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Journal of Basic Writing

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CALL FOR ARTICLES

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

We prefer that contributions be submitted as Word document attachments via e-mail to: rebecca.mlynarczyk@gmail.com. If electronic submission is not possible, mail five copies of the manuscript and abstract to:

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

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

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

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

EDITORS' COLUMN

Recent theory and scholarship in literacy and basic writing have greatly expanded our professional understanding of how arenas for the teaching of reading and writing are constituted. As we recognize reading and writing as social and political activities, we perceive our classroom roles as collaborative and transactional: in teaching, we are affected, and directed, by our students—their interests and competencies—as much as we affect them as learners. It is no longer possible to teach by way of presuming a linear trajectory for learning; that is, to subscribe to what Brian Street calls the "autonomous model of literacy."[1] Students bring their social worlds, engaged ideologically, to the classroom. We do the same, ostensibly representing the university, a bastion of ideological limits as both our students and colleagues regard it.[2] But it is not that students represent many worlds, their teachers just one. The Spring 2009 issue of *JBW* makes clear that the cross-cultural nature of both students' and teachers' experiences, in and outside of the classroom, offers teachers the perspective by which to invite an ever greater range of students' extracurricular interests, practices, and beliefs into the classroom—with the goal of strengthening students' capacity for social critique. Another result also obtains: students come to realize that their social, extracurricular worlds are sometimes also ours, and that we as their teachers can be partners with them in exploring these same worlds we share.

It is this very sensitive understanding of the range of experience encompassing students' so-called "private lives," and thus their ways of being in the classroom, that inspires Donald McCrary to argue for religion as a relatively untapped framework by which to help students examine their process of identity-formation and coming to know society. In our lead article, "[Not] Losing My Religion: Using *The Color Purple* to Promote Critical Thinking in the Writing Classroom," McCrary helps us to see students beyond gender, race, and class distinctions, as he recognizes their great efforts to determine their own futures. Religion, he asserts, is part of this endeavor, indeed the push "that allows some students to get out of bed in the morning, encouraging and supporting them to struggle through another day." Noting that religion is generally seen and discounted by the academy as a tool for reinforcing limits, McCrary explores the

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[1] Brian Street, "Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy: Approaches from New Literacy Studies," *Media Anthropology Network*, 17-24 January 2006 <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/street_newliteracy.pdf>.

[2] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994) 168.

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social, political, and hermeneutic traditions by which African Americans have used religion as a powerful social critique. Thus religion, a putatively private discourse, enters McCrary's classroom in the spirit of black religious leaders and interpretative tradition, offering a model by which to subject other largely unexamined fields of oppressive experience (patriarchy, traditional religion, attitudes toward homosexuality) to open critique. Using *The Color Purple* as a palimpsest upon which to write new interpretations of shared experience, McCrary's students gain a critical lens on society and onto their own lives.

Our next article, "New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions," by Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark, similarly deconstructs the notion of private and public lives as they concern students and teachers in the classroom. Klages and Clark note the increasing pervasiveness of technology in everyone's lives. Students' engagement with technology spans the entire day, whether privately at home or leisure, or publicly at work or in the classroom, thus creating the impression of students' digital literacy. But Klages and Clark argue against such an assumption. Unless students are purposely directed to engage technology in ways that will also allow them to operate in the academy from positions of power and competence, students will continue to find themselves caught in what the authors recognize as a new "digital divide," a realm which separates students who are able to translate digital literacy to academic contexts from those who cannot. The task of "code switch[ing] between informal cyber-situations and the expectations of academic and professional cyber-literacy" is paramount. As the authors assert, "The digital divide is no longer about access to technology, but rather a more complex divide of those who have had the educational access, training, and critical engagement to use technology well as literate cyber-citizens." This situation makes a compelling case for the use of ePortfolios as they are implemented at Klages' and Clark's institution, LaGuardia Community College/ CUNY. Their article documents the successes of students who negotiate the multiple demands for literacy in a technological age through ePortfolios. At the same time, students are able to mine the experience to bridge private and public worlds.

Our third article, "Writing Partners: Service Learning as a Route to Authority for Basic Writers," by Catherine Gabor, highlights the presumption of private versus public lives from the perspective of students who, through an innovative project of letter-exchange, get the chance to step back from course requirements and assessments in order to engage the questions and interests of elementary school children—"partners" whom they similarly help to contemplate a future college career. Gabor shows that even as her basic writing students remain aware of their tentative status within the college (as most of the students are at risk of

institutional disenrollment), they are able to personally connect with their partners, who view their academic status with curiosity and esteem. The joining of the private and public worlds for Writing Partners happens on several levels. The college and elementary students are from similar socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds: home lives and the "public" world of the university are bridged in students' memory of, and current relationship to, the communities which their young partners come from. The private worlds of friendship and neighborhood, including rhetorical and interest markers typically eschewed by the academy, are given recognition and reign. In addition, basic writers are invited to engage the voice of reflection on the many transactions enabled by the Writing Partners curriculum; epistemologically, some might ascribe this voice to a "private" self, one now writing in a public, academic context. However, as Gabor demonstrates, Writing Partners elides such distinctions by creating a space to explore the social and political influences that determine experience, always lived simultaneously in (what is only our perception of) private and public spheres. As part of such a dynamic, students are able to assume new positions of authority, as writers, experts, and members of more than one discourse community.

Martha Clark Cummings' article, "*Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*: Self-Disclosure and Lesbian and Gay Identity in the ESL Writing Classroom," strikes the heart of supposed private versus public notions of self, doing, and being for both students and teachers. As Cummings shows, a range of perspectives influences teachers of the gay, bisexual, transgender, and lesbian community as to when, how, or whether to disclosure their sexual orientation to students. While aware of the social and political impetus for disclosure, Cummings recognizes the potential of such an act to "conceal more than it reveals." She cites Judith Butler: "For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control. . . . If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.'"[3] These issues especially concern writing classrooms which aim to engage students in the active construction of meaning since the negotiation of identity is both a goal and an effect of constructing knowledge. Cummings also recognizes the multiple orientations toward identity held by ESL students, as when doing does not always equal being; or when the limits of one's culture and upbringing permit exploring one's identity only so far. A well-chosen classroom text is thus crucial for permitting a range of discourse around identity issues, including

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[3] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories,* ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge Press) 18.

sexual orientation. Cummings finds such a text in *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* by Peter Cameron (much as Donald McCrary has done with *The Color Purple*). Her narrative of her ESL students' responses to the main character, James, who is gay, embeds the powerful story of her questions of disclosure and provides a model for supporting all teachers' efforts to teach with integrity and respect. Cummings' essay is a powerful end piece for illustrating how the best teaching and learning erode the margins that falsely divide our experience into public and private worlds.

As the *Journal of Basic Writing* goes to press, we say a fond farewell to Karen Weingarten, who has worked with us as an editorial assistant since 2003. Karen's generous support for *JBW* and her careful work in formatting the journal have been greatly appreciated over the years. We congratulate Karen on completing her PhD in English at the CUNY Graduate Center this spring, and we wish her all the best in her new position as an assistant professor in the English Department of CUNY's Queens College.

Beginning with this issue, the Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania, will handle printing and subscriber services for *JBW*. Sheridan's contact information appears on the journal's inside cover.

We hope you enjoy the articles in this issue!

— **Hope Parisi** and **Rebecca Mlynarczyk**

[Not] Losing My Religion: Using *The Color Purple* to Promote Critical Thinking in the Writing Classroom

Donald McCrary

ASTRACT: Private student discourses are often ignored or prohibited in the academy; however, these private discourses are very meaningful, and representative of the ways that students order and speak about the world. Specifically, religion is an extremely significant private student discourse; exploring religious discourse might help students not only to understand the ideological and linguistic formations of discourses, including those that undergird and shape religion, but also to refine their own discourses, written and spoken, inside and outside of school. Using The Color Purple *by Alice Walker, a text that problematizes religious discourse, Ira Shor's* Critical Teaching and Everyday Life *as a model of illuminating ideological analysis, as well as critical essays about religious discourses, students read, discuss, and write about religion and other private discourses to enhance their writing and critical thinking, and secure a more stable rhetorical position within the academy.*

KEYWORDS: private discourse; religion; The Color Purple*; Ira Shor; black church; composition; basic writing*

In the introduction to *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Brian Street recommends an ethnographic approach to literacy that explores "the creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests" (1). However, Street reminds us that all literacies are ideological and can play a significant role in "reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination" (7). For Street, the ideological nature of literacy is a primary reason that we should adopt a cross-cultural approach, exploring the different ways through literacy that people make meaning in the world. Toward this point, the use of private discourses in the classroom, as Hannah Ashley and Katy Lynn suggest, stimulates a field for "identity negotiation," "discourse testing," and the "performance of multiple voices" (7) which, citing Pierre Bourdieu, they define as "utterances voiced through

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speakers known intimately or at least personally by the author" (10). Corresponding with Street's understanding of literacy and ideology, they draw the distinction between personal and private discourse: one "grants experience asylum from critique," while the other "reminds us that perceptions, preferences, desires, even bodily sensations are not simply our own, but are shaped and constructed socially, in discourse" (11). According to Ashley and Lynn, these aspects of experience "get called into question when they butt against a different community discourse" (11). This discourse interaction is crucial because, as Rebecca Powell believes, "a commitment to illumination requires that we make our own subjectivities objects of critique, that we critically examine our own ideological assumptions" (qtd. in Tinberg 358).

In the writing classroom, the exploration of private discourses holds promise for students to engage with language and literacy that really matters to them, while also moderating the tendency toward often sacred *for* or *against* positions of argument (Lynch, George, Cooper 6). My experience of teaching developmental and freshman writing at a four-year, open admissions, private university, includes students from mostly poor and working class backgrounds who represent a variety of ethnicities and races, such as African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Caribbean. For many of these students, religion is one of the most intimately involving discourses of their private lives, a lens through which they understand and navigate the world. I don't think I overstate the case when I say that it is religion that allows some students to get out of the house in the morning, encouraging and supporting them to struggle through another day. At the same time, I think that most of us have had the experience of discussing a sensitive topic, say, homosexuality, in class and hearing students oppose it based on religious beliefs.

Students need to recognize that any discourse is ideologically based, carrying with it the sociocultural attitudes and beliefs of a particular group of people. Understanding this ideological base can help students to better understand the discourse, and generate a willingness to critically engage other discourses for their ideological underpinnings as well. Still instructors, reflecting the field, hesitate to engage religion for its socially interrogative capacity. But might students be encouraged to explore religion because it is so important to many of their lives? Might a controversial text, such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, provide students with a way to explore and interrogate religious themes and ideas without condemning or belittling students' beliefs, while also actuating religion's potential toward social critique? And might examining religion as a private discourse increase

students' critical thinking, which they could apply to the examination of other private and public discourses and ideas? In what follows, I will attempt to answer these questions.

INTERROGATING READER RESPONSE

Like discourse, reading is ideologically based in that we bring who we are and all we know about the world to our reading of texts. In "Which Reader's Response?" Marjorie Godlin Roemer discusses the problem of efficacious reading strategies in her examination of reader response theory, which posits that the reader recreates the text every time he or she reads. Analyzing major reader response theorists, Roemer concludes that these theorists miss or downplay the importance of the ideologies that ground both reader and text:

> As articulated by David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, and others, reader-response theory puts its emphasis on what occurs in the transaction between reader and text. For Bleich, the attention is on the way a reader projects his own desires on a text; for Iser and Rosenblatt, the interest lies in the interaction between text and reader, what the text activates in the reader, and what the reader activates in the text; for Fish, the focus is on the communal assumptions that control the sorts of attention we pay to texts and thereby shape our readings of them. In all this interchange about what actually constitutes the experience of reading and its appropriate pedagogy, what seems to be overlooked is full awareness of the ideological issues these positions raise. For despite Stanley Fish's ingenious argument to the contrary, most of us feel that the theories, or beliefs, we hold about literature and interpretation should shape our practice. Converts to reader-response theory see themselves effecting a more dynamic, more empowering classroom situation with readers who are being invited to make active and personal engagements with the texts they encounter. In principle I agree; in practice I am less certain. (911-12)

Roemer goes on to discuss the interpretive controls that teachers and the academy impose on students' reading of texts, explaining that there is an acceptable set of interpretations for any given text and students who

"deviate" from those interpretations "transgress at their own peril" (112). Roemer believes that the ideologies of both reader (including teacher) and text should be open to scrutiny. She advocates Paulo Freire's critical literacy or pedagogy of liberation as an interpretive strategy to help students read texts, privileging Freire's *conscientização,* which he defines as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (qtd. in Roemer 918). Again in agreement with Freire, Roemer recommends "a style of teaching that sharply focuses on the students' own circumstances and how they, as individuals and as a group, can be helped to greater self-awareness and more complex understandings of their own reality" (918-19). Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser also support Freire's method and his desire to "help students become critically conscious of the connection between their own lives and the larger society and to empower them to use literacy as a means of changing their own environments" (287).

Of course, many have challenged Freire's pedagogy, including, rather famously, Patricia Bizzell, who claims that Freire pretends "his critical literacy methods merely pointed out truths in reality for students to discover—that is, that his methods were strictly objective and value-free" ("Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness" 21). On the surface, Bizzell seems to accuse Freire of replacing one teacher-imposed interpretation with another; however, in "Classroom Authority and Critical Pedagogy" Bizzell explains that the truly liberatory classroom is often a myth and suggests that teachers "persuade" students to accept their "authority" while recognizing, and even challenging, the institutional constraint under which they all suffer (852). Roemer recognizes the ideological and institutional obstacles teachers face, but still supports more student interpretive freedom and objects to "teachers [who] often send subtle but firm messages about which readings should be shared, condoned, and supported, and which readings mark the reader as aberrant" (915). "For the teacher committed to fostering a plurality of readings, there are still always," in Roemer's opinion, "privileged modes of analysis, privileged values, privileged ways of reading the world" (915). I agree with Roemer that we need to create classrooms in which multiple interpretations are acceptable, in which students are encouraged to use their own discourses, their own ideologies to read and respond to texts, because, other discourses, if you will, can often produce illuminating insights that benefit all students. Ashley and Lynn report that in one of their classes, African American and Latina students problematized the idea of body image by their reading of a white female student's essay about her desire to be thin. Using personal

experience, both cultural and familial, the nonwhite students unearthed some specific social factors that impact how many American women view their bodies. Allowing the nonwhite students to explain their reading of the student text helped the entire class to examine female body image in new and illuminating ways (11). In a sense, the nonwhite students challenged the privileged, or dominant, discourse about body image, uncovering the ideological base of a mainstream viewpoint. Roemer's belief in the efficacy of welcoming into the classroom multiple interpretations and discourses, particularly those that seem aberrant or non-traditional, is a view and approach I share, and using private discourses in the writing classroom will ensure that *other* voices are heard.

RELIGION AND THE BLACK CHURCH: LEGACY FOR THE WRITING CLASSROOM

If we follow Roemer and encourage more interpretive freedom in the classroom, then we open ourselves to different ways that students see the world. As I said before, many students in my classes see the world through a religious lens, but religion has long been a taboo subject in many writing classrooms. Fortunately, this prohibition is starting to ease, and some prominent composition scholars are helping to clear the space for religious discourse in writing classes. In "The Book and the Truth: Faith, Rhetoric, and Cross-Cultural Communication," Bronwyn T. Williams explains the reluctance of the composition field to address religion: "The roots of this aversion include an unease with religious authority, a postmodern belief in the social construction of 'truth' and the slipperiness of language, a belief in the separation of church and state, and a Western, positivist conviction that knowledge is progressive, rational, and evolutionary" (107). Anne Ruggles Gere, discussing her own problems with expressing a Christian identity in the academy, says that "[c]oming out as a Christian or an observant member of any faith can be as dangerous as making public one's sexual orientation because the academy has so completely conflated the disestablishment of religion . . . with secularizing . . . higher education" (46-47). Priscilla Perkins, who makes religious discourse a focus in her classroom, argues that Christian students, particularly conservative ones, "are one of the only cultural groups openly and comfortably disparaged by many otherwise sensitive writing teachers in the country" (586). But teachers who restrict religious discourse in the classrooms might be doing their students a great disservice. Citing James Calvin Schaap, Lizabeth Rand explains that we might "view religious

faith as a primary identity that frequently restricts ways of being as do race, class, and gender," and given that "spiritual identity may be the primary kind of selfhood more than a few [students] draw upon to make meaning of their lives," religious discourse should be a topic of discussion in our classrooms (350-51). To facilitate better discussions of religious discourse, Rand suggests that "[w]riting instructors . . . start from the premise that evangelical discourse may reflect an oppositional and critically resistant stance," and that we might "engage students in further conversation about the complex negotiations of selfhood that they undergo" (363).

Rand's idea that evangelical or conservative religious discourses can be critical and oppositional is an important point, even as we seek to be in dialogue with any elements we might identify as oppressive. African-American religion is a prime example of a discourse that can be socially and politically critical and liberating but still contains oppressive elements; its complex nature thereby makes it a compelling discourse to examine in the writing classroom. Most American students have some knowledge of the socially resistant nature of African-American religion as represented by people such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and events such as the Civil Rights Movement. For centuries, African Americans have used the Bible as an instrument of liberation, employing black biblical hermeneutics to serve a variety of social, political, and personal needs. Before and after emancipation, many religious blacks likened their social situation to that of the Jews in the Old Testament who sought deliverance from slavery and the rights of free people: Moses and Jesus figured significantly in the African-American struggle, both acutely aware of suffering, and promising hope, salvation, and redemption. Unfortunately, the biblical interpretations of ordinary black folk have been virtually ignored in the academy, unlike the attention paid to African-American religious hermeneutics performed by scholars. For example, James H. Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* is considered the foundational text of black liberation theology, which reimagines God as deeply concerned in the real life struggles of black people (11). However, ordinary religious black people have long considered God or Jesus intimately concerned with their lives and have performed biblical hermeneutics as a means of both survival and protest. Admittedly, Cone's opposition to "white theology" and his construction of the "Black Christ" might seem radical, but for centuries, blacks have identified with, as Cone does, Jesus' humble birth in the manger, his baptism as identification with sin and sinners, and his ministry, which concentrates on healing, preaching to, liberating, and saving the poor and downtrodden (204-208). We need only

look to the Civil Rights Movement and the work of ordinary churchgoers to secure equal representation in our society to illustrate the point that common folk have interpreted the Bible to serve useful, even revolutionary, ends. In effect, many African Americans construe Jesus as a black man who understands their condition and needs.

Religion as an ideology that encourages, promotes, and supports critical opposition to oppressive forces is also evident in the work of female black theologians. While some female black theologians have criticized black liberation theology for its sexism (this, too, might seem a modern, radical response), many black women have been critical of sexism within the black church for many years. For example, as Bettye Collier-Thomas explains, Jarena Lee left both white and black Methodist churches to become an itinerant preacher from 1818 to 1849. Lee even published a very influential spiritual autobiography in 1836, as did Zilpha Elaw in 1846, and Julia A. J. Foote in 1879 (147). These "ordinary," unheralded black females, and others like them, broke away from the traditional black male-dominated church to construct a religion that spoke to their unique experience as black women. Their legacy is part of the academy today, where we privilege womanist theology, constructed by black female theologians and scholars to elevate the status of black women and combat multiple oppressions, both in and outside of traditional churches and religions. For example, in *Sisters in the Wilderness,* Delores S. Williams asks us to read the Bible from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave so that we might understand that "there is no clear opposition expressed in the Christian testament to the institution of slavery" (146). In *Hagar's Daughter,* Diana Hayes privileges and reimagines the Hagar story, emphasizing the relationship between the black slave, Hagar, and Abraham's wife, Sarah, concluding that both women are societal victims who "regarded men only and envisioned women only in terms of their relationship to those men—as daughter, wife, mother, or sister—unable to stand alone, with no identity they could claim for their own."(7). In *Sexuality and the Black Church,* Kelly Brown Douglas opposes heterosexism, arguing that "Jesus made no pronouncement and certainly no condemnation concerning homosexuality" (90). But other than womanist theologians and scholars, many in the academy are unaware of nineteenth-century black preaching women such as Elizabeth, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Amanda Berry Smith, who preached against slavery and sexism and the strictures of the traditional church, using the Bible to liberate black women and other oppressed peoples. Of the early black preaching women, only Sojourner Truth is widely known; other early black preaching women are known only within certain circles.

I do not discuss early black preaching women to minimize the import of the biblical hermeneutics performed by contemporary black female theologians and religious scholars; in fact, it is due to their exhaustive work that the histories and writings of early black female preachers have been recovered and appreciated. No, I discuss early black preaching women to underscore the point that black people outside the academy have performed critical and illuminating interpretations of the Bible, and that we need to honor and include the private biblical interpretations of so-called ordinary people, our students included, in our examination of religion in the academy.

USING *THE COLOR PURPLE* IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

In my quest to make public the private religious discourses of my students, I sought a text that would mirror their private discourses, enabling them to engage in religious discourse without feeling that their private religious beliefs were under attack. I chose *The Color Purple* because it contains religious language and ideas familiar to many of my students and represents some of the intimate or private conversations and perceptions that they hold about religion.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel that chronicles the main character Celie's journey toward self-discovery and love, as she breaks the chains imposed on her by her husband Mr. __ and an oppressive racist and sexist society through letter writing, and meaningful personal, communal, and, most important for our purposes here, spiritual relationships. *The Color Purple* interrogates black religion in a manner that shows love and understanding of the black world while holding black religion and black people accountable for their behaviors and attitudes. Although I could not locate examples of instructors using the novel to discuss religion in the classroom, and I admit those texts may exist, there are numerous critical treatments of religion in *The Color Purple*. For example, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes applauds the novel's "intersection of spirituality and human emancipation" (276), reading the text as a "subversive and critical ethnography" that "offers a prophetic critique of oppression and its consequences" (277). Kimberly R. Chambers believes that the novel's "notion of religion springs from folk tradition" (49), which "flow[s] directly from the piety of church-going Southern blacks, piety with roots in the folklore tradition that Walker respects and defends" (57). The novel's religious philosophy, according to Chambers, "grants life, an awareness of time past as nourishing and time future as providential" (51). For Diana Hayes, the relationship between Celie and Shug Avery is critical

because it promotes both spiritual awareness and healing for Celie, allowing her to reimagine her relationship with God and "reclaim her own spirit and be a source of healing for those around her, thereby mothering a black community, one which is viable economically, socially, and spiritually into life" (35). Spiritual healing is also a critical idea for Karen Baker-Fletcher because "when we don't take responsibility for self-healing, we spread disease to our communities" (86). These critical reflections about religion in *The Color Purple* demonstrate not only the importance of the theme in the novel but also provide a lens through which to view and critique everyday life.

The class took place during the summer, and although it was a freshman composition course, many of the students had taken one or two semesters of developmental writing and still possessed problems of basic writers, including weak paragraph organization and development, and surface level grammatical errors. The students were primarily children of the African diaspora such as African Americans, Caribbeans, and Puerto Ricans. Several students had failed or withdrawn from freshman composition in a previous semester and told me of difficulties they had encountered trying to complete the course. The writing program at my school is reading/writing-intensive, asking students to write in a variety of forms and privileging the process approach and the portfolio system. Those students who had taken developmental writing were familiar with our writing program, but many of them still struggled to generate and adequately develop ideas in their writing. At the beginning of the course, we had discussed favorite interests in order for me to understand their levels of cultural literacy and critique. Students expressed interest in hip hop music, movies, and street literature, and demonstrated some level of critique, although much of it did not move far beyond appreciation.

To increase the students' level of cultural critique before reading *The Color Purple*, I assigned several chapters of Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, which, among other things, offers an ideological framework for examining everyday artifacts and ideas, of which religion can certainly be included. *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* offers a consistent, detailed ideology, in this case Marxism, which students can read with and against, mirroring their eventual reading of *The Color Purple*. For example, some students admired Shor's concept of "false consciousness" as an internalization of "the ideas of the ruling class" (51), while other students felt the concept eliminated fun or pleasure from everyday existence. The book also helped students to understand that everyday topics or ideas such as religion could be critically examined in the classroom. In addition to *Critical Teaching and*

Everyday Life, I used three other texts to frame the reading of *The Color Purple*: "The Combahee River Collective Statement"; Alice Walker's "Womanism"; and Delores S. Williams' "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices." From these readings, students explored ideas about resisting multiple oppressions, constructing reality through one's own experience, and building supportive communities. These ideas and Shor's ideological framework established a solid critical foundation for students to read and discuss *The Color Purple*. In what follows, I will share the class discussion about religion in *The Color Purple* as well as several student essays about everyday topics that our reading of Walker's novel helped students to explore more critically.

STUDENT CRITIQUE OF SPECIFIC IDEAS IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Patriarchy

Class discussion of religion in *The Color Purple* helped students to see and understand patriarchy as a factor in society and in Celie's struggles. While some might argue that patriarchy is exaggerated in the novel, many students, both women and men, believed the novel accurately depicts the patriarchal attitudes and practices that permeate secular and sacred institutions and discourses. It was curious that some women defended church patriarchy, perhaps because more women than men attend church services and are extremely invested in their faith communities. When a male student asked why churches were filled with women but most pastors were men, several women responded. One woman said that it didn't matter if the pastor was male or female, only that the pastor was a "righteous" person. Still the male student's question about the male-dominated clergy rang true as a critical issue. Although black female pastors have gained the pulpit in churches that have long rejected or denied their spiritual leadership, when we consider the number of black female congregants, women are woefully underrepresented as pastors in many black churches. This point about the absence of female clergy prompted a woman to ask if a solution to patriarchy was womanist theology, not only female pastors but a womanist form of worship. Her question led to a lengthy discussion about alternative religions, with many students saying that traditional religions reinforced patriarchy. "Look at Mr. __," one woman said. "The church people must know what type of man he is, how he treats Celie, but the women still fawn over him in church." "Yes," a male student responded, "even the pastor mistreats Celie and nobody seems to care. It's like what Ira Shor talks about

with false consciousness. The women take on the ideas of their oppressor." I was pleased to see students referring to our previous readings to interpret *The Color Purple.* Moreover, they were discussing religion without rancor or recrimination, honestly debating the ideological underpinnings of religion without denouncing religion itself.

Even more, the students saw a connection between the patriarchalism in religion and in other aspects of Celie's life. A male student asked us to look at this passage in *The Color Purple*:

> I can't remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to get mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. . . . Well, sometime Mr. ___ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life be over, I say. Heaven last always. (42)

Many students saw Celie's capitulation to Mr. __ and her father as a misreading of the Bible. One student said that honoring one's mother and father doesn't mean that parents have a right to brutally beat their children. Another student said that people should follow the golden rule, do unto others, and that anything which violates that dictum is wrong. However, a female student asked us to look at a passage in Shor in which he says that "[c]ritical learning aids people in knowing what holds them back; it encourages them to envision a social order which supports their full humanity" (48). Excitedly, the student said, "The church and its patriarchy do not support Celie's full humanity. She's in a state of false consciousness. She doesn't think that things can be any different." A female student nodded her head and said, "Yes, she can't see any way out of the patriarchy because it's all around her. She hasn't seen anything else until she meets Shug." Although I hadn't contributed much to the conversation, allowing the students to navigate it, I seized upon the idea of imagination because it is such an important element of change and a critical component of black existence. "Have we encountered any examples of imagination this semester?" I asked. After a brief silence, a student tentatively answered, "Well, in our discussion of emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement. Black people had to imagine themselves as free." "Yes," another student said quickly, "but they needed something to refer to, some sort of model. They had to imagine that they were like the Jews. It wasn't totally their imaginations." Another student laughed and

said, "It's like Tiger Wood's daddy or Serena and Venus's daddy. They could look at white golfers or tennis players as models, but they had to imagine their kids could be like them. So models are important, but imagination is important, too." We then discussed Shug as a model for Celie and how difficult it was for Celie to imagine herself as Shug. Celie needs the catalyst of discovering that Mr. ___ has hidden the letters from Nettie to confront Mr. __'s patriarchalism, reject the patriarchalism of her religion, and following Shug, begin to construct a new religion of her own. As one female student said, "Celie creates a kind of womanist religion, but she can't do that until she first understands how she is being oppressed and the role she plays in her own oppression." The students were able to construct a critical reading of patriarchy in the novel seeing how religion could support oppressive attitudes and behaviors but also how religion could be a solution to those very same oppressions. Most important was their examination of the ideologies that undergird discourse and their recognition that religion is a discourse, a story people tell about the world.

Resistance to Traditional Religion

Students had also used the other course texts to fashion a critique of Celie's relationship to secular and sacred patriarchalism before we began formal discussions of resistance to traditional religion in *The Color Purple*. Although students had mentioned Shor and Williams in our previous discussion, the Combahee River Collective Statement (CRCS) resonated greatly with students during this discussion. Written in 1977 by writer-activists Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, with input from other collective members, CRCS is a thoughtful and provocative statement about black feminism, and the foundation of womanism. As we discussed traditional religion in the text, several students pointed to this idea in CRCS: "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." The idea of focusing on one's own oppression seemed important to students because that is exactly what Celie does not do for much of the novel. Instead, she worries about serving others and ignores her own miserable condition. Connecting Celie's condition to her religion, several students wondered how religion should serve us. One female student said that service was a big part of religious faith and that it was wrong to look for any reward. However, another student said that "ser-

vice doesn't mean being oppressed. Where does it say that God wants us to be abused?" This level of discussion impressed me because not only were they using CRCS to read *The Color Purple* but they were also individuating the notion of religion faith.

Returning to CRCS, a student noted this passage about freedom and individuality: "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy." In the novel, Celie is oppressed by church and community values. In order to be a part of both, she must adhere to their beliefs and practices. However, Shug arrives as an embodiment of resistance to church and community values, doing what she wants and serving a religion or spirituality of her own making. Although students had issues with some of Shug's behaviors such as child abandonment, homosexuality (more about that later), and promiscuity, for the most part, they admired Shug's individual spirit and saw her as Celie's personal savior. They also saw many connections between Shug's religion and womanist theology. For example, several students made a connection between Shug's rejection of traditional religion and Williams' reminder about "a liberation tradition in black history in which women took the lead, acting as a catalyst for the community's revolutionary action and for social change" ("Womanist" 7). In the novel, Shug, through her nontraditional behavior and attitude, is a catalyst for Celie to change her relationship with God, and Celie's change transforms Mr. ___ and the other members of the community, essentially replacing patriarchy with personal and community love. Although some students thought the novel had fairy tale aspects, they nonetheless admired the revolutionary nature of Shug's religion, according all creatures equal status because everything is connected. The students also saw similarities between Shug's religion and the pantheism practiced by the Olinka tribe, for which Nettie serves as a missionary. While they admired the Olinka religion overall, they condemned the practice of female circumcision.

I was impressed with the students' ability to make connections among the texts and consider seriously an alternative response to traditional religion. This is not to say that most or any students adopted womanist theology; rather, almost all the students were able to engage with ideologies that undergird traditional religion, womanist theology, as well as Shug's religion, creating a perspective that allowed us to interpret these discourses.

Homosexuality

Although the students were able to discuss critically most aspects of traditional religion, I feared that discussing Shug and Celie's homosexual relation would prove problematic. Homosexuality is a very sensitive issue in many black churches, where it is often summarily condemned. Whenever the issue of homosexuality comes up in my writing classes, some students invariably argue against it on religious grounds. However, as Kelly Brown Douglas points out, attitudes about homosexuality within the black church stem from the fear of any sexual act or behavior that might be construed in any way as abnormal or deviant because black sexuality itself has been construed that way in mainstream society (90). Thus, black church people hypercorrect for sexuality and are wary of anything that seems to go against the norm. What troubled me the most was the level of discourse about homosexuality that I had experienced in other classes. While most students understand that racist or sexist comments are condemned in the academy, some students feel free to spout homophobic statements.

I addressed this issue with the class at the beginning of the semester, but I think our course readings greatly helped students to locate a much more respectful discourse. For example, a woman quoted a passage from Walker's "Womanism" in which Walker states that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi–xii). Through reading the novel, the students admired Walker's intelligence and humanity and didn't want to dismiss her ideas. In fact, some students wanted to defend or support Walker, and a male student located this passage from CRCS: "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand." I thought the quotation would lead to a discussion of lesbian male bashing but was surprised when a student said, "I don't think the problem is lesbians and gays hating straight people but straight people hating lesbians and gays, particularly in churches." This condition was vividly displayed when another female student said that she believed her church choir director was gay, but everyone just acted as if he weren't. Several students reported the same occurrence at their churches. One student said that her choir director was very talented and extremely devoted to the church but "people refuse to admit that he might be gay." The students discussed the attitudes about their various churches toward gays, using Walker and Williams to problematize the argument. One student pointed out that Williams says that "respect for sexual preference is one of the marks of the womanist community ("Woman-

ist" 9). She then asked the class if they would ban Celie or Shug from their churches just because they are gay. Some students said that *they* would not ban them, but openly gay people would not be warmly received. Thus were students implicitly evaluating the ways in which private discourses around homosexuality in church contexts registered in the day to day responses of church members to one another.

As with the traditional religion discussion, our discussion of homosexuality did not, as far as I know, make any converts, although some in the class openly voiced support of gay people. However, our discussion demonstrated that students were able to engage in a critical discussion about homosexuality in *The Color Purple* using critical sources to explore the idea. Further, they shaped a critical discourse that was intelligent, sensitive, and honest, and which may even transfer to a critique of their church communities. As Shor explains, "[b]y critically studying the lives they live uncritically and the culture which eclipses reason, students begin changing their powerless places in society" (49), and perhaps changing the powerless positions of others.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT TEXTS

Because the course was reading/writing-intensive, students read and responded to a variety of texts through both informal and formal writing. Students wrote three formal essays multiple times, but only the final essay had a research requirement, although I encouraged students to incorporate source material into their work throughout the semester. As I said before, the class was freshman composition, but many students were "former" basic writers who still exhibited basic writing skills. As we know, writing improvement can be a slow process, and although I didn't have students who represented the lowest range of basic writing skills, many of them were still struggling to be successful college writers.

The essays represented here are in response to the third and final formal essay of the semester, which asked students to use multiple sources to investigate some aspect of everyday life. Shor provided some useful models for this assignment, as his text includes analysis of everyday things such as marriage, education, housing, sex roles, and family life. I asked students to select an everyday thing and analyze it critically, seeing it as if for the first time and determining how it operated in society. My hope was that our investigation into religion in *The Color Purple* would help students to ask more critical questions about everyday artifacts that they may have ignored or

taken for granted, to dig deeper to discover the apparatus that lies within. I might have assigned religion as a topic, but the overall point of the class was not to interrogate religion. Rather, my goal was to help students critically examine a private discourse so that they would understand how it matters in the ways they read and write about the world. Critiquing religion in *The Color Purple,* I hoped, would have prepared them to critique ideas, practices, and policies that have significant meaning in their lives. I believe that the essays presented here are interesting and even courageous attempts by students to engage their topics and, as Shor says, to "extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary" (93). In the examples that follow, the names and genders of students have been changed to mask their identity.

Richard's Essay on Colorism

Richard is a light-skinned student whose identity, he informed us, is questioned continually by others. Although he is African American, many people have asked him if he was bi-racial. Richard doesn't believe that people should be marked by their color. In one of our discussions about *The Color Purple*, several students noted that Squeak tires of being reduced to her color, to be constantly desired for being a "yellow" woman. This prompted a discussion about colorism, the privileging of white skin, which Williams notes "often separates black women from each other" ("Womanist" 9). Richard was particularly vocal during these discussions; thus, I wasn't particularly surprised that he chose to write about colorism, but I do admire the honesty in which he addresses it, a very private discourse made public. In this excerpt, Richard offers a rather sophisticated critique of colorism and the social and psychological damage it produces:

> The standard of beauty in America has always been white. Magazines advertise fashion, hair, and makeup tips for the general white population. When blacks are featured in these magazines, they are usually fair skinned with features that are close to those of white people. Even the Barbie dolls of color look like they could be called "sun-tan Barbie" because they look like white dolls with a dark tan. When some dark skinned blacks look at light-skinned blacks, they see them as being closer to white, and this is what has [encouraged] a lot of darker blacks to believe that they might not be as attractive as lighter skinned blacks. My grandmother's generation didn't have cosmetic lines special[ly] for women of darker

> colors, and many women wore shades [that] were two to three shades lighter than their complexion. . . .These creams were marketed towards darker women with promise of prettier lighter skin. A 1957 advertisement for Golden Peacock Bleach Cream pictured the familiar dark-skinned "before" and light-skinned "after" picture of a model, with a headline [saying] that the cream turns "black shades lighter" (Susannah Walker 109). Today there are many darker skinned women in Africa who are actually using these bleaching products on themselves. This colorism goes past beauty and also effects many African Americans socially, economically, and politically. There aren't many darker skinned politicians because many of the white population do not see them fit for office. In the case of Barack Obama, one of the reasons he was able to ". . . defeat Hillary Rodman Clinton was that large numbers of white voters saw him as 'post-racial'" (Mabry 1). Many voters see Barack Obama as being black, but he isn't too far from being white because of his light complexion and his white maternal heritage.

Questions about Richard's organization and generalizations aside, I think he produces a rather astute critique. He takes a very difficult and sensitive subject, a subject, I might add, that many people of color try to ignore or dismiss, and addresses it openly and with considerable insight. Earlier in his paper, he shows sensitivity toward light-skinned people by citing Margaret Hunter's idea that "dark-skinned people of color are typically regarded as more authentic or legitimate than light skinned people." Richard then offers a historical explanation of colorism when he discusses the "eight-page letter written by Willie Lynch in 1972, in which he presented his personal view on making [and controlling] slaves." Richard analyzes colorism from different perspectives and strives for honesty and clarity. His admission that "my mother and I have an automatic advantage over many darker toned blacks" is a clear-eyed statement about color privilege that, to me, is enlightened and ultimately healing. Our course readings and discussions helped Richard to explore this sensitive topic because not only had we discussed colorism rather extensively in class but had studied models for cultural critiques. In addition to Shor, the Williams article clearly details the progression of historical and social analysis that produced womanist theology, including the recognition and scholarly analysis of "black feminists like Sojourner Truth, Frances W. Harper, and Mary Church Terrell" ("Womanist" 9). Furthermore, our systematic analysis of important religious issues in *The Color*

Purple provided Richard with the reassurance that private concerns deserve a public hearing.

Sheila's Essay on Video Games

Sheila, a young Hispanic woman and a huge fan of video games, didn't appear that fond of writing but could be enthusiastic when she located something that interested her. Initially, Sheila had difficulty finding a research topic, but when I asked her about her interests, she reluctantly told me that she liked video games. Her reticence was due to fact that, in Sheila's words, "girls aren't supposed to be good at or interested in video games" and many people consider video gaming a waste of time, or, as Sheila put it, "any time I tell someone I like playing videos, they treat me like I'm a slacker or something." Although Sheila was not my most enthusiastic student, she attended every class and completed most of her assignments on time. I think some of Sheila's seemingly disinterested attitude was due to the fact that she felt misunderstood and didn't believe that education recognized the individual. When I told her I thought video games was a great topic, she was surprised but happy and immediately began telling me about articles and books she had read on the activity.

Furthermore, our course work, she told me, had compelled her to look more critically at video game playing. She noted that our discussion of patriarchy within traditional religion had persuaded her to look more closely at the gender roles within her own church and to consider the possible impact of other activities in her life. For Sheila, video game playing occupied an important part of her life, but she had never considered how it might affect her and others, or why particular people might be drawn to the activity. For example, she said that while she was pleased to see the diversity and seriousness among the players in her recent foray into online game playing, she was somewhat dismayed at how angry some players got during team play, and she wondered if playing somehow provoked hostility or whether aggressive people were drawn to gaming. This critical stance helped Sheila write a very interesting paper about video gaming. Here Sheila discusses the pleasures and dangers of gaming in a way that situates her within the activity in an essay, that is, in its own way, as deeply personal as Richard's examination of colorism:

> As a person who grew up playing video games alone and with others, video games are a type of investment for many people. Some

> children who didn't grow up in the best neighborhoods see video games as a form of escape from their everyday circumstances. The unrealistic situations that these video games produce awaken most people's imagination to the point where they become part of the story, almost in the same way as if they were reading a good book; the difference is that through video games you feel more involved and are more engaged with the characters. However, the downside to people finding escape in video games is that some people don't know how to draw the line between the fictional story line of a video game and the real world, [not] realizing that video games are like fictional or sci-fi books. Some people start playing these seeming[ly] harmless games but become so involved that they lose sight of reality. They base their entire lives around the concept of these games which can then be argued that it's not the video games but people who just can't handle them. A more widely known example is Star Wars, which is idolized by thousands of people. There will always be people who when given a venue to let the imagination go free lose sight of reality or even just become too intermingled with the concept that it becomes a part of who they are. In an article in U.S. News and World Report by Jennifer Seter Wagner she interviews a boy named Ollie Morelli about his day to day life which supports the idea that some people can become literally addicted to video games especially online games when they play with other people.

Even with the diction and punctuation problems, this essay represents Sheila's best effort in the class. All of Sheila's paragraphs were well developed, and she was able to argue consistently different sides of the argument. Frequently, it is difficult to teach students to look at an issue from different perspectives, but our discussion of *The Color Purple* helped the students to understand that being critical about something didn't necessarily mean dismissing it, particularly if the topic under consideration is something with which the student is personally involved. Although Sheila seems to "blame the victim" in this excerpt, she later uses several sources to explore the harm of video games, explaining that "[t]hese observations show the tremendous impact video games now have on the youth of today, effecting a child's ability to relate to his peers and socialize with other children." Sheila later discusses obesity and violence as possible effects of gaming, before ultimately saying that gaming can educate and bring people together. Sheila doesn't master the present/refute strategy, but she does employ it with some skill. Sheila

demonstrates a vital aspect of critical literacy: the ability to locate, understand, and acknowledge an opposing viewpoint and analyze that viewpoint in relation to one's thesis. Although Sheila's overall thesis is supportive of gaming, she is able to explore the negative consequences of gaming without being dismissive of or defensive about opposing ideas. After sharing in the productive discussions of religion in *The Color Purple*, Sheila had a model for how to explore different sides of an issue without rancor; instead, she explores gaming with curiosity and is open to what that exploration uncovers.

Jamal's Essay on the Liberal Arts Curriculum

Jamal, an intelligent young Caribbean American man with plans of being a lawyer, was upset that he had take a freshman English course after already matriculating in the Honors program. Apparently, someone had misread his transcript when he transferred into the college, and Jamal was now paying the price. I thought Jamal might be a problem in the class because he clearly was not happy being there. Although most students seemed to enjoy Shor's book, Jamal contributed only if I prodded him, until I offered my own criticism of Shor's somewhat negative evaluation of community colleges, which I feel offer most students wonderful opportunities, even through their vocational programs. My critique of Shor seemed to ignite a critical spark in Jamal, which he carried over to our reading of *The Color Purple*. Although Jamal never discussed his religious affiliation, he had much to say about problems he saw within religion and was particularly vocal about sexism and classism within churches, an idea that Williams discusses forcefully in her article. Jamal thought that Shor's overall argument was somewhat class-based in that he seems to privilege the liberal arts education at elite universities while denouncing the working class vocationalism at community colleges. Although Jamal's own admittance to a good law school might make his stance seem ironic, he made the point that law was, in some ways, vocational and that he could be a good lawyer without a liberal arts education. We discussed class issues in Shor, Williams, and Walker, including class based ideologies and the relationship of class to power. Jamal felt that elites forced liberal arts curricula on students, and he questioned the efficacy of such a move, arguing that since students aren't very interested in courses unrelated to their majors, they are likely to forget what they learned in these courses. I spent considerable class time discussing the present/refute strategy of argument, and perhaps because of his lawyerly leanings, Jamal really took to it. When Jamal told me he wanted to take on Ira Shor and his defense of liberal arts

education in his essay, I was pleased but not surprised because he had strong feelings about this topic. Here Jamal uses a present/refute strategy to discuss Shor's position on liberal arts education:

> Ira Shor argues that liberal arts courses offer you an experience outside of your major that teaches you and encourages you to think more broadly (52). He claims that through the liberal arts curriculum you are being taught to think critically and assess and analyze certain situations better. Most people who value a liberal arts education feel that without the foundation that liberal arts creates for individuals, they will struggle throughout their lives because they won't know how to properly deal with certain situations, and they won't be able to think of alternate solutions for any problems they may face. The[y] feel liberal arts courses give you knowledge that is necessary and [can] be applied in an individual's everyday life, where as simply focusing on the subject that you plan to pursue a career in will limit you and may create [more complex] future problems, especially if you find that the career you chose is not desirable.
>
> Opposing this position, I feel that the liberal arts education is completely excessive, unnecessary and shouldn't be obligatory for students. If an individual needs 128 credits to officially graduate with a Bachelors degree, I don't feel that roughly half of those credits should be in subjects that they do not need or want to take. I do feel that liberal arts courses should be required, but it should only be about twenty credits of the 128 credits you need to graduate. I feel that students are being pushed and forced into courses they do not care for and are wasting their time in meaningless courses learning about people and topics they will forget about as soon as the semester comes to a close. There is no need for a person who wants to have a career in a financial institution to have to sit in three science classes, four English classes, two philosophy classes, and take other courses completely irrelevant to their anticipated career objectives. A student should definitely be required to take a smaller number of liberal arts courses; however the current number is ridiculous.

Admittedly, Jamal overuses "you" and neglects to address Shor's point about critical thinking; however, Jamal does present some interesting arguments of

his own and engages thoughtfully in a topic that has real meaning for him. Of course, Jamal is referring to the core curriculum at our institution and surely not all colleges have a core that requires three science classes. Nonetheless, Jamal may have a point about some students forgetting core content "about as soon as the semester comes to a close" and clearly some students feel that they are "pushed and forced into courses they do not care for."

In the next movement of the paper, Jamal addresses what he believes is Shor's claim that "individuals at prestigious universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other Ivy League schools are learning liberal arts and they have a great emphasis on it throughout their curriculum. [Shor] also states that these individuals are the future leader of our country; thus the liberal arts is beneficial and necessary." Jamal counters the liberal arts at prestige schools argument by discussing grade inflation at those schools:

> [S]ince the beginning of this decade, grade inflation at top universities has been investigated, exposed and proven, which discredits this argument. "Grade inflation is running rampant at America's colleges and universities. The situation has become so severe that two years ago at Harvard University 91 percent of the seniors were graduating with honors. At many colleges and universities a grade of C, once considered the standard for average work, is now almost never given" (37). Students at Ivy League institutions are not getting the grades that they deserve nor are they truly educated like they should be. This is the truth about the individuals who go on to run our country and become leaders.

Jamal neglects to attribute his source in this excerpt, although he does list the source in the Works Cited and attributes his other sources. However, what is important here is the information he chooses to refute Shor. Grade inflation is a rather cunning argument against the significance of liberal arts at prestige schools. And even though Jamal doesn't provide examples of Ivy League leaders who are not "educated like they should be," it might not be that difficult for us to identify some names on our own. In addition to grade inflation, Jamal discusses current market capitalism as a challenge to the liberal arts curriculum; moreover, Jamal eventually addresses Shor's critical thinking argument when he says, "I feel that we can already think when we enter college and most people already have set mannerisms and views and liberal arts courses can't alter their thought and opinions at this point." Jamal overstates the case, in my opinion, but at least he has a coun-

ter-argument, even though it reflects his personal beliefs and reality. What I admire about Jamal's essay is his eagerness to engage with Shor, to add his voice to the conversation, to believe that his ideas are as valid as those of an authority. Reading and discussing religion in *The Color Purple* helped Jamal to reinforce his own authoritative voice, I believe. His writing certainly became more assured after our experience with the topic, and his ability to engage an argument definitely improved.

CONCLUSION

In the academy, private discourses are often ignored or rejected as modes of inquiry; however these private discourses are important to students, representing their beliefs and knowledge about language, culture, and society. Exploring these private discourses through reading, writing, and discussion, students might not only understand better the origin and nature of their discourse but also those of the academy, particularly the language and ideologies that shape and maintain discourses. We often see private discourses as academically irrelevant or distinctly private; however, private discourse is shaped by participation in particular communities; thus, they are in a very real sense always already public. Unearthing the social and ideological nature of private discourse can enhance students' critical thinking and reinforce the notion that critique is a part of their everyday lives, even though they might not regard it as such. Moreover, every critique represents an ideological stance, socially formed, so student critique is also open to further reflection and analysis.

For many students, religion represents a private discourse that is often prohibited in the academy, except in special circumstances such as those involving religion courses or programs. Many students order their lives through their religious beliefs, and for these students, private religious discourse greatly impacts their daily social existence, both inside and outside of school. It is both empowering and frightening for some students to engage in discussions of religion in the writing classroom; however, students often engage academic material through a religious lens, even if they don't share their thinking in the classroom. Rather than pretend that religious discourse or ideology doesn't exist, it might be more efficacious to discuss religion in the classroom, making sure that we do so in a manner that does not directly challenge students' religious beliefs. The goal of discussing religion is not to dismantle or undermine students' religious discourse but to enhance their critical thinking by showing them their beliefs are formed through

critique, and that critique is a necessary function of any viable discourse or ideology. In other words, their religious discourse will not dissolve if it is examined because it continually undergoes examination by the discourse users themselves. If it did not, there would be no need for continual discourse reinforcement through private and social acts of religious engagement.

According to Lee Galda and Richard Beach, students are particularly critical of texts that represent their lives or environments because students "interrogate texts for their authority in terms of whether social norms portrayed actually represent a culture, as well as the stance regarding these social norms" (65). Exploring religion in *The Color Purple*, along with the other critical texts, allowed students to engage with a private discourse without feeling that their beliefs were under attack. Instead, reading and discussing the novel supported critical discussions of important religious issues such as church and biblical patriarchy, homosexuality, and biblical hermeneutics, encouraging students both to critique and defend existing religious ideologies. What is most important is that students engaged in critical inquiry related to a private discourse they cared deeply about and about which they felt authoritative. To discuss a private discourse in the academy gives credence both to that discourse and the academy in the minds of students. Students not only learned new ways to talk and think about religion but also about other topics, both private and public, as evidenced by the essays they wrote for the course.

The research papers reflected enhanced critical engagement by the students because they were able to see a topic from different sides and use those positions to form their own evaluations. Students were, for the most part, more flexible in their thinking and became attuned to the ideological construction of meaning. For example, Richard sought to uncover the social construction of colorism and connected it to the ideological nature of racism; Sheila observed and examined her own relationship to video gaming and was able to extend that analysis to encompass the social, psychological, and cultural impact of the activity. Jamal challenged the notion of the best and the brightest to reveal a societal and ideological acceptance of a privileged ruling class that in many ways contradicts the notion of a meritocracy.

Overall, exploring religion in *The Color Purple* brought a private discourse into the public realm of academic discourse and showed students the ideological nature of discourse while enhancing their critical thinking. Students were able to engage critically with a discourse that mattered to them and to participate in a larger, socially transformative tradition of interpretation and critique, reimagining the social forces that shape them. Exploring

private discourses is critical for student writers, particularly for basic writers, because they need to understand that they are involved in discourse production and dissemination and that all discourses become more meaningful when they are openly critiqued. Our students come to us full of language, meanings, beliefs, and desires. When we fully embrace the linguistic, intellectual, cultural, and emotional wealth our students bring to the classroom, we make the learning experience more enriching for them and for us.

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New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions

Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark

ABSTRACT: This article examines the challenges of teaching basic writing today as students come to the classroom with the basic fluency of digital natives but have the same need for learning writing and critical thinking skills that has traditionally marked basic writers. While most basic writers are adept at accessing information digitally, they are not as proficient when it comes to producing digital information, nor are they able to code switch between informal cyber-situations and the expectations of academic and professional cyber-literacy. They also need to deepen their understanding of the role writing can play in developing digital texts. This article addresses how ePortfolios, blogs, and Web 2.0 tools included in basic writing classes at LaGuardia Community College help students to become effective users of digital media and learn how to write for a multimodal environment.

KEYWORDS: ePortfolio; digital literacy; basic writing; teaching with technology; multimodal composition; student reflection

In an age when 8 million American adults have blogs (Rainie), e-mail is ubiquitous, cyber-communities like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace are already passé among the teen and college-age set, and the use of computers in composition is a given, technology is part of the academic zeitgeist. While in the 1980s and 1990s, much was made of "the digital divide," documenting the economic and educational injustice of access to computers, those arguments are largely erased, or forgotten, in a culture where computers are everywhere. With the advent of Web 2.0 and social media, however, a new digital divide is emerging. Concomitant with the idea of the "digital native" is the idea that all students will come to the

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classroom proficient in new technologies, cyber-literate, and comfortable with the discourse of digital rhetoric. But this expectation presumes of its "digital natives" a literacy which they have absorbed uncritically or which they cannot produce (Prensky 1).

While many basic writers come to us today with the fluency of digital natives, they still have the same need for learning writing and critical thinking skills that has traditionally marked basic writers. Moreover, while most basic writers are adept at accessing information digitally, they are not as proficient when it comes to producing digital information, nor are they able to code-switch between informal cyber-situations and the more formal academic and professional expectations of cyber-literacy. They also need to deepen their understanding of the role writing can play in developing digital texts. In order to be effective users of digital media, students must know how to write for a multimodal environment; they are adrift in a world of instant publishing without the skills of proficient writers and thinkers. Where in previous eras, one might argue that basic writers were almost invisible, today basic writers are often audaciously demonstrating their lack of understanding of edited American English online. Furthermore, the digital environment encourages this showcasing of ungrammatical writing with the widespread use of texting, emoticons, and popular websites like "I Can Has Cheezburger." While these modalities are appropriate for digital environments promoting social networking, they confront basic writers, and in fact all students, with one more code from which they need to switch when intersecting with academic and professional realms of writing.

The virtual world is process-less: writing becomes an act of moving from immediate composing to instant publishing. What, then, are the ramifications for basic writers? How do we teach process in a process-less world of digital media? How do we engage students and help them to value process as a necessary tool for becoming more articulate in their writing? How can we engage students so that they can navigate both digital and traditional writing? How do we help students to code switch between their use of technology with friends and its use in academic and professional situations?

As teachers at a large, urban community college where pen and paper are often the only classroom technology, we believe that ePortfolios are an ideal pedagogical tool for engaging basic writers and teaching them to merge Web 2.0 digital literacies and multimodal composing strategies at this critical juncture of digital and traditional writing. In its most basic iteration, the ePortfolio is a digital version of the traditional paper portfolio, in which students collect written work during the term, select key pieces, and write

reflections about those pieces. In contrast with paper portfolios, however, ePortfolios are available online to employers, admissions officers, and the international friends and families of students. While the ePortfolio adds portability and the possibility of using multimodal composing, it also builds on a considerable legacy of portfolio pedagogy and teaching with technology in the field of composition studies. More importantly, the ePortfolio is beginning to radically change our students' understandings of their relationship to the written word in an era of digital literacy and the power of authority hidden within that authorship. Through the use of ePortfolio and other Web 2.0 tools, students implement critical digital literacy skills as they learn how to write for real audiences and find an authentic voice.

Recontextualizing the Digital Native: Writing and ePortfolios

Clocks change themselves on the weekend of daylight savings time. Coffee makers can be set to turn on automatically in the morning. We bank online. We know what our friends and family members are doing throughout the day by following their Twitter and Facebook updates. And yet, our classrooms remain largely the same as they were twenty or thirty years ago. We have not radically changed our practices or our academic expectations of students. In *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (published in 2008), John Palfrey and Urs Gasser outline recent shifts in culture and explain how the youngest generations of global citizens exist in a digital world that bears little similarity to the world their parents and teachers grew up in. In a conversation with students in a digital rhetoric course, DigiRhet.org created an impressive catalogue of the shifts in our daily lives caused by an increased reliance on technology and the ways that students understand the world. Almost every aspect of our lives today is permeated by a reliance on seemingly invisible technology:

> The list we generated was extensive, ranging from a digital alarm clock; an interactive mapping and direction-giving device one student had in her car; a device for runners to clip onto their shoes that digitally records their progress at time markers set for a marathon; a digital meat thermometer with an alarm that ran through a student's oven; a "virtual girlfriend" a student was "dating" that sent text messages via cell phone and e-mail; a digital audio recorder that allowed a student to record notes and thoughts as she commuted to campus, which she could then connect to her computer to

> transcribe her voice to text notes with the software that came with the recorder; a networked PlayStation console with a headset so that geographically distant players could not only compete against one another online but also speak to each other while gaming; a grocery store keychain card, which promised access to savings and specials but which students recognized quite quickly as a tracking device to monitor purchases; a USB drive that worked as a portable miniature hard drive and virtually replaced all other media (e.g., floppy disks, CDs); and digital cable and TiVo, which several students had in their homes. The infiltration of these different technologies in students' lives varied greatly; for instance, when the student who brought in her USB drive to show and talk about separated it from her keychain and held it in the air, at least ten other students immediately grabbed their keychains or dug in their bags to show their own USB drives and talk about common practices, different uses, storage capacities, cost, and so on. (236-37)

Students are clearly acquiring new types of literacy in their engagement with technology. With the acquisition of new hardware and software, new technological gadgets and devices, and the invisible ways that technology has become embedded in everything from our ovens to our cell phones, the emerging digital world is a vastly different place, one of connectivity and fast pace, than the one in which many college professors were educated.

However, just because students have and use technology, this does not mean that they are proficient in creating it or in code switching for different audiences. As we transition to this new culture as citizens and as teachers, we are simultaneously challenged with learning new media ourselves and bringing them into the classroom, wrestling with what this cultural shift means for our classrooms and our pedagogy. What is real writing in our new technologically rich world? How have the roles of teachers and students been reversed by the fact that our students are often more techno-savvy than we are?

In her 2004 address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kathleen Blake Yancey characterized this cultural change as "tectonic." Likening this increasing technological dependence, which represents a massive change in daily life, to the shifting of the plates that undergird the continents, Yancey believes, as do increasing numbers of educators, that our new digital culture calls for a significant shift in the classroom. Yancey argues, "Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change. Even

inside of school, never before have writing and composing generated such diversity in definition" ("Made Not Only in Words" 298). Yancey examines the impact of these different modes of writing and the situations in which that writing occurs: "The members of the writing public have learned—in this case, to write, to think together, to organize, and to act within these forums—largely without instruction and, more to the point here, largely without our instruction. They need neither self-assessment nor our assessment: they have a rhetorical situation, a purpose, a potentially worldwide audience, a choice of technology and medium—and they write" ("Made Not Only in Words" 301-302). No longer do writing instructors struggle to present the idea of audience to the students in their classrooms. Their students already write publicly on blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, and often, to a large audience of readers connected by cell phones, texting, and the Internet. However, embedded in Yancey's analysis is an assumption that there are culturally and academically valued forms of this new writing, which many basic writers have yet to master.

A 2008 Pew Internet and American Life Report, "Writing, Technology and Teens," highlights the distinction between public and private writing: "At the core, the digital age presents a paradox. Most teenagers spend a considerable amount of their life composing texts, but they do not think that a lot of the material they create electronically is ***real*** writing. The act of exchanging emails, instant messages, texts, and social network posts is communication that carries the same weight to teens as phone calls and between-class hallway greetings" (Lenhart et al.). While many students recognize the difference between academic and professional writing and virtual writing, they are not adept at code switching between the virtual world and the world of academia. In academic and professional discourse, there are assumptions about "acceptable modes of communication" for a particular context. This hidden world of literacy presumes that students and writers in general are able to make the necessary transitions between differing contexts. How, then, do faculty help students to use the technological medium they are conversant in to learn and engage with more traditional forms of writing? How do we transform the paper and pen classroom to a digitally saturated environment? And, most importantly, how do we adjust our own understanding of "good" writing from traditional print literacy to a definition that includes digital literacy—and in ways that are continually shifting? In our next section we discuss the use of ePortfolios at LaGuardia Community College as one way to help shift the classroom to include digital literacy.

Texting Isn't Writing: Today's Basic Writer

Located in Long Island City in Queens, LaGuardia Community College is one of six community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY). It serves a student body of 15,169 matriculated students who come from 163 different countries and speak 118 different languages ("LaGuardia Community College Institutional Profile"). Our classrooms are a fabulous cacophony of difference, divergence, and often, dislocation. Students come to us with varying degrees of familiarity with the American educational system. Classes at LaGuardia include students from underperforming American high schools, students who were trained in Caribbean schools based on the British-colonial model, students who have come to the United States as refugees with very little educational preparation, and students with advanced degrees from their native countries. Because of their diverse educational histories, these students present a complicated mix of expectations about their interactions with teacher-authorities. And, like all students, they arrive in our classrooms informed by the ideologies that have guided their upbringing. LaGuardia students also face socioeconomic risk, often unable to afford the "affordable" community college tuition (tuition and fees for full-time students at LaGuardia range from $1,545.85 to $2,424.85 per semester depending on the student's residency status). Many students have family members to support and care for, and they often work full time while maintaining full-time student schedules. They are at risk on many levels, teetering on the edge of that ever-elusive American dream.

Nearly half of all students entering LaGuardia (44 percent in 2006) are placed in basic writing. Like most basic writers, they are uncomfortable with writing and experience high levels of writing anxiety in academic situations. They have little or no confidence in their writing, reading, and critical thinking abilities. For most of these students, academic writing is seen as a one-way communication in which they seek to demonstrate acquired knowledge to a teacher-authority. In an era of No Child Left Behind, students educated in American public schools often understand writing as high-stakes and test-driven. These students often have little investment in education as a means toward cultural and social empowerment, rather seeing it as an end to economic advancement.

In most situations, including their placement into a basic writing course in college, writing has served as a basis for punishment. Within the City University of New York system, students are placed in basic writing based on their score on a placement exam. Once in the basic writing sequence,

students at some cuny colleges are prevented from beginning their college-level studies. Additionally, basic skills courses (including reading, math, and writing) no longer carry credit. Students perceive the basic writing course as an academic ghetto, preventing them from pursuing their educational goals. Exit from this course is based on a high-stakes examination. Thus, students regard academic writing as the means by which they are judged and found lacking.

Many LaGuardia students also face the challenge of negotiating writing in a second, third, or fourth language, which becomes a daunting obstacle. Despite success in English language acquisition courses preceding their work in basic writing or ESL courses, these students come to us as hesitant writers, concerned about their fluency and often frustrated by their inability to communicate as eloquently or persuasively as they might in their native languages.

Although basic writing and ESL students do not usually think of themselves as writers, they maintain a considerable online presence through texting, e-mail, and social networking. However, this online presence falls outside of their understanding of writing. Indeed, it exists outside of their discomfort with writing. Digitally, they exist happily in a mix of slang and imperatives and patois that richly captures their everyday lives.

Facebook, MySpace, and various journaling communities all privilege personal narrative as a powerful means to construct political, entrepreneurial, and entertainment personalities. Our students, however, have repeatedly learned that their stories are not important. Throughout their educational careers they have been given impersonal, prescriptive writing assignments that punish them for incorrect grammar. Their conception of academic writing is limited to the rigidly constructed five-paragraph essay, something that spelled success in high school writing assignments and on the SAT writing examination. So, while presidential candidates make much of the opportunity to connect with voters through personal stories that make them seem more "real" or "down to earth," and affluent teens and young adults keep blogs that offer their opinions on everything from fashion to sex to politics, our community college students are silenced in this larger cultural milieu, believing that their stories and their lives are unimportant. Their online presence is a means of everyday, survival communication that happens on the go, in short bursts as they connect with others in their community. They do not see this online communication as a connection to the larger world of "writing."

ePortfolios: "*What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be*"

At LaGuardia, the use of digital portfolios, or ePortfolios, offers the opportunity to merge the best of Web 2.0 and the tectonic shifts Yancey identifies with a process-based writing approach that teaches students to think about their writing and what is at stake when they publish that writing (for more information about LaGuardia's use of ePortfolios, go to http://www.eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu/). As students create and refine their ePortfolios, they work toward a new digital literacy while using their already well-defined technological skills, and in the process they begin to understand the expectations of a digital culture.

Too often, basic writers are asked to write simple essays that don't engage their intellectual interests or their critical thinking abilities. For some, "developmental skills" is a phrasal code for "not college able." And all too often, basic writers are marginalized within a larger college curriculum that uses the issue of "standards" as a weapon against them. Yancey writes, "*What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be*" ("Postmodernism" 738, emphasis in original). In our classrooms, we seek to use the ePortfolio as a tool to suggest to students that the world they write is the world they will claim, as authors and as citizens. In our basic writing classrooms, we strive to shift students' perspectives of themselves as non-writers as they compile ePortfolios documenting their development as writers and reflecting on the tangible progress as evidenced by their collected writing. This practice significantly challenges the other measures of student achievement in the course—two high-stakes exams imposed by the university system and our department—to help students document their emerging authorship and to claim authority over their own writing, and, ultimately, their own education. The ePortfolio, and students' understanding of their progress and their limitations as writers, serves to provide them with a powerful counter-narrative within an otherwise anonymous and punitive writing context. As they develop rich multimodal ePortfolios characterized by an intensive use of visual rhetoric to complement their written and oral productions in the course, students build on their technological dexterity and begin to understand their emerging writing skills as equally important components of their digital literacy.

The ePortfolio serves as a locus to teach developmental writing over the course of a semester while also using what Yancey calls a "web sensible portfolio," where students can explore their emerging literacy in a wide range

of digital media ("Postmodernism" 745). The heart of our ePortfolio pedagogy revolves around three key practices: (1) asking students to demonstrate revision in essays, (2) asking students to reflect on their development as writers, and (3) encouraging students to explore the full possibilities of the digital platform the ePortfolio provides. In basic writing courses, the first two often take priority because, as students work on their writing and their reflections, they are also often learning to use the ePortfolio system. Accordingly, their first ePortfolios are often less technologically sophisticated. However, since we share the mantra, "If you can do it on paper, why reproduce paper in the ePortfolio?" we find that students are increasingly creative in their use of digital media. They create movies, PowerPoints, and audio files that allow them to express themselves and to demonstrate their critical inquiry in courses as varied as writing, history, math, and science.

To this end, the practice of writing in an ePortfolio fully embodies what DigiRhet.org identifies as a culture where "Writing is no longer a purely text-driven practice," but one where

> [w]riting requires carefully and critically analyzing and selecting among multiple media elements. Digital writers rely on words, motion, interactivity, and visuals to make meaning. Available computer software applications, for instance, allow writers to more easily manipulate and embed visual information in their documents. Even basic word-processing applications come with fairly large clip-art collections and offer the ability for writers to create data displays like charts, graphs, and diagrams. Most Web search engines allow writers to search for photographs, animations, and video clips to download and use in documents, Web pages, and digital movies. These tools shift the ways in which composing takes place: they change the way we do research, the way we produce texts, the way we deliver our writing. (240)

Student ePortfolios become public artifacts in the course, accessible to all of their classmates as well as their instructors. Long before the evolution of the ePortfolio, our writing classes were all based on paper portfolio models. However, in many ways, the paper portfolio reinscribes the teacher-student relationship as students hand in a portfolio at the end of the term to a professor. The ePortfolio, among its many possibilities, makes writing more public than any other technique or tool we have tried in the classroom. Gone are

the days of peer review groups restricted by the number of copies a student makes of his/her paper (and complicated by broken copiers, printers needing toner, or students without money to pay for photocopies).

The ePortfolio allows easy access for all students enrolled in a course, or even among several courses, depending on the instructor's course design. The ePortfolio is also a good platform to allow students to showcase their use of other technologies like blogs, wikis, digital stories (mini-movies based on essays students write), PowerPoint presentations, and a public discussion thread (through Blackboard course management software). The ePortfolio serves as the locus for all of a student's digital production in our courses. And, because of the very public nature of all of these technologies, students come to think of all writing in our courses as public. Because anyone in the class, or sometimes in other classes, might comment on their work, they work harder to make their writing impressive. During the basic writing course, students begin to combine their increased proficiency in using technology with their own broadened expectations of traditional writing, producing a new investment in their own writing and literacy. That someone else might read their writing is no longer a possible abstraction; it's an expectation. Students also inspire and teach one another with their discoveries, their reflections, and their critical analyses of texts we read in class.

Throughout the semester, students increasingly complicate their understanding of authorship as they write the drafts and reflections that appear on the ePortfolio. Coupled with this new public writing, students begin to enter into an academic conversation about intellectual property and the value of ideas. They engage with new forms of rhetoric as they combine digital imagery with prose. They use film and social networking sites as ways to further experiment with their work and with their development. The ePortfolio, and student work showcased therein, has limitless possibilities for revision, for invention, and for imagination. In class, we discuss their public writing, designing activities and exercises to address the questions around crafting public writing.

ePortfolios offer the most recent iteration of a basic writing pedagogy that seeks to claim space for basic writers' voices within the cacophony of university classrooms, to address issues of audience and voice, to teach about the important role of revision in writing, and to tackle the questions of writing in a modern world, contextualizing and providing a laboratory for exploring writing in the world of Web 2.0 and its varying manifestations of authorship.

Defining New Culture: Acculturation on Many Levels

In her article "Personal Genres, Public Voices," Jane Danielewicz asks, "How might we move students toward public voices?" We have found that using ePortfolios is one way to move students from their personal writing to public writing. As explained earlier, students in basic writing classes at LaGuardia are tentative and often timid in their approach to writing. They barely have a private voice, let alone a voice "that enters the ongoing conversation to change, amend, intervene, extend, disrupt, or influence it" (Danielewicz 425). For our students, it is the ePortfolio that provides a gateway to this type of public academic discourse.

Much of what we do with-at risk writers is help them acculturate to a larger college experience, preparing them for future successes. In the discussion that follows, all student names are pseudonyms. Student writing is used with permission and appears exactly as it was submitted. Liz's student, Maria, a graduate of an underperforming New York City High School, writes this of her initial performance in class:[1]

> When I first came to college, I was under the false assumption that it would be a more slightly difficult, but extremely similar high school experience. Little did I know about the extreme culture shock that was awaiting as I walked through the doors of LaGuardia Community College. Where I was once that perfect student that all the teachers knew and loved, I was now that student who was struggling to keep that reputation in college. That struggle began with my very first formal college paper. This paper challenged and successfully changed my entire perspective of that "mildly difficult" college life that I imagined I would have.
>
> This paper was about how something personal to you, something that you feel strong about could become in a sense political. When I first recieved the assignment, I assumed I would breeze by this paper and recieve an A just like in high school. As I recieved the first draft of my paper back, I didn't know what to do as a huge NP (which happened to be a very small NP in the corner of my paper), stared me in my face, making a mochary of the effort that I put forth to impress my english teacher. (NP means Not Passing). With my hurt ego, I took the remainder of the time before the final draft was due and feverishly worked to re-write the paper, even neglecting my

> other classes. In my mind, the hard work seemed to be to no prevail as I somberly handed in what I thought would be a F.

This paper captures the disconnect between high school and college life that many students experience. While this student expected easy As, she was surprised by being placed in a basic writing class and found herself struggling to meet the demands of that course. In this first reflective letter, she also begins to discover the importance of revising in a process-based approach to writing.

When writing reflective pieces for their ePortfolios, students often discuss how they want people to see and understand them. Of her experience with ePortfolio, Marisa's student Emma writes, "My wish is to make people know more about my personality and the way I'm seeing myself as a writer. Eng 099 class made me to write as a free motivated person. I had so much fun practicing my writing as well as having a hard time in my assignments." Emma, who had started the semester with extreme writing anxiety and who often failed to produce in-class essays because they taxed her so badly, eventually found motivation in writing for her ePortfolio. The knowledge that this document was going to be public was the catalyst for her to write. Another student, Analise, reports, "I feel my EPortfolio its appropriate for public view because I show improvement in all my areas. Also in my opinion I know I could have done a better job but I feel it's a well done project that is presentable." Analise recognizes and finds it necessary to defend what she sees as sub-standard work because she understands the public nature of this writing. Thus, the ePortfolio adds an element to the writing classroom that allows students to safely explore themselves as writers while they turn an eye to a public audience.

Developing their public voice goes further when students begin to provide links in their ePortfolios to the blogs they keep during the semester. The blogs are motivated by our pedagogical assumption that students need to understand their writing as something they are invested in. In the blogs, students write about topics that are important to them, and as contextualized for an audience, understanding that their writing is public. Both the ePortfolio and the blog are integrated into the course as part of our larger pedagogical methodology. Students' blogs are already accessible to their classmates, but by providing links to their blogs in their ePortfolios, they make them public to those in their academic community who might not otherwise have read them. Student ePortfolios are password protected. While they are available to faculty and classmates, the general public cannot see

them without a password; however, including the blog URL in the ePortfolio allows teachers and students other than the ones who were in the initial class with the student to access these very public blogs.

Even outside the college, people can access ePortfolios only through passwords provided by the students. In one class that focused on environmental issues, students blogged about the connections they were noticing as popular TV shows focused on the environment. Marisa's student, Karissa, writes a brief analysis of Bravo TV's "Green is Universal" campaign: "In this campaign many bravo tv's stars, who are Tim Gun, Lee Ann Wang from Top chef 1, and Jesse Brune from Work out, are sharing their experience and tips for keeping our nature being Green." She continues: "For me it is awesome and desirable that the people in the shows-actually they're competetors and kind of masters in their field, so what they do is powerful to persuade people who want to be like them—because it has corrected my thoughts of what I eat, how I wash the laudaries, and why I should work out." This analysis, while not rhetorically sophisticated (or grammatically correct) enables Karissa to share her understanding of this program with her professors, her peers, and strangers who may have surfed onto her blog because she profiles herself as "the Christian who doesn't ignore what is going on in the world." Karissa is beginning to develop a public voice, even as a basic writer. She is entering into the existing conversation about the environment and media, and she is intervening in this conversation. Perhaps, in her future classes, Karissa will attempt to disrupt or amend the conversations in which she is participating.

Our students regularly keep blogs on issues related to cyberspace and technology. A standard part of that assignment is asking students in each class to comment on the blogs of the students in another class. Each week, we ask students to choose an article from the online versions of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *BBC*, or the *Guardian*. Students link to the article and then write brief reflections on why the piece interested them and related to the themes of our class. In her ePortfolio, Serena, one of Liz's students, linked to her blog entry on hybrid cars as an example of how she was able to write an informal, persuasive piece on the question "Can technology make our lives better?" Her resolute answer, as a future computer and information systems major, was yes.

The ePortfolio also allows, in the development of that emerging academic voice, an opportunity to reflect on changes in a student's writing. Serena, who had been in the United States for less than a year, writes in her mid-term reflective letter:

> I never thought I would improve this much in my writing skill. When I first wrote my diagnostic essay it was very poor. It had red ink on most every sentence.[2] It was mess to look at. The problem I faced in my writing class was because of the way of teaching in this college is totally different from what I used to learn in my place. It's really hard for me to adjust the new changes going through my studies. So maybe this is the reason why I am always back in my studies. Going through my paper I found that my essays needed a totally new look. There were changes to be made in the introduction, body paragraph and in the conclusion. Since the introduction attracts the reader, I tried to make improvements in the introduction. If the intro is interesting, engaging and clear, it is sure that the reader will definitely go through your 400 word essay. The common mistake you marked on both of my essays was unclear thesis and how do the paragraphs relate to the main idea. In order to make my essay outstanding and engaging, the 1st thing I needed to do was understand what the essay was about and what it was asking? So when I revised the paper I jotted down my new ideas that came to my mind and rewrote the essay again. Later when I read the essay I found that this revision plan has really helped me.

By mid-term, Serena had moved beyond her initial disappointment at being placed in a basic writing class to fully engaging the course objectives, understanding and articulating how to improve her writing. She shares important cultural information about how different this class was for her than classes in her native Nepal and then recontextualizes her understanding of education in an American educational setting. She explains her understanding of what an essay should do, how it should connect to a reader, and how its structure allows the reader to better understand an argument. Moreover, she demonstrates an increasing awareness of the importance of revision in this process. "I needed to . . . understand what the essay was about and what it was asking," she writes. Isn't this the essential question that all writers should ask of themselves? Serena moves from focusing on errors that her teacher identifies to situating herself as an author and trying to crystallize what she wants to say.

Serena's ePortfolio provided readers with even greater access to personal and reflective information. In another course, she had written an "About Me" essay (one of the important features of a LaGuardia ePortfolio, where students write their personal narrative) complete with pictures and

discussion of Nepal. Like other students, Serena wanted to teach her instructors and her classmates about her native country and her background, so she asked Liz to read and comment on her "About Me" essay. Here, Serena assumed a dominant role as she instructed us through her narrative. Understanding Serena's cultural background allowed Liz to construct their one-on-one conferences in a different way. We started our discussions not with her essays, but with the differences in educational expectations. Her ePortfolio led to many rich conversations about how culture shapes us and our expectations.

Serena's reflective essay demonstrates a clear understanding of the academic expectations of the course and the requirements for a passing essay. She marks her dominant writing challenge as learning to identify the main idea of her own essay, "the 1st thing I needed to do was understand what the essay was about and what it was asking." In her letter, she discusses the two essays she had selected to showcase. Her strategy was to choose essays that had significant structural and grammatical errors and to rewrite those essays, showing what she had learned. Moreover, in her letter, she commented on Liz's comments, showing where they helped her to improve and where she felt confident enough to follow her own ideas about the structure and content of the essay. In her conclusion to the letter, she writes, "I revised my essay again and again. I used to write essays at home and bring them to your office hours. My final revision for this essay was 750 words with full proofreading and not a single grammatical error."

At mid-term, this student was already writing essays that exceeded our first-year college level composition requirements (600 words). She understood the process of revision and how to make her essays stronger. She also demonstrates a clear understanding of our class discussions about the structure and content of effective essays. More importantly, she confidently recounts her choices and her process. Like other students in this class, she writes with the confidence that someone is reading her writing, and that makes it more important than an abstract academic exercise because she knew that her teacher, her classmates, and possibly eventually strangers would be reading her work.

Serena's ePortfolio is also a good example of how students work to use the digital possibilities of the ePortfolio. Each of her final drafts is illustrated. She selected images from the online photograph archive Morguefile and learned how to cite them. Images and digital representations of students form an important visual rhetoric in ePortfolios. She chose to use seventeen different thumbnail images of herself on her ePortfolio's welcome page,

displaying herself in several different versions of her everyday life: as a student in jeans and a sweatshirt, in her native Nepali dress, in a headscarf and "Western" clothing, sitting while studying, and standing on the Staten Island Ferry. These images, coupled with her "About Me" introductory essay, allow her to shape the ePortfolio as a powerful autobiographical narrative, coupling her academic and personal life. She suggests that her experiences and prior education have an important place in her educational autobiography and that her previous life is not disconnected from her current academic and career goals. For Serena, and many other LaGuardia students, the ability to demonstrate many different sides of their personalities and identities is a key way in which the ePortfolio encourages the emerging authorship of the at-risk writer.

In the course of 12 short weeks, the students whose work is quoted here began to transform their relationship to writing, emerging as confident writers with a new sense of how they can translate their authority onto the page. For us, this represents the possibility of ePortfolios in the classroom. Basic writers emerge with a new relationship to the written word, understanding how and why writing can help them in their academic journeys. Additionally, this emerging sense of self is a significant step in our students' educational careers. All too often, the power of the individual voice is negated in a preference for facts and statistics. Students who have yet to learn the power of their own voices are told not to use them. Yet the power of story, the power of narrative, the compelling details of personal experience have always been what captures the imagination. Without the power of personal voice, leaders like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or Gloria Steinem wouldn't have begun their revolutions. This is our expectation: we push students to believe that their voices matter and they start to see their voices matter in public presentations of their writing. ePortfolio makes this possible as they engage in very public notions of writing in the classroom and on the Web.

Possible Classrooms: ePortfolio's Impact on the Basic Writing Classroom

DigiRhet.org points to a new digital divide involving "problems specific to digital literacies and rhetorical abilities. We see a divide where students may download complex, multimodal documents but lack the training to understand how to construct similar documents. . . . The new, emergent digital divide we will negotiate as teachers will be between those with and

without access to the education and means to make use of multimodal civic rhetorics"(236). The ability to make meaning from these multimodal civic rhetorics, according to DigiRhet.org, will create a significant civic and social gulf. Without significant work in digital literacies, as outlined here, basic writers face double jeopardy. They will have the traditional markers and challenges of basic writers coupled with an inability to critically engage and produce in the digital medium. Just as literacy has always been linked to social, cultural, and economic power, so too does this new digital literacy mean access to our newest forms of cultural power. The digital divide is no longer about access to technology, but rather a more complex divide of those who have had the educational access, training, and critical engagement to use technology well as literate cyber-citizens. In our classrooms, we are aware that ePortfolios shape this kind of new writing instruction by engaging students in an awareness of digital literacies and the ways in which writing is both produced and owned traditionally and as we move forward into an increasingly digital world. Through ePortfolio and our use of other Web 2.0 technologies, our basic writing students, for whom writing has often been a means of punishment and restriction within the academic community, come to understand that writing can be a powerful means of social and cultural transformation. By using the ePortfolio as a platform for multimodal work in the basic writing course and for showcasing revision, we believe that we make visible the expectations of a digital culture and help our students to become proficient authors of a twenty-first century narrative.

Notes

1. All student work is used with permission and appears as the author submitted it. Although we have changed student names in this article, we have not edited student work for grammatical correctness or precision.

2. Although this does not make it into Serena's final draft of her reflective letter, we had several conversations about the fact that I don't mark student papers in red ink. She was shocked when I asked her to pull out the paper. She literally didn't realize that the paper was marked in green. However, her reaction to seeing comments and marks on her paper was so overwhelming that she perceived the questions and comments on her paper as having been written in "red ink," a further testament to negative student perceptions of teacher authority (*Liz*).

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Writing Partners: Service Learning as a Route to Authority for Basic Writers

Catherine Gabor

ABSTRACT: This article looks at best practices in basic writing instruction in terms of non-traditional audiences and writerly authority. Much conventional wisdom discourages participation in service-learning projects for basic writers because of the assumption that their writing is not yet ready to "go public." Countering this line of thinking, the author argues that a service-learning project called Writing Partners offers a promising pedagogical approach. Through Writing Partners, college students in basic writing classes write letters to and mentor disadvantaged elementary school students. Participants in many service-learning experiences encounter the (silenced) discourses of race and class in programs where the "served" are often racial minorities and/or less socio-economically privileged than their "server" partners at colleges and universities. However, participant positionalities in the Writing Partners project are much more fluid, for the basic writing students must simultaneously negotiate their "server" positions relative to the elementary school students and their "less privileged" status in the university. As BW students become more aware of their audience's needs by corresponding with their young partners, they develop increased authority as writers.

KEYWORDS: academic discourse; authority; basic writing; confidence; service learning; university-K-12 collaboration

My paper is a piece of classic persuasion: I want to convince compositionists and service-learning practitioners that basic writing instruction and service-learning projects can go hand in hand. This article is about the potential of service-learning in basic writing classes; it is about how basic writing students can serve as not just competent, but excellent, mentors through writing; it is about the kind of confidence *through* authority that basic writing students can obtain from this type of service learning. Specifically, I assert that the Writing Partners project described in this article is a viable and effective service-learning venture for students placed in basic writing classes.

Writing Partners is a program developed by Write to Succeed, an organization started by a group of graduate students in Rhetoric and Com-

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position in 1997 with the goal of enhancing college education and serving children in local communities by fostering mentor-like relationships through literacy. In the Writing Partners project, first-year college students and third- through eighth-grade students exchange hand-written letters over the course of a semester. Many times, at the end of the semester, the grade-school students come to the college campus for a culminating event (for more information, see www.writetosucceed.org). This series of writing assignments, which is also a service-learning activity, can help basic writing students gain confidence as writers and accrue a greater understanding of discourse communities, both of which can help students better negotiate the pull between home literacies and school literacies. In short, Writing Partners makes a space for using home literacy in a college class, thus honoring or acknowledging it),while also helping students to see the range of rhetorical choices available to them as they face the next several years of writing for academic audiences. In short, students write for school (academic essays, daily homework, etc.) but also write letters to people from their home discourse communities (as part of a larger essay assignment) and to their elementary school writing partners. By including living, breathing audiences other than their teacher, the basic writing students are forced to make conscious choices about diction, syntax, and tone based on their knowledge of non-academic discourse communities.

Confidence *Through* Authority

In "Composition's Word Work: Deliberating How to Do Language," Min-Zhan Lu updates the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication proclamation that students have a right to their own language (Committee on CCCC Language Statement). Lu states, "I argue that composition studies in the twenty-first century needs to foreground students' right to deliberate over how they do language," as a central part of a student-centered, transformative pedagogy (193). I see Writing Partners as consistent with the kind of critical or transformative pedagogy that Lu and others (Adler-Kassner and Harrington, Ashley and Lynn, Hindman) suggest. Writing Partners offers students a vehicle for becoming aware of the range of rhetorical choices they can and do make as writers inside and outside the academy, and, as Lu says, "[for] retooling the tools one is given to achieve one's ends; and more specifically, retooling the tools according to not only one's sense of what the world is but also what the world ought to be" (193). One of the key components in a student's ability to "retool" is a sense of authority as a writer.

In discussions of basic writing, scholars and practitioners often look for places to disrupt the hegemony of the instructor's inherent authority in the classroom. Instructors are vested with both the "authority of office" and the "authority of expertise" (Mortensen and Kirsch 559). The academic hierarchy sets them up with the "authority of office": the power to set the course agenda, determine the grades, etc. Their own experience and knowledge base grants them the "authority of expertise." In any given basic writing classroom, the students are not vested with institutional power, with "authority of office." The presence of student "authority of expertise" in the average basic writing class has shifted in the last decade or two with assignments that acknowledge and draw upon students' home languages or their knowledge of pop culture and technology, for example. However, as Hannah Ashley and Katy Lynn point out, even creative assignments designed to tap into students' knowledge bases can end up being "subtly assimilationist," leaving students without a feeling of mastery over the writing that would enable them to mine their own authority (5).

Rosemary Arca highlights service learning as a particularly promising pathway to authority for basic writing students. In "Systems Thinking, Symbiosis, and Service: The Road to Authority for Basic Writers," she offers a succinct definition of the kind of authority that "we want our basic writers to realize": "that sense of potency as a writer who not only has something important to say but also has the skills to say it well" (141). I concur with Arca's definition, but I'd like to extend it by focusing more on the writer's relationship to the audience. In most basic writing classes, the only audience is a teacher who has a better command of the conventions of academic discourse than the students. In the Writing Partners project, however, the audience does not have more knowledge of writing conventions than the college students. Because the audience consists of elementary school students, the locus of the authority is different. The Writing Partners project casts students in the role of authority—as the ones with insider knowledge about college—even before they write the first letter. The assumption is that the basic writing students *can* and *will* teach their elementary school writing partners about college and college-level activities. In other words, basic writers gain confidence as writers *through the authority* bestowed upon them by the setup of the program.

This confidence, as I will show below, helps students feel more like authoritative "school writers" while still maintaining room to critique academic discourse and compare it to other literacies. For example, when writing letters to the elementary school students, the BW students are free to

complain about the burdens of college and/or the constraints of writing for a teacher. While these Writing Partners letter drafts and final copies count as daily homework, they look very different from the rest of the homework assignments students get during the semester (e.g., reading responses), thus providing students with a range of texts to reflect upon at various points during the term. At about midterm, I ask the students to complete an in-class writing in which they reflect on what they have learned from Writing Partners. And at the end of the semester, students write a summative letter about their writing processes and products.

Overview of Methodology

Buoyed by previous positive experiences with Writing Partners in first-year composition classes, I decided to study the effectiveness of the program for basic writers. I engaged in a fairly simple data collection effort: gaining permission to retain formal papers, in-class reflections, and Writing Partners letters from students in my summer section of English 1 (basic writing). My plan was to analyze the data organically and see what themes or connections arose. I presented my initial findings in 2006 at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Gabor), where I got helpful feedback suggesting I collect more data. Thus, I collected papers, letters, and reflections from a subsequent section of English 1 during the spring semester; this second time I had developed several codes or categories to use in analyzing data. For example, I was looking for evidence that students could identify their own rhetorical strategies and provide a rationale for their choices. I was also looking for markers of their confidence or a sense of their own authority. Although this last category sounds fuzzy, the main criterion was evidence of self-reflection and/or meta-cognitive commentary on their own writing (to their writing partners) that identified a sense of pride, accomplishment, or knowledge.

In order to better understand what was at stake for the students in these basic writing courses, it is important to know something about their situation in the university.

> • According to state law, students are "disenrolled" from the university if they do not pass all "pre-baccalaureate" classes, such as English 1 (basic writing), during the first year of college. After "disenrollment," they can attend a community college, pass basic writing and first-year composition, and then re-enroll. However,

only roughly 4 percent of disenrolled students return to the university. In my summer section, all of the students had failed basic writing twice, so this class was effectively the students' last chance to remain in college. In my spring semester class, many of the students had failed basic writing in the fall, while others were enrolled in basic writing for the first time. The stakes were equally high for both groups, though, because the spring semester students were coming to the end of their first year of college—the deadline for passing all "pre-baccalaureate" courses. For this group, a summer session would not be available due to budget cuts.

• Although I did not survey the students for demographical data, I learned about their backgrounds from class discussions and conferences. In the summer section all but one of the students was a first-generation college student, and all but two identified as working class The class profile for the spring section of English 1 was similar.

• Both classes (summer section and spring semester) wrote letters to elementary school students at Title 1 schools (schools in which at least 40 percent of the students fall under one of the federal definitions of "low income"). The summer students wrote letters back and forth to third graders at a year-round school where 34 languages are spoken. The spring semester students exchanged letters with fifth graders in an honors class at a Title 1 school where 31 languages are spoken. While only one of the basic writing students had attended the elementary school we partnered with, many of them had gone to Title 1 schools, had been on free lunch programs, spoke other languages in the home, and had encountered peers with a multitude of linguistic backgrounds. (Again, this information comes from class discussion and conferences since I did not survey the students for demographical data.)

• Near the end of the term (for both the summer and spring classes), the elementary school students visited our college and were treated to a tour of the campus—designed and narrated by my students. It was the first time on campus for all of the students from both schools, many of whom had not known that there was a university in their home town.

• The course includes three essays that receive comments from peers and the instructor. Students then revise those essays as part of a final portfolio that is submitted at the end of the term to a grading

committee made up of basic writing instructors who will decide if the portfolio passes or fails the class.

In the two classes I discuss in this article, the common assignment was "Essay Three: Reflection and Analysis: Choices We Make in Different Discourse Communities," in which students wrote a letter to a professor about their most significant experience in college to date and then wrote a letter on the same subject to a friend or family member outside the university community. The essay prompt asked them to compare and contrast their rhetorical choices in each letter. In order to prepare to write this letter, students read an excerpt on discourse communities from Thomas Deans' textbook *Writing and Community Action* to give them some common vocabulary to discuss their writing strategies. Along with Deans' chapter entitled "Writing in Academic Communities," the students read, annotated, and discussed (in small groups and as a whole class) John Gonzalez's short piece "College Brings Alienation From Family, Friends," Richard Rodriguez's well-known "Aria: Memory of a Bilingual Childhood," along with Victor Villanueva's response to Rodriguez, "Whose Voice is It Anyway?" Gonzalez and Rodriguez get at a similar issue: how formal education tends to assimilate students into a culture of reading, writing, and speaking that is very different from their home culture patterns. Villanueva pushes readers to contend with what they have to give up in order to assimilate. The daily writing assignments and in-class discussions allowed students room to explore their own point of view on these issues and how that point of view is informed by their own experience. In these discussions, I pushed them away from either/or analysis of the assigned readings and asked them how they might maintain home literacy while also mastering academic discourse. While students did not always incorporate these themes in their Writing Partners letters, most of them did talk about the paradox of writing to a non-academic audience as part of a college class. While these readings and writings did not enable students to resolve their own complex questions of assimilation, the range of texts they produced in the BW class helped them move into this discussion more easily and resulted in some insightful responses, detailed below.

Those Who Have Authority Can Share It

In almost every letter to their writing partners, my students assumed a voice of authority. The responses from the elementary school students, asking more questions about college from these "authorities on college"

solidified this sense of confidence in the college students. Another significant trend I saw in my students' writing was the move to share their newfound authority in writing. For example, one of the students, Jasmine (all names are pseudonyms), wanted to help her writing partner feel the same level of confidence that she was beginning to feel. Gaining a sense of authority in her own voice, she worked to encourage her third-grade writing partner to take control of *her* writing as well, to "[bring] out my writing partners personality more. I want her to put more of her voice into the letter." In this case, the student set specific writerly goals for her third-grade partner and asserted that she did in fact have the ability to help her achieve these writing goals.

In another instance, a student named Daniel cast himself as a teacher of writing in a general sense: "I see my writing as an opportunity to help these kids with their writing skills because they are writing about their interests and not about boring stories in some English book." (While he was talking about the elementary school students, I think this point applies to his own experience in English classes as well.) In "From Mystery to Mastery," Kate Chanock points out that although college students are considered adults, they are often asked to complete childish assignments. In fact, Writing Partners is often initially perceived as a childish assignment because students handwrite and decorate letters. Many students in both sections questioned the validity of handwriting for a college class; they felt that they had left handwriting and art projects behind in junior high, if not elementary school. However, Writing Partners not only gives students the freedom to explore topics and avenues of inquiry that interest them (and their elementary school partners), it also places them in the position of adults who mentor, take responsibility for what they write, and encourage those less experienced.

This more adult writing self was manifested in some of the rhetorical strategies that the college students used to solicit the third graders' opinions on "college-level" topics. It is common knowledge that the most confident teachers are not the ones who keep tight reins on their students but the ones who share authority with them. I saw this kind of sharing-of-authority-based-on-self-confidence occurring in the Writing Partners program. For example, a student in a colleague's class that was also doing a Writing Partners project wrote to her partner about a college essay she was writing. In her letter, she says, "I had to make up a new proposition, or law, for [our state]. I decided that [our state] should make an underground subway system to lessen traffic on the freeways. When you drive around town with your family, do you ever get stuck in traffic?" Here, the college student is valuing

the third grader's experience and implying that the child has a valid opinion on a sophisticated topic like urban planning.

In a letter to his writing partner, Raymond, a student in my spring semester class, lays out all of the arguments for his second essay (on video game literacy) and recounts his peers' comments on his draft. After doing that, he solicits his writing partner's feedback on the topic: "Have you ever heard of World of Warcraft or do you play it? Do you play a lot of video games because I do? I had to do a report on video games and the effects it had with the players that play them. I said that video games did not affect the people who play them. But other people disagreed with me. They said it affects the players greatly. It makes them dumber and lazy, and players should be reading books instead. What do you think? Do you think that video games harm the people that play them or it doesn't have any effect on them?" In this letter, Raymond first surveys the grade school student ("Have you heard of," "Do you play"), trying to find a point of common interest and tap into the fifth grader's knowledge. Then, he explains his own personal involvement and introduces the fact that he is in the midst of revising this essay; he is at a point where he can actually incorporate his writing partner's perspective into his essay. I can imagine that the fifth grader was honored that a college student would consider using his opinion in a college paper, and my student must have felt a sense of authority over his writing when he offered that chance to a youngster. Note that he does not just ask, "What do you think?" in a cursory or off-handed manner. He follows up with a question that guides his writing partner's answer, asking his partner to choose either "harm" or "doesn't have any effect." Referring to this letter in an in-class reflection, Raymond writes, "[my writing partner] showed me how far I have gotten as a writer." I would disagree slightly, arguing that the *act* of writing to a fifth grader is what helped this student move forward as a writer.

In several instances, I could see the cross-pollination of the Writing Partners letters and the formal essays and informal in-class assignments. In the case above, the student uses his letter to sort out ideas for his essay. Conversely, another student, Star, used an in-class freewrite as a sort of rough draft for her letter. In her freewrite, she discusses the importance and fun of serving as a role model for fifth-grade children who are not inclined to think about college. In her last letter to her writing partner, Star expresses these thoughts (almost word-for-word from her freewrite). Instead of ending there, Star directs the fifth grader to engage in reflection, just as she had done in her freewrite. She ends her letter to her writing partner with the following questions: "How do you feel about writing partners? What has it taught you?"

Star assumes an almost teacherly authority, asking questions about learning from writing. In all of these examples, the college students are implicitly or explicitly expressing their authority as writers and willing the elementary school students to share in their newfound authority through writing.

No More Apologies: Reflections on Growth

When I introduced Writing Partners to the students in both classes, I told them that one of the ways this project constitutes service is that the children we would be writing to probably did not see themselves as college-bound and that we could encourage them to re-see themselves and their possibilities for the future. In over half of the students' letters and reflections from both classes, they claim to be helping their writing partners see themselves as potentially college-bound. For some of the basic writing students, this was the first experience where they felt they had achieved a tangible goal through academically sanctioned writing. In other words, many of the students in both classes commented (in class discussion and informal daily writing) that they had received negative feedback on their writing in school-based assignments in the past. In general, they had not achieved the goal of impressing the teacher—or the goal of passing the course.

The sense of defeat when it came to writing was present from the first day of the summer session class in particular. When I collected the in-class writing done on the first day, students handed it to me with apologies: "I'm really tired, so this is not my best writing"; "I didn't know we were going to write today, so I wasn't really in the right frame of mind"; "I know this is really bad, I'm sorry, I hope you can help me." I had heard these apologies from basic writing students in the past. It had become almost second nature for students in this course to apologize for their writing, to feel like they had to make excuses for its quality, to take no pride in it, to express no authority as writers.

However, when the students started writing to an elementary school audience instead of to me, they assumed a position of authority in their letters, because—I assert—the elementary school students represented an unthreatening audience. The basic writing students "knew more" just by virtue of being older and having had more experiences. Given that they could occupy a position of authority in these letters, I observed them writing comfortably in the *context of a writing class*. When they got letters back from their writing partners, they could see evidence that they had communicated clearly through their writing: their questions were answered; their stories garnered responses; their jokes were acknowledged.

Students from both sections called the experience "fun" when asked to reflect on it. For example, one of the students, Noah (all names are pseudonyms), stated, "I believe that [Writing Partners] is making this summer session more fun than what I was expecting. Because not only are we practicing our writing but we are having fun doing it." After we read the letters from the third graders aloud in class, Noah wrote: "Some of the questions they asked me were funny. Like this one I got from [my writing partner], he asked me 'Do you have recess in college?'" When Noah read this to our class, we all laughed. But in his reflection, he cast this seemingly silly question in a different light: "When I read this question it made me feel that I was making him think about college. I think that it is a good thing that he is thinking about college at so young a age." Note that, in this reflection, Noah uses language that points to his own authority: "it made me feel that *I was making him think* about college." Noah's experience with Writing Partners compelled him to claim agency in writing explicitly, and I believe that other students felt a similar sense of agency although they may have expressed it more implicitly. In my experience, most basic writing students do not refer to themselves as agents when they discuss writing for college classes; they tend to focus on what they have been told about their writing by previous teachers and not focus on their own authority as thinkers or writers.

For Noah, the confidence that he gained in helping his third-grade writing partner think about college appears in this reflection he wrote about one of his academic essays:

> I am not sure what voice I have created throughout this essay because I still am not sure what voice means. I read the link that is in the web ct assignment. From what I read to me voice was kind of like the way we have to think of audience. I am not sure if I am right but I am trying all I can to try to define the word voice. I think It is the way I phrase my sentences and who I am trying to explain something. I might be wrong but at least I tried. [. . .] I think voice means audience. Because the link about voice deals with trying to express the way I write in different forms of writing. I understand that I need to find my own voice to express my points of views or thoughts to my reader because that way it will become more of my own way of writing. And that will make me understand what I want to present in my essay. So I can present my essay with authority.

In this reflection, Noah starts with the standard apologetic rhetoric: the phrase "I am not sure" appears twice in the first sentence. In the middle of

the passage, I can see his confidence grow, though it is still tentative: "I might be wrong but at least I tried. I think voice means audience." By the end of the reflection, he moves to a place where he can articulate an authoritative plan for his writing: "I understand that I need to find my own voice," which is a far cry from "I am not sure." And, at the very end, he sums up his plan by stating that he needs to exercise his voice in order to "present [his] essay with authority." I think Noah will ultimately succeed in college because he has demonstrated the ability to think critically, to synthesize experiences, even though he has not yet demonstrated consistent control over the scribal skills of Standard Edited English.

Next to "it is fun," "learning about audience" was the most common response to the in-class freewrite asking students what they had learned from Writing Partners. For example, another student, Gabriel, asserts: "Writing Partners has taught me to cater my language to my audiences." While at first this may seem like a generic answer, I want to mention a few things that stand out to me about his response. He chooses a unique and exact verb: "cater." He may not have learned this kind of verb choice through the act of writing to a fifth grader (for example, he never used this verb in any of his letters), but he has been guided to actively think about his audience before making his word choices. In this case, he knew that I would be the reader of this in-class exercise, so he picked a verb that would be understood and appreciated by his intended audience. Furthermore, on his hand-written response, he had crossed out a misspelling of "language" and written the correct spelling next to it. On the day we did this reflection, I called it a "freewrite" in the syllabus and in my own lesson plan notes. Given the connotation of "freewrite," most students did not take the time to self-edit their work. Gabriel, however, did—another sign that he is absorbing the conventions of academic writing, which always call for proofreading. This is a practice I had all students engage in before sending the letters off; I emphasized that we needed to model good "school writing" for our partners. Finally—and most significant for me—he pluralizes "audience." This choice shows me that he acknowledges that different rhetorical situations call for different writing conventions.

His awareness of writing conventions for different audiences is also explicit in Essay Three, the one in which students wrote two different letters about the same subject: one to a professor and one to a family member or friend at home. In his opening paragraph, Gabriel explains that he has written to a professor and his older sister, and he introduces the concept of discourse community as the driving force behind the two different approaches

he took in writing the two letters. He states: "The source or root of these changes is in discourse communities. Discourse communities cause changes, such as language choices and structure, in how we communicate or write to our audiences." He follows this point with several examples of specific vocabulary choices that he makes, indicating that a professor would expect and appreciate words that his sister might have to look up in the dictionary, thus alienating her from the reading experience and possibly causing her to tease him for using such language. His most powerful example, though, is his comparison of his greeting rather than the examples in which he contrasts his vocabulary choices. Here is a lengthy passage from an even longer section in which he examines the conventions of greeting and titles:

> In both letters I addressed or greeted both my audiences by using titles to show respect to my elders. In other words, in both letters, I used words or titles to show respect to my sister as well as my professor. In the letter addressed to my sister, I addressed my sister by saying "Dear Manang Cris" while the letter addressed to my professor I addressed my professor by saying "Dear Dr. Loo." *Manang*, in my native language of Ilocano, means sister. It is used as a sign of respect to those who are older than you and are female. Also, giving the title of Doctor to an instructor shows respect to my elders. *Manang*, and Doctor were both used in my letters to show respect to those who I am writing to. In my culture, not saying *manang* to my elders is as disrespectful as not using "Dr" or "professor" when speaking or addressing my instructors.

Not only does Gabriel identify the different ways that he addresses his letters (earlier in the semester, he might have left it there), but he also analyzes why he has made these choices: codes of respect in different discourse communities. Suspecting that I (his professor audience) will not be familiar with Ilocano, he takes pains to explain not only the meaning of the word *manang* (which he appropriately italicized as a foreign word in an academic paper although he did not italicize it in the actual letter to his sister) but also the connotations of its use. In order to help his academic audience understand the impact of not using *manang* in the letter to his sister, he makes a comparison that his audience will understand: "In my culture, not saying *manang* to my elders is as disrespectful as not using 'Dr' or 'professor' when speaking or addressing my instructors." He thereby displays an ability to analyze the expected conventions of his home literacy and demonstratea that he

can work within the academic discourse community as well by tuning in to markers of respect and expected vocabulary choices, just as he initially did in his Writing Partners letters with greetings and vocabulary choices appropriate to his fifth-grade audience.

Ellen, a classmate of Gabriel, uses her letters, her reflections, and her formal essays to sort out her claims about authority to compose in academic and non-academic settings. In other words, she explores the simultaneous pull of home literacies and academic literacies. Ellen responded to the in-class prompt "What have you learned from Writing Partners?" by stating that answering questions with her writing partner in mind helped her "answer in the most clearest way I can to make my explanation understandable." Again, the third essay is optimized to reiterate student learning as Ellen discusses two letters she wrote about joining clubs at the university, one to a friend at home and the other to her Communication Studies professor. She starts by discussing the beginnings of her letters: "The way I classify my Professor as Ms. or Dr. has already shown a difference of how I would classify my friends at home with nicknames like Sensei, Napkin, and Square Bear." In a particularly insightful moment, Ellen describes the role *kairos* (i.e., choosing the argument that best fits the time, place, and audience) plays when she communicates in various discourse communities: "Even small aspects of the conversation are adjusted to fit the right time to speak, the right words to say and even the right tone to use. I find myself already changing my tone of voice and attitude towards my highly educated Professor." To "make her explanation understandable," as she claims Writing Partners has taught her to do, Ellen offers a specific example. She notes that in her letter to her friends at home, her descriptions of student clubs at the university do not have to be very clear; she elaborates: "[w]ithin my discourse community at home, my slang, anecdotes and inside jokes make explaining situations and feelings much easier than properly describing each aspect to my Professors at school." She then quotes her own letters, contrasting the word choice and tone:

> "I didn't feel like I was ready to join one yet, but I know I'm not about just ignore it and never try ya know, I just need to pull a sensei," is a quote from my letter to my friend Rosemary or "Square Bear," and is assumed that she is already aware of that phrase and its meaning that I need to be open minded and give things chances before turning them down. That non-descriptive sentence is dramatically different when I wrote to my Professor to explain the same idea as I

> wrote, "This even opened my mind to giving groups on this campus a chance at showing me their goals and interests," and even further into the essay [letter] I had to explain more.

Ellen's claim that Writing Partners has prompted her to be more descriptive is certainly evident in her essay. While I include the long passage above to show how the lessons of Writing Partners transfer to formal essays, I want to note that Ellen claims also that "writing these letters allowed me to take the time to look deeper into the goals of each class." She refers to the need to examine the goals of assignments in a letter she wrote to her writing partner. In the course of explaining what she does in her Public Speaking class, she breaks down assignment goals, ostensibly to answer her partner's questions about what she does in college, but also as a cue to herself that she is able to critically examine assignments and make sense of what they are asking her to do; for example, she writes, "Even for a speech class we have to explain what were arguing through an essay." In the passage above, she states that she is looking into campus clubs' goals and interests before deciding which one to join. Writing Partners is helping Ellen develop the habit of critically examining assignments before responding and investigating the goals of organizations before committing her time and money to them.

Finally, Ellen exhibits a growing confidence, the sense of authority that I have been stressing throughout this article. In Ellen's case, though, the authority cuts both ways: she acknowledges that she knows what it takes to be a successful college writer while at the same time asserting the value of her home literacy. In a freewrite, she claims, "Writing Partners make me feel more sure of myself as an individual and as a student." This dual role is expressed again at the end of Essay Three: "Professors may be able to crack codes and analyze stories, but they won't understand my inside jokes and anecdotes as well as my friends unless I properly explain." These two sentences point to both her confidence and her developing capacity to construct herself as a student through writing.

Negotiating Academic Discourse

While academics may generally agree that *academic discourse* is loosely synonymous with Western patterns of argument and use of Standard Edited English, its role in basic writing instruction is highly contested. In the Spring 2005 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Caleb Corkery asks readers to consider the possibility that the perennial basic writing assignment—the

literacy narrative—actually distances some students from academic writing, instead of serving as a bridge between their home literacies and those of the academy. Corkery writes, "Literacy narratives are likely to be more meaningful to students who already feel the potential power of school literacy than to those students who already feel far from participating in it" due to their home culture being richly oral-based instead of print-based (58). I found myself agreeing with Corkery that the traditional literacy narrative is still a form of academic discourse if for no other reason than the audience—the teacher—is an authority on academic discourse. Even though the assignment might invite students to use narrative instead of exposition or research-based prose, it does not ask them to examine when, where, and why they use writing conventions, let alone interrogate the ways in which academic writing has been used as "a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize" and can "become a territory that limits and defines" students' possibilities for expression and communication (hooks 168).

Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington reject many such assignments because they fail to raise students' awareness about the ideologies surrounding academic discourse. These authors lament that

> [i]n many articles, identification of what basic writers lack is followed by a "logical" next step, a discussion of curricular strategies meant to alleviate the problems identified in the research. Yet, these strategies also perpetuate the view of autonomous literacy because they concentrate on developing acumen with those conventions, but not necessarily understanding them. [. . .] Instead the focus is on facilitating students' movement from one discourse (their own) to the other ("academic" discourse as it is defined in class), as painlessly as possible, through the development of particular writing strategies. (20)

Adler-Kassner and Harrington's claim is that assignments that acknowledge students' home discourse(s) still do not do enough to critically examine and compare the conventions of academic discourse to those that students may use with friends and family or in the workplace. As I allude to above, some basic writing teachers strive to have their students master academic discourse without feeling the need to interrogate its underlying ideology. Others like Adler-Kassner, Lu, and Ashley and Lynn are adamant that basic writing be taught as a political act/activity. Of course something as complex as basic writing pedagogy can never be reduced to a choice between two approaches.

Teaching academic discourse occurs along a continuum; Writing Partners is but one node along the continuum, one space of resistance to or relief from academic discourse—one space where students can "retool" and examine their language and their authority, and, thereby, potentially retool their experience of studenthood.

Service-learning scholar Nora Bacon's work is instructive here in regard to negotiating language, authority, and studenthood; she states, "[O]ne important effect of integrating nonacademic texts into the writing class [is . . .] if students write in more than one genre, in more than one rhetorical context, they have access to a *comparative* view of discourse—which is an essential step toward a *critical* view" (606, emphasis in original). I'd like to rephrase Bacon's statement to suggest that writing in different contexts gives students access to a comparative view of authority—not just discourse—which can lead to a critical view of authority. For example, I discuss Ellen's final draft of Essay Three above; at the end of her paper, she gets at the kind of identity/agency/authority negotiation that can lead to an awareness of the range of positions students can occupy in the academy and the ways in which academic discourse compels them to give up their home literacies and assimilate. She concludes her final essay of the semester with this sentence: "Professors may be able to crack codes and analyze stories, but they won't understand my inside jokes and anecdotes as well as my friends unless I properly explain." Here she refuses to completely give in to the pursuits of "cracking codes" and "analyzing stories." She reserves some of her rhetorical power, some of her writerly self, for telling "inside jokes and anecdotes" using discursive conventions that professors "won't understand."

Ellen's example shows that writing in different rhetorical situations can lead to the critical notion of writerly identity that Bacon describes. Ellen shows her ability 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" (Carter 94). This alone would be encouraging to me; however, when looking at Ellen's entire sentence, one can see that she not only recognizes the different positions she can occupy as a writer, she also asserts her authority to choose among and move between those positions. She states, "[professors] won't understand my inside jokes and anecdotes as well as my friends unless I properly explain." This sentence can support at least two interpretations. First, Ellen's main point is that she has to be sure to give adequate explanations for her claims. Read in this vein, her sentence suggests that she is assimilating the conventions of academic writing, and, by extension, capitulating to them. She is

deviating from her previous habit of not explaining things fully in order to comply with academic standards from the English 1 Grading Rubric ("clear development, providing relevant specific details"). On the other hand, this sentence also illustrates Ellen's authority: her ability to write in her home discourse and her authority to choose whether to explain the inside jokes and anecdotes. Her professors cannot gain access to that knowledge without her explanation. Thus, Ellen has embraced her mutable position and asserted that academic writing conventions needn't be her only mode of communication or her only avenue for making knowledge.

Writing Partners and Basic Writing: A Conclusion

While most of my students had much more lived experience in common with the grade school writing partners than I did, at first they did not understand how to turn their knowledge about the audience into writing strategies. Like bell hooks' "ethnically diverse group of students in a course [she] was teaching on black women writers," my ethnically diverse group of students who knew many home discourses initially "never [realized] that it was possible to say something in another language, in another way" (171-72). But the letter format gave my students a school-sanctioned place to exercise their rhetorical muscles by calling upon discursive patterns outside of Standard Edited English. Many students began their letters with salutations such as "Wassup?" While making use of slang greetings and casual tones, they wrote clear and straightforward sentences consistently—sentences that were far less scrambled and convoluted than the sentences in the rough drafts of their essays: their approximations of academic discourse. The specter of the "teacher-as-audience" or of "the academic-insider-as-audience" loomed so large for these BW students, who felt like such outsiders at the academy, that they got distracted from writing clear sentences by the fear that their discourse was not sophisticated enough for an academic audience. But because the elementary schoolers viewed my students as experts on college and college-level writing, the students could relax and express themselves clearly in their Writing Partners letters.

I end on a note of confidence, inspired by the students I have seen do encouraging and impressive work through Writing Partners. While I would love to claim that 100 percent of the students in these classes passed at the end of the semester, that was not the case. However, only three students in each class failed the final portfolio, which is better than average at my institution, and amazing (to me) given some of the barriers they overcame.

For as Deborah Mutnick points out in "On the Academic Margins: Basic Writing Pedagogy," many basic writing students face "linguistic prejudice," "racism" and "class discrimination" at the university (194). Of course, I cannot correlate participation in Writing Partners and students' success on the final portfolio (especially given my small sample); but I do know that the Writing Partners program provided students with an audience that was not perpetrating (even unconsciously) race, class, or linguistic discrimination. In fact, the elementary school students approached the BW students' writing from a stance of admiration (just for making it into college) rather than from a position of suspicion or even neutrality. As I have shown, this led to student confidence, which in turn led to my confidence in the program.

My enthusiasm is also informed by the scholarly conversations about basic writing and transformational pedagogies like service learning (see, for example, Adler-Kassner and Harrington, Carter, Cushman, Hindman, Kraemer, Pine) and challenged by Lu's suggestions that students can retool not only language but also their relationship to it through innovative basic writing instruction. Among the ideas and goals I have as I embark upon a semester of teaching basic writing, helping my students to feel some confidence as writers and to take some pleasure in the act of writing are paramount. For me, Writing Partners is a partial step toward meeting these goals. Through writing to their partners, students learn the importance of sentence editing and of thoroughly explaining examples, and they develop a feeling of confidence as writers. Writing Partners helps these students connect powerfully with an audience through a school writing assignment. Of course, it does not achieve *all* of the learning goals for the course, but one assignment is not meant to. What Writing Partners does do is provide students with a meaningful audience who sees them as authoritative writers and thinkers and thus helps them to perceive writing as a multifaceted, purposeful act.

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And, finally, I want to express my thanks and respect for all of the college and elementary school writing partners.

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Appendix
Essay Three:
Reflection and Analysis: Choices We Make in Different Discourse Communities

Now that you have written about your own experiences in both academic English and in your "home register," write a three- page essay in Standard Edited English. In Essay Three, your job is to compare and contrast your experience of writing the same letter in two different literacies. In addition to using your own reflection on your writing process, you are also required to refer to at least two class readings to further explain your point.

Analyze how your "voice" and language choices changed in each essay you wrote. What prompted that change? What effect do you think these changes would have on your audience? Is it easier for you to make a claim about your own experience when you write in Standard Edited English or in your home register? If so, why is that?

Readings for Essay Three

- "Discourse Communities," Tom Deans (handout)
- "College Brings Alienation from Family, Friends," John Gonzalez (handout)
- "Aria: Memory of a Bilingual Childhood," Richard Rodriguez (handout)
- "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?" Victor Villanueva (handout)
- "English and Englishes," *Keys for Writers*, Ann Raimes

Format Requirements for Essay Three

- Three pages
- Typed, double-spaced, page numbers on all pages except the first page
- First page: in the upper right-hand corner, put the following info: your name, the date, English 1, and "First draft" or "Portfolio draft"; below the list on the upper right-hand side and in the center of the page, put your title—choose a title that could go only on your paper.

Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You: Self-Disclosure and Lesbian and Gay Identity in the ESL Writing Classroom

Martha Clark Cummings

ABSTRACT: A lesbian teacher, recently returned from four years in Japan and teaching an intermediate ESL class in a public community college in New York City, struggles with addressing the issue of her own sexual orientation while using a novel with a protagonist who is questioning his sexual identity. The evolution of gay/lesbian and/or queer theory mirrors the progress of the writer's life as she confronts her own internalized homophobia and the heteronormativity of her culture.

KEYWORDS: community college; ESL; the teaching of writing; collaborative learning; gay/lesbian; queer theory; identity; sexual orientation; the closet

> *"Every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects a new closet whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important."*
>
> —Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*

> *"The important question, then, is not whether sociosexual aspects of cultural practices ought to be addressed but how this might be done."*
>
> —Cynthia Nelson, *Sexual Identities in English Language Education*

Not too long ago, I returned to New York City from four years in Japan, expecting to feel liberated, let out the closet, free again to do as I pleased in

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the ESL classroom. In Japan, when I informed the director of my program of my sexual orientation, she suggested that I keep it "a secret forever." I grew to understand her perspective over the years. In the small city where I worked, such a revelation would have brought the local television, radio, and newspaper reporters to the campus, and I would quickly become the most famous foreigner in town. And not in a good way. Being a lesbian in Japan is associated with pornography. In addition, as Jean Valentine explains:

> [C]onceptualizing self in terms of sexuality is considered alien in Japan, as this makes doing into being, practice into essence, in that what you do defines what you are. In Japan, what you are, your self, tends to be defined through interaction, where you belong with others, your socially recognized networks of relationships. (107)

When my partner and I told our Japanese colleagues that we had left New York together in 1992, moving to California, then Wyoming, then, in 2002, to Japan, only one person remarked, "You must be very good friends." The rest commented on the fact that Japanese people did not usually move that much.

Back in New York, my partner and I went to City Hall in Brooklyn to become Domestic Partners, to claim our rights, and I began to think about what rights I had in the ESL classroom and what I might do with them. I felt fortunate to be starting a new teaching position at a large, urban community college, in a program that describes its overall educational philosophy as "based on the principles of whole language, which assumes that learning is a social activity," a program that "rel[ies] heavily on . . . three learning approaches: cooperative learning, the language experience approach, and fluency first" (Babbitt and Mlynarczyk 40-41). My interpretation of this was that I would have considerable autonomy in the classroom concerning what I might share with students, how I might creatively construct the basis for meaning-making in the classroom.

As part of fluency first (McGowan-Gilhooly), teachers are required to have students read a full length work of fiction. I have since learned that choosing an appropriate text for these students is particularly challenging. I was therefore delighted when, prior to my third semester, when I was to teach a class that included five "multiple repeaters" of the course—that is, students who had taken and failed the course more than once—Peter Cameron published his very accessible and compelling young adult novel, *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*. I have been a fan of Peter Cameron's work since he

first started publishing short stories in *The New Yorker* in 1983. He is an author I trust and respect. In this particular novel, an 18-year-old young man who characterizes himself as "disturbed" considers a variety of issues, including his highly dysfunctional family, who live in New York City; whether or not he should go to college as planned; why his peers seems so distasteful to him; his love for his grandmother, and the correct use of the English language. He is also questioning his sexual orientation. In choosing this text, I was taking a step toward my further uncloseting. Or so I thought.

A Context for Teaching and Disclosure

It seems to me that over the last forty years, gay and lesbian academics have come full circle. We started out strictly closeted and thereby authoritative, that is, not problematizing identity and thereby not problematizing our classroom authority in the classroom. Then we came out and allowed ourselves to be vulnerable. Today some of us are postmodernly performing our position moment by moment and thereby remaining ambiguous. Some queer theorists even advocate intentionally playing the role of the authority again.

I began teaching ESL in 1973, in the era of Lesbian Separatism ("Lesbian Nation"), as well as the beginning of the recognition of "homophobia" (Weinberg). NCTE and other organizations writing resolutions opposing discrimination against lesbians and gays (Crew and Keener) soon followed. I continued teaching ESL through the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when coming out, in the classroom and elsewhere, became a matter of life and death, and through the establishment of Act Up!, with their slogan of "Silence=Death." The mood of the era was summarized by writer and activist, Michelangelo Signorile:

> Everyone must come out of the closet, no matter how difficult, no matter how painful.
>
> We must all tell our parents.
>
> We must all tell our families.
>
> We must all tell our friends.
>
> We must all tell our coworkers.
>
> These people vote. If they don't know that we're queer—if they think that only the most horrible people are queer—they will vote against us" (364).

Advocating that teachers present themselves with a gay/lesbian identity in the composition classroom, Harriet Malinowitz reminds us of the old adage, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem" (264). In her discussion of the place of sexuality in the composition class, she states, "What all of my students . . . [had] in common was the awareness that they lived in a homophobic world, and that homophobia affected them in some way" (22). In addition, she suggests, nondisclosure directly impacts the dynamics by which the construction of meaning may operate. "Because lesbians and gay men must constantly assess the consequences of being out and negotiate the terms of disclosure, often necessitating elaborate monitoring of what is said and even thought ('internalized homophobia'), a particular complication is woven into their processes of construing and constructing knowledge" (24). The dilemma that arises is a composition class that advocates self-disclosure and exploration of personal themes for some but not all of its participants. The antidote, according to Malinowitz, is to treat sexual identity as another "negotiation of meaning" in the composition classroom. This includes a gay or lesbian teacher coming out in the classroom in order to further empower her gay or lesbian students.

In the field of TESOL, Cynthia Nelson describes the changes that took place in the 1990s in terms of "the groundswell of discussions that language teachers began to have in professional forums" at the time. She recounts, "teachers began to advocate for, and exchange practical advice about, such things as considering the educational needs of learners who themselves identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgender; including gay themes in curricula and teaching resources; addressing heterosexist discrimination and homophobic attitudes among teachers, students, and administrators; and creating open working environments so that no teachers have to hide their sexual identities" (14).

Gay, bisexual, transgendered, and lesbian teachers started groups of political and social support as well. Nelson's groundbreaking presentation, "We Are Your Colleagues" with Jim Ward and Lisa Carscadden at the 1991 TESOL convention in Vancouver was followed by a surge of activism that culminated in the formation of a GBTL task force whose mandate was to make recommendations to TESOL's executive board regarding the inclusion of GBTL people and issues at every level of the organization (Cummings and Nelson). In this context of change and possibility toward greater inclusion of gay identity issues in the classroom, I explored what it meant for me to bring my authentic self to teaching.

According to Paula Cooper and Cheri Simonds, the act of coming out is an act of self-disclosure, and "[a] major characteristic of effective self-disclosure is appropriateness. To be effective communicators we consider the timing of our disclosure" (34). No longer dealing with a formal and implicit protocol of secrecy, I considered that appropriateness might thereby help me decide whether or not to come out to my students. However, the more I considered coming out to my students, the more hesitant I became. Mary Elliot extends the point: "Self-disclosure implies the personal, the unacceptable or difficult, and the uncomfortable; self-disclosure of sexual orientation surely packages all three. Self-disclosure in the congruent or 'golden' moment rather than the incongruent moment can mitigate fear by removing much of the artificiality and sense of 'wrongness' from the disclosing moment, a sense that can be confused with the value of the disclosed content itself" (704). What this meant to me was that I would not start the course by announcing that I was a lesbian and had chosen a novel with a protagonist who seemed to be questioning his sexual orientation because it was a topic I couldn't get enough of. Instead, I would wait until the students recognized the issue as an important one in the novel and possibly in their own lives. I would wait, then, for the "golden" moment before disclosing my sexual identity to my students.

I decide this despite what more I find in the literature on disclosure in the English language classroom, namely that the matter is not that simple. As Judith Butler states, self-disclosure may conceal more than it reveals:

> In the act which would disclose the true and full content of that 'I,' a certain radical *concealment* is thereby produced. For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control, but also because its *specificity* can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence. . . . If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.' The 'you' to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity. (18)

As Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell observe of their experience teaching a lesbian studies course: "We found that we could not . . . represent ourselves 'as lesbian' within institutional contexts (such as our respective faculties of education) without instantiating profoundly unproductive es-

sentialist notions of fixed, stable, and marginal 'lesbian identities'" (297). In other words, if I come out as a lesbian in my classroom, I am not only giving up heterosexual privilege and authority, but I am inviting my students to apply to me all of the labels and stereotypes they have in their minds about what a lesbian is, what a lesbian looks like, what a lesbian does, and finally, to attribute anything I do that offends or frightens them to the fact of my being a lesbian. When one of my students who feels wronged says to me, "You're only doing this to me because I'm a man," I assume he means because I am a lesbian. The space in which I can maneuver may grow smaller, not bigger, when I come out.

Disclosure as a Critique of Culture, or Coming Out Is Not Like It Used to Be

Ultimately, Elliot reminds us that the act itself involves crossing an "abyss" (704), which includes the experience of "dread, panic, confusion, and uncertainty of the actual moment of disclosure" (694), and yet revealing [one's sexual identity as a] "public 'identity,' because it is predicated upon private taboo sexual practices, can never achieve full status as an identity in the heterosexist mind. Coming out will almost always, therefore, feel more like the confession of a secret than we who live within the consciousness of a complex gay and lesbian culture would wish" (704).

In the one other ESL classroom in which I had come out, back in the early 1990s, the students, once they had recovered from their initial surprise and the fact that they did not have the language to adequately express the feelings they were having about my revelation, responded by telling me their secrets. They seemed to think I was inviting them to share a secret, too. And they did. A Japanese woman wrote an essay about her attraction to African American men, and a Chinese woman confessed that the only reason she was in New York was that she had had an affair with a married surgeon at the hospital in China where she had been a doctor. Somehow, if I did come out to my ESL students again, I had to do it in a way that would allow them to see that I was not confessing a dirty secret, but naming my place in a homophobic culture that was oppressing all of us.

Sarah Benesch, for me, represents the embodiment of a critical approach to teaching ESL composition that includes sociocultural critique. Describing her teaching of a lesson about the death of Matthew Shepard, she writes: "I focus on one assumption that emerged and was treated dialogically: that heterosexual men are justified in responding to the presence

of homosexual men with anger or violence to assert a traditional notion of masculinity" (577). And by the end of the class discussion, her students realize that their violent reaction is based on fear. Nelson, too, suggests that "exploring, rather than shunning, homophobic attitudes . . . can lead to insights . . . about the ways in which language and culture operate" (86). Her suggestion makes a great deal of sense to me. As a sociolinguist, the exploration of language and culture through expressions of homophobia seems particularly enticing.

In order to engage in this kind of discourse, Karen Kopelson suggests that the instructor appear neutral. Such a stance is performative, "a deliberate, reflective, self-conscious masquerade that serves an overarching and more insurgent political agenda than does humanist individualism. It is never a stance that believes in or celebrates its own legitimacy but, rather, feigns itself, *perverts* itself, in the service of other—disturbing and disruptive—goals" (123). My problem with this approach is that my students know I have a passionate position on every issue that comes up in our discussions. How could I possibly be neutral? For example, much to my students' surprise I think watching television is such a waste of time that I don't have one. I care passionately about reading and writing and the movies, and I love to look at art. How could I be neutral about whether or not the protagonist of the novel we are reading is gay?

Other researchers suggest, dishearteningly, that it doesn't matter what we do, that no matter how diverse gay and lesbian people might be, in our homophobic culture, there is a lens through which gay and lesbian people are viewed that snaps into place at the first moment the word is mentioned and which cannot be altered. And yet, another approach, Queer Theory, suggests a difference could be made by moving the focus from "the repression or expression of a homosexuality minority" toward developing "an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations—in a word, the constitution of the self and society" (Seidman 128). In other words, if an instructor were able to remain neutral, or at least ambiguous, she might be able to engage students in a discussion about why it seems so important for society to maintain the gay/straight binary and what, exactly, is at stake.

And so I viewed the option of neutrality as supportive of my decision to wait for a "golden moment" of self-disclosure, if one arose. Otherwise, I would refrain from bringing up my own sexual identity in the conversation. I would try to do the right thing. In other words, I would help my students

develop as writers and critical thinkers in the context of the novel we were discussing.

Reading and Writing about *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*

With the long, varied history of thought and action around disclosure of sexual orientation in the classroom in mind, I expected the discussion of this novel to be an emotionally fraught experience. It was a small class. Only fifteen had registered, and after the first three weeks, three had dropped out. We met for two 60-minute periods four days a week. The students also had tutoring for two periods on Fridays from a very experienced tutor.

Convenient for forming small groups that could speak English together, the twelve students included groups of four from each of three parts of the world. They were: Anastasia, a Ukrainian woman in her fifties with two grown children; Sophie, a Russian woman in her mid-thirties, the single mother of two young daughters; and a 19-year-old Romanian named Andre, whose stated goal after college was "to transfer to other college and keep performing myself." Rounding out the Eastern European group was Nila, from Uzbekistan, the young mother of two children, who said, "I hope to get from this course more English, because when I came to United State I started learn English at the beginning, even I didn't knew what it means he or she."

There were four Chinese students under 25: Tang, from Mainland China, who, when asked on a first-day questionnaire what he hoped to do after graduation, wrote, "I have no idea but I am sure I have to work"; Stacy, also from Mainland China, whose best essay was about being her parents' second, hence "secret" child and growing up with her grandparents; Sunny, a Cantonese speaker; and Rebecca, from Macao, also a native speaker of Cantonese, who asked, "If I live here more than 5 years, My English will be better than now, wonna it?"

The other four students were Haitians: Henri, a man in his twenties who worked all night and had a very hard time staying awake in this 12:40-2:50 class on no sleep; Charles, a security guard at the Department of Homeland Security, who often told us "Never hesitate to call 911"; Monique, a troubled woman in her thirties who was unable to manage her life at home with two small children and a husband who was not anxious to help her become educated; and Paul, a 19-year-old who asked, "How hard I need to work to get an A+ in this class."

In teaching the course, I tried to follow the advice of *Changes*, a textbook I co-authored, wherein "the role of the instructor is often implied... setting up groups or pairs; answering questions about the activities, the readings, and the instructions for writing; structuring and facilitating class discussion and sharing, helping to make sense and order out of the sometimes conflicting and disordered group reports; adding the interpretations of the larger community" (Withrow, Brookes, and Cummings xiv-xv).

As for discussion of the novel, I kept to Kenneth Bruffee's notion of collaborative learning, and depended in large part on the students. In their groups, students decide what issues are important and relevant to them and write statements or questions about them that could be argued about. The students define the important issues as "sharable concern[s], . . . topic[s] that people talk, read, and write about. Issues grow out of concrete experience and connect several similar or related experiences" (31). Students then go on to write discussion questions about these issues. The concept of the discussion question is also derived from Bruffee's *generalization*, "an observation or judgment that says something about more than one person, object, or experience. It says something about many similar people, objects, or experiences" (32). Generalizations generated by these ESL students included: "Divorce hurts children as well as parents"; "Second and third marriages should be banned"; and "Rich people have more choices than poor people." The students decided together they could discuss or write essays about any of these issues.

What they noticed first was the vast social class difference between James, the 18-year-old protagonist of the novel, and themselves.

"This is a book about rich people," Paul, one of the young Haitian men, said after reading the first chapter. Others nodded in agreement. From the moment they opened the book and started reading, James' dysfunctional wealthy family was a source of constant fascination for them.

"How do you know?" I asked all of them, getting up to write their responses on the board.

They had not heard of Brown University, where James was supposed to go in September, but his sister attended Barnard, a famously expensive college. They knew because the family lived in Manhattan, in a neighborhood where the two teenage children could forget to lock the door, and not in Brooklyn, where we all lived, along with other recent immigrants and their teachers, bumped out of Manhattan by the soaring price of real estate. Moreover, the family had a dishwasher, they said. And they were offended by

James' employment in his mother's art gallery. What bothered them about such employment? I asked, and they cited a passage in which James' mother explains, "You do not go there because you are needed. You go there because I pay you to go there so you will have a summer job and learn the value of the dollar and know what responsibility is all about" (8). As a group, these students were not in need of any lessons about the value of a dollar.

My students did not know what a standard poodle was, but they said that if this family had a big dog, they must have a big apartment to keep it in. The parents were divorced, also a luxury, and James' father lived in a building built by Donald Trump, on the Upper East Side, a notoriously rich neighborhood.

Washington Square Park and the dominant presence of New York University in Greenwich Village were also unfamiliar, but again, if this family lived in a neighborhood close to a park with a dog run, they were rich.

We came to their first serious issue in the novel, the fact that "Mr. Rogers," the mother's third husband had, as James describes it, "stolen [his] mother's ATM and credit cards, or at least 'borrowed' them while she lay dozing in her nuptial bed, and somehow used them to get $3,000, all of which he gambled away in the wee small hours of the morning" (15).We discussed this issue for some time. On the following day, I made it a freewriting topic, "What would you do if your loved one stole your credit card and spent $3000?" Many of their responses were indignant.

"It's like I tell my children," Monique, a Haitian mother of two, said, reading aloud from her writing. "'Sorry' is not what I want to hear you say! Don't say 'sorry!' Don't do it! Then you don't have to say 'sorry!'" She became agitated enough that the rest of the class began to laugh nervously.

Tang, a heavyset Chinese boy, had a more magnanimous attitude. He wrote, "If my loved one stole my credit card and spent $3,000, I would be so disturbed, thinking why she wants to stole my card and spent that much money. I would ask her did something happened on her or any others. Why you can't talk to me or tell me need help."

The others were less generous. Mr. Rogers' stealing made the divorce justifiable, in many of their eyes.

The differences between James' family and their own was an issue that came up often in the freewriting these students did in class. Some of the answers were obvious. The parents were divorced. James and his sister treat each other badly. James could only have lunch with his father if he made an appointment.

As Charles, another Haitian student, described it in his freewriting, "I keep thinking about James family; it like a crasy family. The family is a rich family but money can not buy happiness. I was thinking of not having family relationship like this family and that's really holds my mind, a father told his son that; 'it's OK for me, if you gay.' That is really bad."

When he talked about it in class, after each group had asked some version of "Do you think James and his father have a disrespectful relationship? Why or why not?" Paul leaned forward, covering the left half of his face with one hand, and said, as if deeply ashamed, "When his father asked him if he was *gay*, that was *bad*."

"Bad in what sense?" I asked, wondering if this was my golden moment. My heart was pounding, my palms sweating.

"How could he ask him that?" Paul wanted to know.

"This is America. New York. Parents want to know exactly what's going on with their children. We talk about everything," I said.

"But . . ."

Paul could not express his indignation on behalf of the young protagonist in the novel. I waited for him to go on.

"The pasta . . ." Paul finally said, and at this point his classmates chimed in.

The scene was disturbing to all of us. First, at their lunch appointment, James' father told him never to get married. Then, after James ordered penne for lunch, his father said to him, "You should have ordered steak or something. . . .You should never order pasta as a main course. It's not manly."

A discussion of food in their cultures ensued. We talked about whether certain foods were eaten primarily by men and others by women. They giggled and explained to me that there were foods "that made you horny," that only men should eat. I could have circled back and asked, "What do you think provoked James' father to ask if he was gay?" But my students had not asked. The key issues in the book were theirs to choose. Whether or not James was gay was not one of them yet.

Later that day, in my teaching journal, I wrote:

> Is my coming out even relevant? How much do I, a 60-year-old lesbian, have in common with an 18 year-old gay boy who is just discovering his sexuality? Do I tell them I have been through a similar struggle? As an 18-year-old, alienated in the affluent suburbs of New York City, I fell in love with my best friend, we slept together,

> I discovered myself, she wanted to die, tried to kill herself, and was institutionalized? Wouldn't that be going too far? Where do I stop once I've started?

But I had let the moment pass. There would be another.

During the course of the semester, while reading and discussing the book, other issues continued to preoccupy my students, always leading us away from the issue of the protagonist's sexual orientation. They were alarmed that James was considering not going to college because he thought it was a waste of time. They were confused by his dislike of people his own age, puzzled by his sister's snide comments when James visited his grandmother—in their cultures, loving your grandmother and wanting to be with her was not only acceptable but the norm—and baffled that James spent hours on the Internet looking at houses for sale in Nebraska, Kansas, and Indiana.

It wasn't that they didn't write about James' struggle with his sexual orientation, particularly after reading Chapter 11, in which James reads his co-worker, John's, profile online in "Gent4Gent" and impersonates exactly the kind of person John is looking for. John invites James, in the persona he has created, to a party at the Frick Museum. The students puzzled over James' motivation in their reading journals. Rebecca, a very serious young woman, from China, said:

> The meeting of John and James seem to be interesting. We learn that John is gay and James kind of loves him. They both work at the gallery why wouldn't James just tell John that he is interested in him. Maybe James is not completely gay or maybe he is turning into gay and don't know how to accept he is gay. He tell us that he does not care what people think of him but we are living in a society where there is a lot of interaction I think he must care about what other think of him. The thing that confuse me the most is the part where James meet John on the internet and did not let him know he real identity but yet James decided to go and meet John in person. Other than the name there is really no description or personally about John. I would like to know more about John. He seems like a real interesting character. James has mention several time that he wish to buy a house in the middle state and live there but he never

> mention about who he wish to live with. I was wondering why James did not include John in any plan if he love John.

When we talked about this scene in the novel, again it was not the issue of sexual orientation that troubled the students, but the fact that James had deceived a person he seemed to care for.

We talked about self-deception, an issue that comes up again and again in the novel. Their ideas and opinions about James and his family took shape, grew stronger, as they practiced expressing themselves in writing. Andre, from Romania, wrote, "He is not interested in nothing. Instade to go to college to have fun and learn he want to buy a house in Nebraska or Kansas and to stay on a porch and read books like an old men, I think he is the boring one."

Stacy, from China, pointed out the ways in which James' mother deceived herself by going to Las Vegas for her honeymoon, a place she had previously disdained: "Problem is not in the place. Is they both didn't have love. So whatever, where was the honey place?"

Paul wrote, "James deceive himself because he doesn't want nobody to know that is not happy even his self."

When we finished the book, students expressed surprise in their reading journals that James had known all along that he was gay. Paul said:

> I was surprised by the end of the chapter 14th when James said that he knew he was gay, and when he said that being gay was perfect. That's really surprised me. I thought he had a little problem with his father when his father asked him if he's gay, I don't know why because he knew he was gay, may because the way his father asked him. I would like to know how his mother and his sister will feel when they know that and what they will say about that. I remember his father told him he could help him if he gay I would like to know how?

During our discussion of the end of the novel, Charles suggested, quietly, that perhaps we had all had feelings like James did sometimes. Andre said it was all right for women, but for men it was sick. Here, finally, was a moment where I felt I must intervene.

"I think it's fine," I told him, "for men or for women. It may not be fine for you, personally, but it's fine." The students smiled at me benignly.

Did they know? Should I tell them? Instead I told them something my dissertation advisor had said to me 20 years earlier.

"Do you know what a continuum is?" I asked, and Nila, the young woman from Uzbekistan, who seemed to have studied everything, said, "Yes. Connected. In chemistry. Like rainbow."

"Exactly," I said. "Maybe we are all somewhere on the continuum," I continued, drawing a semicircle on the board, "between 100% heterosexual and 100% homosexual," writing these words at opposite ends of my continuum. "Maybe that's OK."

"I am over there," Andre said, laughing, pointing to the 100% heterosexual.

"That's fine," I said. "But maybe we are not all over there with you. Not every minute of every day. And maybe that's OK."

No one said anything. But perhaps a point had been made, if briefly, about the fluidity and diversity of sexual identities. And as Malinowitz reminds us, "I believe that the long intermediate moment—which may, certainly, last forever—of being involved in the act or project of overcoming [one's internalized homophobia] is the real moment of pride" (267). Perhaps I had something to feel proud of.

For the final exam, I gave the students a choice of three questions that evolved from the work we had done together over the course of the semester (see Appendix). Ten of them chose Question One and two chose Question Two. No one chose to answer Question Three. Of the ones who chose to explain and illustrate why James was sad, Andre blamed James' family, as did Henri, "he don't enjoy it talking to his mom and his dad"; and Charles, "James . . . feels disconnected emotionally to his family where love, respect, and attention seems unexist." Rebecca suggested that "Deep inside of his heart he suffer because he can't act or live like others," but she did not elaborate. Paul explained that James' way of thinking made him sad. "James got fascinated from anything and this thing can make him sad. I remember one day, he was taking a walk with Miro (the dog), he saw a man and a woman were walking together. He thought that they were having fun, they seem they were in love. Just went to a restaurant or movie and he thought they will never have a wonderful time like that again and he's sad. James is the kind of man who got sad of his thought."

Nila, too, attributed James' unhappiness to his family life, noting that, "They talked with the dog Miro then with each others."

Rebecca wrote about James' life, beginning by saying that she, like James, hadn't wanted to attend college and then describing how she was

different from James. Only Stacy, a Chinese young woman who didn't say much in class, addressed the issue of James' being gay, writing:

> James was gay in the book. Although he in a free country, James was freedome to choose his lover sex, but his case is limited in people. I am regualar girl, I like guy, I can't accept a same sex be my boyfriend. I believe, my family member can not accept too. It's different like James. James' father agree his son was gay, he didn't reject his son was gay. One day, James told his father he was gay in their dinner. James father didn't angry with him and said: 'well, women may make you think about get marry more time than a man.' And James' father look like nothing. If I told my parents I be with a girl, they should be crazy. They can't accept their daughter be with same sex person. They will lock my at home, didn't let me outside, and bother me everyday until I changed. They would think this is not a normal thing, they can't cool down themselves and talk to me. But James father not, he felt nothing, James also. I think the reason is they both disappoint of women. Because James' father was a suffer marriage and James was a bad memory, So they disappoint the marriage and women. James saw his mother thinking about himself, it may make him be gay.

This essay made me smile, not only for the unusual language—"accept a same sex be my boyfriend"—but because she was addressing the issue I cared about in an open and honest manner, telling me what she really thought without worrying about my judgment of her ideas. What more could I ask?

Conclusion

Did reading the book have an impact on the sociosexual attitudes of these ESL students? Certainly. They also had a chance to express themselves and exchange ideas about other issues that were important to them: love, money, respect, family, and higher education. In addition, they saw an example of a gay young man who could not openly discuss his sexual orientation even though he was encouraged by everyone around him to do so. Through reading this novel, they experienced the ways in which homophobia affects everyone.

As for me—in future classes—I will continue to be alert to "golden" moments. Furthermore, I learned from this experience that being pedagogically prepared to deal with issues of sexual orientation and homophobia, through the creation of lessons that critically engage students might make the experience of teaching this particular novel more relaxing for me and more enlightening for my students. As Nelson points out about "[t]his gargantuan task" of disclosure, it is "nothing less than intimidating. After all, determining where to begin keeps many of us from ever getting started" (299).

I have, at least, begun. Whether or not I choose to keep my sexual identity "a secret forever" in the ESL classroom, I concur with Nelson that "The key issue is not so much whether teachers come out . . . in the classroom but the extent to which their own insights and quandaries about sexual-identity negotiations are informing their . . . teaching practices by shedding light on questions of identity and representation generally" (119). The continuing development of the perspectives I embrace for dealing with sexual orientation and homophobia, then, could very well lead to new understandings of identity, for me and my students.

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Appendix

FINAL WRITING EXAMINATION

Choose one question. Plan what you write. You may consult *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* and a print dictionary. Be sure to refer to the book in your answer.

1) In Chapter 7, on page 87, Dr. Adler, James' psychiatrist, asks him, "How are you feeling today?" And when he answers, "I feel sad," she wants to know for how long. "Years," he says. Write an essay describing James' sadness. In your opinion, in what ways is he sad? Why is he sad? If you were his friend, what advice would you give him to help him cope with his sadness? Use examples from the novel to support your argument
2) Compare your life with James' life. In what ways is your life similar to James' life? In what ways is it different from James' life? Use examples from the novel to support your argument.
3) James spends most of his time alone. At one point in the novel he says that there are only two people he likes, his grandmother, Nanette, and his co-worker at the gallery, John. Describe James' relationship with John. Why does James connect with John? Use examples from the novel to support your argument.

News and Announcements

2010 Conference on Basic Writing Award for Innovation

The Conference on Basic Writing's Award for Innovation recognizes writing programs for innovations that improve educational processes for basic writers through creative approaches. Please note that only innovations that have been implemented will be considered for the award.

CBW wants to recognize those college and university programs that are implementing new or unique ways to improve the success of their basic writing students.

Is your program doing something especially useful and effective in terms of assessment, placement, pedagogy, curriculum, community outreach, etc.? If so, please nominate yourself for the 2010 CBW Award for Innovation.

SELECTION PROCESS: Recipients of the Conference on Basic Writing's Award for Innovation Award will be determined by a review group. Awards will be given to approaches that clearly benefit students at the winning institution, and that may be extended to other institutions.

AWARD CRITERIA:

- Originality—the creativity and uniqueness of the innovation
- Portability—the extent to which the innovation lends itself to application in other institutions or contexts
- Results and Benefits—specific details, data, and observations derived from the innovation, focusing on specific educational benefits to students

APPLICATION MATERIALS: ALL application materials must be submitted in electronic form, and all applications will be acknowledged. Please send:

- A descriptive title of the innovation, along with the name, address, phone number, and e-mail of the contact person.
- An explanation of how the course/program in which the innovation is centered includes students labeled "basic writers" by the institution and, if applicable, a brief (1 paragraph maximum) explanation of how students are labeled as such.
- A complete description of the innovation including:

(1) justification of the creativity and uniqueness of the innovation compared to traditional methods; (2) evidence or examples of portability to other basic writing programs; (3) the measurements and monitoring used; (4) results indicating a significant benefit in achievement in educational goals or outcomes.

- Note that Innovation documentation is limited to five (5) single-spaced pages or less (excess pages will not be read!) in 11-point font or larger. Graphs and charts are accepted as part of the page limitation.

IMPORTANT DATES

December 1, 2009: Nominations due

January 2010: Award recipient notified

March 2010: The Winner will be honored with the presentation of a plaque at the CBW Special Interest Group (SIG) at CCCC in Louisville, Kentucky. The winner will be invited to give a brief presentation about the winning program to the SIG attendees.

SEND APPLICATIONS / DIRECT QUESTIONS TO:
Greg Glau, Northern Arizona University (Gregory.Glau@nau.edu)

2010 Conference on Basic Writing CCCC Fellowship

The Conference on Basic Writing is pleased to announce the 2010 CBW/CCCC Fellowship, a $500 award given to a teacher of basic writing to subsidize travel to the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Louisville, Kentucky, in March 2010. The awardee will participate in the Conference on Basic Writing Pre-Conference Workshop, which is held the Wednesday before the Conference begins. The CBW/CCCC Fellowship is intended to support basic writing (including preparatory and developmental writing) instructors who might otherwise have difficulty attending CCCC. Priority will be given to applicants who clearly demonstrate how attending the 2010 CBW workshop and CCCC will benefit their own professional development, their students, and their colleagues.

Fellowship applications should include a comprehensive two-page letter that addresses the following key issues:

- How will attending the CBW Workshop and CCCC benefit the interests and needs of the students with whom you work?
- How do you plan to share the information and ideas gathered at CCCC with colleagues?
- How will this experience help you to become more active in advocating for students in basic writing (or other preparatory/developmental writing) courses?

A completed Fellowship application should include the letter described above, a current curriculum vitae, and, if applicable, the title and abstract of an accepted 2010 CCCC presentation. The award recipient will be notified in January 2010.

Questions, concerns, and completed Fellowship applications should be forwarded by e-mail or regular mail by December 1, 2009, to:

Dr. Sonya L. Armstrong
Northern Illinois University
Department of Literacy Education
148 Gabel Hall
Dekalb, IL 60115
Sarmstrong@niu.edu

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