional research grow more varied as one advances to the upper levels of specific disciplines, but a common process infuses them all: posing questions, conducting research (primary and/or secondary), drawing conclusions, and finally submitting those conclusions to an

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editor or professional audience in thesis-based prose with discipline-proper format and documentation style. The aim for scholars, of course, is to publish and, with any luck, create a small shift in the thinking of the field. Those in professional or technical fields are expected to deliver concise findings in the proper technical format.

Teachers, as former students (usually of the diligent variety) and current scholars, internalize this process so thoroughly that we often lose sight of the degree to which this standard permeates expectations for student writing from very early grades. Even in elementary school, students are asked to write paragraphs using a style that is influenced by a thesis-research structure, from topic sentence to supporting evidence—a fairly rigid mold that differs from what most students have learned about conversational discourses that circle and wind and often leave off with a messy or subtle conclusion.

In this article, I will discuss a learning community for “at-risk” students at the University of Wyoming that attempts to engage basic writing students in the thesis-research process. The Synergy Program includes three courses in the fall and one course in the spring. In addition, students attend a one-day, six-hour summer orientation during which they gain an in-depth introduction to the program and form initial connections with faculty and peers.

I will begin by giving the background of the Synergy Program and discussing several reasons that our students have resisted academic writing prior to their entry into college. Then I will describe two linked courses that highlight the connection between thinking, reading, and writing, and an approach to research that acknowledges the tensions that these students feel toward academic discourse. I will describe how the Synergy learning community has worked toward meeting several goals, which include:

- Respecting students’ backgrounds and personal cultures, and showing this respect by making students co-investigators into issues of identity formation and how acculturation into academic modes of thought (that is, the thesis-research process) can alter identity in potentially threatening ways.
- Showing connections between learning in various contexts, by helping students negotiate the balance between thinking, reading, and writing.
- Teaching critical reading strategies and using compelling texts that foreground students’ own writing projects.
- Encouraging students to take ownership of the thesis-research process through an ethnography research project and final web portfolio.

## **Background of the Learning Community**

The Synergy Learning Community was initiated as a pilot program at the University of Wyoming (UW) in fall 2001 with the goal of offering conditionally admitted students a focused, integrated, and successful first-semester experience. Students labeled “conditional” because of low high school GPAs or ACT scores join the program voluntarily—some, admittedly, because of parental pressure. The students who enroll in Synergy each fall earn an average score of 16 on the English portion of the ACT, significantly lower than the average score of 19 earned by the comparison group of conditionally admitted students who did not participate in Synergy. Prior to the Synergy Program, UW’s English Department offered a remedial composition course recommended for students identified as basic writers based on in-class diagnostic essays. In 2001 Synergy “replaced” these courses and took on the role of addressing the needs of basic writers. Approximately 75 to 85 percent of Synergy students enter the program with characteristics that would have placed them in the remedial course, and for this reason, faculty recognized early that critical reading and writing needed to be central components of the program.

Instructors volunteer to teach in the Synergy Program, and Synergy’s class sizes are smaller than regular courses—18 students maximum as compared with 23 for regular classes. The Program strives to create an academic learning community through several important structural features. According to definitions provided by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, Synergy fits the description of a cluster model learning community, in which two or more classes are linked thematically or by content. In a cluster learning community, students attend classes together, and faculty plan the program collaboratively. The Washington Center defines learning communities broadly as “classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build these learning communities, with all intended to restructure the students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines” (*Learning Communities*).

For one week each summer, new and veteran Synergy instructors meet to plan the courses and develop a sense of friendship and shared goals. Since the program’s inception in 2001, Synergy faculty consistently report many of the benefits of working in a learning community, which were documented



by a national study of learning communities conducted by Lenning and Ebbers in 1999: “diminished isolation, a shared purpose and cooperation among faculty colleagues, increased curricular integration, a fresh approach to one’s discipline, and increased satisfaction with their students’ learning” (iv). The learning community benefits described by students in end-of-semester questionnaires also correlate with published results of learning communities at other institutions, namely increased engagement in courses and improved self-confidence fostered by a strong peer group and social community (Mlynarczyk and Babbitt; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith).

The learning community model is particularly effective for a program serving academically at-risk students. Bruch et. al. argue that “learning communities can provide historically marginalized students with a sense of belonging and space such that they can be truly engaged and active contributors in the learning community” (18). Because Synergy students tend to experience higher levels of frustration with critical reading and academic writing, the learning community courses employ connected approaches to projects to engage students’ interest on multiple levels. Connections within the learning community often involve common readings and themes as well as assignments that begin in one course and continue in more depth in another.

In foregrounding Synergy students’ habits of resistance toward academic writing, it’s important to note that the Synergy program attracts a disproportionate number of males and minorities. In fall 2004, for example, 72.7 percent of Synergy students were male and 31.8 percent were minorities—a significant ratio in light of the fact that minorities comprise only 8 percent of the general student population at UW. According to university statistics, males, minorities, and students admitted with conditions are at a higher risk for dropping out or failing than the overall population of students. As Elbow points out in his article “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard,” “highly resistant students fight and sabotage the teacher, they sometimes walk out, and the only thing they give is the finger. Boys and men seem to fall more often into this relation to teacher authority than women do” (20). Synergy instructors have noticed this type of rebellious behavior among male students in the learning community to a greater degree than in their non-Synergy courses.

Minorities in Synergy, especially Native American students, struggle with a sense of disenfranchisement from their home communities as they enter a setting where the dominant race is white, and the dominant cultures unfamiliar. As Gray-Rosendale, Bird, and Bullock point out in “Rethinking

the Basic Writing Frontier: Native American Students' Challenge to Our Histories":

At times Native American students are those for whom leaving the tribe to gain a college education can feel like a tremendous betrayal of one's culture and may be talked about as such by other members of one's clan. . . . [I]n their cases, is the journey from "margin" to the "center" such a valuable journey after all? (79)

Just as significant as the demographic data defining Synergy students' identities are the perceptions of conditionally admitted students held by faculty, administrators, and the students themselves. Based on patterns of poor academic performance and apparent lack of motivation, familiar constructions of underprepared students as cognitively or culturally deficient and unsuited for college are sometimes adopted by even the most liberal minded colleagues at UW. Many academics, with some support from conservative social science research, assume that students' low scores on college aptitude tests (in this case the ACT) reflect low IQs and low levels of general intelligence needed for successful college work. And although Synergy students represent a typical cross-section of social classes at UW, we've heard several comments by sympathetic colleagues that reveal perceptions of Synergy students as coming from predominantly lower socioeconomic classes. Considering that UW is located in the poorest county in the state with a 21 percent poverty rate (and that 87 percent of on-site students come from Wyoming towns), this misrepresentation of Synergy students contributes to some negative institutional bias as administrators attempt to protect students from representations of Wyoming residents as "low class."

### **Students' Resistance to Academic Writing**

While it is difficult to make generalizations about Synergy students who come from a wide range of backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures, faculty have discovered during the program's first four years that Synergy students feel a higher than average degree of marginalization from academic settings. For years, many of our students have been considered "class clowns," rebels, bad students, poor writers, and bad influences on other students. In fact, during interviews that faculty conducted in fall 2003, the most common reasons students cited for their conditional status was a lack of motivation toward academic work and a learned process of "getting by"

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in high school with little work, intermittent study habits, and poor attendance. When asked in an early self-assessment to simply reflect on their high school experiences, students' responses overwhelmingly represent dueling perceptions that success in school is a matter of luck, and failure a matter of uncontrollable uninvestment. The following quotations represent attitudes characteristic of many Synergy students:

When I think of high school I think of the word "slacker." I was a very well trained slacker. . . . [E]very day I would wake up at 9:35 a.m. and go straight to second hour I often would sleep in through second hour as well because the teacher could hardly care less. . . . I guess I did all the work I was assigned which got me through it so easily. . . . I think I may have finished that class with a A- or B+ but I didn't even have to try at all it just came easy to me. Some kids would try as hard as they could but they ended up getting low C's, I guess I'm just lucky. [Hispanic male]

In high school I was constantly skipping classes and procrastinating which hurt my GPA and attendance. I only had one friend who graduated with me but unable to achieve the same goals of entering college. [Native American female]

When I look back on my high school career there are a lot of memories that come flooding back. Ironically almost none of these memories have anything to do with education. . . . The last day of school my senior year was one of the days that really messes with me. No more high school, no more teachers, no more stupid rules to follow. . . . [A]s always it's just a matter of getting past the frustration and doing what you have too to be a success in life. [white male]

Of the twenty-seven students in two Synergy courses who completed the self-assessment, none of them expressed respect or enjoyment of their secondary schooling or revealed an academic experience that struck them as worthwhile. And, each fall, we encounter a few students who do not overcome their deeply ingrained negativity and passivity toward academic learning. As Shor writes in *Empowering Education*:

Habits of resistance are learned early and well by many students in traditional schools. Unfortunately, these habits are carried into

democratic and critical classrooms. Having internalized resistance to authority in schooling, students take their sabotaging skills wherever they go. Because of this, empowering educators face traditional student resistance as well as resistance coming from the invitation to empowerment itself. (139)

Many of our students enter the Synergy program with great suspicion of teachers who give students even partial control over grades or ask them to find personal connections with writing assignments, having been duped in the past into believing these practices really “mattered” to their final grade or led to believe that these approaches are correlated with “easy” classes that offer few meaningful challenges.

On the other hand, when presented with too many rigid rules and guidelines for writing assignments and class participation (or when presented with material that they find irrelevant to their own identities), Synergy students detach, falling back on familiar and rebellious high school roles. In this sense, faculty face a tricky balance with our approaches to course policies and writing assignments, attempting to present students with firm expectations while inviting their participation in evaluating their own work and shaping course policies, themes, and assignments. This is a balance we continue to try to master, year after year.

It is my strong belief that Synergy students’ disengagement from (and sometimes strong dislike for) thesis-research writing is not based on simple laziness or lack of ability. Rather, students’ self-assessments in 2003 and 2004 reveal repeated testimony that many students’ negative attitudes are founded on anger, a long-standing rebellion against instructional techniques that students felt trampled their “right” to express their often marginalized opinions—in whatever form they chose. Resistant students discover early that the ways they express themselves at home or with peers are considered unacceptable in academia, and rather than adapting to the new standard, they begin to take pride in overtly shaking up the polite and teacher-pleasing classroom deportment of their peers. Needless to say, their writing—if they actually do it—is equally rebellious against “the rules.” These feelings of anger might be manifested in conscious and outright protests against writing assignments, or they might simmer for long periods of time underneath a frustrated but teacher-pleasing facade and show up in the students’ indecipherable writing style. This kind of anger transcends issues of social class or home culture.

Students’ fear of investing themselves in academic writing has seldom been articulated in interviews and self-assessments, but can be seen

primarily in the high rate of disengagement and dropout among Native American students in our program (and at the university as a whole). For students who come from family or community cultures that are far removed from academic discourses and hierarchies, accepting a new form of thinking is akin to widening a rift between them and their home cultures. These students don't necessarily feel unable to learn the new discourse, but they keenly and quickly see how it clashes with the discourse of their deepest identities. On some level, these students understand that learning the new discourse—academic writing, for example—changes the way they think and therefore *who they are* in a fundamental way. These fears raise enormous tensions in students toward adopting new modes of thinking and expressing themselves in writing, and in turn, they disengage or continue to write in the style of their familiar identities.

Min-Zhan Lu addresses this resistance in her article “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing” when she explains that “learning a new discourse has an effect on the re-forming of individual consciousness” (95). Lu describes how basic writing instructors of the past have either persuaded students that the new discourse will not alter their home identities (an approach discussed by Mina Shaughnessy), or they have attempted to convince students that the “anxiety” or “psychic strain” of learning a new discourse will “disappear once the students get comfortably settled in the new community” (Bruffee; Farrell 8). Instead, Lu asserts that “it’s important to let students know the anxiety of acculturation may continue. In fact, teachers [must be] interested in actively honoring the students’ decisions and needs to ‘live with the tension of bi-culturism.’” She continues, “The best way to help students cope with the ‘pain,’ ‘strain,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘fear,’ or ‘confusions’ resulting from this type of conflict is not to find ways of ‘releasing’ the students from these experiences or to avoid situations which might activate them” (95). Rather, Lu argues, a contextual approach would be more effective, since it could help students deal self-consciously with the threat of betrayal, especially if they fear and want to resist it.

### **Engaging Students Through Course Connections**

The heart of Synergy’s approach to writing lies in the connections between the program’s two linked writing- and research-based courses, College Composition and Rhetoric and Critical Thinking in Intellectual Communities. Each of these courses is required by the university, though non-Synergy students generally take an “Intellectual Communities” (I-course) associated with their chosen major (I-courses replaced the previous

“University Studies” course that many perceived as intellectually weak and unproductive). I-courses have the charge of focusing on critical thinking and career exploration in each discipline. The Synergy Intellectual Communities course, which we designated a “Critical Thinking and Reading” course, is unique both in its connection to the Composition course and its mission to help students negotiate issues of identity and success that underlie many students’ past struggles with academic writing. Synergy dispels much of the stigma attached to basic or remedial writing courses by approaching basic writing not as a deficiency in writing structure or mechanics, but as a deeply held attitude of uninvestment in the writing process.

In an attempt to help students overcome this attitude of uninvestment—particularly toward writing projects involving research and clear thesis structures—Synergy faculty in the Composition and Critical Thinking course collaborated in melding two courses that give students room to develop not only writing, but also reading and critical thinking literacies in a context that does not presuppose their investment in the process. One project in particular is central to this goal. Both the Composition and Critical Thinking courses share a semester-long ethnographic research project, an endeavor that students find interesting and relevant, and a process that affords faculty crucial opportunities for “folding in” more traditional reading and writing assignments. The ethnography research project culminates in students designing a web portfolio to house their process, findings, and personal reflections.

Ballenger points out some of the primary reasons students find ethnography so compelling: it involves inquiry into people and particularly groups, it requires concerted attention to social context, and its questions are answered by spending significant time *in situ*, or in the places where the community are doing what they usually do. The ethnography, in short, leads students to “own” this project in ways they have never owned thesis-research writing assignments before, and its ultimate genre—the web portfolio—reaches an immediate and personally relevant audience.

When asked in fall 2004 to reflect in writing about research projects completed in junior high and high school, Synergy students overwhelmingly revealed negative perceptions of the writing component of the research projects. Some students enjoyed the learning that accompanied research and a few enjoyed choosing topics, but invariably they expressed strong ambivalence or dislike for putting their findings into writing. One student wrote, “We had to choose an issue like abortion or logging and research it then write an argument for or against and present it in several different

ways—a formal presentation and a poem or something. . . . I hated them. Learning about different things was alright but putting them into a paper really was crappy.” For many of our students the valuable part of the research process was their interest in the topic; writing meant undergoing the drudgery of satisfying what they knew to be the teacher’s main interest—the thesis-focused product. In addition, because students were relying almost entirely on research conducted by others in formulating their arguments, they found the reading accompanying research projects to be extremely difficult to engage with.

In the Synergy Program, as a lead-up to the ethnography, the Critical Thinking course begins the semester with five weeks of reading assignments connected to identity formation, issues of acculturation, and community study. Students take reflective notes on each assigned text in a format of their choosing. In the Composition course, students begin the semester by contacting and initiating a relationship with their chosen community and beginning to pose research questions. They use this connection with their community (in addition to the readings in the Critical Thinking course) as a starting place for initial writing assignments. In the second half of the semester, the ethnography work transfers to the Critical Thinking course, where students continue working on primary research and begin designing the web portfolio. Students spend the last six weeks of the Composition course conducting secondary research on an issue relevant to their chosen community and composing a classical argument essay. The links between the courses are summarized very briefly in the following chart; assignments marked with an asterisk are taken from the *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson):

<b>Synergy Program: Connections between Composition and Critical Thinking Course</b>	
<b>College Composition</b> <i>1<sup>st</sup> half of the semester, approximately</i>	<b>Critical Thinking</b> <i>1<sup>st</sup> half of the semester, approximately</i>
Choose and contact a community for ethnography: conduct one interview with a member of the community and one observation of the community. Discuss interview techniques employed by authors of <i>Our America</i> .	Discuss issues of identity, acculturation, conceptions of success through <i>Our America</i> and personal reflections.
Posing a Question Essay* (focusing on a community students have belonged to or currently belong to).	Short readings and note-taking; exploring the meaning of critical thought and active reading.
Editorial Essay (developing Posing a Question essay into an article).	Begin web work (learning to negotiate FrontPage software).
Essay reacting to <i>Our America</i> and planning reflectively for the Ethnography Project.	
<i>2<sup>nd</sup> half of the semester, approximately</i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> half of the semester, approximately</i>
Discuss rhetorical appeals, write Rhetorical Analysis (Summary Strong Response)* of group book.	Group book project: choose a book to read in groups and prepare group panel presentation.
Conduct secondary research for Classical Argument essay.	Refine research questions for ethnography; develop consent forms.
Write Classical Argument essay* concerning problematic issue faced by ethnography community.	Conduct further observations and interviews; take photos.
<b>Culminating Project</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop components of ethnography and final Web Portfolio.</li> <li>• Oral Presentation of Web Portfolio.</li> </ul>	



As this table reveals, many of the essay assignments included in Synergy's Composition course are not uncommon to first-year composition courses at universities nationwide, including the posing a question, rhetorical analysis or summary strong response, and classical argument essays. Synergy's approach stands apart from more traditional first-year writing courses because of the learning community's emphasis (largely through connections to the Critical Thinking course) on active reading, issues of acculturation into academic thinking and writing, and student-centered research in the ethnography project. In the following sections, I will explain these fundamental areas in detail and discuss how they have helped our students to feel more invested in reading, research, and academic writing.

### **Engaging Students in Reading**

The first text students read for both Composition and Critical Thinking courses is *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (Jones and Newman), a book that provides a starting point for investing students in the writing process by helping students explore issues of acculturation. While students read several books over the course of the semester, I will focus my discussion on *Our America* because it represents a concerted connection between reading and writing that all texts in the learning community employ. *Our America* is essentially a transcription of a series of interviews conducted by two eleven-year-old black boys, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, who live in or near the Ida B. Wells project in South Chicago. When approached by journalist David Isay concerning the alleged murder of a five-year-old boy in the project by two older children, LeAlan and Lloyd agree to conduct an "inside" investigation into the murder by interviewing various people in the project and reflecting on their own experiences growing up in an atmosphere that they repeatedly compare to a war zone.

Several features set this book apart from much of the academic reading students have done and make it a crucial starting point for both courses. First, the book achieves an interesting hybrid status by representing both written and spoken discourse. Because every chapter in the book (aside from Isay's preface) originated as a taped interview or recorded monologue by one of the boys, the language is conversational, circular, at times raw and at times childish, but unmistakably "oral language." The boys use the dialect of their South Chicago community and include a glossary of terms at the back of the book.

Asking students to read a book that is, in one sense, more speech than it is “prose” highlights a crucial connection between thinking, speaking, and writing that exemplifies the connections between the two courses. Synergy students tend to be very adept “talkers,” and because of the roles many have experienced as “outsiders” or “skeptics” in secondary school, they often possess some critical thinking skills that even the brightest students in our regular classes have yet to develop. Synergy students readily accept and understand a connection between thinking and speaking. However, because they have never really been offered a chance to talk their way through a writing assignment, and because they have been told countless times that it’s incorrect to “write the way you talk,” the path from thinking to speaking to writing seems to have a “dead end” at the writing leg of the journey. In an article titled “Assessing Talking and Writing: Linguistic Competence for Students at Risk,” Montgomery writes:

Traditionally, educators assumed that the development of oral language preceded other forms of literacy, especially formal writing. Recent research, however, has suggested that all literacy forms—reading writing, speaking, listening, and thinking—emerge concurrently, serving to reinforce each other throughout school years. When all of the forms are recognized and supported, growth in one form, such as student writing, facilitates progress in another, namely, oral language. The process moves in both directions. . . . [S]tudents at risk for developing literacy can benefit greatly from a talking/writing instructional program. (243)

Our aim in beginning both courses with *Our America* is to model for students that their own familiar modes of thinking and speaking can create compelling written arguments—can become a powerful form of discourse, even in an academic course. Recognizing and respecting this possibility is the first step in gaining students’ investment in learning other forms of discourse—namely, the thesis-research writing process.

In the Critical Thinking course, nearly all of the readings deal with issues of marginalization, identity formation, and community study and reflection. Students take notes on each reading by highlighting the main points and their own reactions in whatever form they are most comfortable with—visual tables or drawings, standard outlining, annotating the reading, or recording thoughts on tape.

In 2001 and 2002, faculty struggled to convince students to express their own thoughts and reactions to the ideas presented, to go beyond simply representing the main points of the reading. Students seemed reluctant to take a stand or express an opinion about the reading in their writing (though this problem was not present in class discussion), and they doggedly adhered to standard outlines or bullet-lists of the main points. In an attempt to help students see the difference between critical reflection and summary, faculty shared examples of more reflective notes written by a few students, modeled the process, and asked students to practice annotating the reading according to their personal reactions in small groups—to no avail. In our end-of-semester interviews in 2002, many students shared with us that this kind of written reaction to reading was not encouraged in high school, where instructors penalized reading responses that deviated from a rigid book-report model.

In 2003, faculty attempted to integrate the hybrid text/speech dynamic of *Our America* into students' reading responses by asking them to engage in an online threaded discussion of the reading with their peers. In our first attempt, we asked students to write about what surprised them most in *Our America*. When we read these discussion threads later, we were delighted at how thoughtful students were in discussing the book when engaged in an electronic discussion with classmates. These electronic discussions represented more careful and more organized thinking—and students achieved some of the elements of critical thought, which they had been unable to practice in their weekly note taking. The online discussions give students a chance to write without worrying about the mechanics of their language, but rather to simply experience how writing helps to shape and define their thinking—in dialogue with their peers. Quiet students participated enthusiastically, and all of the “voices” were read with equal attention, creating an environment in which students cared about their writing and their audience's reaction. Following are a few “threads” from the discussion:

I actually thought it was amazing how every one was so willing to talk to LeAlan and Loyd. I guess that I have this stereotype about the projects that most of the people are hateful and wouldn't want to talk to any one knocking on their door, or some one just walking up to them in the street. I guess that this book cleared up that misconception about these people. Now I know that these people want to talk and be heard.

My response to our america was nothing but anger. Anger in the fact that our so called presidents running for office are spending what, two hundred million dollars on thier campaign to get alected for prez, when we have these problems..... just wait till i write my essay on this subject [for College Composition].

Unlike traditional note taking, the threaded discussion bridges the gap between thinking, speaking, and writing in a familiar and discussion-based context. We continued the threaded discussion as a way to encourage this type of reflective dialogue for the remainder of the semester.

Allowing students to read texts that foreground the voices of marginalized individuals and to explore complex issues of acculturation in the reading and their own responses aided several students in recognizing the basis of their own skepticism toward academic work. For example, one student recently chose to write about how his own affiliation with a gang made it difficult for him to engage in school because he saw plainly how the school system viewed gang members as “kids in the quest to commit violence,” when in reality “they work everyday of their life staying alive and providing for their [gang] family.” He writes, “Many join because the gang may provide love, brotherhood, and compassion that the kid is missing at home from his own family. . . . Gangs often recruit youths who have low self-esteem or are picked on [by] others at school. . . . The schools need to reach out to the person. They need to stop stereotyping them.”

For this student, the stereotyping may have been only part of his resistance to school: he points out again and again in the response how the gang family is built around absolute loyalty to the gang’s way of life (and, more importantly, the gang’s definition of “success” in life). Acculturation into an academic, upwardly mobile “mindset” could certainly challenge that affiliation. It’s difficult to pin down the role these initial reflective note-taking assignments play in increasing student motivation, but this student showed a marked effort at mid-semester to invest himself in both the Critical Thinking and Composition courses—more than he had in the early weeks of the semester. He scheduled conferences with instructors and began to work on making up assignments he had missed. Understanding that there is no recipe for “solving” each student’s struggles with academic discourse and issues of acculturation, we took this as a positive sign that this student had begun to feel some investment in learning—he understood that these courses were making a sincere effort to explore complex issues *with* him and weren’t offering pat answers or ultimatums.

In keeping with our goal of connecting speech with prose and opening up discussion about tensions between home communities and college, students next watch a taped C-Span interview that took place in 1997, when LeAlan Jones was eighteen years old and a first-year college student. After listening to LeAlan's attempts to explain how he balances his identity between the norms of the housing project in which he grew up and the university—for him, two communities that require entirely different forms of discourse, dress, and even ways of thinking—students discuss this issue in class and as a threaded discussion. Do they see evidence of tension in LeAlan's responses? Do they think it is possible to maintain a healthy balance between disparate communities and keep strong ties to both? What is LeAlan risking in speaking out to inner city youth about his own transformation? In a threaded discussion, one student wrote:

I think that he glossed over the deeper issues. Even though he discussed some heavy issues, it seemed like there were definitely some underlying problems that did not get addressed. He may have sugar coated it so that it would be easier to swallow for people who had no experience with drugs and violence like LeAlan and Lloyd had.

Another student responded:

I agree that he glossed over the deeper issues. . . . I was most interested about the insecurities Lealan and Loyd felt about their future. They had a lot of curiosity about what other members of their community thought about their future. Considering a lot of members of their community have turned out with such troublesome lives, it seems like it would be a concerning issue.

In class discussion, we talked more about these “deeper issues,” speculating about how LeAlan's friends and family in the projects might respond to his education, and how the interview seemed to bring out mixed emotions in LeAlan: pride in his background, determination to “make something” of himself while remaining loyal to his family and community, pain for the suffering he had witnessed, and a dueling mixture of anger and respect for the “political machine” that had ignored his community for so long. Those Synergy students who identified most with LeAlan's struggle to integrate the norms and values of disparate communities predominantly came from home cultures that either did not value higher education, or valued its rewards but

did not put these values into practice by encouraging or modeling good learning habits. In an interview conducted in 2004, one white male student from a rural town in Wyoming described the challenges he faced in balancing his goals at the university with his family's attitude toward education:

My mom was 15 when she had her first kid. She dropped out and got married to my dad. He graduated high school but didn't go any farther with it. One works at Ace Hardware and the other works at the Dollar Store. There's no income in that. The main thing—I don't want to financially struggle. After looking at everything, like my brothers, I don't want to be like that. Most of my brothers are pretty mad because they didn't think I would make it [to college]. They are like he'll drop out and be like the rest of us. He'll be around here and we'll have fun. I always make everything fun. Since I am not there they always call and ask what I am doing or if I will be home this week. I say weekend—I have class. When I go home, they want me to stay an extra day to go hunting or something. I tell them I can't because I have class.

As this student exemplifies, the individuals who found connections with LeAlan's story were not only minority students or students from urban areas; many white students from rural communities also found much to relate to in *Our America*.

### **Culminating Projects: Ethnography Project and Web Portfolio**

To put *Our America* in another light: students begin the class by delving into a book that describes, in essence, a research project. The two eleven-year-old authors are far from academics, yet they are posing questions about their community, interviewing people both inside and outside their home culture, struggling with the answers, and investing themselves in a research process that is highly meaningful to them. They have created an informal ethnography of a violent community in South Chicago, using their own voices and their own questions. In this sense, LeAlan and Lloyd help introduce Synergy students to the most compelling benefits of ethnographic research: the researcher becomes the expert in the areas that interest him or her most. The research process involves much more than reading articles and books and writing on note cards—it involves *speaking, listening, thinking, watching, and growing*. The researcher investigates secondary sources from

a place of true ownership of the core project and conclusions. Finally, as Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater point out, ethnographic study involves focusing on and developing abilities that come naturally to most of us:

Ethnographic fieldwork offers us formal techniques for recording and documenting what we already do quite well informally: observe carefully, listen closely, and speculate about others' talk and behavior. But, as anthropologists have long known, learning to do fieldwork has an added value: one begins to see oneself and one's own cultural attitudes more clearly—since any study of an other is also a study of the self. ( 3)

*Our America* models a form of personal ethnography in which the researcher uses his or her own voice in creating “thick description” (Geertz) of a community that typifies ethnographic research. While we give students important guidelines for their projects, we also encourage them to find a style and tone that works best for their study and persona. To learn more about the ethnography process, students listen to the experiences and advice of volunteer guest speakers from Anthropology and International Studies; they read a detailed description of ethnographic research and writing process excerpted from *The Curious Writer* (Ballenger); and they analyze several print and web ethnographies, including “Ethnography of a Junior High” by Janet Davis (book chapter), “An Urban Ethnography of Latino Street Gangs” by Francine Hallcom (website), and “An Ethnography of a Neighborhood Café: Informality, Table Arrangements and Background Noise” by Laurier, Whyte, and Buckner (website).

During the first half of the semester, students choose a community, complete an initial observation and interview, and write two short essays in College Composition in which they reflect on their past experiences with community involvement and strategize for the ethnography study. Students occasionally choose to work in pairs or small groups because of a common community interest or reluctance to meet strangers alone, but all students develop individual research questions, turn in individual assignments, and compose their own web portfolio. Instructors loan out tape recorders to students (each class has approximately three tape recorders for student use), and students use their own cameras for taking photos of the community. Because Laramie is a relatively small town comprised of a six mile by four mile rectangle and a centrally located university, students do not typically have problems with transportation to community sites.

In the Critical Thinking course, students turn in detailed notes on their observations and interviews and refine the four initial questions that guide them in studying the community in more depth. Again in the Critical Thinking course, drawing on course readings, we generate areas for critical observation of a community, which might include gender roles, appearance, comfort level with revealing details about personal history, body language, topics of conversation, and different dynamics between members of the community. Students spend the latter half of the semester creating consent forms, conducting more observations, interviewing key informants and relevant “outsiders,” taking photos, narrowing and revising research questions, and formulating conclusions.

Following a set of guidelines, students use FrontPage software to create a personal web portfolio that highlights their chosen community and all of the various research elements they have put into the ethnography. They create a homepage, links to interviews and observations, links to photos, and a link to the central piece—a comprehensive discussion of their process, questions, and conclusions (see Appendix for the complete assignments). Although the ethnography project is the weightiest assignment in the Critical Thinking course, comprising one-third of the students' final grade, students earn credit throughout the semester for turning in reading notes, engaging in a mid-semester group book presentation, submitting interview and observation field notes, completing preparatory writings for the final ethnography, and submitting drafts of the final ethnography. Students must receive credit for at least half of the preliminary assignments in order to pass the course, even if they complete the ethnography web portfolio.

Students have great flexibility in designing their web portfolios, and each one becomes a reflection of the individual student as well as the community studied. On their homepage, students include a link to a personal reflection that responds to the prompt:

Introduce yourself. Tell us where you're from and some details about the places and people that mattered most to you growing up (maybe your hometown, high school, church, work, sports, friends, family). Tell us a little about the path you took getting to the University of Wyoming—the challenges and encouragements you experienced. Finally, think about the relationship between your own background and the community you studied. What did this ethnography help you learn about yourself?



On the last day of class, students present their web portfolios in an atmosphere of excitement and pride—typical feelings for “presentation day” in many courses, but a new experience for many of our students. In 2004, a few students who had missed weeks of classes and failed to complete many other assignments during the course of the semester showed up on the last day to present their web portfolios (and the portfolios were quite good, for the most part, though some students unfortunately still did not earn enough points to pass the course).

Students traditionally labeled “at risk” or “basic writers” for an array of complex reasons often need a context for thesis-research projects that they find meaningful to their own identities—and a product that puts the scholarly paper, long despised by these students, on the back burner. Because the more traditional writing assignments in the Composition course are closely tied to the ethnography study, these writings take on more meaning and motivational value for most students. The web portfolio, the culminating result of much of their previous work, reaches a much broader and closer audience, including friends and family, and it remains “alive” on the web long after the courses end. In experiencing a sense of ownership of this ethnographic study, and in caring (perhaps for the first time) about how diverse audiences will react to their portrayal of a specific community online, students gain a glimpse into the academic mindset that has previously been a mystery to them—the expectation that learning to research and present conclusions for an outside audience is a valuable discourse and worth practicing.

Our hope is that students will take this experience with them into future classes, and attempt to find ways to take ownership of their other coursework in similar ways. Although Synergy courses only extend through spring semester of the first year, the majority of students maintain contact with their Synergy instructors—often through their senior year. In addition, many enroll in non-Synergy courses taught by Synergy faculty. Perhaps the most powerful ongoing connection to the learning community occurs through students’ peer groups. Synergy students continue to have close friendships and study groups with their Synergy peers for many years. In follow-up phone interviews with Synergy students from 2002 and 2003, all reported having maintained close ties with one or more peers from the learning community.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe one ethnography project that highlights one of the greatest benefits of the ethnography assignment: its tendency to help students recognize the dueling personas they may be struggling to reconcile in their approach to academic success (and academic

writing). In this example, the struggle occurs between the student's loyalty to a culture she sees as rebellious and un-academic and her desire to gain a college education.

Maria is a Hispanic student whose immigrant grandparents had only a third-grade education and whose mother worked her way from the beet fields of Nebraska to an administrative position at the university. After spending much of the semester expressing her anger at social injustices committed against Hispanics, and against downtrodden people in general, Maria chose to study theater majors for her ethnography. In her editorial essay for Composition, Maria begins:

You would think that slavery ended after the Civil War was fought many years ago. In all honesty slavery still exists in the United States today. Shocked? I would hope not, I would hope that the citizens of the U.S. would know about the treatment of many Mexican immigrants in the fields of California.

Later in the essay, Maria describes an interview she conducted with a family member:

Elias Cardona experienced this unfairness while living in the state of Nebraska. I asked him how it felt, he said "It was a struggle everyday. Seeing signs like No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed, it's hard and it made you angry, but you had to keep trying no matter what. . . . [T]here is racism and inequality in the world still, and all you can do is just keep fighting and believe you can make a difference."

In an interview we conducted with Maria near the end of the semester, she revealed that she feels less hopeful about the ability of marginalized people to find justice in America: "There are just some people out there that just can't make it and I don't want to think negative like that. When you actually think about it—it's something that made me angry in class—somebody said these people can pull themselves up and become anything they want just like we can. I was like, no they can't. If they make it they end up getting beat down."

In the interview, Maria also expressed some competing feelings about her schooling:

In school, I was always the one who was different to everyone else. I was the loud one and would crack up at everything and would

mess around with the teachers. I think I still feel like a little of an outcast. . . . [I]t's like we are in college and we have this money we are giving to the college trying to make something of ourselves so what we are doing is sitting in class listening to some guy when we could be out helping people. It seems that life and government has put a screen over our face about what's really going on and what we can do with ourselves. They put the only way to make money is to go to school. The only way you mean something to society is if you go to school. There are some problems out there that need to be fixed and a lot of us can do it but we are too busy going to school. I don't like thinking like this—let's move on. I think I am one of those people who want to be remembered for something. . . . [B]ut you see people's mistakes and you don't want to make them and that motivates you to do better. I see [my sisters] having a hard time right now. They both have kids and are married. They both got involved in really bad things that screwed up their lives. It's definitely motivation to go to school to see how that came out.

In choosing theater majors for her ethnography, Maria found a community that echoed some of her own feelings—identifying themselves largely as outcasts, working through their art to portray social issues, and gaining a college education as a means to develop personal talents rather than to increase their standard of living. In her ethnography, Maria writes:

This community was truly original because they are taught to question society, and to talk about what people usually do not want to discuss (ex. Sex, drugs, war). Drama students believe that the play writes the truth and shows many things that people need to see and learn about. I found this surprising of the theater community because in a way drama students are leaders, martyrs, and revolutionists in today's society. I am sure that many outsiders of this community would not be aware of the message that theater students are always trying to send into the world in the form of simple school plays.

This community helped Maria identify with college in a way that validated her own misgivings about selling out to “the system,” and while it likely did not alleviate all of her conflicted feelings about being in college, it expanded her conception of what academic work can achieve for social good.

**Synergy’s Effects on Student Writing and Retention**

In evaluating the progress of student writing in Synergy, we control for instructor bias by participating in the English Department’s grading jury, a system by which students’ major writing portfolios are holistically evaluated by the students’ instructor and one or two other composition teachers who are not part of Synergy. In 2001, Synergy’s first year and before the program initiated meaningful connections between the Composition and Critical Thinking courses, Synergy students’ final grades in the Composition course were significantly lower than those of students in regular Composition courses. In 2003, after the initiation of the connected reading, writing, and web portfolio assignments, Synergy students’ final Composition grades showed significant improvement (see Table 1 for comparative data).

*Table 1: Grades in Composition Courses for Synergy and Regular Students*

	A	B	C	D	F
Synergy, 2001	0%	39%	15%	38%	8%
Regular Composition, 2001	25%	47%	23%	3%	2%
Synergy, 2003	28%	48%	24%	0	0

These improvements have held steady every year since 2003, and the fall 2004 midterm portfolio grades showed similarly encouraging results: A: 9 percent; B: 24 percent; C: 67 percent; with no Ds or Fs. It’s important to note that midterm grades for students in all Composition courses, both Synergy and non-Synergy, are lower than students’ final grades, in part because the midterm portfolio is due five weeks after the semester begins.

In 2003, Synergy students also showed significant improvements in retention over the comparison group of conditionally admitted students who did not participate in Synergy. The retention rate from fall to spring semester was 87 percent for Synergy students as compared with 81 percent for the conditionally admitted students who chose not to participate in Synergy. Among the comparison group, 63 percent were on academic probation at the end of fall semester, while only 27 percent of Synergy students were on academic probation. In addition, the average GPA for Synergy students was 2.39 as compared with an average GPA of 1.77 for the comparison group. These statistics become even more impressive when considering that at the

beginning of both years, Synergy students' high school GPAs were lower than those of the comparison group, and Synergy English ACT scores were markedly lower. These retention data support Synergy faculty's belief that the problems our students face with writing go much deeper than structural or sentence-level issues. We believe that addressing students' anxieties about learning academic writing and achieving academic success (ideas that are often linked in students' underlying perceptions of academia) can increase student motivation and success in far-reaching and significant ways.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Prompts for Ethnography Study and Web Portfolio**

#### **ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY & WEB PORTFOLIO**

We've spent the first half of the semester starting to think about community study and contacting and observing various groups; we've read several short articles looking at identity formation (gender, multiple intelligences, and definitions of success) and longer texts looking at how people become part of a community and how that community shapes who we are (geeks, college sorority and drinking groups, poverty-stricken communities). Now, we'll begin concerted work on finishing at least 3 observations and 3 interviews with key informants and working on drafting your actual written ethnography. Finally, you will create a web portfolio to house your ethnography, your personal reflections on the project, and links to the raw data and observation notes you've compiled over the course of the semester.

#### **What is an ethnography?**

An ethnography is a method of studying and learning about a person or group of people. Usually, ethnography involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment. Rather than looking at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects ("the big picture"), the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed understanding of the circumstances of the few subjects being studied. Ethnographic accounts, then, are both descriptive and interpretive; descriptive because detail is so crucial, and interpretive, because the ethnographer must determine the significance of what she observes without gathering broad, statistical information. Clifford Geertz is famous for coining the term "thick description" in discussing the methodology of the ethnographer. Try to figure out what a group of people know and how they are using that knowledge to organize their behavior. Instead of "What do I see these people doing?" ask, "What do these people see themselves doing?"

**Remaining Deadlines for the Project**  
**(You can turn any of these elements in early if you'd like.)**

***Complete three field observations of your community and take notes.***

- **Observation 1:** already due—if you haven't turned in these notes, do it asap!
- **Observation 2:** field notes due November 1
- **Observation 3:** field notes due November 15

***Complete three to four interviews with key informants and outsiders to the community.***

- **Interview 1:** due November 1 (this deadline has been pushed back 1 week)
- **Interview 2:** notes due November 8
- **Interview 3:** notes due November 22

\*Note: One of these interviews should come from an outsider to the community. Feel free to conduct more than 3 total interviews if possible.

***Conduct secondary research on the community and issues that influence the community.***

- **Coe library presentation** of research resources: November 1
- **Secondary research summary:** due November 8

***Draft your ethnography essay.***

- **Ethnography preparation essay:** due November 22

***Develop the web portfolio.***

- **Draft of web portfolio due:** December 6 for in-class workshop
- **Final draft due:** at our final presentation



# Basic Writers and Learning Communities

Rachelle L. Darabi

*ABSTRACT: This study investigates a basic writing course within a freshman learning Community at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW). Multiple layers of data, both qualitative and quantitative, provide a thick description of what occurred overall in that classroom over the course of one semester. My findings suggest that basic writing classes are more successful within a learning community in terms of student pass rates and increased engagement. Thus, further study of basic writing courses as an integral part of first-year experience programs, especially those that utilize learning communities, should be a priority.*

*KEYWORDS: active learning strategies, basic writing, collaboration, learning communities*

With a continual increase in the percentage of students who go on to college, educators are faced with more and more developmental students challenging us to examine our educational system. Students identified as basic writers at the college level have completed socially approved education requirements that should affirm they are ready to begin the next stage of education. Yet colleges and universities across the country proclaim a percentage of each freshman class underprepared for the work that will be expected of them over the next four years.

At the same time that inadequate academic preparation and achievement have spotlighted basic writers, the national economy and shaky state budgets have spawned legislative demands for greater efficiency, leading university administrators to look for ways to tighten their belts. One way to do this is to eliminate programs. Basic writing programs have been among those under fiscal review. Some critics have questioned monies spent on programs that seem to have limited success, while others question the social impact of eliminating such programs. Thus, we find ourselves at a point of tensions, wedged between the need for an educated society, the need of universities to uphold standards but at the same time educate those whom they admit, and the pressures on and from government to show greater effectiveness (that is, to retain and graduate more students) at lower costs. Such tensions have caused changes in basic writing programs at many universities.

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At Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), we have felt these tensions. IPFW, a comprehensive university serving northeast Indiana, is a commuter campus enrolling approximately 12,000 students in an urban setting. IPFW is an open-admissions institution with approximately one-third of each freshman class testing into basic writing courses. Many of our students are low income and the first generation in their families to attend college, so they are doubly at-risk. As our resources are limited, it is essential that whatever programs we develop are successful. Based on extensive retention studies of our own students, we decided to pilot learning communities. My study, driven by my observations as the assessment coordinator of the two-year pilot program, investigates a basic writing course within a learning community. To understand the context, it is useful to review recent research on developmental courses.

Many critics from academia and beyond claim that developmental classes cause a lowering of academic standards and actually contribute little to student success. Politicians and the media complain that the questionable validity of these programs along with their great costs makes them expendable. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, "once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses" (*Greater Expectations* viii). A National Center for Education Statistics study showed that in 1995, "81 percent of 4-year public institutions offered at least one remedial class" with 71 percent offering remedial writing courses (iii, 6). Some studies of courses such as basic writing claim that "the more remedial study students need, the lower their prospects of graduating" (*Greater Expectations* viii). Other research points to a different picture. Hunter Boylan and Barbara Bonham completed a study of 150 developmental programs that addresses the issue of standards directly and that of costs indirectly. To study the impact of developmental programs on the institutions in question, Boylan and Bonham examined the cumulative grade point averages, long term retention, and subsequent academic performance of developmental students in regular college courses. For the study, they defined developmental students as "those judged by their institutions as underprepared for college work" (309). They found that "for the most part, the grades of developmental students lagged somewhat behind the grades of other students throughout their academic careers" (309). However, they also found that the retention and graduation rates for developmental students compared favorably with the national rate of 45 percent (309). Recent studies cited by Frank Newman, Director of the Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World<sup>1</sup> during testimony before the U.S. Congress, claim a

51 percent five-year graduation rate.

The aspect of Boylan and Bonham's study that really addresses standards and relates to retention is the ability of developmental students to pass subsequent regular curriculum courses after completing developmental courses. They found that 77.2 percent of developmental math students passed the regular math course at their institutions with a C or better; 83 percent of developmental reading students passed a college social science course with a C or better; and 91.1 percent of developmental writing students passed the regular English course with a C or better (308). These data would seem to provide evidence that a majority of developmental students can meet the standards at their institutions after completing appropriate coursework. This provides indirect evidence that the costs of developmental education are not too high if increasing numbers of students are retained and ultimately graduate.

One of the greatest concerns with retention is the freshman year because it is between the freshman and sophomore years that the largest losses of students are seen. In their article titled "What Works in Student Retention," the American College Testing (ACT) program claims that "over half of all students who leave college do so before their second year" (1). This has been the case at IPFW. That is, our first-year attrition rate has been consistently around 35 percent.

## **Background on Learning Communities**

The Learning Community (LC) movement is one of the most promising approaches to improved retention (Jackson 6; Guskin, Marcy, and Smith 1). The idea of community has a solid foundation of research to support it. Faith Gabelnick et al. describe LCs in the following way:

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curriculum entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (19)

According to Gabelnick et al., five major types of learning communities exist: 1) linked courses, 2) learning clusters, 3) freshman interest groups, 4) federated Learning Communities, and 5) coordinated studies (19). The National Learning Commons Project website contains the following

description of curricular learning communities which are what the IPFW project utilized: "In higher education, curricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students."

Learning communities are centered on the social construction of knowledge. Richard Raymond, when describing his experience teaching in curricular learning communities, says, "we [the LC instructors] knit students together by relying on the social constructionist theory in all three classes" (269). According to Roberta Matthews:

... learning communities are, in many ways, collaborative learning writ large; they link disciplines across boundaries thereby enriching intellectual and learning experiences and, like collaborative learning, help students build bridges between their prior experience and their academic experiences in higher education. (42)

The core principles of learning communities focus on integration of curriculum, active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility, all of which position LCs within social constructionist theories.

Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Marcia Babbitt, speaking of teaching English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students in LCs, say that what intrigues them most, beyond high pass rates and good grades, is "the special classroom atmosphere in these classes" (73). They find that "students are so much more active and engaged in their learning than are students in regular, unlinked ESL courses" (73). Richard Magjuka, Associate Professor at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, adds to this point: "at its core, a learning community is both a pedagogical tool and a curricular device designed to build connections among students, faculty and staff who seek to attain shared goals and learning outcomes" (29). Barbara Jackson, Associate Dean of University College at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, says:

Learning communities are such powerful agents in the higher education learning process because they embody some special characteristics. They represent, for example, one of the few opportunities undergraduates especially beginning students have to engage in comprehensive, engaged, deep learning. (7)

A number of schools have taken advantage of the positive attributes of learning communities. La Guardia Community College of the City Univer-

sity of New York is cited by Frank Newman as having increased its graduation rates by creating programs that provide greater academic support. A major focus of LaGuardia’s efforts has been learning communities that are provided for all of LaGuardia’s student population, including developmental students. Positive results are seen in other LC initiatives across the nation, notably on commuter campuses such as Temple University and the University of Texas San Antonio. At Temple University where 14,000 out of 18,000 students are commuters, LCs have proven successful as shown below:

**Table 1: Retention and Graduation Rate Differentials  
at Temple University  
(1994-1998 cohort)**

Retention Rate Differential for LC versus non-LC Students (1994- 1998)	5 year Graduation Rate Differential for LC versus non- LC Students (1994 cohort)
+ 5 - 8%	+ 6%

(Source: Levine and Degman).

Likewise, the University of Texas San Antonio, a commuter campus of 18,000 with a large minority population, has shown better retention rates for LC students:

**Table 2: Retention Rates for LC versus non-LC students  
at UTSA for 2000-2001**

Retention Rates for LC Students	Retention Rates for non-LC Students
72.27%	63.84%

Average GPAs were also higher for LC than non-LC students (UTSA).

Research generated from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reveals remarkable results. In the presentation “Value Added: Learn-

ing Communities and Student Engagement,” George Kuh, Director of the Center for Postsecondary Research, presented data compiled from 80,479 students (first year and seniors) who indicated that they had participated in learning communities. The data came from 365 different four-year institutions. In the results, Kuh and his research partner, Chun-Mei Zhao, found that lower ability students (defined by SAT/ACT scores and high school grades) were more likely to participate in learning communities. However, they also found that these students had achieved grades comparable to those of their higher ability peers by the end of the semester. In addition, Kuh and Zhao found that these higher jumps for lower ability students persist through their senior year. LC students (both freshmen and seniors) score higher on all measures of student engagement found in the NSSE. Roberta Matthews, author of “Learning Communities: The Art of the Moment, the Work of the Future,” has this to say of Kuh’s work:

We know that learning communities and the values they embody are based on solid research about effective learning. Their impact is reflected, as George Kuh and his associates point out, in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is quickly becoming the gold standard of quality assessment of the undergraduate experience. (41)

Mark Wiley notes that “learning communities have become increasingly popular ways for working with students, especially first-year students, yet there has been little discussion of these structures in the composition literature” (16). With the exception of Mlynarczyk/Babbitt and Raymond cited earlier, I found few studies on composition classes within learning communities and none on basic writing. My study on a basic writing class within a learning community makes a step toward filling the gap in composition studies.

### **Learning Communities at IPFW**

Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) provides a number of academic support services for students including a tutoring center, writing center, math test center as well as technology training and supplemental instruction—peer-led, group tutoring sessions attached to classes with high failure rates. Developmental courses include one basic writing course, two pre-college math courses, and one reading course. In

addition, there is a freshman seminar taught by professional academic advisors (it is available to any incoming freshman but not mandatory). Despite all of this support, IPFW is still faced with a 65 percent retention rate of first-year students that has seen little improvement over the years. IPFW's Office of Academic Affairs asked for a study of factors, including gender, high school rank, cumulative GPA, SAT, or ACT scores, and college placement test results, possibly correlated with retention. This study found that passing ENG W130, the basic writing (BW) course, was the single variable consistently correlated with retention (IPFW Retention Study).

Based on the evidence that passing W130 was linked to retention, the committee reviewing the retention study recommended that we explore the use of learning communities in a pilot project. Due to the natural link between BW and communication, we paired English W130 with COM 114, Fundamentals of Speech Communication as the second class. So that students could receive an extended orientation to campus and exposure to study skills, the one-credit freshman seminar called Freshman Success (IDIS 110), was selected as the third course in the learning community. A natural role for me as the Director of the Center for Academic Support and Advancement was as assessment coordinator.

The LC pilot program at IPFW, offered in 2001, consisted of five cohorts of curricular learning communities. Each community had the same three classes listed above: Com 114, ENG W130, and IDIS 110. Eighteen students were enrolled in each cohort with a total of 90 students in the pilot project (less than 1 percent of the overall freshman population). Advisors were made aware of the learning communities and enrolled students who showed an interest. However, at the end of the summer orientation season, many of the communities had not filled. As a result, many students registered during the last week for the communities because there were no other options. These late enrollees, who make the decision to come to college very late in the process, tend to be our most at-risk students.

The faculty selected to teach in the communities were recommended by their department supervisor or chair and showed an interest in the project. For the first pilot in fall 2001, faculty received a single day-long training session that focused on integrating the learning objectives of the courses and the overall theme of the communities, diversity. The LC faculty teams were encouraged to meet regularly during the semester to coordinate the activities of the class, and all did so. They used their team time to discuss ways to integrate the courses and to explore issues related to individual students.

Because faculty in the first pilot had not met early enough to integrate their courses very effectively, the project director—Dr. Jeanette Clausen, Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs—and I developed a more extensive training for the second pilot in 2002. We asked the faculty to attend several training sessions, beginning in the spring semester. The training again focused on common learning objectives and course integration, and faculty members were again asked to meet regularly during the fall semester. Most of the teams met weekly or biweekly to develop joint projects and to discuss students. As part of the assessment of the LC project, I observed faculty meetings. In the second year of the pilot program, I observed more substantive discussions on course integration and joint learning outcomes. Some of the connections among the courses included English faculty giving students training in library research to be used across all three courses, the freshman seminar instructors teaching test-taking skills before the English and Communication midterms, joint writing assignments developed between Communication and English, and joint co-curricular activities. For one of the joint assignments, the Com 114 teacher assigned a novel that students did a speech on and subsequently wrote about in the basic writing class. For a co-curricular activity, several of the communities engaged in a diversity activity which divided the students into teams. The objective of the game was to gather as many financial resources as possible in a mock city. However, the groups were unaware that they had received disproportionate resources, so that only certain groups could win the game. Students later discussed the simulation in the communication class and wrote about it in the composition class and the freshman seminar.

Several of the faculty for the second year of the pilot had taught in LCs the previous fall. Faculty received stipends for teaching in the LCs in both 2001 and 2002. In the second year of the pilot project, faculty were asked to compile teaching portfolios on their LC classes to help assess the program. Another method of assessment used was observation of classes and instructor meetings, for which I was solely responsible.

Our first pilot learning community project showed outstanding results, especially for the basic writing course. In particular, the D-F and Withdrawal rates for the basic writing courses in the learning communities were lower than expected as can be seen in Table 3:



**Table 3: % D-F-W Rates for BW courses  
in Pilot Learning Communities 2001**

BW in 2001 LC Sections	All Sections of BW 1995-2000
18.6%	29 - 45%

In addition, analysis of the fall 2001 sections shows a positive relationship between the learning communities and student success defined as greater numbers of students receiving a C or better in the course and fewer students receiving Ds, Fs, and Ws. Chi-Square analysis of the total grade distribution of the basic writing courses in the learning communities showed the average number of students receiving a C or better was higher in the LC than in the non-LC populations. There were also higher course GPAs in the LCs, and students within the LCs received higher grades in their LC than in their non-LC classes, which may indicate that students are participating more in the learning process in LC classes. The quantitative evidence seems to suggest that the basic writing course functioned better in an LC than outside; however, the population sizes are too small to determine statistical significance.

### **A Close Look at One Class in the Community**

All of this evidence as well as my own observations in the classrooms piqued my interest and led me to conduct an in-depth study of one basic writing course within a learning community in fall 2002. I was guided by two major research questions: What positive outcomes are evident in this basic writing course within the learning community? And, are there aspects of the basic writing course itself that appear to contribute in a positive way to the other courses in the community?

I selected one basic writing course from the five sections designated as part of the learning community project and observed the class for two weeks at the beginning of the semester, two weeks mid-semester, and two weeks at the end of the semester for a total of eighteen observation periods.

The faculty member teaching this course (I will call him Ed) is a tenured instructor. I selected him because he had prior experience teaching in the fall 2001 learning community project and is a thirteen-year veteran of teaching writing at IPFW. He is committed to active learning, student engagement, and diversity.

During the course of my study, I watched students in this class move from a low interest in class activities to a high level of interest and high level of engagement. Early in the semester, students came into class and took their seats saying very little to each other or to Ed. They participated very little and only when prompted. By the end of the semester, students moved into classroom activities with little or no prompting from the instructor. They started coming to class early and staying late (which was common among the learning communities as reported by faculty). In fact, on a number of occasions, the instructor had to literally throw the students out to make room for the next class, which did not come until an hour later. Students also made a point of speaking to everyone in class at the beginning of each session.

Students also became interested in their own and their classmates' learning processes. This was evident in a number of ways. First, if a student was absent (which was rare), every other student knew why and reported the reason to the instructor, or, if they did not know why the student was absent, I would see them on their cell phones tracking down the student to either get him or her to class or to find out the reason for the absence. Students also regularly checked on their peers' progress on assignments. As one student mentioned to me, "If I don't get my work done, I feel as if I have failed all my classmates." In addition, I could see their interest in each other's welfare in the peer review of student writing as they stuck with the reviews even if it meant meeting after class until they were sure their classmates could move on with their drafts. They also engaged in other class-type activities with their classmates outside the classroom: additional peer reviews, study groups, consultations with people outside the class about their own and their classmates' writing. Not only did I hear students talk about these activities, but I also spotted them together in the library and other common study areas on campus.

As the students gained a deeper understanding of the writing process and the course assignments and goals, they became more and more independent as learners and had less need for an "instructor-centered" approach. This shift was reflected in the instructor's teaching as well. At the beginning of the semester, Ed was teaching in what George Hillocks describes as the

presentational (teacher-centered) mode. As the semester progressed, he moved quickly to the environmental mode, with teacher as co-learner with expertise, and then on to the individual mode (Hillocks 247). In this mode, there is a one-to-one level of interaction, like a tutorial. Ed was able to do this because, as he said, “everyone took charge of his or her own paper.” He was able to move about the room, working with individuals on questions related to their writing. “I love that type of interaction,” he said in our final interview.

Throughout my interviews with him, the instructor commented on how this class was different from typical W130 classes. He attributed the difference to the learning community and the relationships that the students built with each other and with their instructors. In one of the interviews, Ed commented:

The fact that they got to know each other was really important. At the beginning of the class, that contributed to the high school atmosphere and behavior, but in the end, it was what led to them having the feeling that “we’re in this together.” The learning community seemed to facilitate the transition from high school to college.

Many instructors in learning communities across the country have commented on the “high school” effect that Ed mentions. In fact, this behavior has been called “hyperbonding” and can cause an LC to deteriorate. However, Ed used effective strategies to prevent the hyperbonding from deteriorating into an unproductive environment. He was very clear about his expectations regarding college-level work and college behavior, discussing and modeling these expectations for his students in class.

Ed analyzed what seemed to be going on in this particular class. The following comments are taken from several different interview sessions:

Social construction of knowledge is possible because of the comfort these students feel with each other. . . . There is commitment to learning. It is important for them to help each other in their groups and to get help. . . . Writing involves a number of higher order thinking skills and examines your own ideas, feelings, and perceptions. I think what makes the communities work is that students have the opportunity to do that [examine ideas]. Other courses, even Communication [one of the other LC courses], don’t have that element; the writing course is central to the learning community.

Clearly, Ed feels strongly about the significance of the writing course as part of the learning community. The engagement that is involved in a writing course promotes the principles of LCs and can lead to significant change among students. A lot went into the process that generated this transformation; it did not happen by chance as is evidenced by the same occurrence in both the fall 2001 and fall 2002 LC projects.

Additional evidence of the effectiveness of this course came from the students themselves through their reflective writing. The content of three reflective pieces I collected indicated that students developed a greater understanding of their writing processes as they focused on concerns such as audience analysis, development, organization, and more. Here are two excerpts from the students' writing:

I really enjoyed writing my paper on the television show "Friends." It was a little hard because at one point in time I didn't know what to write about. That was a big problem for me. I hate when I get writer's block. The way I fixed it was by sitting down and writing everything I know.

I thought that evaluating the movie would be a piece of cake and that it wouldn't take forever to type up the paper and have it all done and finished by the due date, but I was wrong about that. I found out that I needed to watch the movie over and over to first watch for myself, then watch it again to take note about the way the characters are portrayed, then have to watch it again to talk about the special effects that they had done to make the movie better.

These writers are getting in touch with their writing process, which is an important step for basic writers. They are developing a set of strategies that they can draw upon for future writing.

My question about what aspects of the basic writing course contribute in a positive way to the other courses in the community was perhaps the most compelling question for me in this research. To answer this question, I relied on classroom observations and teacher interviews. My classroom observations allowed me to form a picture of the eighteen students in this course as well as a picture of Ed and his pedagogical strategies. By observing Ed's interactions with fellow teachers within his learning community, I was able to get a snapshot of them as well. Because I also observed each of the other fourteen classes involved in the learning community project once, I

did gain some insight into the overall community project. Once again, I will refer to some of the comments made by Ed when considering what elements of this class made it function better as part of a learning community than it would have alone.

It is important to review the pedagogical strategies (collaborative activities of various kinds, modeling, multiple drafts of each assignment, peer reviews, and portfolios) used by the instructor that allowed this environment to develop (an environment that was enhanced by the “community effect” as he noted several times). Much of the class time that I observed was devoted to collaborative activities. In the words of Kenneth Bruffee, “collaborative learning demonstrably helps students learn better—more thoroughly, more deeply, more efficiently—than learning alone” (xii). My observations found the students engaged in almost constant collaborative work. Besides peer reviews, other types of collaborative activities were mock peer review sessions at the beginning of the semester in order to learn that process as well as mock evaluations, arguments, and so on. Thus, for each type of paper the students were to write, Ed allowed them to work out a model for the assignment collaboratively, with the help of activities in their textbook. Besides these modeling activities, Ed also had students do brainstorming activities. Some of these were collaborative as with the topic searches for the evaluative and argumentative papers, but others were individual as with the “I” search for the argumentative assignment—an exploratory model in which students start by writing what they already know about their topics, move on to what they want to discover, search for and document sources, and finally synthesize the information in a researched paper. All the work I saw was collaborative except the “I” search, some journal writing in class, and a work day, where the students worked individually on their papers at their computers. However, even on that work day, most of the students were engaged in informal critiquing, asking questions of the instructor and fellow students and asking for their papers to be read by others.

Ed asked the students to do three peer review sessions for each of the four papers that they completed. Although early in the semester these reviews seemed to focus mainly on surface-level problems, as the semester progressed, the depth of the reviews increased. By the middle of the semester, students were focusing on issues such as audience, organization, development, cohesiveness, and style.

Ed mentioned a number of times that these students did not turn into scholarly writers, but they did learn and participate in the writing process and become more focused on learning. All but one passed the course and a

number of them made significant progress. Two students received As in the course. Ed made the following comments about these two young women, whom he had originally considered weak writers:

These two just really got it. They figured out early on what it would take to get an A, and they went for it. They understood the writing process and used it to their advantage. They asked a lot of questions, participated completely in the peer review process, and really revised.

Another practice Ed used was reflective writing. The students had to complete a large number of writings for their journals, many of which were reflective pieces. The students reflected on significant aspects of their papers, much like what they concentrated on in their peer reviews. The evidence provided through observations, student reflective writing, and teacher interviews indicates that these students did understand and utilize the writing process and did develop their own writing strategies.

Other data support the effectiveness of the basic writing class within a learning community. First, as with the 2001 pilot, the rates of D, F, and W grades for 2002 were lower in the LC sections of W130 than in the non-LC sections and lower than the overall rate for 1995-2000 as seen below:

**Table 4: % D-F-W Rates for BW courses in Pilot Learning Communities 2002**

2002 LC Sections of W130	2002 Non-LC Sections of W130	All W130 Sections 1995-2000
25%	31%	29 - 45%

In addition, student absenteeism was very low. The instructor had kept his attendance records for all of his thirteen years at IPFW. With one exception, the best attendance rates over time were from the two years of the learning community classes. In a Chi-Square analysis, the difference was significant. Although I only analyzed Ed's sections of English W130, all of the LC instructors reported better attendance rates in their LC classes than

in any of their current or previous stand-alone classes. Faculty reported nearly 100 percent attendance rates. In fact, one instructor commented that attendance like this is “unheard of” in developmental classes at IPFW.

Quantitative data on the pass rates of Ed’s students over time suggests that the learning community sections of the basic writing course are more successful. The highest numbers of students successfully completing the class (passing with a C or better) were obtained in the two semesters that the instructor taught the LC sections of W130.

In addition, the retention rate after one year of students from the observed course is remarkably positive. The observed W130 course had 82 percent of the students enrolled in the following year versus the overall retention rate at IPFW of 65 percent. In addition, the GPAs of these students were strong; the majority were above the 3.0 level. This confirms Kuh and Zhao’s finding that indicates that although LCs attract lower ability students, those students have comparable GPAs to their higher ability peers at the end of the first year.

Finally, course portfolios compiled by the other LC instructors contained positive evidence. These instructors indicated that they saw students being transformed, learning in a different way. In particular, interview excerpts concerning the high quality of the joint project (a paper in W130 and a speech in 114 on the same topics) between a W130 and a COM 114 class indicated that these instructors felt the students had really grasped the learning objectives of this project. The basic writing instructor said:

In the end I would like to say that the joint assignment was the most successful one during the semester, and I would highly recommend similar assignments to be used in the future Freshman Community courses.

This positive response was echoed by the speech instructor:

Students agreed that this was their favorite assignment. Maria and I both agree the final projects were awesome. Personally, I derived more pleasure from this joint assignment than if I had worked on it alone. It was a win/win situation for the students, Maria, and myself. Our students rose to the occasion in their critical thinking and their final grades reflected their commitment to the class and the assignments.

The content of the course, the pedagogical strategies, the modes of instruction, the course goals and learning outcomes all led to a successful semester in the writing lives of these basic writing students. But did these elements function better in a community than if the class had been offered alone? Is there evidence that the elements of the BW course make it a pivotal element of learning communities? Several pieces of evidence suggest an important relationship between the two. First of all, the quantitative evidence indicates that the basic writing (W130) courses within communities were more successful than W130s overall with regard to attendance and success (lower D-F-W rates, which in turn may lead to better retention of students). The qualitative data—Ed’s comments as well as those made by other faculty members teaching in an LC—suggest that all elements of W130 were enhanced by being in the learning community. Ed pointed out on a number of occasions how atypical this particular class was. The following comments gleaned from a number of interview sessions illustrate this:

Attendance is good, better than other W130s. . . . Their papers are coming in on time, much better than typical W130s. All their drafts have been on time except one student who came to one peer review without a draft. Also their participation is excellent. Everyone participates. . . . Students in my honors composition section don’t participate as much, even in small group activities. . . . Everyone [in W130] has completed both papers. Also, they are all still engaged. This is significantly different. . . . The overall quality of peer review is better than typical W130s. . . . I got completed portfolios from everyone. In a regular W130, about one-third will turn in partial or essentially non-portfolios—nothing revised. In this class, everyone turned in a fully revised portfolio. . . . Never saw a W130 where they just got to work. . . . Everyone took charge of his or her own paper.

Since this was Ed’s second year of teaching W130 in a community and his thirteenth year of teaching basic writing at IPFW, I believe his judgment to be sound. In addition, based on my own experience teaching W130 for over fourteen years and observing the learning communities for two years, I believe that the W130 course functions better within a community than alone. Ed, a skilled teacher who is committed to helping students succeed, twice saw his LC basic writing courses achieve very different results than any of his basic writing courses that were not part of a community. Further research with skilled, committed, and supportive teachers is needed, however, to confirm whether the “LC effect” is constant.



What aspects of the basic writing course contribute in a positive way to the rest of the community? All the collaborative activities of the W130 course serve to bond the students further, making their relationships solid for interactions in other classes. In addition, Ed has fostered the students' investment and ownership of their own learning. He clearly values what they do and provides an environment that fosters their transformation into independent learners.

Ed explains that writing "involves a number of higher order thinking skills" and encourages writers to examine their own "ideas, feelings, and perceptions." Students who acquire these processes and skills benefit in other classes as well. My own observations showed the students moving from shallow peer reviews that required only lower level thinking skills to much more in-depth analyses of each others' works. Furthermore, through observations, I saw the students move from more social to more class-related interactions, which points to the students' movement towards a more mature approach to their education.

A final point that came out during the wind-up session for the LC instructors for the 2002 Learning Community project ( a two-hour session held in January 2003) is that instructors noted a greater connection to the university on the part of the LC students. These students were more actively involved with student organizations, academic support opportunities, and student on-campus jobs than students that the same instructors had in non-LC classes. Since research shows that connections to campus are key in retention efforts, this is an important outcome of the communities.

### **Implications of the Study**

What does all this mean? The evidence that I compiled in this study shows on many levels—both cognitive and affective—the positive outcomes of placing a basic writing course within a learning community. Improved attendance, increased participation, improved completion of assigned work, and lower D-F-W rates are all positive outcomes that make the placement of the basic writing course within a Learning Community attractive. The in-depth picture of one section of this course demonstrates the potential of offering it within a learning community. All of the strategies used in this course are typical of those used in other writing courses; however, the bonding among students that took place in the community seemed to enhance the effect of these strategies, leading to positive outcomes.

This research also indicates much about how students learn. The quantitative evidence showed more students receiving grades of C or higher

not only in the basic writing class but in the other classes of the learning community as well. These improved pass rates appeared after the instructors of these courses adopted the pedagogical strategies of the basic writing course, which essentially embrace the sociocultural model of teaching and learning described by Baker, Wilhelm, and Dube. This tells us much about the power of those strategies and that model and the impact of their use on student learning. The outcome of the pilot project has had a significant impact on the planning process for IPFW's current learning communities project, in particular for the training of all LC instructors.

Although I am pleased with the outcomes of this research, I am also aware of the flaws and of the need for additional research. I feel confident that the impact of the basic writing class on the Learning Community (and vice versa) was positive; therefore, we have included it in our current LC project, which I oversee. The shape of my future research will be guided by my hypothesis that placing basic writing courses in the context of a Learning Community enhances the already solid BW pedagogical strategies, with the result that students achieve higher levels of engagement and greater success. The final test, of course, will be to continue examining enrollment data to see how many of these students remain at the university over time and complete their degrees. The statistics on this group of BW students, 82 percent retention after one year, are impressive. We hope to broaden this success for a greater number of students.

My study suggests that placing basic writing courses within learning communities may be a possible response to some of the criticisms leveled against BW courses. My observations also strongly suggest that we need to pay special attention to the kinds of training that LC instructors receive. A need for professional development is clearly evident. First, LC instructors need training in developing goals and learning outcomes for their classes. In the case of basic writing, where the goals and outcomes may be outlined by the department as is the case at IPFW, instructors need to be trained to use strategies that will help their students achieve the expected goals and outcomes. For example, LC instructors need to be able to use active learning strategies and develop effective collaborative activities. In addition, faculty need to be trained in how to effectively integrate the curriculum of the connected courses. Helping instructors to master classroom assessment techniques to determine the effectiveness of these strategies would also be a productive use of training time. Further, student development theories need to be shared with learning community faculty. Since the "affective" domain is such a prominent part of the learning community as evidenced

by the high degree of bonding among students, LC teachers need to understand how the affective aspects may manifest themselves in the classroom. In particular, they need to know how to harness the “community effect” as Ed did in order to have a positive outcome.

Positioning basic writing courses within learning communities may lead not only to positive outcomes like greater student success but also relief of some of the tensions surrounding remediation at the university level. By increasing students’ opportunities to succeed, universities can spotlight these successes rather than being defined by failures, allowing faculty and students alike to focus their attention on learning.

### Note

1. The Futures Project was established through the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University in 1999 to investigate emerging trends in higher education.

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# In the Service of Writing and Race

Angelique Davi

*ABSTRACT: Service learning has been recognized as an effective pedagogical tool in the writing classroom. It has also served to help students develop an awareness of diversity and multicultural issues. In this article, I examine the benefits of service learning in a basic writing course designed for students of color attending a disproportionately white institution. Students in this course are accepted into the university through the Contractual Admissions Program (CAP), a program designed for students whose academic profile might otherwise impede their access to higher education. Through a close examination of student journal reflections and classroom exchanges, I argue that incorporating service learning in the curriculum helps students of color develop their reading and writing skills, recognize the*

*KEYWORDS: writing, reading, service learning, race, reflection*

For the past five years, I have taught basic writing to students who enter Bentley, a four-year business college, through the Contractual Admissions Program (CAP), a program designed for students whose academic profile might otherwise impede their access to higher education. The majority of students who enter Bentley through CAP are students of color from predominantly underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. I set out with the same goals in CAP sections as I would in any section of writing: I want students to strengthen their writing skills by improving their reading skills and their critical thinking skills, and I hope that by developing these skills, students will develop self-confidence as both writers and members of an intellectual community. However, the material conditions of CAP students' lives may impede their progress toward achieving these goals. I have found that incorporating service learning, which integrates academic study with community service, into the curriculum has helped CAP students develop their reading and writing skills, recognize the contributions they make to the community and college, and understand how looking critically at issues of race, class, and gender can play a significant role in their intellectual growth. This article explains the benefits of incorporating service learning into a composition course and describes how I have integrated a service-learning component into the CAP writing course.

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## Service Learning and the Writing Classroom

According to a number of studies, service learning has numerous and varied benefits. Service learning can provide students with a deeper understanding of course content (Bringle and Hatcher); help develop a sense of self-efficacy (Lee); enhance a student's understanding of the relationships among readings, course content, and site experiences (Dunlap *Reaching Out*); and establish in students a sense of civic responsibility (Eyler and Giles). Service learning can be effective in helping students develop a "deeper understanding" of an abstract concept such as critical thinking (Dunlap "Methods" 208). Indeed, service learning can help students both understand the concept and engage in the practice of critical thinking. According to Thomas Deans, a study done by Janet Eyler, Dwight E. Giles, Jr., and John Braxton suggests that students participating in service learning develop an ability to "*see problems as systemic*, and the ability to *see things from multiple perspectives*" (3 emphasis in original).

Such goals both complement and enhance the learning objectives in a composition course. Numerous publications have promoted service learning in composition studies. The American Association for Higher Education Series *Service-Learning in the Disciplines* dedicated an entire issue to Composition Studies (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters). *College Composition and Communication* has published a number of essays on service learning in the composition classroom (Himley; Welch; Green; Herzberg). Several expository writing anthologies focus on community service, providing writing exercises and readings that are designed to foster a sense of civic engagement (Ross and Thomas; Berndt and Muse). Deans outlines three types of service learning writing often assigned in the composition classroom: writing *about* the community, writing *with* the community, and writing *for* the community. Deans writes that the "pedagogical values now universally lauded in composition—active learning, student-centered learning, cooperative learning, life-long learning, cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, authentic evaluation—are built into the very blood and bone of most community-based academic projects" (2). Because they are writing from lived experience, students often find their writing more meaningful (Bacon).

Despite its reported benefits, service learning is not without its pitfalls. Recent successful diversity initiatives on college campuses nationwide notwithstanding, colleges and universities remain disproportionately white. Thus, service-learning programs are often populated by white students who

are asked to go into poor urban areas to work with diverse communities, and there is a tendency for these students to view community service as an opportunity for self-fulfillment. Many middle-class white students walk away from their service-learning experience perceiving it as a kind of “giving back” to society; as a result, they feel good about it *and themselves*. Consequently, service learning has been viewed by some critics as “a dressed-up version of paternalistic charity or noblesse oblige that will inevitably reproduce the injustices it purports to address” (Deans 7).

Reflecting on the gap that exists between disproportionately white institutions of higher learning and the communities they serve through service-learning programs, Ann Green argues that service learning can work more effectively toward social change if faculty members encourage students and themselves to tell “more explicit stories about race and class” (277). Such an approach, she argues, leads to “more complex theorizing about the relationship between those who serve and those who are served” (277). Green advocates encouraging students to tell the “difficult stories” rather than the more familiar ones of how service learning “feels good,” which requires a willingness to “break our silences around race, class, and service” (277).

Another central criticism of service learning focuses on the failure of many programs to engage students in a critical examination of the systemic inequalities that pervade our culture. In “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” Bruce Herzberg explains how students typically fall short of structural analysis:

Why is homelessness a problem? Because, they answer, so many people are homeless. The economy is bad and these individuals lost their jobs. Why are so many people undereducated or illiterate? Because they didn’t study in school, just like so-and-so in my fifth-grade class and he dropped out. (309)

Herzberg writes: “If our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation” (309). Or put another way, as Robert Crooks argues, community service fails by working as “a kind of voluntary band-aiding of social problems that not only ignores the causes of problems but lets off the hook those responsible for the problems” (qtd. in Herzberg 309).

Thus, some of the goals of service learning—getting students to see from multiple perspectives and to become increasingly aware of cultural and

class boundaries—might not come to fruition if we fail to encourage students to think critically about their *own* identities. As Green sees it, breaking this silence around race, class, and service depends on white teachers interrogating and “unpacking white privilege” (277); for teachers who are middle class, it means “acknowledging differences of class, caste, and culture and not assuming that those who are working class or poor want middle class culture or aspire to middle class materialism” (277).

I am interested in discovering ways to help white students develop what Herzberg calls “a social imagination” (67). However, in this article, I want to shift the focus to the service-learning classroom populated by students of color who are required to go into spaces that are predominantly white. Students of color, who have experienced racism on a day-to-day basis (see, for example, chapter 3 of Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes’ *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*, entitled “Seeking a Good Education”), benefit from developing critical thinking skills that enable them to analyze race ideology<sup>1</sup> from both a personal and institutional perspective. Many students of color come to colleges and universities having been inappropriately tracked or labeled “remedial” in high school programs. As a result, their perception of their own writing skills and their confidence in those skills—or lack thereof—is influenced by these external assessments. David L. Wallace and Annissa Bell’s research reveals that students often internalize these attitudes about themselves as learners and thinkers. In a service-learning composition course (though it need not be limited to composition courses only), students of color may find themselves with opportunities to think critically about their lived experiences both inside and outside the classroom, systemic oppression, and dominant ideologies. For example, students of color may find themselves recognizing more subtle forms of racism embedded in the educational system that may have contributed to their sense of their academic performance. As a result of this reflection, some students begin to understand the complexity of racism and its influence on their assessment of themselves as poor writers.

I argue that this particular dynamic disrupts the “do-gooder” mentality of students who participate in service-learning courses. Some students of color in my course, who come from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds and are at an educational disadvantage, have described themselves as feeling marginalized in the classroom. Many begin to see themselves as necessary members of both an academic and a social community after working in service learning. By embedding service learning in a basic writing composition course, students have an opportunity to reflect on their service-



learning experiences through the practice of writing. Through a variety of written reflections, complemented by class discussion, these students begin to develop both their reading and writing skills, and they develop an ability to theorize issues of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, service-learning programs that require students to teach give them a chance to understand classroom dynamics from a different vantage point. Most importantly, students begin to recognize the role that education played in establishing or reinforcing some of their own and others' attitudes about them as learners and thinkers, about their race, and about their culture.

### **Bentley's Contractual Admissions Program (CAP)**

Expository writing is a required two-semester program at Bentley. CAP writing instruction is offered through a lab component, which doubles the normal contact hours from two and a half hours to five hours each week. CAP students take the first semester writing course—EXP 101L—during a six-week intensive summer program, which they must complete successfully prior to matriculating in the fall. Thus, CAP students arrive at Bentley when very few students are in the residence halls or on campus. During the six-week program, those students of color accepted into the program are in the majority in terms of race since each summer only one or two white students are accepted into Bentley through CAP. All students entering the program share similar academic profiles, as well. Academic success has remained largely elusive to CAP students prior to their arrival on campus. The situation changes radically during the fall semester, when the remaining students return to campus. For example, sixty-nine percent of full-time undergraduates enrolled for the fall 2005 freshman class identified as white or non-Hispanic; two percent identified as black, four percent as Hispanic, eight percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, two percent as multiracial, five percent as nonresident, ten percent as race/ethnicity unknown. The median SAT score for all Bentley students was 1220. In September, CAP students suddenly find themselves in the minority in terms of race, class, and ethnicity, and at the bottom of the academic ranks.

I have taught the CAP summer composition course, EXP 101L, as well as the CAP fall semester course, EXP 201L, for five years, and thus I have had much experience watching these students transition from the intensive summer program to the traditional academic year, and my course objectives have evolved accordingly. While I continue to focus on reading comprehension, writing skills, and critical analysis, I see EXP 201L as an opportunity

for inviting CAP students into the intellectual conversation, helping them establish and recognize their place in the academic community, and making race, class, and gender ideology an explicit part of the course so that students can recognize these ideologies at work in their lives both inside and outside the classroom (Green).

When they enter the summer composition course, many CAP students think of themselves as poor writers. Few of them mention strengths when asked on the first day of class to describe their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Most of them describe themselves as needing significant help with their writing abilities. Note, for example, the way John,<sup>2</sup> a student originally from the Dominican Republic, answers the question: "Didn't learn much from my high school on writing. Strengths—you'd have to point them out to me because I don't think I have any. Weaknesses—a lot, so if you could help me improve my writing, I'll be more than thankful." He closes by describing himself as "very self-conscious." Others list phrases such as "bad at grammar," "not good with punctuation," and "bad at organizing ideas." Kim, who was born in Vietnam and came to the United States when she was a child, says she needs help with her English both in the "way she speaks and the way she writes." Many students have difficulty seeing themselves as good students, and on those first days of the summer semester, very few are ready to embrace themselves as members of an intellectual community.

While struggling with their place in the classroom and larger college community, most of these students are also dealing with demands related to coming from working-class families. The summer program is designed so that students can return home on Fridays in order to work in part-time jobs. In one recent case, a successful student had to drop out of the program one week before its completion in order to return to her full-time job, which provided her family with its main source of income. Furthermore, many of these students are being raised by single parents or extended family guardians—aunts, cousins, and in one case, siblings. Thus, many students are also juggling the demands of family duties like babysitting or caretaking.

In any course, but especially in a basic writing course, I want students to learn how to read, how to write, but most importantly, how to think critically. CAP students' writing abilities are affected by their weak reading comprehension skills. When students are asked to summarize a short reading assignment, their required annotations reveal the difficulty they have in identifying the main point of a passage or in understanding the structure of an author's argument. Much of the summer semester focuses on improving students' ability to tease out the meaning of a passage before asking them

to analyze those ideas.

In EXP 101L, the summer composition course, I use popular culture as a theme and semiotics as a vehicle for helping students develop both reading skills and critical thinking skills and have had success using Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon's *Signs of Life* toward this end. Given their familiarity with popular culture, students find themselves both comfortable with and knowledgeable about the topics and images we analyze. Students who participate in my summer course analyze the cultural values embedded in everything from sneaker ads and cereal boxes to newspaper op-ed pieces and scholarly essays. In doing so, I hope students become more adept at seeing and recognizing ideologies at work in their lives.

In the fall EXP 201L section, which includes the service-learning component, I ask these same students to apply this critical lens to ideologies of race, class, and gender inside and outside the classroom. In the past I had always relied on anthologies and students' personal accounts to generate these discussions. However, I have recently discovered that integrating a service-learning component into the course can be an even more powerful way to address these issues.

### **One Approach to Service Learning**

In the fall of 2004, I received a Service-Learning Curriculum Development Grant offered through Bentley's Service-Learning Center (BSLC). Grant recipients work with the BSLC academic coordinator to find a service-learning program that complements the goals of the course. BSLC staff members help to coordinate the program and take care of student placements. An onsite student project manager oversees weekly activities. The particular service-learning program I use, "2+2=5: The Power of Teamwork," which was created by a Bentley undergraduate, introduces elementary school students to the importance of teamwork in helping them develop their interpersonal skills.

Weekly exercises in the "2+2=5" program focus on cooperation, leadership, communication, trust, and conflict resolution.<sup>3</sup> Student facilitators engage the elementary school students in team-building activities. For example, in "the flying egg," students must work in small teams to design a protective device for an egg that will be dropped from a height of five feet. Each group is given the same materials with which to work. Student facilitators serve a number of roles during each activity. At the start of each class, they review the previous week's lesson and introduce the new topic.

During the activity, the facilitators, who have been assigned to one small group for the duration of the semester, work with the elementary students to help them solve the task. Finally, after each activity, student facilitators bring the class together in a large group and lead a reflection discussion.

After leading the elementary school students through each week's activities, CAP students post weekly reflections in an online journal as part of their coursework. The first time I taught the course, students posted comments on Blackboard, an online course management system. The second time I taught the course, students kept a blog. While the two electronic formats are somewhat similar, the Blackboard site gives only the instructor the ability to create discussion threads where students can post comments on a particular theme. On the course blog, students have the ability to create these threads in a more unstructured format. Posting journal reflections in this public forum promotes student-centered learning as students use the space to exchange ideas among themselves. For example, Nanda writes, "I posted a blog about how my group always finished the activity early and I did not know what to do with the remaining time. I had many people respond to my problem and give me ideas for a solution." A portion of each EXP 201L class meeting is set aside for discussions of students' on-site experiences, journal postings, and any related concerns. Students also periodically produce in-class freewrites that are used to generate class discussions or ideas for longer, more formal writing assignments.

Because of the nature of the service that students are asked to perform—teaching and facilitating discussion among elementary school children—both times I taught this course I focused on the theme of education in the United States. The literature on service learning suggests that best practices for effective integration of service learning into any course include "service that is connected to the curriculum" (Tannenbaum and Berrett 198). CAP students in EXP 201L reflect on their past experiences in elementary school and high school. They examine the service-learning elementary classroom space, and they examine their experiences on the Bentley campus.

Throughout the semester, students read a number of texts to help them begin to think about education in the context of race, class, and gender. Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, which focuses on the subject of education from the perspective of marginalized students, serves as the central text of the course. Many CAP students relate to the stories of the students Rose describes. The text also helps them begin to recognize "the abilities hidden by class and cultural barriers" (Rose xi). While CAP students retell their own stories with relative ease, I use readings on race ideology to help them begin

to theorize the complexity of their stories in the context of race, class, and gender. Again, Stuart Hall's piece "The Whites of Their Eyes" is quite useful in this context as well as excerpts from the video recording *Blue Eyed* based on Jane Elliott's experiment in discrimination with students in her third-grade class in Riceville, Iowa, in the late 1960s. I also use Margaret Metzger's piece "Playing School or Telling the Truth?" which helps students begin to recognize the role they play in the process of making meaning of a text and the production of knowledge in the classroom.

I also find it important for students to feel comfortable examining the cultural values operating *within* our composition classroom. Fan Shen's piece entitled "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as Key to Learning English Composition" has been quite useful toward this end.

As part of the written requirements of the course, students spend much of the semester working on a research essay that must address some aspect of education in the United States. While the final draft of the essay is due on the last day of classes, students begin work on the project by the second week of the semester. A first draft of the essay is usually due within the first four weeks. It is important to note that students are not required to write about their service-learning experience in these final essays. Don Kraemer has raised questions about the types of writing we assign in service-learning basic writing courses. He argues "writing-for projects do not serve our students well because rather than inquire into the complexity of making leadership collaborative, they advance the process of making student servitude seem inevitable" (93). In my class, the service-learning component provides another way of helping students begin to examine the cultural values embedded in the classroom and to experience the classroom from a new vantage point as teachers. Despite the fact that students are not required to write specifically about their service-learning experiences in their final papers, in most cases, the service-learning experiences and our discussions of race, class, and gender inform students' choices of topics and their analysis.

The majority of the CAP students spend time at an elementary school, which serves predominantly white students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. The second time I taught the course, three students chose to work at a local housing project whose children come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. For two of those students, the choice to participate in the service-learning program at the housing project stemmed from scheduling conflicts. One student, however, after visiting both sites, found himself energized by the children at the housing project and liberated by the more informal structure

of the program. While students were teaching the same curriculum at both sites, the CAP students teaching at the housing project did not face the same academic demands imposed on those students working in the elementary classroom.

As a result of this open structure, the students participating in service learning at the housing project had more autonomy to make decisions at the site. Albert describes the satisfaction he felt in getting the children at the housing project to focus their energy on the “2+2=5” activities and in helping them develop team-building skills. He writes, “These students at first were a case. They did not want to listen. At first [I] had to force them to want to participate in the activity.” But the real satisfaction came in his ability to teach others:

I was the coach for my team. . . . I pretty much took the role to lead them to victory without actually playing. This was very memorable because I really connected with the students. Telling them that they were very good, that is how you do it, build up there confidence and they just began to do a better job. The students found this very encouraging.

Albert’s approach in motivating the students, “telling them they were very good” (words many CAP students report rarely hearing in their own educational experiences), was a point CAP students often addressed in class discussions. These students drew from their own high school experiences—both positive and negative—to help them determine the best approach in teaching the younger children at each site.

## **Ways of Seeing**

CAP students have spent their lives seeing from a variety of perspectives related to their gender, race, and socioeconomic status. As they begin college, they are often aware or just on the verge of recognizing a number of value systems operating in their lives. Most of their lives they have been synthesizing a variety of ideological influences as a matter of survival. For example, Latina students often describe having to navigate the tension between traditional cultural views of gender handed down to them by parents and older generations, and dominant U.S. cultural notions imposed by their peers and evident in mainstream media. As gendered subjects themselves, they describe having to negotiate constantly the border between the two

competing ideologies. While CAP students may not have the language to describe these tensions as “competing ideological forces,” they are eager to start articulating the differences.

These students recognize complex dynamics at work in the different classroom settings arising from issues like race and class. For them, this opportunity to reflect on issues such as racism can be an empowering part of a course. While the service CAP students provide focuses on teaching elementary students the components of teamwork, issues of race and racism often implicitly affect the service-learning activity. Because the service learning is embedded in a composition course, students are provided with a structure that allows them to develop the ability to recognize and analyze these issues in a more rigorous way through class discussions and written reflections. And students often return to the composition classroom eager to discuss their experiences as students of color in a variety of settings.

In students’ electronic postings and in class discussions, the topics students choose to address suggest that race matters, but students’ ability to tease out the complexity of the issues comes through reflection. Making the implicit issues of race, class, and gender more explicit is evidenced in an exchange that took place the first semester I incorporated service learning into my course. During one class discussion early in the semester, Mary, a student of color, said she had something “odd” to share with everyone. Mary was quite tentative as she broached the subject. In fact, after raising it, she tried to dismiss it. Other students in the class who seemed to know what Mary was alluding to encouraged her to continue. Together, Mary and those students familiar with her story recounted an incident that occurred during Mary’s first visit to the elementary school, when a fourth-grader pointed to her and said, “You look just like my family’s maid.” During that initial class discussion, Mary could articulate only feeling uncomfortable for being noticed and having attention called to her for this reason. She didn’t use language that suggested she was thinking of this comment in the context of race, class, or gender. All she could say at the time was that the incident reinforced a sense of herself as an outsider in the classroom space.

It took weeks for Mary to sort through the complexity of the brief exchange with the elementary student. As a class, we returned to it on several occasions. Stuart Hall’s piece on inferential racism<sup>4</sup> helped students begin to tease out the complexity of this seemingly innocent statement. In class, students read from their freewriting exercises,<sup>5</sup> which focused on their personal experiences with subtle forms of racism. Through these exercises, students tried to better understand Mary’s feelings of discomfort, as well as

their own, stemming from the elementary student's comment. They came to the conclusion as a group that this incident was racially motivated. As a result of the course readings and class discussions, Mary decided to meet with faculty and administrators at the elementary school. And later Mary reported to the class that faculty and administrators acknowledged the need to incorporate more explicit diversity education into the classroom. What started as a private matter became a public issue. Eventually, Mary's service-learning experience coupled with the critical inquiry she and her classmates engaged in regularly in the composition course around issues of race helped Mary turn a moment in which she felt uncomfortable into an empowering experience.

At this point in the semester, Mary had come to see herself not as an outsider but as a useful member of the community. After a visit to the elementary school, she wrote about being assigned to work with a new group of students. Mary felt somewhat tentative given that she had not had a chance to establish a relationship with these particular students. As she approached the group, a student she hadn't met during any previous visits to the site got excited to have her join the group and called her by name. Mary writes, "It was a student that I did not know by name. I felt like a celebrity. I felt like one of them. I never thought any of the other students would know my name let alone notice me. It was like I was there friend." Mary described feeling excited by the fact that some of the students looked to her as a leader. She became aware that everything she said or did might have an influence on them. For Mary, standing as a role model for others was an unfamiliar but completely invigorating position. Standing in that position in a classroom setting was entirely new to her.

By the end of the semester, Mary had developed a kind of confidence that led to her ability to critique her educational experience, her performance in the elementary school classroom, and our own expository writing classroom. At one point, Mary wrote that the service-learning program "makes the teaching and the learning precious." She felt that the best aspect of the course was that students were allowed to "teach themselves." She describes her approach in handling a situation in which the students lost their focus:

I continued with the activity with them and the group that was not so successful lost all focus and began to play. I wanted to switch back to the instructor persona but I decided to stay as a student. As a student I told them that someone could get hurt if WE [Mary's



emphasis] keep fooling around and then WE won't get to do the next activity. We behaved ourselves and continued the activity.

Mary goes on to comment on the way in which the children were willing to come together to accomplish their task. Where they had previously divided themselves along gender lines, Mary notes their willingness to work together. In the activity Mary describes, the students were asked to participate in a trust fall. In this activity, one student falls backwards into the arms of his or her classmates. The activity comes at the very end of the semester and is used as an assessment of how much the elementary students have gained from "2+2=5":

It was another trust fall but it only involved two people at a time. When we told them to pick a partner who they can trust, I was amazed to see that the girls didn't go with the girls and the guys with the guys. Everyone trusted everyone.

In the context of Mary's experience at the site, it's worth noting her conclusion to the reflection. She writes:

Writing this now just reminded me that at a young age I did trust easier and take more risk than I do now. Maybe that's the cycle of life. However it works, I'm glad that I have a place to go where I can be a kid again.

As a class, we discussed Mary's final meeting and the complexity of her reflection. While she was charged to teach the elementary students the importance of trust in the context of team-building, Mary found herself feeling somewhat tentative and guarded in her earlier experiences at the site. Through her willingness to engage in conversations with her peers in our composition classroom, she was able to move past the traumatic earlier exchange and commit herself to her role as educator. Her ability to move from student to teacher and back to student again offered her at least two vantage points from which she could make sense of her experiences. And writing offered her an opportunity to engage in inquiry that helped her examine the power dynamics in the classroom.

Mary was not the only student to work through her experiences in this manner. In the electronic postings, students reflected on a number of complex issues that each of us as teachers reflect on from day to day. In a

poignant passage, Albert describes the children at the housing project as kids who “have many things going for them but to this point just a few people know this.” Albert, a Hispanic student, spent much of the semester trying to help the children develop a positive image of themselves. He writes that he wants them to exceed “the expectation other people have for them.” Albert’s interests in helping marginalized individuals recognize their strengths carried over into his final writing project. There, he researched the immigrant experience on the Bentley campus. To do so, he interviewed students and service workers—cafeteria staff, custodial workers, and groundskeepers—in order to determine how people were perceived and treated at Bentley. Albert focused much of his analysis on the role of language. He writes, “Currently at the Bentley campus, the word for a person who is from any Spanish-speaking country is ‘Spanish.’ I am Puerto Rican and Colombian. I find it very offensive being called something other than what I am.” Being bilingual, Albert chose to work predominantly with Spanish-speaking immigrants. His writing combines his primary research, his experiences in service learning, and reflections on his own experience in bilingual classrooms. He writes, “I feel my [bilingual] class was not seen or equal to the other classes. The teacher and staff at the school were always thinking it was surprising that one of the ‘bilingual kids’ was doing well in the class. I was that boy that was in the bilingual class.”

Most students were eager to use the service-learning experience as a jumping-off point for returning to their own racialized experiences in elementary school and high school. They wanted to revisit those memories after having found themselves in the role of teacher at the service-learning site. The course allowed them to think critically about both their present and past experiences. Note, for example, Theresa’s comments in a Blackboard posting that focuses on her experiences in the classroom as a child. Here she starts off by describing one of their “2+2=5” activities at the elementary school:

We decided to divide the groups by counting off from 1 to 4. . . . the minute I saw my group I didn’t want to make any judgments because in my elementary career I was judged and I don’t want that to happen to others because of me.

For Theresa, teaching was actually a way to revisit past painful memories. In a freewrite she explains, “This is time for me to heal my wounds by seeing what it is like for a teacher teaching little children.” In her final essay for

the course, Theresa juxtaposed her experiences in elementary school with her analysis of the ideal teacher and classroom space. Much of her analysis depended on her service-learning experience and her ability to place herself in a new position, one which empowered her and offered a new lens for examining her memories and her own identity as a student. Theresa came to Bentley on a probationary status through CAP. She had little confidence in herself as a writer. By the end of the fall semester, she was setting out to write a paper that could serve as an instruction manual for teachers. In her final paper, she describes teachers who misjudged her and who labeled her because of her accent, her race, and her ethnicity. She describes the ways in which she internalized her teacher's comments, only recently deciding to confront the teacher and prove to her that she was nothing like the teacher determined her to be. She writes:

I have tasted all types of sizes and classifications such as "marginal," "normal," and "advanced." From my experiences, I have the ability to build the perfect teacher. As I travel through my memories and unravel what went wrong and what was right, I will create the model educator.

Students often commented on learning that was taking place in multiple directions. Audrey writes:

With the  $2+2=5$  component of our class, we get to see what teaching is all about; this time we get to experience both the teaching and learning experience; we get to learn and we get to teach, and it is wonderful.

What I see as pulling back the curtain and demystifying the teaching process led students to take ownership of their classroom experience and their learning. It led to a greater awareness of issues stemming from race, ethnicity, and identity that may have subtly influenced their experiences. For example, by having to develop their own approach to teaching the weekly lessons, students had to spend time thinking like teachers and analyzing best classroom practices. As a result, students would come to the writing classroom and ask me questions about my approach with them. If, for instance, I asked students to participate in a small-group activity, occasionally they would recognize the similarity between my pedagogy in the college classroom and their approach at the elementary school. This aware-

ness made some students more willing to ask questions and more invested in the learning process itself.

It is important to note that students can be resistant to learning about race and racism. Tatum ("Talking about Race") examines the sources of this resistance in classrooms populated by white students. She writes, "The introduction of these issues of oppression often generates powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair" (1). Based on her analyses of student journals, Tatum points out that students' ability to acknowledge, comprehend, and analyze systems of oppression can be enhanced "when students are given the opportunity to explore race-related material in a classroom where both their affective and intellectual responses are acknowledged" (2).

This resistance about which Tatum ("Talking about Race") theorizes became rather apparent in my classroom. I can recall one fall semester class session, in particular, when the heaviness in the room was suffocating. I assumed students were feeling burdened by assignments and midterm exams. When I questioned them, they recounted a number of racist incidents that had occurred on the Bentley campus. Audrey said she had never had to deal with these things in high school, but now she found herself having to defend her race, having to explain obvious things to people, and having to be a spokesperson for the Hispanic community. In a freewrite, she described feeling depressed and overwhelmed by the experiences. Audrey's assessment of her Bentley experience is quite interesting. On one level, she was probably correct; she may have found herself dealing with more overtly racist comments in this new campus environment. On another level, though, Audrey's frustration may have stemmed from the fact that her service-learning experience and her experience in the course made her see and read these racist incidents more frequently and more clearly. At the beginning of the semester, she really resisted this ability to see. She and Theresa would often argue over whether or not an incident was motivated by racism. Audrey didn't want things to be a matter of race or ethnicity. In the context of white racial identity development, Tatum ("Why Are All the Black Kids") writes, "But it is difficult to stop noticing something once it has been pointed out. The conflict between noticing and not noticing generates internal tension, and there is a great desire to relieve it" (101). Audrey, as a student of color, experienced that same type of tension and desire for relief.

By the end of the semester, though, she found herself recognizing and confronting these incidents. In fact, she and Theresa, who were in the same history class together, would ask CAP students in the composition course to

help them determine if a particular professor's comments were racist. Audrey got to the point where her interest shifted to the ways in which these ideas developed in people—ideas that were of no use in any classroom space. In one posting, she writes:

In the [ \_\_\_\_ ] school, we get to see the way children develop, how they develop stereotypes, how they become the “typical” football players, the cheerleaders, and the “bad” kids. And we get to see how, even in fourth grade, these kids are already adapting to a way of thinking.

For others, evidence of this learning and newfound confidence appeared in their final research essays. For example, Mary first proposed to examine the value of the SATs in assessing a student's ability to succeed in college. However, as the semester progressed and as Mary developed a greater ability to theorize issues of race and gender, the focus of her essay changed. By the middle of the semester, Mary was analyzing cultural values embedded in the test questions and the ways in which the SATs, as designed, might favor white students. In her final essay, she writes, “The SAT has been and still is an unfair . . . test that affects the chances of females, minorities, and low-income students of receiving higher test scores and entering good colleges.” In her essay, she examines the history of the test, the biases of the questions, and the effects of the system on students.

In addition, while her service-learning experiences and fellow students' written reflections helped her and her classmates develop a greater awareness of issues of race, class, and gender, Mary's experience in the service-learning program informed her research on larger educational issues, as well. She writes in the conclusion to her final essay:

From doing the service-learning program, I saw that at a young age, students do not academically perform at their best when they are timed. They panic and cannot focus because they are trying to get as much done as possible, rather than clearly thinking the problems through.

Theresa, as mentioned earlier, wrote a manual for teachers, with a focus on the ways in which stereotyping of any kind leads to internalized attitudes within the students themselves. She describes the effects of being labeled by teachers and writes, “and then there is the label that you give yourself

once you have been labeled by the teacher.” Theresa uses her memories of being mistreated and misidentified to provide her readers (whom she assumes to be teachers) with some guidelines: “As an objective person, one must look from all angles and not make judgments. The education system might appear to be proper and clean. But things are not always what they seem.” While Theresa does not explicitly refer to the skills we try to teach students in composition classrooms, her above comments seem to demonstrate critical thinking.

Finally, Angela, a Hispanic student who struggled much of the semester with her writing, used her final essay as a place to pose the question “Does the skin color of a person determine their success?” She examined the factors contributing to the low number of students of color enrolled in college. Her supporting evidence came from reflections on her high school experience and her participation in CAP. She writes, “My mother and father are working class parents with a low-income salary and like any other parents hope for me to receive my college education so that I won’t end up like them.” For Angela, the relationship between race and class became hard to ignore: “Many minorities cannot afford college tuition and are therefore incapable of attending college even though they may meet all the criteria for acceptance through the admissions process.” Angela’s essay remained somewhat disorganized even in its final draft. However, she went from being reluctant to post her comments in the public electronic forum at the start of the semester to being eager to present her research to the class at the end of the semester. Exhibiting ownership of her ideas and finding the voice to express those ideas seems essential for any student trying to achieve success in a writing course and in college.

### **Reframing One’s Thinking**

Service learning gave CAP students a chance to understand and critique their educational experiences. Alternating between the role of student and the role of teacher or mentor, the students came at the issues raised in class from multiple vantage points. By doing so, students whose sense of themselves *as students* had been shaped, in part, by their elementary and high school experiences, began to recognize their potential to rewrite misleading and often inaccurate assessments of themselves.

Notice, for example, the way in which Albert reflected on his own approach as an instructor working to encourage a student whom he saw as having great potential but little self-confidence. He writes, “Every week I

found myself going to him and asking him how he was doing and not letting him get down.” Albert asked the student why he wasn’t taking credit for exceptional work he had done. According to Albert, “He responded that nobody thinks I can do it.” In his reflection, Albert recalls being labeled and stereotyped in school. He describes advising the elementary student to “listen to all of the positive comments people tell him” and to “turn all of the negative comments [into] motivators.”

In CAP students’ written analyses, they moved from past experiences in high school to present experiences in both the elementary school classroom and their Bentley classrooms. Ultimately, having the freedom and opportunity to critique the education system itself, students developed confidence in themselves as writers and thinkers. For example, Peter, a Hispanic student, in an analysis of Mike Rose’s views on students’ learning processes, combines his experiences in service learning with his reflections on his high school experience. Only after having been in the teacher role himself working with elementary students did he fully understand his AP calculus teacher’s approach. He writes:

He taught us like no other teacher I ever had. He would encourage us to be conceptual learners. He would always want us to understand mathematical concepts as opposed to just knowing how to do things. At first I didn’t understand him, but now I feel like [I] understand the importance of the idea.

And Albert writes:

The Service learning part of this class has been so great because it gives a twist to the meaning of Critical thinking which is what we the students of Expository Writing 201L are supposed to be learning and using outside of the class.

He describes service-learning sites as “places where [he] could use all we were learning in class.” He describes the elementary classroom as a place where students could develop their “ability to communicate” and to “problem solve.”

For students who have been perceived as weak writers and thinkers and, in many cases, have internalized these perceptions, the service-learning component allowed them to occupy a new and empowering position. One student writes that one of the elementary school teachers, after observing

the CAP students work with the children in her class, had learned from the experience: “she is thinking about changing her way of teaching a little bit to somewhat continue what we are doing now. . . . I found that to be remarkably incredible.”

Many students of color come to the college composition classroom having experienced racism and other systems of oppression. Participation in service-learning, combined with opportunities to reflect both in writing and in class discussion, can provide students a means to critique those systems; they move from awareness to critical consciousness. Moreover, many students of color in my service-learning course, in their role as teachers, developed not only a new vantage point for understanding positions of privilege in the education system and the role they have occupied within educational settings, but also a new appreciation of their own untapped potential. However, many students realized that making visible these structures of inequality is only the first step toward dismantling them. Most of the students in my basic writing course will find themselves the only person of color in many of the other courses they take while at Bentley. One of the aims of this service-learning experience is to provide some new techniques through which students can address their feelings of discomfort—as Mary’s experience demonstrates. In the best case scenario, students will feel empowered and able to address overtly the subtle racial dynamics in the classroom. Such empowerment should be the goal not only of service learning but of education in general.

### **Author’s Acknowledgments**

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### **Notes**

1. I rely on Stuart Hall’s often anthologized “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media” for an accessible explanation of the concept of race ideology that students can penetrate.
2. The names of students have been replaced with pseudonyms, and all students have granted permission to use their writing.



3. Scott Morency, the creator of "2+2=5," has created a student handbook that outlines the program's mission and the weekly activities. Copies of the handbook are available through Bentley's Service-Learning Center <<http://ecampus.bentley.edu/dept/bslc/>>.

4. The first semester I taught the course, we abandoned the course anthology only three weeks into the semester because the readings did little to foster our thinking around the issues students were bringing back to class from their service-learning experience. The Hall piece, which is something I often use in expository writing, became much more poignant for the students in the context of Mary's experience.

5. Students are not required to submit their freewrites to me at any point in the semester. Thus, many of the classroom exchanges I describe, which are based on students' in-class writing exercises, are limited to my teaching notes. By not requiring students to submit these writings, I hope they will be able to write more openly and honestly. I ask students to read out loud only those passages they feel comfortable sharing with the class.

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# (Re)membering Basic Writing at a Public Ivy: History for Institutional Redesign

John Paul Tassoni

*ABSTRACT: This essay offers a history of a basic writing course that began at a public ivy campus in the 1970s. Relying on principles of universal design and on insights derived from his school's studio program about ways the institution's selective functions can impact curricular matters, the author describes how the basic writing course was merely retrofitted to an English Department's goals, rather than integrated into its mainstream business. In turn, the author suggests that historical studies such as this can help basic writing teachers excavate and reinvigorate democratic reform efforts often backgrounded in light of a school's elite reputation.*

*KEYWORDS: universal design, history of basic writing, studio, access, public ivy*

*[R]emembering is a way of doing things, not only with words, but with our minds, in remembering or recollecting we are exercising our memory, which is a kind of action.*

*—Paul Ricoeur*

*Someone is watching — and documenting what we are doing. Now! while they're looking for something in our files — let's do something else.*

*—C. Ann Ott, Elizabeth Boquet, C. Mark Hurlbert*

The two short narratives below reflect my memory of basic writing at Miami University. They are part of the same story; for the moment, however, I want them disentangled so that I can key on their respective emphases. This first part summarizes efforts at curricular change that a colleague and I, both English faculty at Miami's regional campus in Middletown, undertook (haphazardly) on behalf of our school's "at-risk" student writers:

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As a genuinely curious junior faculty member in 1995, I asked why the department's College Composition Committee's list of subcommittee assignments included no mention of English 001/002, the basic writing workshops. When committee members—including several former directors of the composition program--expressed surprise over the workshops' existence, I responded (after some coaxing from my Middletown colleague) with a proposal to form a subcommittee to monitor basic writing at the regional campuses. The committee approved the proposal at its next meeting, marking the first time, I since have learned, that basic writing received any mention in the College Composition Committee's minutes, this despite the fact—I have also discovered--the workshops had been listed in the university's catalogue since 1974. I also learned, rather quickly, that English 001/002 had been since the late 1980s staffed and run by our campus's Office of Learning Assistance, not the Department of English.

Nevertheless, authorized by our department colleagues at our highly-selective central campus to butt into the doings of an English workshop taught by another office, my colleague and I engineered a series of not-so-happy meetings with the incumbents, finding ourselves intruders in a place long occupied by others doing what they felt necessary to ensure the academic survival of students identified as "at risk" on our open-access campus. Learning Assistance was enrolling students in 001 and 002 concurrently and approaching the paired workshops as a single, 2-credit basic writing course that students took prior to English 111, the first course in Miami's liberal education plan. From what my colleague and I had seen by way of syllabi and worksheets, we assumed (rightly or wrongly) that English 001/002 focused on grammar instruction and piece-by-piece construction of essays, a type of pedagogy that, we felt, represented writing to students as a series of subskills rather than as a rhetorical act.

Anticipating the support of our department colleagues on the central campus at Oxford, home of a respected graduate program in Composition and Rhetoric, we set out to make some changes in our campus's basic writing curriculum. We wanted to use 001 as a studio, where students enrolled in English 111 would meet once a week in small groups to discuss their class assignments with students from other classes and with studio instructors, who would facilitate

a workshop atmosphere.

Although the incumbent teachers then and since have resisted our characterization of them and their 001/002 course in the regressive terms I use above, my colleague and I saw ourselves, nonetheless, locked in a series of rigid polarizations: process/post-process pedagogies (she and I) vs. current-traditional pedagogies (seemingly, everyone else); the Office of Learning Assistance vs. the Department of English; adjunct (hired through Learning Assistance to teach this “remedial” developmental workshop) vs. full-time faculty (who traditionally had steered clear, and had been expected by the Department and Learning Assistance to steer clear, of the workshops); compositionists (us) vs. the writing specialist (the Director of our Writing Center), even theorists (us) vs. practitioners (them). During one period in the midst of these “dialogues,” my colleague and I each managed to pilot a section of English 111 (which we taught) conjoined with sections of English 001/002 (taught by Learning Assistance staff), but this initial studio was no studio at all: It was a current-traditional class latched onto a process/post-process course different from other English 111 offerings only in that it was reserved for students identified as “at risk.”<sup>1</sup>

Then, serendipitously (in our view, anyway), instructors who had been teaching basic writing designed and received University Curriculum Committee approval for a 3-credit basic writing course, English 007: Fundamentals of Writing, and they vacated 001/002. At this point, my colleague and I “found,” so to speak, 001 “on the books” and began teaching it in the manner we thought best. In 1998, then, English 001, a one-hour, credit/no credit writing workshop, became the site for studio practice and the property of the English Department at Miami University Middletown after a ten-year stay in the Office of Learning Assistance and after being off the radar of the department on our central campus in Oxford for at least the same length of time.

Indicating broader institutional attitudes toward notions of remediation, this second narrative details features of my school’s selective function in action:

Spring 2002: Our department’s studio program has been up and running for four years and I accomplish the rare feat of checking off

everything listed on my day's to-do list. Tapping my fingers on my desk, wondering what I might do to kill the final 36 minutes of this office hour, I start to wonder how Learning Assistance ever came into possession of English 001 in the first place, and I wonder why that office, and not English, still staffed the "Fundamentals" course, English 007. It occurs to me to call an administrative office on our central campus and ask someone there to explain the situation to me.

A very high-ranking person in this office answers the phone. I ask him, "Why does the Office of Learning Assistance conduct the basic writing courses at Middletown?"

"What?" he asks. "The English Department doesn't teach them?"

"What subject do *you* teach?" I ask him.

He says, "Science."

I ask, "How would you like it if Learning Assistance taught your science courses?"

"Why, I wouldn't like it at all," he says. From what I can tell by his tone and from what I know about this person from previous conversations, I can assume he is genuinely concerned with and baffled by the information I've just offered him. In response, he gives me the name of another high-ranking person, who happens to be familiar with the history of the University Curriculum Committee and whom I phone immediately.

I ask this person the same question I asked the first person, and he tells me a story. I'm aware the story he tells me is the wrong story, however, because the situation as I know it predates by at least 20 years the one he describes. The story he rehearses for me involves our campus's 3-credit basic writing course, English 007, a story with which I am already familiar. Or rather, as it turns out, it is one with which I am only partially familiar.

The person on the phone tells me that sometime in the late 90s the Curriculum Committee "swung a deal" with the executive directors of the regional campuses to approve the 007 course on two conditions: One, that the course not count toward graduation (and I believe this is pretty consistent with state mandates regarding pre-100 level courses, anyway); and two, all parties needed to agree that English double-oh-7 would "*never* appear in the college catalogue." In short, the committee permits the executive directors their course

only if English 007 “gets out of the house of English.”

While I am talking to this person, he tells me he has taken out the catalogue and is paging to the listing of English courses. What he sees in the catalogue is the course description for English 001 (not 007, which, as agreed, does not appear there); he sees a course that I know has been on the books since 1974 and which now is the location of Middletown’s studio program. In any case, the voice I hear on the other end of the phone at this point seems puzzled, “How did this get in here?” he asks. “This is not supposed to be here.” (Tassoni, “Blundering” 273-74)

Rather than blend them together, a process that would involve smoothing over obvious discontinuities in presentation, I leave disentangled the above narratives because, with Mary Soliday, I do not want “to assume that curriculum changes will challenge the academy’s selective functions.” “To work against the discourse of student needs . . . that has defined our [basic writing] enterprise,” Soliday writes in *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education*, “we cannot afford to conflate [the] two perspectives or to neglect one in favor of the other” (19). In other words, any history of the development of Miami Middletown’s studio cast solely in terms of ways it addresses the *needs* of basic writers at our open-access campus would rest “upon a cluster of assumptions, the chief of which is that only students require remediation, not institutions, coalitions, or interest groups.” To challenge these assumptions, I agree with Soliday that we need to generate more specific case studies of the role remediation plays in postsecondary education, so that we who work in the field of basic writing can view the manner in which our local struggles unfold similarly (143). An understanding of these patterns, in turn, can help us better locate our reform efforts (144), so my disentangling/highlighting of my university’s selective function in action—the Curriculum Committee’s insistence that the regional campus hide 007 and my Oxford administrator’s subsequent surprise at finding a course considered remedial<sup>2</sup>--helps me address the kinds of practices and beliefs that might curtail access of some Middletown students to the central campus (where an average of 200 to 300 Middletown students transfer annually),<sup>3</sup> not to mention access to the middle class and altogether better life chances. Reciprocally, this focus on selective function helps me respond to beliefs and practices that block access of those who work and study on the central campus to the experiences and understandings of regional campus students, particularly those whose lives and preparation



levels might not reflect those of traditional academic narratives.<sup>4</sup>

### **(Dis)entangling Curriculum Change and Selective Function**

*"It would be unprofessional, and politically unwise, to suggest that teachers of Freshman English can radically change the Nature and purpose of Miami."*

*-Response of Miami University English Professor to Freshman English  
Text and Program Committee, 1975*

While I disentangle aspects of selective function from my history of curricular change in English 001, I do not underestimate the degree to which this function always already entangles curricular matters. Studio practice itself leads me to an examination of such institutional dynamics; and unlike my colleague quoted in the epigraph opening this section, I am hopeful that studio work, especially studio work done within the expanded contexts offered by case histories such as the one I recount below, can lead to institutional redesign consistent with democratic aims. Based on the model articulated by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, the studio sections at Miami Middletown are basically geared to help "at-risk" students examine the implications of teachers' assignments, comments, and grades and to facilitate students' negotiation of these various aspects while they explore their own writing processes. Students enrolled in the studio bring to each session some element of the writing projects they are conducting for their mainstream courses. Working collaboratively with the studio teacher and other students, they discuss the parameters of particular assignments, offer feedback to drafts in progress, and scrutinize their classroom teachers' responses to their work as a means toward developing their strengths as writers, improving their academic performance, and enhancing their overall understanding of the role they might play as readers and writers of culture. Our regional campus offers six to twelve sections of 001 per term and their instructors, tenured or tenure-line members of the English Department and other teachers with extensive backgrounds in composition studies, meet regularly (under the auspices of the basic writing subcommittee I mention above) to explore issues in studio practice. One of the more common threads we discuss in these meetings pertains to how we might best use the broadened perspective on writing instruction that studio work allots us to intervene in curricular *and* broader institutional matters.

In regard to curriculum, studio sections, after all, comprise "at-risk" and, at times, advanced students concurrently enrolled in a variety of composition (and other) courses, so each session provides us with views of writing

pedagogy across an array of classes and disciplines. Such views, I think other studio instructors would agree, reinforce for us the importance of students' understanding the rhetorical contexts within which they write, as well as the ways these contexts affect how and what students write. In addition, the small-class size (usually four to six students) of the studio permits more time for individualized discussion than do mainstream courses: We, therefore, learn more about our students' backgrounds and life circumstances—gang life, disgruntled wives and husbands, four kids, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyslexia, two jobs, an unreliable car—that affect their performance in school, let alone on individual writing assignments. In other words, alongside classroom matters, English 001 allows us to examine, as Grego and Thompson say, “that which academia has traditionally disregarded as unacademic (and, thereby, irrelevant) and show[s] how that very thing is actually of defining significance” (65-66). Our own understanding of the manner in which all of these personal/instructional/contextual elements impact our students and our studio work has also led to multiple discussions in which we explore ways our studio discoveries might be channeled back into the curriculum, discussions in which we question the degree to which we might use our insights to help other teachers across the university provide better instruction, flexible requirements, and pertinent course content, thus assuring more access for more “at-risk” students to upper-tiered courses on the Oxford campus, as well as on our own.

Concerning selective function, then, it is my understanding of the ways contextual matters can operate as forces for inclusivity or exclusivity that makes my administrator's “not supposed to be here” so alarming to me. Although understandable in the wake of the Curriculum Committee's dictate that 007 remain invisible, the statement nonetheless points not only to an institutional bias that “at-risk” students may confront, but it also calls attention to 001's own status—despite its thirty-year history—as retro-fit, a status compromising any transformative function it might serve. I refer to retro-fit here in terms of disability studies and notions of universal design, which I think align easily with issues in basic writing, especially in regard to open access.<sup>5</sup> In her introduction to *Strategies for Teaching Universal Design*, then NEA chairperson Jane Alexander explains: “The concept of universal design goes beyond the mere provision of special features for various segments of the population. Instead, it asks at the outset of the designing process how a product, graphic communication, building, or public space can be made most aesthetically pleasing and functional for the greatest number of users” (iii). A retro-fit, such as a ramp, may allow access to a building for

some segments of the population previously excluded, but the retro-fit itself does not guarantee other features of the building will be as equally negotiable or that the retro-fit itself will be without stigma or that the retro-fit even will be sustainable; universal design, on the other hand, looks to integrate accessibility function into the overall design of structures. Related to basic writing, universal design, then, would look for ways of integrating the issues and concerns of “at-risk” students into the mainstream business of the department and the institution more generally, rather than merely retrofitting onto its structure a single course that is perpetually “not supposed to be.” Redesigning the institution in the manner of universal design marks a challenge to what Mike Rose has called “the myth of transience,” which constructs basic writing as a provisional duty of colleges and universities, not part of the real work of postsecondary education, and funds and non-tenures those involved with the enterprise accordingly (5). This narrow notion of postsecondary education’s “real work,” international consultant on universal design Elaine Ostroff might say, reflects a limited view of diversity shaped “for a mythical average norm,” rather than focused on opportunities to examine standards and to increase the good design and usability of the institution (1.12).

Any such movement toward institutional redesign necessarily expands definitions of “access” beyond just “admission to the university.” After all, as the history below indicates, English 001 students have been from the course’s beginning not only admitted to Miami University, but also enrolled in other courses at the same time they were members of the basic writing workshop. In light of notions of retrofit and universal design, I view issues of “access” more in terms of what Pegeen Riechert Powell describes as “the struggles of oppressed groups to achieve real changes in current and persistent power structures” (29). And with Tom Fox, I see these demands for access culminating in significant critiques and revisions of literary canons and selection and placement procedures, as well as in “the continuing battle for civil rights for African Americans, the struggle for safe and productive lives for women, arguments for the acceptance and support of gay and lesbian people, and the fight for legitimacy and respect for those who speak languages and dialects other than standard English” (*Defending* 1).

While attention to these concerns is indeed apparent in many courses, policies, and initiatives across our university, such conceptions of access, particularly where they are tied to basic writing, remain problematic to the school’s image as public ivy. In Miami’s case the perpetuation of this image means that it must, at least in part, affirm its “Yale of the West” reputation

for selectivity and academic excellence in the wake of a state policy that stipulates any graduate of a charter school must be admitted by the state university system's local division (Moll 43). As Richard Moll pointed out in 1985, Miami's solution to this conflict has been the regional campuses at Hamilton and Middletown, which are each within twenty-five miles of Oxford and so can take most of these commuter students, while the central campus continues to award slots to students on the basis of standards derived from class rank, grade point average, curriculum, high school recommendations, special abilities, and SAT and/or ACT scores (58). In other words, the Middletown campus itself, not to mention English 001, could be viewed as an attempt to assure Oxford's reputation for selectivity and quality by separating it from the university's efforts to provide access. John Alberti writes,

[T]he question of access in higher education, which links crucially the question of social class with race, gender, and other protected status categories, is often obscured by the question of "quality," most typically in the creation of a false opposition between access and quality. At most open-access, working-class schools, this issue manifests itself in the question of "remedial" education and the relationship between two- and four-year schools. . . . In its most positive manifestation, this concern is linked with worries about whether such students will be able to succeed in college and make it through to graduation. In its more typical, negative form, discussion can devolve into questions of who is or isn't "college material" and whether the very presence of developmental classes on campus somehow contaminates the entire curriculum with lowered expectations and standards. (570)

To challenge this false dichotomy between "quality" and "access," Alberti recommends reversing the perspective in the ways teacher/scholars think about higher education so as to think about second-tier schools—open registration, regional and four-year colleges, what Alberti calls "working-class" colleges—as the norm (563).<sup>6</sup> Aligning myself with basic writers here, my historicizing of 001 pushes this reversal in perspective a bit further. This history provides a narrative that challenges residual power structures in the cause of revising reductive notions of quality that maintain the studio as a retrofitted element and stall possible sources of institutional redesign.

My research into the history of English 001 indicates its retro-fittedness, if you will, persists in a tension between efforts to mainstream and

assimilate students of nontraditional academic and social backgrounds and efforts to siphon concern for these students who are referred to courses like 001 away from the Department of English at Oxford to the school's Office of Learning Assistance on the regional campuses. Situated in this office, not only the students, but also basic writing faculty and staff are distanced from, as William DeGenaro writes, "the intellectual and disciplinary work of writing studies." This distance, DeGenaro would say, marks a point at which historical context becomes crucial:

Without context, it is easy to look at my own former institution's separation of first-year composition and basic writing as a simple and isolated case of situating instruction within the unit with the most experts. The English Department has composition experts. The Learning Assistance Center has experts in secondary, special, and developmental education. History tells us that such a schism is neither isolated nor simple. Rather, institutions of higher education have a long history of setting up institutional roadblocks to student success. Sociologist Burton Clark famously analyzed back in the late 1950s the "cooling out function" of higher education—the tendency to depress the aspirations of students. Now I'm not advocating blindly adopting monolithic and overly deterministic concepts like the "cooling out function" and applying those concepts to our own institutions. On the contrary, I'm suggesting that only through localized histories can we interrogate the extent to which these historical forces may be in effect locally. (ms. 7)

Designed for students to take concurrently with their first-year composition course, English 001 from its beginning reflected efforts to mainstream, rather than isolate (Gracie, E-mail),<sup>7</sup> the school's nontraditional students and, as such, was as it is today positioned—potentially—to help students and teachers generate change reflective of universal (re)design. However, siphoning forces—in the form of an elitist and unreflective regard for academic standards and the image of the public ivy—stalled at the gates any impact beyond a retrofitting that the course might have at either the curricular or selective levels. Surely, I can understand that systems must at various times in their histories retro-fit and jury-rig correctives to respond to changes in policy and philosophy or to maintain old promises in the wake of such changes. I can also acknowledge that courses like 001 signal my own institution's intention to address operations that compromise its democratic

aims. Nevertheless, I do not believe that these retro-fits can stand at such a distance from “the intellectual and disciplinary work of writing studies,” nor associatively, from political debates scoring the relation between any public ivy institution and its open-access campus, and hope that the system undergoes the deep changes necessary to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the very practices it retro-fits unto its ongoing business. Highlighting matters of selectivity, my aim in composing this history is to use the momentum my colleagues and I have generated through our studio curriculum to turn this distance into a place for critical exchange geared to help reverse the flow of this siphoning.

This reversal entails “historical reflection,” which, as Miller and Bowdon write in their section of “Archivists with an Attitude,” “can help us to value the potential of our situation by revitalizing our sense of the civic” (593). Like Ricoeur in the epigraph that opens this article, I see remembering as a “kind of action” (5), a way to identify how struggles unfold similarly, but also as a way to move beyond repetition of these patterns toward deep changes in the ways a public ivy such as ours might enhance its commitment to democratic access. Reading the concerns and interests of the regional campus students currently enrolled in our studio program as the norm, I construct an institutional history of basic writing at Miami Oxford, not to dwell on biases that had all but expelled basic writing as a concern of the English Department at the central campus, but to excavate, repopulate, and revitalize the efforts that developed and sustained English 001 there to begin with, and to gather the forces of those efforts in the cause of redesigning the institution toward more democratic ends. Such a redesign would mark the degree to which basic writing is crucial to the mainstream business of the university, not as a transient response to a temporary literacy crisis, but as an enterprise that speaks directly to the challenges of making education as accessible, as relevant, and as liberatory as it can be for the greatest number of students.

### **Dis(re)membering English 001 at Oxford**

*“Finally, the Department offers a writing Workshop each term for one hour of credit. First preference for registration is given to Educational Opportunity Program students.”*

*-Bob Johnson, Chair of English Department, 4/27/1976<sup>8</sup>*

While reflecting an effort to support nontraditional students, the history of English 001 at Oxford also marks a resistance to institutional re-

design. Of the senior faculty—including two former department chairs, four former directors of college composition, and various others I encountered casually before and after committee meetings and in formal interviews—and the administrators I spoke to while preparing this article, few people (two, actually) recall English 001 ever being offered at Oxford: Most of the people who were even aware of the course's existence assumed it had only been offered at the regional campuses. Putting politics aside for a moment, I don't think these memory lapses and mis-memories are surprising—how many of us will recall next semester, let alone thirty years from now, when and how the courses we currently do *not* teach were ever taught? I do think the type, if not the lack, of memory is significant, though, especially given the time period in which 001 first came into being. During this period from 1974 through 1978, when English 001 started appearing regularly in the Oxford schedule (it doesn't, by the way, appear on the Middletown schedule until 1979), departmental records frequently refer to what is alternately called the “writing problem” or “writing crisis” at Miami University, connected explicitly to the “Johnny Can't Write” articles that circulated in such journals as *Newsweek* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and which triggered similar crises in schools across the nation (See Shor, *Culture Wars* 59-103). The English Department at Oxford circulated a questionnaire to all its campuses at this time concerning teachers' conception of students' levels of literacy. The answers confirmed the degree of discontent faculty associated with the preparation levels of students. While one report that I found (excerpted in the epigraph beginning this section) does mention English 001 as one means by which the department was working to counteract students' writing “deficiencies,” the course is ignored in other reports, even in those documents encouraging the establishment of a writing center that would link the English Department with the Developmental Education Office (now the Office of Learning Assistance). Indeed, English 001 seems virtually absent from Oxford's memory: at least as that memory is represented in the archives and in the minds of those whom the archives represent.

The course receives no mention, for instance, in the 1977 “Final Report” of the Committee for Improvement of Instruction's Subcommittee for the Study of English Composition, which had been formed specifically to address Miami University's “writing problem.” As a result of its findings, the subcommittee encourages increased efforts to explore innovative methods of teaching composition, calls for higher expectations for student writing across the university community, and advocates “changes in teacher education programs to increase the effectiveness of secondary and elementary

teachers' abilities in composition instruction." Additionally, and perhaps most pertinent to my project, the nine-member subcommittee--composed of three English Department faculty, three students, and representatives from Business Analysis, Physics, and Developmental Education--identifies "the difficulty in isolating from the average student those students who require remedial or intensive programs" as a chief component of the "writing crisis," and they assert that to deny the fact that a "certain segment of any set of students will require remedial education" would "force the better prepared students to operate at a level below their potential" (Committee 1). The subcommittee then names the Office of Developmental Education as responsible for providing services for these remedial students once they've been identified. In other words, far from viewing English Studies, as John Alberti suggests, as "uniquely positioned to provide leadership in the effort to locate the progressive potential inherent in looking at social class more closely within the classrooms of higher education" (564), the report seems to indicate that students in need of remediation, for whom—I would guess--curricula must be adjusted, class time devoted, and values systems reconsidered, offer a hindrance to traditional students, not a challenge to standards and certainly not a call to integrate their experiences and understandings into the mainstream business of the department, if not the university (see Fox *Defending* 41). Simply, the assumption here is that remedial students need to be isolated from "better prepared" students and that those isolated students would be best served by non-academic offices. In accord with this institutional design, the fact that the English Department itself at this time offered a basic writing course that mainstreamed "at-risk" students while providing them with extended support through the one-credit workshop received no mention at all. It is the Developmental Education Office and not the English Department that the "Final Report" designates as responsible for students identified as underprepared.

Attitudes that buttressed this tendency toward the siphoning off of underprepared writers "out of the house of English" were apparent to a degree even in the English Department itself, given its reaction to the CCCC resolution on Students' Rights to Their Own Language in 1974—again, the year that 001 first appeared in the catalogue. The President of the College English Association of Ohio had asked for responses to the resolution and the English Department's Text and Program Committee (a precursor to the College Composition Committee) scheduled a meeting in February 1975 to discuss its implications. Responses to the resolution and to the scheduled discussion ranged from sympathetic to virulent, from reasoned to flippant,



but not one of respondents saw the Resolution as an invitation to institutional redesign. One department member, in a memo headed "Senseless Meetings," saw the CEA's request as a personal matter, better attended to by individuals who wished to reply, not by the Text and Program Committee. "I'm all for meeting on February 4," she writes, "but let's get on with our own business. The world will take care of itself, and harmless drudges will make pronouncement after pronouncement. The pronouncements will continue to be harmless unless we let them interfere with our business." Looking a little more deeply into the politics of the status quo, a couple of faculty posited Standard English as already a compromise amongst varying dialects, terming it "a language which, contrary to the CCCC resolution, exists in a generally recognizable way, and which is, whether we wished it were or not, the first prerequisite for success in the world of educated English speaking people"; the other respondent describes Standard English as "a classification allowing great variety [of language variations] but with recognizable and mutually agreed upon limits." While these respondents wrote in defense of Standard English, others expressed distaste for the kinds of languages affirmed in the resolution. "[T]his is the stupidest goddamn idea I have ever seen & the dumb motherfucker that proposed it has got his head up his ass," writes one member of the committee, expressing his reluctance to even attend the meeting scheduled to discuss the resolution. Another note, replete with expletives and deliberate misspellings, wishes a swift demise to the CCCC altogether and chides the resolution for its lack of specific reference to black dialects, whose valuation the respondent sees as the document's hidden agenda.

Two other memos, notable for their length and serious attention to the issue, express qualified agreement with the resolution to respect language variants, but given time requirements and the weight of the culture, admit that there are some limits to the acceptable range of dialects the campus could teach, let alone use. These memos are also notable, however, for ways they characterize the central campus and its students. One respondent writes, "The dialect business isn't all that crucial an issue on the Oxford campus. Our students are almost all white, upper middle class members of the elite dialect group. Their problems for the most part do not stem from them using a socially censored dialect but from their inability to use their own dialect effectively." Another respondent suggests that a course of study in which "all [language] variations can and ought to be accepted" should perhaps be conducted at "the branch campuses" for students who do not want to go beyond two years of study. Such a student would "pursue some growth of

students with “deficiencies,” on the other hand, were the province of the Developmental Education Office and the regional campuses.

The Text and Program Committee’s qualified endorsement does, however, suggest the tension between the department’s elitism and its democratic (read “assimilative”) aims in its reference to students’ “right to learn and use a dialect *other* than their own.” While some members of the department who responded to the resolution discussed Standard English as itself an amalgam of many dialects, the language of the Text and Program Committee indicates the extent to which discourse about writing instruction has often overstated the differences between students’ languages, particularly those languages of students identified as “at-risk,” and academic language, and it is a rhetoric with which the CCCC resolution itself has been complicit. As Joseph Harris writes,

There has been much debate in recent years over whether we need, above all, to respect our students’ “right to their own language,” or to teach them the ways and forms of “academic discourse.” Both sides of this argument, in the end, reset their cases on the same suspect generalization; that we and our students belong to different and fairly distinct communities of discourse, that we have “our” “academic” discourse and they have “their own” “common” (!) ones. The choice is one between opposing fictions. The “languages” that our students bring to us cannot but have been shaped, at least in part, by their experiences in school, and thus must, in some ways, already be “academic.” Similarly, our teaching will and should always be affected by a host of beliefs and values that we hold regardless of our roles as academics. What we see in the classroom, then, are not two coherent and competing discourses but many overlapping and conflicting ones. (18-19)

Where overlaps and conflict might point to potential sites for institutional redesign, the “us/them” effect of the polarization Harris describes serves, rather, to instill retro-fit. This effect undergirds a pedagogy of initiation through which “at-risk” students must conform to the demands of the existing structure, which, in turn, makes no move toward reciprocation but to retrofit various services. So, while English 001 was designed to mainstream rather than isolate its students, the Text and Program Committee’s qualified endorsement of the CCCC resolution, in overstating the differences between discourses, might be read as a cautionary message to those students who

are already the most anxious and uncomfortable about the status of their language in academia. Similar to the memo above that references kids on a playground, this message, writes Tom Fox, is that “We [academics] write a different ‘English’ here, forget what you know” (Fox, *Defending* 58). The language of basic writers, Fox admits, surely differs from academic discourse, no matter how it is defined; but, he argues, the pedagogy of initiation may jeopardize basic writers’ success: “They not only have to master ‘skills’ (as in the service courses), but they have to acquire a new way of understanding, knowing, arguing, reflecting” (59). Since I think it fair to guess that the Oxford department circa 1974 would not have invited its traditional students (part of “us”) to embark on courses of study in nonstandard English dialects, I think it is also fair to assume the students referred to in the concluding statement of the committee’s qualified endorsement are students (a “them”) for whom Standard English is not the dialect with which they are most comfortable. With this reference, then, the Text and Program Committee does indeed acknowledge, if not extend its hand to, students who do not reflect the school’s white, upper middle-class mainstream. At the same time, however, this invitation, based upon the notion of initiation, represents a retro-fit, not an offer to explore home and school discontinuities, reject standardized texts as a measure of writing ability, or examine discourse communities in academic contexts (see Fox, *Defending* 41). While debates over such issues may have occurred in other locations and situations across campus, they did not attend discussions about basic writing.

Notably, one of the members of Text and Program Committee listed as present at the February 11 meeting was Marjorie Cook. What’s significant about Dr. Cook is that, beginning with English 001’s first appearance in the course schedule in 1972/73 through Fall 1983 (when she stopped teaching classes), Marjorie Cook is the only instructor listed for the course. Both the English department chair and the director of college composition during these years recall English 001 as *her* course (Gracie, Interview; Johnson), and while studying her 1978 syllabus with me, the former chair conjectured that she used English 001—which seemed to highlight exercises in grammar and punctuation and some in-class writing devoted to the modes—to help prepare students for the basic competency test, which they needed to pass in order to earn credit for Freshman Composition.<sup>10</sup> Although campus lore affirms the administration has always frowned on the notion of any remedial courses at Oxford (Smith), this former chair also recalls no controversies at either the departmental or administrative level regarding Cook’s offering the course (Johnson). Indeed, her syllabus, which represents an accommodative rather

than critical approach to Standard English, would seem to suggest that Dr. Cook's intention was not to "radically change the Nature and purpose of Miami," but to help nontraditional students assimilate to the prevailing Nature and purpose, an intention which may have facilitated its coming into being as retro-fit rather than as a site for institutional redesign. As writers like Lisa Delpit have argued, there is much to appreciate about such accommodative approaches, and I have no intention of dismissing their benefits to underprivileged populations. However, the eventual siphoning of 001 to the university's "outer boroughs," if you will, indicates how precarious such democratic enterprises become when they are retro-fitted to existing structures. As well-intentioned as they may be, retro-fits of this sort are not developed to inform existing systems how they might redesign themselves in response to insights offered by new constituencies. Accommodating (rather than resisting) existent criteria, English 001 could be accepted as a "friendly amendment" to the existing structure; in the same way, it could be easily absorbed into an historical narrative that affirmed elite students as central characters and assigned walk-on roles to those arriving through open-access policies.

While English 001 at Oxford now remains mis-remembered at best, the colleagues who authored her 1985 memorial do laud Dr. Cook herself for teaching "at the two extremes of departmental offerings—English 001 for academically disadvantaged freshmen and seminars for Ph.D. candidates specializing in modern poetry" (Gracie, et al 1). In regard to the former group, the memorial attests to her generosity (in terms of both money and commitment) toward and tendency to stay in contact with her basic writing students even after they had graduated (1-2). Dr. Cook died in January 1985, and although from Spring 1986 to Spring 1987, seven sections of the course were offered, staffed by G.A.s and adjuncts, it would not be scheduled at the Oxford campus again until 2003. It should also be noted that Cook became an assistant dean the year that 001 first appeared on the books and that she had been promoted to associate dean by the time of her death, at which point she was still listed as the instructor for English 001. In other words, while its instructor garnered a rather high profile in the institution, the course itself remained marginal to departmental, not to mention university, concerns. Here was a tenured member of the department and administrator teaching basic writing at a public ivy, and but for her memorial and the one memo I quote above, I can find no reference before 1995, when I proposed the formation of the subcommittee on basic writing, of the course in any of the documents directly tied to English. What helped make this such a

personal and even, to borrow the terms of iconic discourse, such an altruistic enterprise on Cook's part (see Gunner 31)? Why were Dean Cook's efforts not something more central to the mission of the department, especially at this time when students rights to their own language and the "writing crisis" had generated enough attention to become part of the institution's history, at least as that history is represented in the university's archives?

Alongside the allegiance to elite discourse and distaste for nonstandard dialects that some members of the English Department expressed in reactions to the CCCC resolution, the answer could rest in the student population Dr. Cook served. I have found scattered references to writing workshops, but not necessarily to English 001 or Marjorie Cook, in archival files devoted to the Educational Opportunity Program Students, those students to whom, up until 1992, the college catalogue listed as given first preference for English 001. In a memorandum dated July 15, 1974, which would have been the summer directly before the semester in which 001 first appeared in the catalogue, the Director of the Equal Opportunity Office offered this description of the EOP to members of a university committee who were deliberating continued waivers of suspension for EOP students:

In the recent history of Miami University there has been very little done in terms of remediation of academic difficulties or compensation for academic deficiencies. Until the advent of the Educational Opportunity Program, the student with any academic deficiencies, if admitted, was required to literally lift himself by his own bootstraps if he was to be successful here. The Educational Opportunity Program was the first organized attempt to recruit, support, retain and graduate this kind of student at Miami University. (Young 1)

EOP students, according to the Equal Opportunity Director, represented "financially disadvantaged backgrounds," came from "predominantly black high schools," and were usually the first of their generation, if not first in their family, to attend college. Unlike traditional ("us" group) students who might fail to practice their dialect of privilege successfully, these EOP students ("them") experienced "cultural, social, and educational [dis]advantages" and were limited by "their family backgrounds and their environments" (Young 1-2); and in what can be seen as an early challenge to the discourse of student need, the director acknowledges that Oxford represents to EOP students "an environment that is hostile to low achievement and somewhat indifferent to their background" (Young 2).

A course syllabus from English 001, attached to a petition to revise its catalogue description in 1978, affirms EOP students as target audience in its description of course objectives:

*Some students—particularly students whose severe deficiencies in verbal skills stem from a poor background in language studies—would benefit from a laboratory session for the theory of rhetoric taught in English 111. The students in 001 would apply such theory by writing in a more structured situation than is possible in English 111, with more guidance from the instructor, and with immediate discussion and evaluation of the writing. (My emphasis)*

In other words, if the population of basic writing students that Marjorie Cook instructed in 001 did indeed come out of the EOP program, then we might attribute the lack of English Department documentation about them to the fact that, despite some gestures such as that represented in the final lines of the Text and Program Committee's qualified endorsement of the CCCC resolution, they simply were not considered the purview of the English Department. In addition, the fact that Developmental Education files reveal only vague references, at best, to the workshop could be attributable to the fact that the course was indeed an English course taught by a rather distinguished member of that department. English 001 at Oxford, caught between two programs with two distinct missions, on the course schedule of a lone teacher, and reserved for a group of students who did not match the profile of the school's "white, upper middle-class" norm, seemed positioned all along to be unremembered, mis-remembered, retro-fitted.

### **Preemptive (Re)membering for Institutional Redesign**

*"When you retire, you get a call or letter from Archives, asking you to remember them."*

*—Frank Jordan, Professor Emeritus, Miami University*

While I will describe in this section the value of preemptive (re)membering, there is at least one reason to be cautious about such an enterprise: The administration at Oxford (in conjunction with the state's Board of Regents)<sup>11</sup> might really act at some point upon the impression that our English 001 studio (and all that it represents in terms of open access and

universal design) is, indeed, “not supposed to be here.” While the story of 001 on the Middletown campus has a rather available history of its own,<sup>12</sup> the invisibility of 001 at Oxford has perhaps been a contributing factor to the studios having the vitality, thus far, that they’ve had. The factor that invisibility has played was suggested to me in Fall 2003 when students at the regional campus who were not enrolled in English 111: College Composition were being locked out of our 001 studios when they attempted to register on-line. Up until this point, Middletown faculty and advisors had encouraged any student who desired additional focus on writing from any course to enroll in the studio and had even attracted some sophomore and junior English majors, who contributed their own insights to studio sections. In Fall 2003, however, my former regional campus colleague who co-founded our studio program, now director of College Composition at the central campus, scheduled a section of 001 there devoted to ESL students. Through a process fathomable, perhaps, only to computer programmers, her scheduling of the course at Oxford triggered some mechanism in our university’s computer registration system, aligning enrollment to the course’s catalogue description, which explicitly states that students should be concurrently enrolled in English 111 in order to take 001.<sup>13</sup> Someone, so to speak, had begun watching us: The moment to generate redesign while backs were turned was shrinking rapidly, and the time to negotiate change face-to-face had arrived.

While people in the deans’, archival, records and registration, personnel, and department offices are still returning the files I requested in the process of my researching this article, I’m considering a type of negotiation that proceeds from a preemptive (re)membering, one geared toward implicating as many people as possible in re-peopling, re-prompting, and redesigning the history of basic writing at our public ivy. Although virtually no memory exists of English 001 at the central campus, my research tells me that many active faculty members were very much involved in the literacy debates that took place there during the late 1970s and that a few of them were actually involved in instituting and even constructing basic writing at Miami. For instance, I found the name of one person who didn’t recall the course or even the existence at one point of a Developmental Education Office at Oxford to be listed several times in the early 70s as the director of writing workshops sponsored by that very office. I found the name of another person who could not at first recollect English 001 listed as the person responsible for having prepared the catalogue description revision for it in 1978. I even managed to exchange emails with a teacher who taught the course as a visiting

instructor in 1986. She remembers having to lobby hard to have the course offered, as most faculty, she writes, would not admit that any Oxford students required remedial help, but she also remembers that the chair of the department did agree with her, took a stand, and scheduled the course (Smith). I also exchanged emails with this former department chair: He has no recollection of the course ever being offered at the central campus (Chabot). As I mention earlier, I do not fault any of these people for not recalling their role in 001's history. Instead, I am encouraged by the responses I received to my inquiries. While nearly everyone I spoke to during the course of my research failed to recall English 001 as an Oxford course, no one responded derogatorily to the course or its intended purpose (as the archives might lead one to guess), and nearly everyone sent me unsolicited emails after our initial exchanges, sharing with me their resurfaced memories of Marjorie Cook and submitting to me newly recalled bits and pieces of the department's history.<sup>14</sup> These responses germinated in me a belief that projects such as this can re-people a history that would otherwise remain vacant or, at most, mis-remembered in ways that unwittingly resist institutional redesign.

My original impulse was to construct this history using iconic discourse focused on the efforts of Marjorie Cook. While I do believe that her work with basic writers at Oxford deserves further study, I came to realize that this version of the story, focused on the one teacher who taught this one course, would only foreground the efforts of individual will and eschew the much-needed discussion of institutional inertia and, as Soliday might say, neglect scrutiny of the university's selective function. My hope is that a re-peopled history, enacted through the very kind of face-to-face pestering and re-prompting this type of research involves, can help reverse this inertia that exists in the tension between the institution's democratic aims and its elite reputation. Mary Soliday calls for more case studies of the role remediation plays in higher education so that we in the field can better locate our reform efforts, but what a preemptive (re)membering at local sites can also do is implicate those who might otherwise not recognize their own stake in this field. Despite its incidents of self-professed affinity to elitist standards, the history of basic writing at Miami Oxford indicates a series of individual and structural initiatives poised to challenge forces of exclusivity: Educational Opportunity Programs; a course designed to provide basic writing students with additional support *while* they are enrolled in mainstream courses; a writing center jointly directed by English and Learning Assistance; a Department Chair willing to offer the course against the grain of the institution's image as a public ivy; English faculty conducting summer workshops for "at-risk" students; a "call for increased understanding



and respect for dialect diversity within our pluralistic society”; an Associate Dean who founded and taught a course devoted to the school’s most vulnerable students. In other words, writing our own institutional histories is one way to “find allies,” as Ira Shor recommends, to help us create change (“Apartheid” 102). Stories such as the one told in this article are by nature collaborative ventures, involving research that re-gathers, re-members people and policies that have all along fueled challenges to the exclusivities characteristic of a public ivy. Histories such as this provide narratives so that allies might locate themselves in them and discern the roles they have played and might still play in relation to institutional forces that curtail or facilitate access.

Preemptive (re)membering toward these ends can be conducted through other means as well. One thing I’ve personally started to do is insert a note that reads “John Tassoni was here in [year] looking for basic writing at Miami University” into various files I review over the course of my research. Aside from concerns of egotism and a desire for comic relief, one of my intentions in inserting this note is to counteract the gap that suggests no one at Miami has ever been interested in basic writing. Leaving this note in files, I hope, will help direct future researchers and signify to them that the history of basic writing at Miami will not be as forthcoming as they might like it to be, but that it is, indeed, “here.” Another preemptive move our university’s basic writing program is making involves including junior faculty in studio work itself, where they can be a part of an emerging and well-documented history, one that now, thanks to the new director of the program at Oxford, receives frequent mention in the College Composition Committee’s meetings and minutes. And perhaps above all, this preemptive (re)membering has helped lead to a planned Fall 2006 course that will link a graduate seminar, studios, and sections of English 111 at Oxford and Middletown— English 111 sections open to students reflecting any level of preparation who self-select because they desire additional writing instruction. Our intention is to have the graduate students correspond on-line with the undergraduates and work with them in studio settings, all the while the graduate seminar, following principles of universal design, will feature readings and discussions geared to help our graduate students develop curricula that address students representing multiple degrees of academic preparation and forms of literacy: In other words, we’ve come to learn that sometimes it is not just students who require “remediation,” but that teachers *need* engagement with diverse student populations early in their training, rather than be forced to retro-fit curricula that they might otherwise design for a “mythical average norm.” My former Middletown colleague and I also have recently submitted a proposal to rename the studio, giving it the

number English 104, and to expand its catalogue description so that it more clearly invites students to enhance their engagement with and critical reflection on college composition. Such changes will integrate studios further into the institutional design and its new course number should reduce the stigma for those writers at Oxford who could benefit from additional instruction but who avoid the course because of its association with remediation.

In light of such persistent associations, between the regional campuses and remediation, between access and diminished standards, between selectivity and quality, I cannot help but argue, with Reichert Powell,

that it is impossible and irresponsible for mainstream composition studies professionals at selective universities like Miami University to remove themselves from debates about standards and access. Thus, rather than dismiss unproductive understandings about skill, people at institutions like Miami's Oxford campus need to engage those understandings, challenge them, and interrupt the easy association between the gatekeeping function of first year writing and considerations of skill in writing pedagogy. In so doing, we have a better chance to intervene in the conservative—as in 'resistant to change'—imposition of standards on the changing demographics of higher education. (9)

And given that, as Alberti points out, students at elite colleges are beginning to resemble those at second-tier schools in their need to work long hours off campus and their increased exposure to the pressures of commuting, given the growing expense of college room and board (563), the need for Oxford to weigh accessibility issues against the standards it imposes on its own changing demographics increases annually. Unlike my colleague who thirty years ago wrote that "it would be unprofessional, and politically unwise" for writing teachers to suggest a radical change in the "Nature and purpose of Miami," I cannot imagine a less responsible way to behave than to ignore what we know about the undemocratic society we live in, and with teacher-researchers like Shor, Soliday, and others, I believe by remembering the history and politics that brought about and sustain these unequal arrangements we can suggest, potently, revisions in the ways our institutions go about determining who belongs and who does not, about who is considered in the overall design and who is, at best, retrofitted. Why wait for the archives to call us, when we can call upon them now and make them responsive to our goals?

## Notes

1. See Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson "Not Just Anywhere, Anywhen" (75-81) and my "Retelling Basic Writing at a Regional Campus" (178-80) for more detailed and sympathetic accounts of the discussions between English Department faculty and Learning Assistance staff. These other accounts offer more explanation of the rhetorics and politics at work here, the power differentials whose sources extended beyond the individuals who sat down at these unproductive meetings. This present article focuses on (re)membering basic writing at the Oxford campus, but I'm well aware this project must occur on multiple sites.

2. Omitting descriptions of remedial classes from catalogues is not unique to Miami nor something new in academia. See Lunsford (40-41) for a discussion of such practices at Yale and Wellesley during the late nineteenth century.

3. For a discussion of the politics of naming a campus "central" or "main," "regional" or "branch," see Hieber 78-79.

4. See Alberti for a deconstruction of this traditional narrative.

5. My thanks to Jay Dolmage for providing me with this vocabulary and many of these connections.

6. In a similar vein, Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers suggest that we "consider the teaching of writing in open admissions sites as central to the historical formation and continuing practice of composition studies" (440).

7. See McNenny for articles detailing the controversy surrounding mainstreaming, its theory, politics, and practice.

8. The quotation is from a memorandum addressed to the provost and titled "The Crisis in Composition." The memorandum was copied to members of the university senate to inform the group of measures the English Department was taking to improve the teaching of writing skills in the wake of the "Johnny Can't Write" controversy described in *Newsweek* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

9. These memos and drafts of the committee's qualified endorsement of

the resolution are contained in a file marked "Text & Program: Agenda, Summaries 1974-1975" and located in the archival files in the office of the Director of College Composition. My thanks to the director for making me aware of these records.

10. During this time, the department did debate the validity of this standardized, grammar-based, multiple-choice form of assessment. However, these debates emerged from process vs. product considerations rather than issues directly related to basic writing (Johnson).

11. I have limited this discussion to an exploration of the relation between central and regional campuses. Attitudes and policies at the state level also, of course, shape this relationship. For a discussion of the relation between research schools, basic writing, and state policy, see Stygall. Also see Fox ("Working").

12. Middletown's Executive Director, C. Eugene Bennett, for instance, lauds the basic writing program in each of his "Annual Reports" through the early 1980s, mentioning it on the first page of each report.

13. The *Miami Bulletin* description for 001 and 002, which originally aligned with 112, the program's second course in its foundation sequence, currently reads as follows: "A laboratory in composition to be taken concurrently with English 111, 112. Credit/no-credit only" (233).

14. My thanks to all those colleagues, past and present, who took the time to help me (re)member English 001, including Barry Chabot, Bill DeGenaro, Donald Daiker, Mary Fuller, Bill Gracie, John Heyda, Bob Johnson, Frank Jordan, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Max Morenberg, Marion Pyles, Jerry Rosenberg, K. E. Smith, Jeff Sommers, and Ellenmarie Wahlrab. Special thanks also to archivist Bob Schmidt and Janet Cox from Academic Personnel Services, as well as to all the others who left their desks to seek files and records on behalf of this project.

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