

Roberta; or, the Ambiguities: Tough Love and High-Stakes Assessment at a Two-Year College in North Georgia

Spencer Salas

ABSTRACT: This ethnographic narrative employs a neo-Vygotskian perspective (Holland et al.) to examine how, in the setting of a remedial ESL program at a public two-year college in North Georgia, the subject position of an ESL basic writing instructor was mediated by her understandings of and engagement with the multiple and interactive contexts of her professional activity. Despite a wide variety of tensions that complicated the instructor's understandings of who she was professionally, Roberta was able to position herself in ways that allowed her to make sense of her professional choices. However, her construction of gatekeeping as advocacy brought with it an emotional toll at the end of each semester when some students passed and some students failed—shaking the sense of her tough-love pedagogical stance. Representations of basic writing professionals are critiqued to argue the need for more nuanced research for and with basic writing faculty in the activist college composition literature.

KEYWORDS: two-year college; teachers' mental lives; basic writing; ESL students; Generation I.5; postsecondary remediation

In a navy blue Vietnamese *ao-dai*, Roberta,¹ a temporary full-time ESL adjunct, leaned across the screen of her PC's keyboard and into her e-mails. Not Vietnamese, as her traditional costume might have implied, Roberta was Thai, and from the northern reaches of that country. Adopted by Evangelical North American missionaries at three months old—hence her Christian name—Roberta commented that she was routinely complimented on the quality of her spoken English by her colleagues at Sweet Water, the two-year college in North Georgia where she taught

Swiveling toward me as I knocked on the door of the yellow cinderblock cubicle in Academic III, Roberta initiated our Monday morning ritual—trash-talk starting with the story of how the weekend's violent thunderstorms had knocked over a Bartlett pear

Spencer Salas is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

tree in the front yard of her house in suburban Atlanta, a house that she and her husband were about to put on the market. Dave, her computer-geek husband, hoping it might grow back in the spring, pruned it down to a stump. Immediately, Roberta had him remove the “Charlie Brown tree” to the woods behind their house.

“So what’s your secret for getting so many to pass the Compass?” I asked—shifting to my researcher role. To the delight of Sweet Water’s Learning Support administrators, 85% of Roberta’s students consistently entered the postsecondary mainstream—passing her course, the English Department’s exit essay, and the COMPASS exam in Writing.

“‘Cause I’m a MoFo” [motherfucker].

This “tale of the field” (Van Maanen) is about Roberta’s “MoFo”—an ethnographic narrative of how, in the institutional specificity of a public two-year college in North Georgia, a full-time, temporary ESL basic writing adjunct was able to position herself in ways that allowed her to make sense of who she was professionally, what her work achieved, and, furthermore, to construct the gatekeeping in which she implicitly participated as a form of advocacy for the students she taught.

Contemporary activist research for L2 postsecondary writers has worked, among other things, to deconstruct the complex and layered histories of monolingual English writing instruction in U.S. institutions of higher learning (Horner and Trimbur; Horner), the representation of U.S. educated English learners in postsecondary classrooms (Harklau, “Representations”; Harklau, “Newcomers in”; Harklau, “From the ‘Good Kids’”), narrowly conceived notions of academic literacies (Zamel and Spack; Canagarajah, *Critical Academic Writing*), and the hegemony of “standard” written English (Lu, “An Essay”). Collectively, such discussions are characteristic of a twenty-year Freirean critical consciousness raising/”conscientização” of postsecondary composition studies framing basic writing instructors as potentially transgressive or transformative intellectuals whose critical pedagogy represents a brand of cultural politics for liberating L2 writers from the asymmetrical power relations of the postsecondary writing classroom (for a comprehensive twenty-year review, see, Durst).

Problematically, L2 writing teachers such as Roberta—and the emotional toll they may feel because of their complex and, at times, conflicted, subject positions—are somewhat under-represented in the literature advocating on behalf of postsecondary English learners. When they do appear, they

are habitually portrayed as one-dimensional gatekeepers barring immigrant students from the two-year college mainstream (Valdés 145) or as self-styled provocateurs (Lu, “Professing Multiculturalism”; hooks; Shor).

As the number of two-year institutions offering English as a Second Language continues to increase dramatically, especially in areas of the country with large immigrant populations (Schuyler), ESL basic writing faculty are increasingly the first individuals such learners encounter in postsecondary education. How such professionals make sense of who they are and what their work accomplishes matters.

More nuanced descriptions of basic writing teachers working for and with English learners are needed to understand how individuals navigate institutional environments where, potentially, they are, as Roberta was, compelled to assume multiple, if not conflicting, roles and constituencies as advocates for the English learners they teach, and gatekeepers for the postsecondary institutions that employ them. These multifaceted professional constructions are potentially complicated by unyielding institutional definitions of what it means to be ready for college-level work, by the politics of immigration, and by the conundrums of the unfolding lives of those same professionals and the students they teach. More careful examinations of these teachers and students are needed to help make sense of the competing national and local discourses surrounding issues of English learners and other non-traditional students at the postsecondary level.

THE STUDY

Data Generation

Roberta’s story emerged as part of a five-semester qualitative inquiry distributed over two academic years that initially began as a project for qualitative research coursework and grew into a dissertation. My entry to Sweet Water College followed from the coincidence of my running into its ESL Learning Support program coordinator early in 2004 and asking if she knew of an ESL classroom that I might observe. By mid-January of that year, I had made my first visit to the college—a commute that continued through fall 2004, spring 2005, fall 2005, and spring 2006. Participatory data collection shifted as the questions I asked during the semesters evolved, eventually constituting more than 250 hours of site visits as documented in 300-plus pages of fieldnotes, 500-plus pages of instructional artifacts, 10 hours of audiotaped classroom interactions, and more than 10 hours of structured

audiotaped conversations with Roberta and the four other ESL composition instructors involved in the study. My roles ranged from being a silent observer taking notes on an Alpha-Smart (a portable, battery-powered keyboard) to becoming an active participant helping with small-group or individual work in the classroom. In a number of instances, I willingly substitute taught for the participating teachers; and, in spring 2006, I joined the ESL program at Sweet Water as a part-time adjunct faculty member.

Theoretical Framework and Analytic Method

Cultural anthropologists have long argued that how women and men come to be as individuals is largely dependent on their participation in the societies or cultures to which they are born or recruited—what they commonly refer to as “cultural models” (Holland and Quinn). The anthropological construct of cultural models—processes that shape thinking and emotions through repertoires of presupposed and popularly shared knowledge—have since been affiliated to Vygotsky’s notion of mediating devices. Complex sorts of Vygotskian “helping means” (Holland and Valsiner; Holland and Cole), cultural models enable individuals to know how, what, and why to do, to think, and to feel in any variety of human situations. They allow, for example, a North American undergraduate to fall in love or a recovering alcoholic to narrate his conversion to a group of likeminded peers (cf., Holland and Quinn; Holland and Lave; Holland et al.).

Bringing Vygotskian understandings of the liberatory and seemingly limitless possibilities of the semiotic mediation of children’s play and Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic self to the construct of cultural models, Dorothy Holland et al. theorize a human propensity “to figure worlds, play at them, act them out, and then make them socially, culturally, and thus materially consequential” (280). Accordingly, Holland et al. propose the construct of “figured worlds”—worlds that women and men collectively write and rewrite in “practice” (Bourdieu) through what Holland et al. name, “improvisation.”

Introducing the concept of improvisation with an anecdote, Holland et al. tell the story of Maya, an “untouchable” woman in Nepal. Prohibited from entering Holland and Skinner’s home through the front door lest she “pollute” the cooking area, Maya climbed up the side of the house and into the office for the interview she and they were intent on having. Climbing up the side of the house was her improvisation—a spontaneous alternative to the subject positions afforded to her at that moment.

Thinking about Maya's story, and in a Geertzian tradition of humanistic, interpretive, and hermeneutic anthropological scholarship, I crafted the narrative that follows. As is typical in ethnographic approaches to qualitative research, data analysis was an inductive, recursive, and ongoing process that accompanied data generation and continued afterwards in a transformative interplay (Wolcott) of description, analysis, and interpretation to arrive at a "thick description" (Geertz) of Roberta and her participation in the figured world of Sweet Water College ESL Learning Support.

Specific procedures or methods for compressing, fashioning, and reading my data followed Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw's practical considerations of the processes of ethnographic research. These procedures included initial line-by-line open coding of my data with the comment function in Microsoft Word or a pencil to name my understandings; focused coding whereby the assorted tags I had previously established were reduced into larger categories; in-process analytic writing; initial and integrative memo writing; and content analysis of archival data.

ESL LEARNING SUPPORT

Roberta worked for the University System of Georgia. In this system the Board of Regents first institutionalized postsecondary Developmental Studies programs in fall 1974 "as a means of bringing the reading, English, and mathematical skills of marginally prepared students up to standard" (Office of Strategic Research and Analysis, Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia). In 1993, Developmental Studies policy and procedures were reconfigured under an umbrella organizational structure of Learning Support whereby individual institutions were empowered to set higher regular admission standards and/or higher standards for exiting Learning Support than those set by the Regents themselves—but not lower. At Sweet Water College, Learning Support was not for the few, but for the majority. In fall 2005, the total number of first-year students at Sweet Water totaled 1,567. Of those, 803 (slightly more than 51%) were enrolled—for the most part, involuntarily—in one or more Learning Support courses.

Sweet Water's ESL Learning Support coursework was a complex curricular menu designed to prepare students whose native language was "not American English" for success in credit-bearing college courses. The program of ESL study differed, sometimes substantially, from student to student—depending on one or more of the following factors: (1) their SAT/ACT scores,

(2) their scores on the College's or ESL program's placement exams, and (3) their obligatory writing samples for the English department.

THE RE-EDUCATION OF GEORGIA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Returning to the vignette with which I began this narrative, Roberta was young, young-looking, or, in her words, “what-ever.” Consequently, she worried that if she weren't tough with her students, some might disrespect her diminutive five-foot Asian-American person. Accordingly, bravado was one of Roberta's strategies for garnering the respect of the mostly young adults she taught. However, data analysis indicated that being unyielding was more than Roberta's way of instilling discipline and respect. Rather, Roberta's tough-love stance was an integral part of her conception of what it meant to be an advocate for English learners in the context of Sweet Water, where test scores meant everything as students contended with a daunting battery of assessments (see Appendix A) .

Certainly, many of the students I had met in Roberta's Level III classrooms didn't “sound” like English learners at all. In fact, some had apparently grown up in the mountains of North Georgia, graduated with admirable grade-point averages, and were able to effortlessly “Yes Ma'am/No Ma'am” Roberta as all well-mannered North Georgians are expected to do. However, as Roberta explained, their presence in the ESL class was not determined by how they spoke, but by how they wrote.

Roberta explained that if Georgia high school graduates were in ESL it was because they had not been taught the basics in high school—or at least what was generally considered basic at Sweet Water, which was, after all, what mattered. Even if enrollment in Advanced ESL Grammar and Writing was a bitter pill for some of her U.S.-educated students, Roberta was convinced that it was for their own good. Thinking aloud about her course in an interview, Roberta said:

It hurts now. Oh, it is so painful now you're going to cry now at the end of the semester when you fail [laughing] it's—it's that sort of “it makes you stronger” cliché [laughing]. And I hate to even say that—but it really is. But it pays off though, it *really*² does pay off. Again, when they go into 1101 and 1102 [Sweet Water's two-semester Freshman English requirement] and they are making *better* grades than native born American students or native English

speakers, they always come back and say, “I know more” than these students. I know what a relative clause is and I know why a comma goes there and why it doesn’t go here. And it makes them feel so much better.

Thus, Roberta’s micro-preparation of her students for the high standards of grammar and mechanics that she believed the college’s English 1101 professors were deeply intent on safe guarding, and to which, she believed, her students would be subjected once they entered mainstream college coursework, was what she could do and did do. In the setting of the two-year college, such was Roberta’s advocacy as she had conceived it—that her students would pass their exams and be enabled, through her course, to succeed at Sweet Water.

Although Roberta considered her students to lack the basic skills needed for postsecondary composition, she did not consider ESL Learning Support as remediation. The argument in its various forms over the five semesters went, “It’s not remedial if they’ve never had it in the first place.” Or, as Roberta ruminated, “Here’s what a noun is. Here’s a verb. Here’s subject-verb agreement. Here’s verb tense. They don’t get any of that in high school.” For the others, the international students, ESL coursework was, likewise, not remediation. Rather, it was language learning—like French, like Italian, like Russian. It was a process that took time. There was simply nothing remedial about ESL, she argued—not really. She was certain that there was nothing “wrong” with her students.

That said, despite Roberta’s insistence that ESL Learning Support was not remediation, her students’ transcripts indicated something to the contrary. Namely, ESL Learning Support coursework—with one one-credit exception—counted for institutional credit only. Thus, Roberta and her colleagues were unable to will ESL Learning Support into being, at the level of their students’ academic records, into something more than what it was.

ROBERTA’S MOFO

Rare was the day in ESOL 0099 that Roberta did not reference the English professors—what their expectations were; how they would come down hard on certain errors on the exit essay; and what students might expect of English 1101. Handing back their first attempts at a simulated exit essay, Roberta (Mrs. Ware) explained to the class her not completely accurate motivation for grading their papers so rigorously:

I don't want you to think about this as Mrs. Ware is grading my paper because she hates me and she's giving me poor grades because of this. Think of it this way, when I exit this class, my paper will be graded by at least two English professors, not Mrs. Ware. And Mrs. Ware is grading me according to how she believes the English professors will grade my paper. So here's what I need to do to improve for my next paper. I want you to look at it that way.

Actually, in some instances, Mrs. Ware did grade the essays. The first two readers were either (1) a combination of two English professors, or (2) an English professor and an ESL faculty member other than the one who had taught the student whose essay was being scored. The first two readers assigned a score of Pass, Fail, or Borderline. With one Fail the student failed. In the event of a Pass and Borderline or two Borderlines a third reader's score was taken into consideration. That third reader was always the ESL instructor whose student's performance was under review. Thus, Roberta's score did count, occasionally.

Yet, she recognized that however much lip service her mainstream colleagues paid to the importance of the writing process, a five-paragraph essay could not—above all—contain a comma-splice, a run-on, a fragment, and/or striking features of non-native language use. It had to contain a closed thesis statement at the end of the introductory paragraph, each paragraph had to contain a minimum of six sentences, and examples had to be concrete.

“You Need to Write This Down”

Hoping to instill a “healthy” dose of fear in her students, Roberta shared with all of her ESL Advanced Grammar and Writing students the rubric she used to score their mock exit essays. The instrument (see Appendix B), developed by the former ESL program coordinator, was an inventory of what the English Department faculty considered the minimum requirements of academic literacy. By this rubric, a trio of Sweet Water faculty would “blindly” score the ESL students' exit essays, and it was by this rubric that a score would be defended should a challenge arise. For whatever reasons, for now, her ESL students weren't in English 1101. It was therefore, she explained to her students in class one morning, essential that she and they stick to the rubric:

I have *seen nearly* perfect papers—and when I say that, you know the content is pretty good the organization is pretty good there, with very few mistakes, grammar mistakes in the paper—fail that exit essay because of four or five comma splices. And I’m, *I am* upset when I see what I think is a paper that should be passing fail because of four or five comma splices or maybe four fragments or maybe missing commas after introductory adverbial clause. . . . it is—it is a heartbreaker when somebody deserves to pass and they don’t because of something that’s *so* significant but while you’re reading your essay maybe it’s insignificant to you—or you don’t catch on right away to those commas. That is a real disappointment to me, and it’s also a heartbreaker for the person who *writes* a wonderful essay. . . . I don’t want that to be *you* at the end of the semester.

Despite Roberta’s strong commitment to helping her students pass the final exit essay, she occasionally did express frustration with the college’s fixation on the grammar and mechanics of writing, as explained in the next section.

“Grammar, Grammar, and More Grammar”

The “superficiality” of the five-paragraph essay and the time crunch to get her students prepared for the assessment cycle didn’t allow her students to “truly” write, as Roberta explained during an interview:

I have to really focus on grammar, grammar, and more grammar—just so that they can write a superficial paper and then get through that standardized test. And I lose time then to focus on critical thinking—on logic—on the things that I really want to focus on—and, and what any English professor also would really expect from them at the higher level. “Don’t just spit back”—you know—“examples to me. Really think about what you’re writing.” And it doesn’t allow us enough time to delve into that.

However, Roberta knew that even after English 1101, high-stakes standardized testing would not be over. There would still be the Georgia Regents’ Test—a system-wide assessment consisting of a multiple-choice reading comprehension test and the ubiquitous five-paragraph essay written on a choice of topics (See Appendix A).

By breaking writing down into discrete units and by teaching how those units worked together, Roberta hoped to sensitize her students to a litany of stigmatizing errors that would fail them on the exit essay and hurt their scores on the COMPASS, which measured various grammar, usage, and style points. Around the fifth week of the course, a shift would take place—one marked by Roberta’s first mention of the “closed thesis statement” and its distinction from an open thesis statement as exemplified in this fieldnote:

Let’s stop right here. This is my million-dollar question—write this down. I don’t see a lot of you writing. You need to write this down. This is called a closed thesis statement. Now in their grading guide, they give this 30 points. Therefore, if you don’t have the closed thesis statement you’ve just failed the essay.

For the remainder of the semester, Roberta asked her students to look at and try out the sorts of five-paragraph essays they might be asked to write for the exit essay—an argument, a description, a comparison/contrast, etc.—recycling questions from previous exit exams as practice prompts, for example, “Describe your perfect Thanksgiving.” Roberta did not explicitly “correct” her students’ papers. Rather, she identified errors using a system of symbols that she shared with students. She then asked students to make the appropriate corrections/revisions using the symbols to guide them.

In addition to the weekly timed writings, Roberta and her colleagues presented models of other types of essays the test takers might encounter such as “Comparison Contrast Writing.” Specific grammar and writing issues that had come up in students’ mock exit essays also received focused practice—for example, the punctuation of restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses in sentences such as: “Kuwait, which is a small country in the Middle East, is rich in oil”; “A medical computer is a machine that analyzes the results of laboratory tests”; etc.

It was odd, Roberta commented, that although her students were computer-savvy, they were still being asked to hand write the exit essay: no spell check, no grammar check, no nothing. Students were changing. Perhaps, she speculated, Sweet Water would have to change one day too. When or if that would happen, she was not sure. For now, her hands were tied. Sixteen weeks went by quickly. She and her colleagues had to get their students ready for the tests.

TOUGH LOVE

In an audiotaped interview in fall 2005, Roberta elaborated on her self-styled bad-ass-ness:

If I grade at an easy level they might get a B out of my class. Yet, the English professors will grade that final exit essay and perhaps give it a Failure. So I think it's really important for me to keep my grading scale as difficult and hard as it is—very close to what the English professors' rubric or guide is. Another reason maybe for the strictness in my class is that I have *a lot* to do in one semester. And, obviously it can't always be done. But, I'm trying to take the majority of the students through this class. And to do it successfully I need them to be on their best behavior every time I hold a class. And that might be another reason why I feel like I have to be very disciplined—and have them disciplined in my class.

Importantly, the course design of ESL Advanced Grammar and Writing had not been imposed on Roberta or her two colleagues who also taught the course. Rather, the “back-to-basics”/“practice-makes-perfect” pedagogical paradigm was one to which they all seemed to adhere. Or, as the program coordinator explained to me, getting students to understand dependent clauses, independent clauses, compound sentences, complex sentences, compound/complex sentences, etc., and moving them through a sequence from sentence to paragraph to essay to types of essays were standard two-year college L2 writing fare in Georgia. That was how it was done.

For Roberta, a trio of other considerations—her own previous experience as a student in a two-year college, the politics of immigration in North Georgia, and the rules surrounding merit-based student financial aid—reinforced her boot-camp approach to ESL Advanced Grammar and Writing.

Roberta's Two-Year College Experience

Roberta, herself, had gone to a two-year college. She was immensely proud of the education she had received there, and how well it prepared her for the four-year university she went to afterwards. Furthermore, she believed that if four-year colleges were to take their two-year counterparts seriously, Sweet Water faculty had to work hard and make their students work hard:

I attended a community college myself because I could not afford to go to a four-year university. I then transferred to a private four-year university—after my community college experience. And I think one of the first things I noticed was that I was considered a really good writer at the four-year university. And I think that community college experience I had—I think that those professors I had really pushed high standards in their English classes—maybe out of a feeling of—not inferiority necessarily—but out of a feeling of—you know even though we’re a community college we have high standards too. And I performed really well at the private four-year university.

Roberta wanted her students—whether they went on to a four-year program or not—to feel as good about their community college experience as she had and did still. Would they remember her name as she remembered those of the two-year college teachers who had taught her so well? Would they talk about her the way she talked about those two-year college teachers that she had known? Would Sweet Water be a point of reference for them as her own two-year college experience had become for her? These things she wanted very much.

The Shadow of Stone Mountain

Roberta speculated that the locals tended to think of all immigrants as illegal—and that, she considered, was sad. Sweet Water was just a Sunday drive from Stone Mountain, the site of the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan in 1915 (MacLean). Under the gaze of the Confederate leaders carved into the granite mountainside, white supremacists were still active in the region. Local and regional newspapers reported heinous incidents of racial violence and xenophobia of which immigrants, especially Latinos, were increasingly the victims (Moser).

It was difficult, she recognized, if not impossible for some to understand the intense and constant pressure she felt to prove herself worthy of anything she had ever achieved. White guys, even her husband, just did not get it:

I had—I’ll just go ahead and tell you some more about my husband [laughing]. I had a conversation with my husband—not a fight—a long conversation where at the end of the conversation he finally

admitted he didn't get it. And he kept on saying that I had perceptions—I had perceptions and they weren't real. And I said, "You won't ever know." And I think some people won't ever know. . . . Everybody else will tell you—you know—"Those are just your perceptions, those feelings aren't really happening." But they don't know it because they aren't you.

Roberta's awareness of local attitudes toward immigrants helps to explain her firm belief that making things easier for her students would only make it harder for them in the end. They had to toughen up as she did when she was still mistaken for a student when she went to make photocopies in the faculty lounge; as she had when, driving up from Tampa, a cashier at a back-road gas station had refused to hand back her credit card—throwing it at her across a counter. Passing the exit essay, the Compass Exam, her course—all these things would make them stronger for Sweet Water mainstream coursework and, even, for life. There would be no handouts for them.

Keeping Hope Alive

The relationship between students' GPAs and their financial aid packages was yet another facet of the tough-love rationale Roberta and her colleagues adhered to in teaching Advanced ESL Grammar and Writing. Through monies raised by the state's lottery, the HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) Scholarship Program provided graduates of Georgia high schools with tuition, mandatory fees, and a book allowance to attend any of the state's public colleges, universities, or technical colleges. It seemed that in nearly every ESL class I visited during my five semesters at Sweet Water, there was always one or more students on a HOPE scholarship. However, to keep these scholarships, students needed to maintain a 3.0 GPA. Students who had been ineligible for HOPE as entering freshmen could apply for the program after attempting 30, 60, or 90 semester hours—but, again, only with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0. Hence, Roberta made the case that if ESL students prematurely entered the mainstream, their GPAs would suffer, and their current or future financial aid would be jeopardized. ESL Learning Support was really a sort of GPA safe house, she argued, that potentially benefited her students economically.

HONORS DAY

In the spring of 2006, I attended “Honors Day” at Sweet Water—a yearly celebration to recognize students’ academic achievement. The faculty wore their caps and gowns. Under the proud gaze of their families, students filed in to the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance.” From the podium, Sweet Water’s president officially opened the celebration with a metaphor:

With the dogwoods, azaleas, and other flowers in bloom, the campus is like a large garden. The college provides the “soil” that students need to grow. Faculty and staff are the sunshine and the rain. The college is truly a wonderful nurturing environment. . . . There’s a country song that goes, “I’m a wildflower that blooms wherever I land.” But we’re glad you chose our garden.

Applause reverberated across the basketball courts-cum-auditorium as the president asked the audience sitting on folding metal chairs and bleachers to recognize the “gardeners” of the college: Sweet Water’s faculty.

In their Sunday best, former and current ESL students were among the prizewinners that afternoon: Most Improved ESL Student; Students for a Progressive Society Leadership Award; President’s Art Award; Latino Student Association’s Most Active Member; Phi Theta Kappa (international honor society for two-year college students); Outstanding Chemistry Student; Outstanding Physics Student; and more. Nine current or former ESL students won an array of honors.

The *pièce de résistance*, however, was when Jacinto, a former student of Roberta’s, received the College’s most prestigious academic prize: the Mass Prize. He had been an ESL student; he had been hers. That afternoon, the choices Roberta had made about what sort of teacher to be made perfect sense to her. All was right at Sweet Water.

Kudos?

Ecstatic, Roberta sent an e-mail to the Chair of the Division of Learning Support, naming her current and former students and their awards. The next day, the Chair forwarded Roberta’s note to the faculty listserv:

Good Morning,

I thought that you would like to see how many former ESL students received honors yesterday. I don't think that most people realize that these students began in Learning Support/ESL. Roberta Ware compiled this list. It's impressive that nine of these students earned all types of awards, including the Mass Prize. I'm proud of these students and their ESL instructors who helped them begin their pathways to college success.

The Chair's e-mail received only one short response:

The Chair and anyone who cares to know:

Of course! Most of these students I presume are international students and they tend to work harder (and perhaps have better academic foundation to begin with) than most of our native students. Once they get the language down, they usually do well. I happened to have two of them in my MATH 2650 Linear Algebra class so I can attest to that too. Kudos to everyone who helps to nurture these students.

The math professor's assumption—that most of the prizewinners were internationals—was mistaken. Jacinto, the Mass Prize winner, was a home-grown product of the U.S. K-12 system. Curiously, none of the Sweet Water faculty publicly responded to the insinuation that the Latino locals were lazy and ill-prepared, or that if ESL students had succeeded it was because as internationals they had received a sound education before enrolling at Sweet Water—unlike their peers in public high schools in Georgia. Deep down, perhaps everyone agreed. Or perhaps it wasn't worth fighting over this time. ESL Learning Support students had done well. Maybe that was kudos enough for Roberta.

DISCUSSION: GATEKEEPING AS ADVOCACY

Advocacy as/in Context

As research on second-language teaching and learning has slowly come to challenge the notion of a best practice or method (Kumaravadivelu), it is perhaps time to rethink the often unequivocal ways in which professionals such as Roberta and their teaching are categorized and to look more closely

at the sense teachers make of themselves—how they understand themselves professionally, and how they are understood. The ambiguities of teaching ESL Basic Writing at a two-year college in North Georgia were such that Roberta understood herself as a good teacher, bad teacher, bad-ass teacher, and something or some things other along the way. She was a teacher; she contained multitudes.

Admittedly, Roberta shared a degree of complicity in the marginalization of English learners at Sweet Water, where the sort of high-stakes assessment practices might even appear to constitute a far too convenient way of denying immigrant students full entry into institutions of higher education. High school diplomas in hand, an increasing number of Sweet Water's so-called "Generation 1.5" students found themselves sort of enrolled in college. Such students were accepted to the two-year college on the condition that they complete a cycle of institutionally mandated, non-degree credit-bearing coursework. All this was, in Roberta's view, because the English professors simply didn't feel they had the time to "waste" on English learners who were coming out of U.S. high schools—or other institutions—without what they regarded as the requisite academic writing skills. Someone else would have to "deal" with them. It was, therefore, she argued, up to individuals such as herself to teach U.S.-educated English learners and their international peers what it was that the institution into which they were only provisionally admitted would require of them to be mainstreamed. This she did—explicitly—again, and again, and again.

There was also, as I have mentioned, Roberta's understanding of the white supremacism of the region; the insidious deficit understandings of the "preparedness" of U.S.-educated English learners that seemed to prevail among some members of the "mainstream" faculty; the issues surrounding students' GPAs and the maintenance of their HOPE scholarships and other financial aid opportunities; Sweet Water's four-year college aspirations; Roberta's own undergraduate experience—her youth, her gender, her Asian-ness. Roberta's advocacy was a/in context.

After many semesters of hesitation, I began talking to Roberta about the activist literature on English learners that had motivated this study and the ambiguities of postsecondary remediation. Some scholars argue that such instruction is effective (Merisotis and Phipps) while others maintain that it isn't (Johnson; Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham). Some take a middle ground, saying that sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't (Bettinger and Terry Long), or that no one really can say conclusively to what extent college remedial work

succeeds (Perin). I wanted to know, I told her—point blank—if she thought of herself as a gatekeeper. Roberta explained that she was and she wasn't:

If our students are not up to standards and they can't succeed at the next level, I'm not going to let them out of my class. This—for example, let's just pick something from my composition class that has to do with grammar: verb tense and verb form and word form. You don't get it, you don't get out. Okay, you have non-English problems; I'm sorry you're staying behind. Is it just spelling problems you're having? Are you French and adding an "e" onto everything or German? Not a problem—we'll let you out. Do you not have any articles in your paper? You're going to stay back in. You know, *I am* a gatekeeper in that sense. If you don't meet the standards and I don't think you can actually go into 1101 with a fighting chance, then I'm not going to let you out of my class.

It was then that I understood that for Roberta there was no contradiction between gatekeeping and advocacy. Gatekeeping was advocacy.

Roberta's "Improvisation"

Roberta worked for an institution called Sweet Water; and was charged with preparing "non-American English" learners to succeed in what the institution considered college-level coursework. Roberta's proven ability to guide students through the labyrinthine assessment cycle of which, admittedly she was a part, and into English 1101 was one of the major references by which she understood herself. It was furthermore the reference whereby she was understood. She was a good teacher. The proof was in the numbers of those who passed every semester. The proof was in Honors Day. The proof was in Jacinto.

But what had most convinced Roberta that tough love was good love was the fact, she told me, that every semester former ESL students—many U.S. high school graduates—returned to thank her. They returned to tell her that English 1101 was a breeze. This, she argued, was her validation; 85% of her students had effectively "climbed up the side of the house" (Holland et al.), thereby reaping an immediate, though perhaps short-term, benefit from Roberta's construction of her teaching subjectivities. Her students' success—her "improvisation" (Holland et al.)—had allowed her to re-construct her teaching self not as gatekeeper but as a bad-ass who could and

did navigate scores of English learners into the Sweet Water mainstream. Roberta did not love the tests. She did love it, however, that 85% of her students passed them.

The Last Day of School

In the figured world of ESL Learning Support at a two-year college in North Georgia, hand writing a five-paragraph essay in two hours with a pen, white-out, and a monolingual dictionary was, perhaps, less about an English language learner's mastery of academic writing, and more about a demonstration of loyalty to that local paradigm of what, at minimum, it meant to be an "educated person" (Levinson, Foley, and Holland).

Whatever the Sweet Water assessment obstacle course was not, it most certainly *was* "literacy" as a powerful contingent at Sweet Water had defined it. Roberta clarified,

The preparation that we put them through is really our way of almost molding them and not just preparing them but molding them in a certain way to fit the college-student criteria in that sense. These are the things you're going to have to be or do in order to become a mainstreamer in that sense.

A five-paragraph essay was not a five-paragraph essay was not a five-paragraph essay. There was a Sweet Water way to write; there was a Sweet Water way to be.

Although 85% of Roberta's students consistently passed the assessment labyrinth, there were no institutional statistics to support Roberta's fervent belief that those same students did well in their future coursework, or that they ever completed degrees. Over my five semesters at Sweet Water, I had met many of Roberta's students—some of whom I continued to see in the hallways of Academic III and the ACCT lab early in the morning. Others had disappeared. No one seemed to know what had happened to them.

Still, 85% was something to be proud of; and, it was something Roberta was proud of. To that end, her understandings of gatekeeping and advocacy were not necessarily contradictions. Rather, gatekeeping as advocacy made sense for her—sometimes. That is, even as Roberta was able to rationalize why one student had failed and another had not, her analyses did not completely relieve her of the pangs of self-doubt that she sometimes articulated in our interviews and conversations.

Having taught the course multiple semesters, she confided that she could pretty much tell by mid-semester which students would probably not pass. That knowledge became all the more poignant at the semester's end, when Roberta had to make the phone calls telling some of the students that they hadn't passed the essay and would have to repeat the course. These were difficult phone calls to make.

Spring 2006 had been a particularly tough semester. Roberta's numbers had faltered. The backlash from a town hall meeting about illegal immigration that the Students for a Progressive Society had organized had been intense. The city's newspaper ran an article about the "often-tense debate" on 7 March and another on 12 March about the "immigration enigma"—again citing the town hall meeting at Sweet Water as an example of the emotional public debate in Georgia over illegal immigration. The same local newspaper reported on 1 April that the forum had not sat well with some [unnamed] members of the state legislature and that the town hall meeting—reportedly—had nearly cost Sweet Water a \$5 million addition to its student center. The paper reported that the funds, earmarked for the college, had almost been redirected. It was also whispered to the ESL Program Coordinator who had sponsored the town hall meeting that she might lose her job. Not long after the articles appeared, a drunken caller phoned into the Dean's voice mail the message that "all the faculty—everybody up there—needs to be shot." Roberta and her colleagues were terrified. Students were afraid and upset. They couldn't, she explained, seem to concentrate on their schoolwork. Roberta's pregnancy that semester had also been difficult. For the first time that anyone could remember, Roberta had cancelled classes. To further complicate the situation, students who shouldn't have been in Advanced ESL Grammar and Writing had been placed in Roberta's course and stayed there, unwilling to go down a level. There was only so much you could do in 16 weeks.

On the last day of fieldwork, I met Roberta in her office. We chatted in her yellow cinderblock cubicle in Academic III, and I remembered the many conversations we had had before. But, this time, the fragility of Roberta's construction of her professional self was painfully evident. Her bravado was spent. I asked her how she felt about the semester. She paused. Then, she told me how one of her own students had not passed the course, the exit essay, or the COMPASS. As much as she wanted to be the "professional," as much as she wanted to distance herself from a student's failure, she could not. She told me that in the back of her mind she wondered if she had succeeded or if she too had failed. Roberta told me that she was no longer so

sure. She wanted to be sure. She wanted to be a professional. This was the ambiguity of teaching ESL Advanced Grammar and Writing: Roberta's love hurt. It hurt like a motherfucker.

Notes

1. Roberta, Sweet Water, and other names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Words that were emphasized by speakers in interviews are printed in italics.

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APPENDIX A

EXITING ESL LEARNING SUPPORT

Students at Sweet Water must successfully complete all of the following to exit ESL Learning Support and enter credit-bearing English courses:

(1) Pass the capstone ESL Advanced Grammar and Writing course.

This course is described in detail in the article.

(2) Pass the English Department's exit essay. The exit essay is a three-day affair at the end of each semester. On day one, students write a five-paragraph essay in two hours, choosing from a slate of five questions. On day two, they return to write another five-paragraph essay from a different slate of questions. On day three, they have approximately one hour to choose the stronger of their two essays, edit it, and submit it for scoring by English and/or ESL professors.

(3) Pass the COMPASS Writing Skills Exam. The COMPASS Writing Skills Exam, a pre-packaged computerized assessment developed by the ACT and in use across the University System of Georgia, simulates the editing process by presenting several 200-word readings and requiring students to locate and correct grammar, usage, and style errors. Additionally, the test presents one or two multiple-choice questions focused on the strategy, organization, and style of the reading passage. To pass the COMPASS, students must score 61 or higher. If they don't attain this score, they have to repeat the course, the exit essay, and the COMPASS exam in a subsequent term.

THE TESTING CONTINUES . . .

The Georgia Regents' Test. After successfully completing the freshman English sequence, all students at Sweet Water face another high-stakes standardized test—the Georgia Regents' Test. This system-wide assessment requires students to pass a multiple-choice reading comprehension exam and write a five-paragraph essay on a choice of topics. Passing the Regents' is a requirement for all of Sweet Water's degree programs.

APPENDIX B
ROBERTA'S RUBRIC FOR THE EXIT ESSAY

+	CONTENT—Add	-	MECHANICS— Subtract
10	Introduction—Minimum 3 sentences; no details; progression from general to specific; connections logical and interesting	10	Fragment
10	Thesis Statement—Closed (If you do not use a closed thesis, you will lose 30 points.)	10	Comma Splice
15	Topic Sentence for each body paragraph (5 pts. each sentence)	10	Run-on Sentence
30	Development—Paragraphs of 6 to 8 sentences (minimum); points supported by examples. (10 pts. each paragraph)	5	Verb Tense/Time
10	Conclusion—Connected to content of introduction and body; does not repeat statements previously made.	30	Verb Form
5	Logical Connectors—Used when appropriate and necessary	10	Agreement— Subject- Verb/ Pronoun- Noun/ Noun-Adjective
10	Paragraphs—Structured properly	3 each	Word Form/Word Order/Spelling/ Articles/Punctuation
10	Logical Thought Progression	10	Missing Comma/ Introductory Adverbial Clauses