Redefining Literacy as a Social Practice

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ABSTRACT: Despite multiple and persuasive arguments against the validity of doing so, many basic writers continue to be identified by what Brian V. Street calls the "autonomous model of literacy," a model that research tells us is as artificial and inappropriate as it is ubiquitous. This article describes a curricular response to the political, material, and ideological constraints placed on basic writing via this autonomous model and instead treats literacy as a social practice. After a brief description of the local conditions from which our program emerged, I articulate what I call a "pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity," the new model upon which our curriculum is based. Informed by both the New Literacy Studies and activity theory, rhetorical dexterity teaches writers to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one. The final sections of the article describe the assignments included in a recent version of our curriculum, as well as selected student responses to these assignments and readings. Accepting that a curricular solution to the institutionalized oppression implicit in much literacy learning is necessarily partial and temporary, I argue that fostering students' awareness of the ways in which an autonomous model deconstructs itself when applied to real-life literacy contexts empowers them to work against this system.

KEYWORDS: New Literacy Studies, activity theory, politics, curriculum

Like so many Writing Program Administrators, I often find my dogmatic quest to subvert problematic representations of literacy disrupted by the reality of my daily work and the fact that such representations far outnumber the ones composition scholars might endorse. Similar experiences abound among WPAs in general; however, the distance between perceptions seems all the more significant for those of us directing basic writing programs, writing centers, and similarly marginalized learning spaces. Despite multiple and persuasive arguments against the validity of doing so, many basic writers continue to be identified by standards-based assessments of their reading and writing "skills," and basic writing classrooms continue to

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be dominated by skills-based instruction (Del Principe). Unfortunately—and, in my case, even by state mandate—those of us who know better are often no less constrained by the ubiquity of the skills-based model in public representations of literacy learning. From 1989 to 2003, all Texas public colleges and universities were required to assess (via a "state-approved" test) every incoming first-year student in reading, writing, and math: test-takers failing the reading and/or writing sections were subsequently labeled "not ready for college-level literacy" and those of us directing basic writing programs at these institutions were required—again, by state law—to "remediate" them accordingly. (For a provocative discussion of the negative effects of such standards on student writing—especially those from minority groups—and how we can provide space for these writers to work against these effects, see Susan Naomi Bernstein's "Teaching and Learning in Texas.")

Right now, the primary, "state-approved" testing instrument in Texas is the *Texas Higher Education Assessment* (THEA), formerly the *Texas Academic Skills Program* (TASP). According to the official THEA Test Home Page, "The purpose of the test . . . is to assess the reading, mathematics, and writing skills first year students should have if they are to perform effectively in undergraduate certificate or degree programs in Texas public colleges and universities." THEA measures the literacy "skills" deemed necessary to "function" in college according to the test-taker's responses to multiple-choice, "objective" questions about grammar and usage and a single persuasive "writing sample" written within a specific time limit,[1] despite the fact that, as the CCCC Position Statement on Assessment reminds us, "choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing. . . [and] . . . one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions" ("Writing Assessment").

Additional problems with standardized measures like these have been well documented—in this journal and elsewhere. Such measures treat literacy as though it were neutral, autonomous, and completely portable. As Mike Rose pointed out nearly twenty years ago, students who fail measures like these "know more than their tests reveal but haven't been taught how to weave that knowledge into coherent patterns" (*Lives* 8). Standardized tests are also wildly unfair, as high-stakes measures like these place students of color and—especially—those from poorer neighborhoods at an even greater disadvantage (see Haney; McNeil "Creating"; Schrag).

The standards themselves are highly problematic, as well, especially when those standards test "competency" in areas like "appropriateness"

and "unity." Students writing for these standardized tests often attempt to, as David Bartholomae ("Inventing") puts it, "Invent the University." But they are not, by definition, full-fledged members of university-sanctioned communities of practice and, therefore, are often unable to do so in ways test graders are likely to recognize and endorse. As Mike Rose tells us, "if [we] get close enough to their failure, [we] find knowledge that the assignment did not tap" (*Lives* 8). Standardized testing keeps decision makers at a safe distance from such knowledge.

Even though the TASP Law (Texas Academic Skills Program) was repealed more than three years ago, the logic that placed these writers via this system remains. State law also precludes—at least it did until TASP law was repealed in 2003—any public college or university in the state from offering credit for remediation programs serving students who failed one or more sections of TASP (or THEA, the exam that replaced TASP in 2004). Thus, making major changes in placement procedures seems unwise—especially in this environment where raising admission standards might be a more popular and likely choice than any placement procedure I might advocate.[2] In fact, recent debates have again given rise to the rhetoric of exclusion that threatens college access for writers most likely to fail standardized literacy measures—not just in Texas but, in fact, across the nation. At the national level, the first "Issue Paper" in response to the Secretary of Education's "Commission on the Future of Higher Education" (established by Secretary Margaret Spellings in 2005), "set the context" for this "National Dialogue" by treating the very existence of basic writing as a major reason for American postsecondary education's "diminished capacity." As they explain, "[s]everal institutions of higher education are admitting students who lack adequate preparation for college-level work, thus expending precious resources in remediation" (Miller and Oldham). As our own institution struggles with the retention rates of our first-year students, faculty and administrators have begun to ask whether or not these students should even be here. They are not, after all, "college material." I fear that Secretary Spellings' Commission may force us to exclude an even greater number of minority and poor students in order to raise retention rates, in much the same way that Texas public schools raised test scores and graduation rates by dubious means: retaining students, moving at-risk students to special education, or perhaps even "suggesting" they attain General Education Diplomas (GEDs) instead. As Walt Haney, Linda McNeil, and Angela Valenzuela, and others have revealed, such moves have not been uncommon in our state as students in special education programs are not required to take and pass TAKS and those who

drop out but obtain GEDs within a year will not be counted as "drop-outs" on the school's performance record.

It is in this environment that I have learned to live with the test. As we shall see, the test that places students in basic writing here at Texas A&M-Commerce works from a very different set of assumptions than do the courses that make up our Basic Writing Program. Though we do not believe these tests serve as accurate measures of what our students can actually do, I haven't yet pushed for changes to placement criteria nor will I until I am absolutely sure of two things: (1) such discussions won't again raise the issue of whether or not we should be raising admission "standards" rather than continuing to spend "precious resources" to try to "accommodate" those deemed "not ready for college-level literacy," and (2) new measures—if we must have them—will be adequately funded and theoretically sound. Until both of these conditions are in place, I am leery of fighting for changes at levels of program and placement. Instead, we focus our efforts on change at the levels of curriculum, training, and exit criteria.

The remaining pages of this essay describe one curricular response to the political, material, social, and ideological constraints placed on literacy education—particularly basic writing—via the ubiquity of what Brian V. Street calls the "autonomous model of literacy." Rather than perpetuating the autonomous model, this new framework treats literacy as a social practice. According to Street, the autonomous model "disguise[s] the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have the . . . benign effect of . . . enhancing the . . . cognitive skills" of those marked "illiterate," thus ". . . improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their 'illiteracy' in the first place" ("Autonomous and Ideological Models" 1). Rather than perpetuating this problematic treatment of literacy—through which "testing" can be easily accepted as the "cornerstone of reform" (Bush, as qtd. in Hillocks 11)—Street urges us to embrace "the alternative, ideological model." An ideological model of literacy

> posits . . . that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. It is also embedded in social practice, such as those of a particular job market or particu-

> lar educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always "ideological," they are always rooted in a particular worldview and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others. ("Autonomous Models" 2)

Thus, according to Street's ideological model, standardized tests of literacy must be understood as not only inappropriate but largely unethical in that they privilege particular contexts, identities, and knowledge while marginalizing all others.

Accepting that a curricular solution to the institutionalized oppression implicit in much literacy learning is necessarily partial and temporary, however, I argue that fostering in our students an awareness of the ways in which an autonomous model deconstructs itself when applied to real-life literacy contexts empowers them to work against this system in ways critical theorists advocate. The primary objective of the current essay is to offer a new model for basic writing instruction that is responsive to multiple agents limiting and shaping the means and goals of literacy education, agents with goals that are quite often in opposition to one another. Doing so requires that I not offer a curricular solution in isolation as any responsible pedagogical decisions must take into account the layers of agents influencing any and all social, political, material, and ideological conditions for learning. The following section will describe the theoretical framework upon which our program at Texas A&M-Commerce is based. I will end with a description of the writing assignments and presentations included in a recent version of our curriculum, assignments that ask students to articulate familiar communities of practice like poker and pyrotechnics and compare the requirements for literate practice within these communities with those required for school-based ones. The final pages of this essay include selected student responses to these assignments and readings.

Theoretical Justification for a Pedagogy of Rhetorical Dexterity

Over the past few years, my teaching and administrative work have become increasingly affected by regular attempts to circumvent traditional representations of literacy and my growing appreciation of vernacular literacies—video game literacies, Star Trek literacies, and Anime literacies, among

others. Such literacies are represented not only by our students but also in the scholarly literature—for example, Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher's *Literate Lives in an Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States*, Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, and, especially, work in the New Literacy Studies (for example, James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Literacy and Learning* and *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*). Studies like these force me to take out-of-school literacies seriously and, as I have done so, I have been amazed to find the intellectual rigor and rhetorical sophistication embedded in rhetorical spaces that extend beyond the academy, especially those spaces rarely understood to have anything to do with the kinds of writing students are expected to do at school. This growing knowledge and the conservative political climate in which those of us committed to representing literacy differently often find ourselves have led me to develop what I call a "pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity"—that is, the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice (the academy) based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one. Helping our students develop rhetorical dexterity is the primary objective of our basic writing program at Texas A&M-Commerce and of the project described in this article. By no means do I expect these writers to develop full-blown, "objective" ethnographic studies of their familiar communities of practice, but I argue that we must routinely and explicitly validate the complex systems in which these students are already considered literate by taking them seriously and asking our students to do the same.

What's original about the approach advocated in our program (rhetorical dexterity) is not the basic assumption that, as Katherine Shultz and Glenda Hull put it, "literacy is not literacy is not literacy" (19), nor that academic literacies (Standard Edited English) have much more academic and social currency than vernacular ones (Street *Social Literacies*; Gee *What Video Games*, *Situated Language and Learning*; Purves and Purves). I'm not the first to assert that basic writers have their own expertise and should be encouraged to draw from it (Soliday "Toward a Consciousness"; Kutz, Groden, and Zamel; Mahiri; Marinara), nor am I the only scholar to argue that basic writers are only "basic writers" within the system that identified them as such (Fox; Horner; Soliday *Politics*; Lu and Horner; Hindman; Hilgers; by implication, Huot; Bartholomae "The Tidy House").

The innovation of this approach is in the ways I propose to teach those writers labeled "basic" to value their expertise, abilities that Kutz, Groden, and Zamel have called "competencies" but that I will call here "literacies." In doing so, we pay particular attention to our students' experience in more vernacular literacies like those associated with work (waiting tables, styling hair, building homes, designing webpages) and play (quilting, painting, playing video games). A pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity thus enables us to represent literacy differently—to basic writers, to tutors, to basic writing teachers, and, through them, to those representing literacy beyond our learning spaces. Via a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity, I have chosen to shape "instruction that enables students to understand how definitions of literacy are shaped by communities, how literacy, power, and language are linked, and how their myriad experiences with language (in and out of school) are connected to writing" (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 98).

In other words, we teach these students that we are all highly literate in at least one other context—even writers who struggle in contexts demanding Standard Edited English. I argue that productive literacies are possible in this environment of high-stakes testing when literacy learners can understand, articulate, and negotiate the similarities (what I call "points of contact") and differences (what I call "points of dissonance") between a community of practice with which the writer has much familiarity and another, less familiar one. Rather than focusing on what these students must do to comply with the standards that tests like these purport to measure, we teach them to examine the ways in which systems like these define literacy and ask them to compare such assessments with the ways in which literacy has and may continue to function in their own lives—in school and in those spaces seemingly unrelated to school. We teach these writers to trust in and make use of their own expertise—their own literacies—by continually asking themselves questions like the following: (1) How do I put literacy to use in my own life among people that matter to me in places I know and understand, especially in those places and among those people where I am taken most seriously, as a meaningful member with ideas that matter? (2) How can I reuse (and reclaim) these strategies in new places and for new people who may have different needs and expectations? In doing so, we do not ask them to develop a "bundle of skills" (Resnick) that can be carried with them from rhetorical situation to rhetorical situation, but rather to develop the "rhetorical dexterity" necessary to read, understand, and make use of a variety of linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical cues in ever-changing rhetorical contexts.

Defining Literacy

The primary objective of a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity is to help our students develop the flexibility and skill necessary to negotiate multiple, always changing literacies. In doing so, we are clearly expanding the definition of literacy to include those activities not typically accepted as "reading" or "writing" in any traditionally academic or school-related sense. To understand the parameters of this more social conceptualization of literacy, David Barton and Mary Hamilton suggest we consider "literate" behavior in terms of "discourse communities" rather than universal standards, which they define as "groups of people held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting, and using written language" (29). For our purposes, "communities of practice" seem more appropriate than "discourse communities" because the former stresses literacy as an activity rather than a state of being (via membership or ability to meet universal standards).

"Communities of practice" are relations of people who have in common a "shared competence and mutual interest in a given practice" (Choi 143), be that repairing Xerox machines (see Orr), recovering from alcoholism (see Lave and Wenger), teaching writing, or countless other activities in which a person may be involved. The concept first emerged in the Lave and Wenger study of the ways in which various communities of practice teach newcomers the practices valued and reproduced in those communities (midwives, meat cutters, tailors, and recovering alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous). The term has been most popular in managerial and organizational studies, and in recent years many larger, more progressive corporations have made extensive use of the learning theories that have emerged from it.

According to Lave and Wenger, a "community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice." The term "impl[ies] participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (98). Embedded in activity theory are two, complementary assumptions: (1) language, literacy, and learning are embedded in communities of practice rather than entirely within the minds of individuals; and (2) communities reproduce themselves through social practices. When these social practices become routinized and interrelated ("just the way things are done") within a community of practice, they may be understood as part of an activity system.

In any given community of practice, some activities will be understood as "appropriate" and others largely inappropriate, and the majority of these activities cannot be understood apart from the activity system in which these actions are perpetuated. That is, actions considered "typical" or otherwise valuable in a given community of practice become a part of the activity system representing that community. These systems are social and cultural rather than individual and objective in that any activity system is made up of groups of individuals who sanction and endorse particular ways of doing things and particular results, identifying some results and processes as innovative and valuable and condemning others as ineffective, inappropriate, or even unacceptable.

Rhetorical dexterity treats learning new literacies as a situated activity; thus, in a sense, this means the basic writing classroom with rhetorical dexterity as its goal offers learners the "legitimate peripheral participation" Lave and Wenger contend is a necessary prerequisite for joining any community of practice. As they explain:

> Learning viewed as a situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skills requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socioeconomic peripheral practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about relations between newcomers and old timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. (29)

A curriculum shaped by a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity thus asks basic writers to examine the "process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice" as they have experienced it in an out-of-school context and to apply that process to the ones required of newcomers in academic communities of practice. In doing so, we ask students to consider questions like the following: What are the activities that make up a community of practice with which you are deeply familiar? How did you learn them? What identities are constructed via these activities? In other words, how is who you are shaped by your experiences within this community of practice? What artifacts are produced via the activities of this community

of practice and how might those compare with the artifacts produced in academic communities of practice?

An approach like this forces participants to pay attention to the inequitable ways literacy is represented and how that representation often paralyzes many already marginalized writers. But as I will try to make clear in this essay, it does not stop there. Certainly, such inequities must be acknowledged before students can gain control over the academic literacy measures shaping their student lives. As teachers representing Standard Edited English and proficient users of it, it is imperative that we recognize these inequities and speak to them—*with* our students and *for* our students—especially given that inequities among literacies and among literate users largely determine how one learns new literacies. However, as I discovered myself via different curricular choices and as I have argued elsewhere (see *The Way Literacy Lives*), pointing out and giving students the space to speak back to those inequities will not enable them to subvert them—or even, in many cases, to begin to represent literacy differently to and for themselves. Instead, we must give them the tools they need to *experience* literacy differently—to look again at the ways in which literacy functions in the multiple and intellectually viable lifeworlds in which they are already full-fledged members.

The Curriculum

"I really do not know who I am as a writer, but I know I am a bad writer."

--Dominique, "Thoughts of a Troubled Writer"

Like many programs, we begin each term by working against the myths that shape commonsense understandings of what basic writers need. But in keeping with the findings of the New Literacy Studies scholars like Brian V. Street and James Paul Gee, we do so within the context of what we know about how literacy functions in the world beyond the largely artificial "school" literacies we often celebrate. In other words, we teach basic writing by articulating and helping our students to articulate the way literacy actually lives, which, as Brandt explains in "Accumulating Literacy," places greater pressure on Americans "not to meet higher literacy standards as has been so frequently argued elsewhere but rather to develop a *flexibility* and *awareness*" (651, emphasis mine).

Thus, not unlike many other basic writing programs, we begin by asking students to articulate the ways in which they have experienced lit-

eracy and learning thus far, especially how they understand the "rules" for writing in school and whether those rules have changed over time, from subject to subject, from classroom to classroom, from project to project. Many basic writers tell us that such rules do change, and these changes often confuse and frustrate them. As one writer explained it recently, "I've been told one thing I did in a previous class was wrong in another. When it was said, I became very upset because I'd been doing what I was taught. Once that barrier was broken I had to *start from scratch*" (emphasis mine). As we know, when literacy is understood as a matter of "correctness," the standards by which "correctness" is judged can cause writers much confusion, especially those who, like this student, witness the standard mutating right before their eyes.

In the next three essays, students investigate vernacular or familiar literacies. We discuss the concept of "communities of practice," reading a brief essay I wrote for just this purpose called "What Is a Community of Practice?"[3] that articulates the ways in which "communities of practice" may function as an appropriate framework for investigating familiar literacies and learning new ones. Students are then asked to explore the "rules" that all literate users must come to know, understand, and be able to negotiate in order to be heard, understood, and taken seriously in that particular community of practice (as a plumber, a deer hunter, or a fan fiction writer for example).

In the third writing assignment, they are asked to investigate a familiar literacy of their choice. Students have chosen everything from quilting to playing dominoes to creating Anime, and these early essays are often quite general in their descriptions of "literate ability" within this target community of practice. At this point, many of them are surprised to find that someone could be as "football illiterate" or "Christian illiterate"[4] as they learn I am and as they learn other readers who are not members of that community of practice tend to be. The objective at this point is to learn how expertise (i.e., "literacy") functions when trying to communicate among people whose experiences, interests, and expertise may differ in some rather substantial ways.

Essays 4 and 5 require a more detailed and sophisticated analysis of two different categories of communities of practice: workplace literacies and those most commonly associated with leisure. In preparation for the essay on workplace literacies, students read and present to one another chapters from Mike Rose's recent book *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*—a series of case studies that articulate the cognitive abilities required of electricians, plumbers, carpenters, welders, waitresses,

and hair stylists, among others. In doing so, they consider the special tools, terminology, values, and body movements that might be required to be accepted as members of these communities of practice. Many students draw upon their own expertise in the fields they investigate (previous students include the daughter of a plumber or a Mexican immigrant with fifteen years experience as a building inspector).

In preparation for Essay 5 (on literacies associated with "play"), we examine and discuss excerpts from Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* and James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Literacy and Learning*, both of which treat video games as intellectually rigorous spaces that demand much of players—not only those learning to play the game for the first time but also those who are already highly literate players.[5] Previous students have examined the "rules" for membership in communities of practice like skateboarding, photography, basketball, *Halo 2*, and cheerleading. Again, they analyze the specific strategies literate users employ to be heard, understood, and taken seriously among other literate members of this community of practice. Here, they begin to really articulate the specific events that taught them what they needed to know to become insiders in the target community.

The next two essays are revisions of earlier ones. In Essay 6, we return to the literacies the students associate with school, asking them to "think about all we've done in class thus far and consider what it might have to teach us about the 'rules' for writing in school and how they might be established, upheld, and perpetuated. What special terminology is embedded in these rules? How does it change from context to context? How do we learn these rules? What special knowledge do we need to have before we can embark on a new reading/writing project? Why?" In doing so, we hope they will begin to represent their experiences with school literacies in less "autonomous" and more situated terms. Most do. Essay 7 is a revision of one of the three essays exploring vernacular literacies.

The final essay asks students to compare and contrast the literacies needed for a community of practice seemingly unrelated to school with those literacies required of writers at the college level. In preparation for this essay, writers develop a one-page handout comparing these two literacies, which they then present to the class. The presentation itself serves as fodder for the final essay.

The genre these writers use to report their findings is important as it forces them to develop a meta-analysis of a given community of practice in terms that those who are illiterate in that community might need in order

to make sense of it and perhaps to join it. Reporting on the findings of Copeland's 1985 study of the effects of writing on learning, Cheryl Geisler shares Copeland's "warning":

> [I]n using writing to help students learn, one should structure writing activities so that they help students incorporate in their writing those particular ideas they are expected to learn. If students write about a topic but are not asked to do so in a way that helps them focus upon the targeted information, writing may not help students achieve the learning goals set forth. (Copeland qtd. in Geisler 115)

The "targeted information" in rhetorical dexterity is the way literacy lives within a variety of communities of practice, thus the genres themselves ask writers to consider what someone unfamiliar with that community of practice might need to know. According to Marian (a pseudonym, as are all student names in this article), an art major and recent student in our program, this meta-awareness is very useful. As she explains, investigating familiar literacies in this way forced her to articulate things about them that she instinctively knew in some ways but had not been able to consciously apply in new contexts. As she explains, communities outside of school and those related to work

> don't usually have written rules like academic discourse communities, so we had to look beyond words to find out what the rules were. . . . After all the assignments we've done so far, . . . I felt like I know myself better than before. All the rules in the . . . communities we all know that they are there, but writing them down and analyzing them sort of marks their existence in our mind.

Each community of practice is made up of, among other things, behaviors shaped by ideologies particular to that community which may seem odd to outsiders but are merely commonsense to members of the community. From the ideologies informing a particular community emerge the "rules" one should know and apply before she will be considered "literate" by other literate members. The problem is that without working consciously against those things that we instinctively assume to be plain commonsense, the real rules will remain largely unavailable to outsiders and unteachable by insiders. That is the way ideology functions; ideology, as Marilyn Cooper

explains, "just sits there, making the world we think we know" (159). The genre through which these writers are asked to communicate the invisible "rules" users must know and make use of in order to be heard, understood, and taken seriously "marks their existence in [their] mind[s]," which enables them to analyze and make deliberate use of that knowledge base in new, largely unfamiliar contexts.

The curricular choices that might effectively make use of a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity extend well beyond the ones described above. What I offer here is just one option, and we will continue to rework our own curricula as interest and student needs demand it. In the remaining pages of this article, I will attempt to describe student responses to this particular curriculum in ways that I hope will enable readers to see what those students were able to gain from this specific incarnation of it.

School Literacies (Essays 1, 2, and 6)

"They are outrageous with the rules. They've even gotten to the point where they've started combining shit. Like combining a period with a comma and calling it a semi-colon. They even use two upside down commas beside each other known as quotations. I interviewed my friend Jessica. She says, 'I don't like semi-colons. Why can't they just be a damn comma[?]'"

--Lamanda

Student representations of school literacies largely replicate what Adler-Kassner and Harrington describe as a "huge gulf" between "being a writer" and "learning to write." In other words, at the beginning of the term very few of these students see themselves as real writers, despite the fact that many write quite often in their lifeworlds beyond school. Holly, a theater major who describes herself as an "avid reader with severe dyslexia," reads and writes pages of fan fiction each and every day. Fan fiction, as I learned from Holly, is fiction developed to extend the story lines created and reproduced in media outlets like comic books, Hollywood films, television, and even video games. Fans of particular television shows/books/video games/films extract their favorite characters and develop stories around them. These stories must be consistent with the "universe" in which this character first emerged but can take liberties that may not have occurred in the original. Holly describes the appeal of fan fiction this way:

> Fan fiction has now become quite a habit for me. In high school, I'd come home as fast as I could, sit down in front of the computer,

> and read for hours on end, getting drawn into these stories. It takes me away from reality and I find myself becoming a character in one of the many stories.

The stories themselves are generated by fans and circulated among these same fans via Internet sites devoted to the subject. Thus, as Holly is a fan of the Anime series *Techni Muyo!*, she frequents fan fiction sites devoted to that series and its key characters.

Like many students in our basic writing program, however, Holly has never found reading and writing for school at all appealing. Thus, many begin the term by describing themselves as "bad writers" who "hate" writing, a self-assessment they attribute to either a lack of familiarity with "the rules" for writing or an "obsession" with the rules. As one writer, Dominique, puts it, "Beginning writers often want to know what hard and fast rules are, the rules we simply must follow. Sometimes writing teachers and books of advice even provide us with the rules, which we then get obsessive [about]." In his second essay, another basic writer concurs: "Sometimes when I am writing, I get frustrated by minor things. . . . For example: when I'm writing a sentence, I still have ideas or words that still go with that sentence. But I can't finish it, because then it becomes a run-on sentence. *Once again, I become a victim of the rules*" (emphasis mine).

The rules for writing, it seems, are both mysterious and confining. Many express frustration at their inability to learn "the rules" of writing, as well as the ways in which they feel that, once learned, these rules continue to distance what they *want* to say from what they feel they *can* say. Ruben argues that while such rules may be "necessary," they often "tend to stop me from expressing everything I want to say." In her sixth writing assignment, Emilia makes a similar argument: "If you are given certain . . . rules to follow, that limits your ability to express yourself as an individual writer, stripping you of your creative rights." In her second essay, "No Rules, No Pass," Ashley concurs, arguing that the rules, especially what she calls "the five paragraph rule . . . limits my ability to express how I feel about the writing assignment." In fact, she continues,

> . . . I think that rule sucks and should be removed from *wherever the rules of writing are made*. I suggest that teachers of the future should: first, open children minds that there are many different ways of writing . . . and never teach a child that their teaching of the rules is the only way we should know. (emphasis mine)

These students understand, instinctively, that the rules change, but the changes seem unpredictable and largely arbitrary. Steven asserts that "the . . . rules, for some reason, seem to change according to the person grading." Others, like Emilia, locate the source of this change in the circumstances in which school writing takes place. Writing near the end of the semester, Emilia explains:

> Before taking this class, I thought writing was pointless, boring, frustrating, confusing, and had too many rules to follow. All those feelings came from many years of being taught so many different rules and being penalized for using them. The most recent case of that happen was my sophomore year in high school when we had to take a practice test of the new standardized state test, the TAKS. Now we were not given any previous warning of how the test was to be graded or what was expected to be written. . . . [Before the test], I had been making super grades in my English class because I had mastered the art of whatever rules for writing we were expected to follow, so I thought I had that test grade in the bag. When it came down to it, I had scored a one (the lowest grade possible) out of a possible four *because I was following rules that no longer applied to the new writing styles of the present time*. . . . I began to realize the severity of how these rules were affecting my grades as well as my knowledge as a student. (emphasis mine)

Another writer offers a similar reading of his experiences with writing "rules": "There are so many different ways of writing. I learn one way then have to learn another. What I mean by this is what I write really depends on my teacher and my surrounding." From this experience, he likely learned what Emilia describes as "the severity of how these rules were affecting my grades as well as my knowledge as a student." For Emilia, thank goodness, the consequences of not knowing the new rules for the latest high-stakes context would not continue to be quite as negative, at least as far as TAKS was concerned. As she explains,

> Later on in my sophomore and beginning of my senior year of high school, I learned the "correct" way to write for TAKS, and went in knowing what was expected to know in order to pass the writing portion of the test. From taking this English 100 class, I know there really isn't a "correct" way to write and it isn't always pointless.

Like Ashley who argues that the "five paragraph rule sucks" and should be changed, many of the writers in our program view this rule-mak-

ing dynamic as mutable, but they have difficulty locating the persons or institutions responsible for making these decisions. Shatavia asks, "Who created these rules, the government? It's funny how these rules come up but no one knows who created them." Among those who grew up in Texas, where writing "rules" are largely upheld by high-stakes tests—preparation for the tests and the test itself—many hypothesize that these rules were, in fact, made up by the government. In his fourth essay, Ruben tells us, "The government plays a big role in the creation of the rules of writing because of all the tests they make for us to go to college." Speaking of these tests, he explains, "the government was making [things] harder and harder as time was passing." Desmond reminds us how intricately connected are the "rules for writing" as enforced via state-mandated tests like TAKS and THEA and the very courses in which he must enroll:

> As the years continue to go by, the government seems to keep enforcing more and more rules, and laws that you must write a certain amount of essays each year you are in school. Some college classes and high school classes are taken due to requirements of the government even though they might not be needed.

He ends on a note that succinctly expresses the powerlessness writers often feel in the face of further marginalization via institutionalized oppression like this: ". . . if you were to try and fight the government about this issue, then they would probably try to take what ever you already have away and not even give it to anyone else." Caroline responds to this hopelessness with biting humor: "Who invented these rules? The government? If a writer messes up, would the FBI come and arrest them? How dumb can that be? It's like an unexplainable mystery waiting to be solved." It was not until we began exploring other literacies that writers like these would begin to speak of literacy in terms that seemed to free them from the frustrations imposed via artificial and arbitrary writing rules.

Out-of-School Literacies

"Every now and then I am given the opportunity to write about something I am passionate about. I feel like I can express my thoughts in an orderly fashion and feel good about it. I do not think of it as a waste of time or a blow-off assignment to make a passing grade in class. It is a chance like this, which makes me feel like I am able to write and get my point across effectively. It is the only time I really enjoy writing."

--Gretna, "Writing's Hold on Me"

Mike began our program, as he explains in his final reflections near

the end of the term, "a very frustrated twenty-six year old man." His frustration was, in part, a natural consequence of returning to school after several years in the manufacturing sector of the work force, but it was amplified considerably by our requirement that his first paper for us speak directly to his experiences with writing in school. As he remembers his response to the first-day writing assignment several weeks earlier, "writing in school was just a very sore subject for me at the time that paper was written." In the second week of the class when he came to the writing center for assistance with his paper about the "rules" for writing in school, he was understandably frustrated: "Look, I haven't been in school for almost ten years," he said, growing obviously and increasingly more agitated. "I never knew the rules then, and I certainly can't talk about them now."

"Okay, so talk about what you do know," I said. "There are no wrong answers." He remained unconvinced. I asked him to tell me what he did in his spare time. "I don't know. Why does it matter?" He finally told me he did a lot of hunting, so I asked him to talk about the "rules for hunting." How did you come to learn them? Are they written down somewhere? Can you break them? What is their purpose? After quite a bit of discussion about hunting, we returned to his experiences in school. "Tell me a story," I requested. "What's the first thing you remember about school—not necessarily the rules associated with writing but with your experiences as a student." He started to write. Later in the term, Mike would describe our exchange this way:

> Dr. Carter and I went back and forth for at least an hour about why she thought I could write this paper. Finally, I gave in and began writing. I didn't stop until I had 3 pages. Something happened inside me [that day] and I knew I was going to love to write.

But it would not be until he started to unpack the literacies associated with his workplace experiences that things would really begin to change for him as a writer, as he explains in his final essay for the term:

> When I started Literacies at Work, I was so excited. I had a lot of work experience to draw from for this paper, . . . [b]ut after brainstorming for a while I decided that the most interesting job to write about would be injection molding. . . .
>
> This paper was about my employment with Retco Tool Company and all the processes that were involved in manufacturing carbide parts using injection molding equipment. I had several people read this paper and I revised it 3 times before turning it in

> to my teacher. When [my teacher] returned the paper back to me, I could tell that she was impressed with my work. She had probably never heard about most of the information in this paper because this type of work is unique and there are only three company's in the world that have been able to perfect making carbide using low-pressure injection molding techniques.

It was that paper about the literacy requirements of Retco Tool Company that would make the greatest difference for him as a writer. "After writing [the essay about his workplace literacies,]," he argues, "I had pretty well figured out that English writing class was not the only literate community on the planet" (8).

Younger writers may have had fewer workplace experiences from which to draw, but most still found the experience of investigating a familiar community of practice associated with a workplace useful to them in rethinking the way literacy lives in communities of practice beyond school. Many drew from their experience with part-time jobs as a cashier at McDonald's, a shift leader at Jack in the Box, a server at IHOP, or a grocery clerk at the local supermarket. As Derek describes it, his position as a "courtesy clerk" at Brookshire's can be summed up this way: "What I do at my job is talk to people, make them feel comfortable where they are at, and pack the hell out of their groceries while talking to them." Steven chooses to describe his job as a cashier at the same grocery store as decidedly more complex. At first glace, he explains, the job of the cashier may seem simple enough: "The cashier . . . must . . . make sure he hands back the correct change and [that] you walk out with everything you have paid for." However, while this may seem "easy . . . there are many things that are in a cashier's mind while checking out a customer," things like "his scan time" ("how many items he can scan per minute is crucial. A top scan time could earn honors like Employee of the Month"), keeping the cash drawer accurate, and "memorizing the produce codes."

As Derek describes his position, the primary value-sets in the community of practice that is "packing groceries" are activities that make the customer feel "comfortable" and get the groceries packed quickly. The customer's "comfort" is important to Brookshire's management as they must compete with the lower prices Wal-Mart offers just down the road. "Courtesy," according to employees like Steven and Derek, is "what sets us apart." An awareness of the "external design grammar"[6] to use Gee's words, of a given community of practice thus enables Derek and Steven to prioritize activities

within their positions—Wal-Mart offers "low prices" but not the "courtesy" available to shoppers at Brookshire's (no one carries out a shopper's groceries at Wal-Mart, for example). Steven knows that a quick "scan time" and an accurate cash drawer are valuable activities in this particular community of practice as well—a value established and reinforced within this community of practice via "honors" like "Employee of the Month." He is also aware of the "internal design grammar"[7] that affects his ability to meet the objectives valued within this community; things like "memorizing produce codes" are important because looking up these produce codes would reduce his "scan time" considerably.

Speed and accuracy are valuable in Paola's work as a waitress at IHOP as well, and this community of practice also requires "good social skills," a "good memory," and the capacity "to do two or more things at the same time." As she explains, "every job has its own rules, ideas, and its own way to get the job done." The activities required to "get the job done" are reproduced organically by virtue of the "tips" that work as incentive within this community of practice, but they are also reproduced more formally by the specific tools made available to the servers via the restaurant in which they serve and the systems by which the supervisors and the corporation of which the specific location is a part have in place. For Paola, this meant:

> [W]hen I started to work as a waitress, my boss explained to me what I should have to do, how to serve the customers, used the register machine, and write the tickets, that way the cook would not get confused with the order. I had to follow one of the waitresses with more experience to see how to serve, take people's orders, ask for drinks, and give to the customer an appetizer while they are waiting for their food.

Thus, it appears that several of the activities reproduced in this community of practice are learned by newcomers via what Lave and Wenger call "legitimate peripheral participation." While training, Paola "participated" in this community of practice by shadowing a full-fledged member to learn what she does so she can, in turn, begin performing the activities of waiting tables in many of the same ways. Again, the values guiding work as a server appear to be courtesy, accuracy, and speed. She needs a system for approaching the tables in order to keep the customers happy (drinks refilled, food ordered in a timely manner and in such a way that "the cook would not get confused," etc). Her "legitimate peripheral participation" in this community of practice while training enabled her to develop fluency

in the "internal design grammar" of this system.

Some values-sets are reproduced via more formal training materials, as is the case with the large and highly regulated company McDonald's. As Courtney explains, the activities reproduced at McDonald's are much more formalized than they seem to have been for servers at IHOP. According to Courtney, "When working at McDonald's you must be train before be[ing] put in a specific area." She continues:

> You have to watch videos on everything a McDonald's worker have to do. The video might take all day or make two day. You must watch video on how to cook the food from fries, to meat, breakfast item. . . . Also you must know how to clean. You can not clean a McDonald's restaurant like you clean your house. You must have cleaning item that McDonald's get from a company. Such as special Windex, sanitizer for towel and dishes as well.

The systems McDonald's employees must adhere to when completing tasks within this context are deeply dependent upon the corporate structure of which their particular location is but a part. The values reproduced within this community of practice may be accuracy and speed, but of primary importance here is uniformity—in methods, in tools, in the artifacts produced. As Courtney puts it, "McDonalds is a fast food business, but that does not mean we are always fast. Sometimes we might take the wrong order, put the wrong things in the bags, or might not give the right change back." As Steven describes his work as a cashier at Brookshire's, these activities would be grounds for dismissal in the communities of practice with which he is most familiar. At McDonald's, however, at least according to Courtney, they are quite commonplace.

What Out-of-School Literacies Have to Teach Us About Academic Ones

Course Objectives: The student will (1) understand that literacy is context-dependent, (2) investigate one or more familiar communities of practice, (3) articulate the unwritten rules participants must obey in that community of practice if they want to remain/become accepted as members, (4) investigate new literacies in order to articulate the unwritten rules participants must likewise obey (or at least acknowledge), (5) locate and articulate the points of contact between familiar literacies and school-based ones, (6) examine and—where possible—articulate the points of dissonance between different communities of practice, and (7) put rhetorical dexterity to use in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes.

-Course syllabus

Derek doesn't play many video games because of his visual impairment. As he explains, "I cannot see the detail that is needed to play some of them." He does play a lot of *Madden 2003*, however—a football simulation video game. Derek is drawn to this particular video game, he explains, because he's a football player and "the ethics and terminology is about the same. I have found that it is a lot easier to play a game that you will already have some kind of understanding to. It has so much to do with past experiences." In many ways, then, this game parallels for him more traditional education. As he explains, "I feel that video games are very educational, because you have to take time to learn the meaning of the game, . . . the purpose of the game, and . . . the combinations of codes that will have to be used to successfully beat the game." Likewise, approaching a new writing assignment requires writers to take time to learn the internal and external design grammars limiting and shaping the relevant rhetorical spaces, the "purpose" of the assignment itself as understood by the key evaluators responsible for it, and "the combinations of codes" (language use, special terminology, rhetorical moves) that will be required of them as they negotiate this complex writing task. Thus a familiarity with similar activities—particularly as the similarity is based on the new literacy being a simulated version of the one already well known to him—enables Derek to adapt quickly to this new environment. He understands, however, that many times the new literacy being learned will depend on codes, conventions, and rules that are largely unfamiliar to him. While this budding awareness does worry him a bit, he tells us that he is much happier thinking of literacy as "different" everywhere rather than always the same.

In his final essay (entitled "Knuckle Grinding"), Brad argues that, for him, learning new literacies depends not so much on familiarity—as Derek contends—but on a willingness to take risks. Accordingly, as Brad explains, "writing is a lot like playing extreme paintball: When you're on the field and you don't know the game, you're going to get shot down, and it hurts. . . . So when this happen all you can do is sit out that once and wipe the paint off and jump back in, and use the skills you learned from the last game like what to do and not to improve your skills that much more."

Thus, a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity also requires that the learner not only redefine literacy in terms more consistent with the ideological model Street advocates ("Autonomous," *Social Literacies*), but also develop a willingness to take risks to determine the limits and possibilities available within the new context and weigh the consequences of adherence with any desire to resist doing so. The value of risk-taking behavior in learning

new literacies is often much more visible in communities of practice associated with games like paintball and video games than those associated with school, however. In the strange and provocative weblog *The Dancing Sausage*, a recent contributor makes clear that the "video game literate" are those who are "willing to die":

> The ultimate test of video game literacy is this: Are you willing to die? The video game literate generally are. . . . They'll try any button until they figure out what works. They will walk over the shimmering circle which may be a land mine, may be a warp portal; they will chase after the bouncing ball which may turn out to be a health restorative, may turn out to be a bomb. They'll try anything once. If it proves to be lethal, they'll try not to do it again.

According to this contributor's argument, literate players are willing to die for at least two reasons. First, they know "death" is the likely consequence of taking the risks necessary to learn what's possible in this new context; second, because in video games, "death" is relatively insignificant. Each player has multiple "lives" available to her. If her ship sustains too much battle fire to go on, she's issued a new one. No questions asked. If she "dies" more times than the number of "lives" allocated to a given player, she simply starts a brand new game. Players risk death in order to learn from it, and they are willing to "die" because death in this context is rather meaningless.

It is important to note, however, that to the video game literate, a willingness to die is not the same as finding no value in living. Quite the contrary. Actually, death in a video game is no more (and no less) than the ultimate threat—a danger one immediately takes charge of when one is willing to die. Death for the literate gamer is a necessary risk, however; otherwise the player can never really learn what's possible within that virtual context and which activities are too deadly to ever try again. For Brad, "death" in a game of paintball offers him the same opportunity to learn, and in comparing this important prerequisite for learning when playing paintball with the need for risk-taking behavior in developing print-based texts in school, he learns to embrace risk there, too, rather than continue to, in his words, "play it safe." Transference from a familiar literacy to an unfamiliar one is easiest for Derek when the new literacy is not completely unlike the old one; for Brad, this transference is possible once he learns to value and again make use of the same risk-taking behavior that serves him so well in gaming contexts like paintball.

Gretna also chose to compare out-of-school literacies with writing as a learner, paying particular attention to the ways in which she became a "legitimate" member of more familiar communities of practice and how she planned to make use of these lessons in this new context. For Gretna, one of the key issues that continued to affect her perception of herself as a writer was her concern about the constraints of time. But in developing her presentation that compared gaming literacies to what she called "writing literacies," she began to consider the ways in which her success in the video game *Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*) also depended on her ability to think fast. As she explains, throughout the game you must think "the steps through," much like she discovered she had to when writing her timed response to the high-stakes test that placed her in basic writing. *DDR* is a console game that uses a floor pad on which players "dance" rather than a control unit with obvious buttons or a joystick. The player (or players) selects a song, then attempts to step where the signals on the television screen tell her to step (signals on screen are color-coded, as is the floor pad).

According to Gretna, this experience requires lots of quick thinking. Apparently, when playing *DDR*, players must ask themselves, "Which foot will they have to move their bodies to dance as efficiently as possible?" She continues:

> It's the same thing with writing. The topic you are writing about requires thinking it through and finding the best way to explain something. Timing is everything [too]. Being able to pace yourself according to the time given to you and the length of a song are definitely a big part of both activities.

Thus, in making these comparisons, Gretna was required to consider the ways in which she had been able to successfully negotiate time constraints in some rather complex spaces (like *DDR*), a revelation that helped her develop much more confidence as a writer in unfamiliar rhetorical spaces. Interestingly enough, she does point out at least one advantage that "writing literacies" have over gaming literacies: "While writing, you are able to think about what you are going to write about. Unfortunately, you are not able to plan out or predict the steps you will be making while playing *DDR*. The screen only shows you a small amount of what you will be dancing to at a time" and you get no choice in the dance steps you are required to mimic.

Rather than examining the "in-the-moment" experiences of playing/writing in contexts like school and video games, Adrian, an avid player of

what he tells us is "futbol" (not "soccer"), chose to compare team "formations" to rhetorical traits of writing like "organization." As he explains,

> . . . when you use formations in futbol you use it so that you have organization on the field in order to develop a play. . . . A formation is all about placement and it does affect all the other player[.] If one player doesn't know it doesn't work. A formation is chosen by seeing what formation an opponent is bringing on the field and then you use a formation that will hurt them. . . . Well with writing you can use formations in order to organize your paper and even develop a well organized paper.

Sports were a common choice among many writers in our program. Danny compares reading for school with his position on the football field as a linebacker.

> In my mind there are many ways of reading. . . . When I played as a linebacker, I would have to read plays. First I would have to tell if it was a passing or a running play. If it was a passing play, I would have to drop back into my zone and cover whoever entered it. If it was a running play, I would have to figure out which side the play was going to, who was carrying the ball, which hole it was going to go through, and what my job was. I had to read all this all within three seconds. I found this very difficult.

Danny "read" the football field in many of the same ways Adrian and his teammates "read" (current formations) and "wrote" (new formations) in response to this reading. As players (of football in Danny's case, of futbol in Adrian's case), both students had to anticipate where the players were going; they both had to "read" and be able to make sense of the logic guiding the opposing team's plays before they could determine the best way to respond to them. They both had to do this quickly, and only the football/futbol literate know how. Danny continues: "In a way this is also how we read books. When you read a book you have to be able to tell who was telling the story, where the story was taking place, when the story was happening, and what the story was about."

In making these comparisons, then, these writers were able to redefine literacy in terms more in keeping with the way literacy lives, (re)produced within a given community of practice with a deeply situated, people-oriented

set of behaviors considered "literate" and very specific consequences for not following the rules. As Marian puts it in her response to Essay 6 assigned late in the term, "No matter what we think of these rules, obey is the only option. Every community formed its own language. . . . If we are in school, this community of practice, then we have to follow the[ir] rules, because that's how this community works. People who can't follow the rules will be left out of the community, no matter how intelligent they are."

By the end of the term, however, most writers understand that these rules change as the context changes—changes that are neither entirely arbitrary nor always predictable. To illustrate, Marian offers an interesting example of the common elementary school lesson "'ain't' ain't a word." According to Marian, we are often taught in school that "[t]he word 'ain't' can never be seen in a formal paper." She finds this lesson highly problematic; as she explains, "[t]he word 'ain't' might not need to be defined as non verbal but" instead as "a word that belongs to another community." This statement alone reveals the ways in which she is beginning to treat literacy as a social practice rather than a universal norm.

In effect, the real objective of the course is not to get students to produce sophisticated academic discourse that is well organized, concrete, and convincing. That is certainly *an* objective, but as one reviewer of an earlier draft of this article asked, "What makes you believe that it is this particular sequence of essays/readings/coursework that helps students toward rhetorical dexterity, rather than the simple fact that they write six college-level essays, with the support of studio-type peer- and mentor-feedback"?[8] From our analysis, it appears that by taking this course students do, indeed, learn how to produce academic discourse that may be judged effective in even the most traditional of contexts. I agree, however, that their abilities to do so are likely the result of smart, constructive "peer- and mentor-feedback" as well as the new curriculum.

What students do gain from a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity and this particular curriculum, I argue, is a new understanding of the way literacy actually lives—a metacognitive ability to negotiate multiple literacies by understanding that "literacy is not literacy is not literacy" (Schultz and Hull 19). The course did not, necessarily, give students "literate strategies" that they could easily translate from one community to the next, at least not automatically or without rereading the unfamiliar community of practice in similarly rigorous ways. In the end, then, making relevant the communities of practice with which they were already quite familiar (often even experts in) helped these students redefine literacy for themselves in more productive ways. As

one writer puts it in her final reflections for the course, "Overall, I learned that academics can be related to everything we do. . . . Some people find it as hard as I did at first to relate their [familiar] communities to academics. As I found out by doing so, everything we do or say is related to academics in some way or else how do we learn to do or say these things?" In other words, how we learn in any community of practice is necessarily going to help us understand how to learn new literacies in academic communities. It appears obvious, once we make it obvious. That is what we must do for our students and—in doing so—help them do for themselves.

Notes

1. The writing sample is often a response to a question of policy (like required school uniforms or recycling programs), where it is expected the writer will take a single position (pro or con) and defend it in prose that exhibits high levels of "competency" in areas like (1) appropriateness, (2) unity and focus, (3) development, (4) sentence structure, (5) usage, and (6) mechanical conventions. Literacy skills measured according to responses to multiple choice questions include the following: (1) "determine the meaning of words and phrases," (2) "recognize effective sentences," and (3) "recognize edited American English usage" ("Section II: TASP Skills").

2. Deborah Mutnick offers some compelling arguments for maintaining deep awareness of the political and institutional forces limiting and shaping basic writing programs, as do Keith Rhodes and Mary Soliday (especially in *The Politics of Remediation).* In *As If Learning Mattered*, Richard Miller offers similar warnings for similar reasons, since nothing we do in the academy ever takes place "under conditions of complete freedom," as much as we'd like to believe otherwise. In fact, there are many "material, cultural, and institutional constraints that both define and confine all learning situations" (7).

3. A copy of this essay, as well as a recent incarnation of this course sequence (for 2006-2007), can be found at <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/bwp_introduction.htm>.

4. In a recent presentation for CCCC, I explore the ways in which my own Christian illiteracies have complicated my work with some of my most religious students (Carter "Living Inside the Bible Belt").

5. We also viewed *Trekkies* as an interesting example of how fandom func-

tions as a community of practice, as well as an episode of the British reality show *Faking It* in which a fry cook learns what he needs to pass as a master chef at a top restaurant in London. Future sequences may make use of the cult film *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* as it examines the value-sets, activities, language, clothing, and other elements that mark the activities associated with heavy metal fandom (at least in the mid 1980s). The film is a strange documentary in which an amateur filmmaker simply records the activities of fans "hanging out" in the parking lot before a Judas Priest concert.

6. James Paul Gee defines "external design grammar" as "the principles and patterns in terms of what one can recognize as what is and is not acceptable or typical social practice and identity in response to the affinity group associated with a semiotic domain" (*What Video Games* 30). For our purposes, "affinity group" and "semiotic domain" may be considered synonymous with "community of practice." According to Gee, "People in an affinity group can recognize others as more or less 'insiders' to the group. They may not see many people in the group face-to-face, but when they interact with someone on the Internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking, writing, valuing, and believing as well as the typical sorts of social practices associated with a given semiotic domain. This is to view the domain externally" (27).

7. According to James Paul Gee, "internal design grammar" refers to the "principles and patterns in terms of what one can recognize that is and is not acceptable or typical content in a semiotic domain" (or "community of practice").

8. Two hours each week, English 100 students meet with a group of five to seven other writers led by a peer tutor—this in addition to the three hours each week they spend with their English 100 classroom instructor. In these writing groups, students workshop papers and challenge themselves and one another to think of reading and writing in new ways via their Dialogue Journals (as suggested by Ann Berthoff) and their Dialogue Journal Conferences (as suggested by Yancey and Huot in *The Journal Book: For Teachers of At-Risk College Writers),* all of which inform their development of a reflective essay in which they articulate the way the work they generated this term meets the course objectives, as articulated at the beginning of this section. Again, visit <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/bwp_introduction.htm> for more specific information about the course, including relevant course materials.

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