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ANATOMY OF A BASIC WRITING PROGRAM

Like children, basic writing programs are conceived in one of two ways. The first is akin to the head-over-heels, urgently passionate affair which begets a large but generally unwanted brood. The other more resembles those staid lovers who weigh advantages, disadvantages, and consequences, who make careful plans before breaking into the baby business.

Too often, basic writing programs result from a momentary Dionysian revel or flirtation. Certainly, the dictates of a legislature or the mandates of a faculty are seductive siren songs, especially if they are orchestrated by immediate funding. But when the blush of romance fades, the tune turns into a cacophonous harping after accountability or cost efficiency, and the family, grown large and unruly, demands ever more time and attention.

Clearly unable to assume the guise of a lithe, hot-headed lover, the Ohio State University has preferred the less exciting but perhaps more prudent path toward adding a new member to its family. Hence, the University invested almost two years in research and testing before opening the Writing Workshop. What follows is a step-by-step description of how those two years were spent and a report on the current activities of the Workshop.

PLANNING: PHASE ONE

Our first planning phase began during Winter term, 1975-76, when a committee of the Faculty Senate of the College of Arts and Sciences recommended that the University consider offering remedial work in

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English. In response to that recommendation, we began to examine the issue of declining student writing abilities and to attempt answers to the following questions:

- (1) Have past remedial English courses at Ohio State University and elsewhere resulted in measurable student gains?
- (2) If not, why have they failed to do so?
- (3) Under what conditions is basic writing instruction likely to be effective?
- (4) How might our students' skills, processes, and attitudes toward writing be best described?

In July, 1976, these questions were partially answered in "Remedial English: A Descriptive and Evaluative Report."¹ We found that, at Ohio State, efforts at remedial instruction during the 1950's could not be characterized as successful. The failure rate generally hovered around thirty-three percent; combined percentages of D's and E's ran considerably higher. Few of those who completed the remedial course went on to finish the regular three-term English sequence. Similarly depressing pictures were painted by researchers from Florida, California, New York, Texas, and other parts of the country.

Tracing causes for failure was considerably more dangerous than documenting the failure. Nevertheless, some semblance of a pattern began to emerge from our study of our past efforts. In general, remedial classes were large and unwieldy: twenty-five to thirty-five students was the norm. Classes offered little time or space for one-to-one or small-group work. Teachers, who used only a traditional text-workbook, or sometimes a literary text, had few aids: no class-tested programmed texts, no tutors, no facilities with which to vary instructional mode or to integrate reading and writing skills, and no special training in the teaching of writing. Furthermore, the teachers were not volunteers but often reluctant draftees. Although we had no way of recapturing such elusive indicators as student motivation, we found that past efforts at remedial instruction at Ohio State University had few, if any, incentives

1. The pilot project is briefly reviewed in "What We Know—and Don't Know—About Remedial Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (February, 1978), 47 - 52, and more thoroughly described and analyzed in "Measurable Improvement in the Writing of Remedial College Students," ERIC Clearinghouse. Abstracted in *Resources in Education*, November 1978.

built into the program: students received no credit of any kind for the course; they were required to pay an extra fee; and they were clearly stigmatized as “boneheads.” Given the luxury of hindsight, we were rather amazed that even a small percentage of the remedial students managed to complete the freshman sequence successfully.

Based on our study of Ohio State University’s past programs, a survey of remedial programs at fifty-five colleges and universities, and careful study of a number of programs which had produced some positive results, we were able to offer a tentative answer to our third question, “Under what conditions is basic writing instruction likely to be effective?” by positing the following set of assumptions:

- (1) class size should be limited to fifteen and should be accompanied by individualized study in a writing workshop;
- (2) classes should be taught by trained and interested teachers who volunteer, rather than are assigned, to teach;
- (3) courses should carry some form of credit;
- (4) instruction should be informed by careful study of the student population to be served;
- (5) course goals and objectives should be clearly stated;
- (6) alternative learning materials and instructional modes should be available to students;
- (7) engagement in the full writing process should be the core rather than the end goal of the course(s).
- (8) courses should include a reduced-pace, two-quarter option.

We attempted to answer our fourth question, “How might our students’ skills, processes, and attitudes toward writing best be described?” in several ways. We knew that the mean ACT English scores had dropped two full points since 1969 at Ohio State. An informal faculty poll corroborated that decline: a majority of the faculty members surveyed believed that the ability of their students to express thoughts clearly in writing had diminished in the past five years. Furthermore, a diagnostic paragraph exercise administered to Freshman English students at the beginning of three consecutive terms revealed that thirty percent of the students *each term* were unable to state a thesis and develop it in edited American English.

In a further attempt to describe our students and their writing problems, we asked members of twenty-four randomly selected Freshman English classes to complete a questionnaire. Of the

approximately five hundred questionnaires distributed, 414 were returned. The first question on the poll (Write one paragraph that begins: “My high school English courses helped me (or *did not* help me) prepare for college because. . .”) elicited much valuable general and specific information. Generally, the students felt ill prepared and insecure. Sixty percent felt that their courses had not helped prepare them, while only thirty-seven percent felt that they had prepared them; three percent felt uncertain about whether they were prepared or not.

Later in the questionnaire, the average student reported “quite a bit” of difficulty with formulating a thesis and with mechanics, and “some” difficulty with getting a topic, with organizing, with grammar, and with writing enough. Yet these same students reported remarkably good high school grades: seventy-five percent of them earned either A or B in their last high school English courses; sixty-nine percent earned either A or B in their next-to-last high school English courses. Not the high grades, however, but the feelings of ill-preparedness and insecurity in writing were borne out by many of our statistics: the average student was able in thirty minutes to write only ninety words in five sentences; the mean length of independent clauses, often cited as a factor in syntactic maturity, was only seven words. The overwhelming majority of sentences written followed the S-V-O simple sentence pattern; only a very small percentage of the students began sentences with anything other than the subject or noun phrase. The average student essay contained slightly over two grammatical errors in barely five sentences. We balanced, of course, such analytic analysis with a holistic reading of the paragraphs and with a check against ACT English scores. The holistic rating team scored the paragraphs on a one-to-four scale, with one the lowest and four the highest score. The following results

<u>Holistic Scores</u>	<u>Number of Students receiving Score</u>
1	117
2	203
3	84
4	10

correlated well with the earlier diagnostic paragraph results: slightly over twenty-eight percent of the sample produced unsatisfactory paragraphs.

PLANNING: PHASE TWO

The 1976 report which described this student questionnaire and which provided tentative answers to our four preliminary questions ended by recommending that a pilot project be carried out the following year to test some of our assumptions and to profile the skills of incoming students who showed a need for basic writing instruction.

We spent the 1976-77 school year carrying out the pilot project (fall term), evaluating the project and analyzing student writing samples (winter and spring terms), following pilot project students through their next University terms, deciding on the basis of our evidence whether or not we should open a Writing Workshop, and, finally, preparing for that Workshop. By fall term, 1976, we were ready to do a little test tube experimentation, but we were not, to revive our original and somewhat far-fetched metaphor, ready to add a legitimate child to our University family.

Approximately one hundred students were invited to participate in the pilot project on the basis of ACT scores of ten or below on the English test and fourteen or below on the composite. The broad objects of the pilot course were as follows: (1) to enable students to write paragraphs that are built around a clear central idea to which all following sentences are linked, that adequately sustain, complicate, and develop the central idea, and that are adapted to a specific audience; (2) to enable students to increase control of basic syntactic and grammatical errors; (3) to enable students to read and comprehend university-level materials; (4) to bring students to realize that reading and writing are the major means of achieving successful university performance. All seven instructors worked on the formulation of these objectives; all volunteered for the assignment and were committed to the notion that writing skills can be taught and learned; all participated in an intensive training session.

Students in the pilot course attended class sessions four hours a week, one hour each day from Monday through Thursday. In addition, they signed up for two hours of individualized work each week in a small writing workshop staffed by the course instructors and several graduate teaching associate volunteers. Class time was devoted to class or small-group discussion workshops and to writing, thus reserving one-to-one work for bi-weekly conferences with students or for workshop time. Class work was aimed at (1) sharpening reading skills by emphasizing pre-reading, skimming and scanning, note-taking, comprehension, and vocabulary study; (2) practicing mastery of concepts

introduced by the students' common text or by the sentence-combining videotapes (produced by CUNY/SUNY, 1976) that students worked with; and (3) generating writing topics which would provide students with practice in drawing inferences, conceptualizing, summarizing, and tracing lines of analysis or argument. Students devoted the two hours of workshop time to specific writing or reading problems, either alone or with the teacher/tutor. Equipped with no hardware, the workshop provided only a place in which students could work intensively with a tutor or with a number of cross-referenced texts on reading and writing skills.

For administrative reasons, the pilot project course was offered as a five credit, S/U-graded course, the credits counting towards a student's graduation but not substituting for any other English requirement.

The average student in the pilot project scored nine on the English ACT test (though several scored as low as one or two). In an attempt to detail the student profile further, we administered an extensive questionnaire eliciting information about high school background. The results of these questionnaires indicated that twenty percent of the students took no English after the sophomore year in high school and that another thirty percent took their last English course as juniors. Furthermore, students reported that the last two English courses they took could best be described as "literature," that they did little writing (number of themes reported per course averaged slightly over two), and that, in fact, they could remember little instruction in writing sentences, paragraphs, or themes. Students reported that they had "not much" difficulty with either reading speed or comprehension (yet the reading test we administered revealed severe deficiencies). As a group, the students also felt they were well prepared to work with the dictionary, yet classwork later revealed many confused the dictionary with the *Thesaurus* and that most thought of the dictionary as simply a list of correctly spelled words. Another discrepancy emerged in student responses to questions about grammar and mechanics. Sixty percent of the students reported that they received "little or no instruction and practice in revising and correcting mechanical or grammatical errors in writing," while sixty-five percent reported "a great deal" of instruction in grammar and ninety-six percent felt that these matters influenced the grades given on assignments. While no hard and fast generalizations can hold here, in the eyes of these students one distinction seems apparent: teachers were indeed instructing them in something known as "grammar," but that subject was not related to the students' own

writing. It follows, then, that students viewed much grading of their writing as unfair. In fact, for a great many, the dissociation between grammar (the structure of our language and, in many respects, our thought) and writing was largely complete. In short, the students' views corroborated the many studies which have shown that the study of grammar alone does not improve writing. The responses to this questionnaire suggested, then, that a link needed to be established in our students' minds between well-formed sentences or paragraphs and well-formed *thoughts presented on paper*. It also suggested that the relatively high grades students received in their last two high school courses (forty-eight percent received A or B in the next to last course; forty-nine percent received A or B in the last course) might be attributed not only to general grade inflation but to the fact that much of the grading may have been based on response to literature or on such intangibles as "class participation" rather than on development and mastery of skills.

Formal measurement of student gains took the forms of four tests, administered at the beginning and again at the end of the course: (1) Form A Reading Test of the McGraw Hill Basic Skills Series,² (2) the syntactic maturity test developed by O'Donnell and Hunt (1970), (3) an in-house error-recognition/editing test, and (4) a writing sample, consisting of a paragraph written in response to a question we had tested thoroughly beforehand.

Specifically, the McGraw Hill test offered a means of measuring reading speed and flexibility, measuring comprehension, comparing pilot project student scores with those of other college freshmen, and breaking down the test items in comprehension into several sub-skill areas. Hunt and O'Donnell's syntactic maturity test, a passage of thirty-two single-clause sentences describing the manufacture of aluminum, has been widely used as a measure, particularly in studies seeking to establish the effectiveness of sentence-combining techniques. The error recognition/editing test consisted of two paragraphs containing a total of thirty errors. The majority were spelling errors involving homonyms, contractions, double consonants, word endings, and transpositions. Other categories of error included punctuation, capitalization, agree-

2. The syntactic maturity test is reproduced in *Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts* (Champaign, Illinois: NCTE, 1974), by William Fagan, Charles Cooper, and Julie Jensen.

ment (noun-verb and pronoun-antecedent), possession, adjective/adverb and comparatives, case, and verb tense. Students spent thirty minutes reading the paragraphs through completely and editing the paragraphs, sentence by sentence, correcting all errors they found by crossing out the incorrect item and writing the correction above the line. The writing sample asked students to do the following task: "On the reverse side of this paper, write one paragraph in which you present the major reason your worst teacher was ineffective." Both pre- and post-test writing samples were scored holistically by a trained team whose members were familiar neither with the students nor with the pilot project. In addition, the samples were analytically scored by another trained team, a process that included tabulating fifty-four items for each student sample. Of the four measures, the reading, syntactic maturity, and error recognition/editing tests were used primarily for diagnostic purposes while the data gathered from the writing samples, which we took from a control group as well, were used to evaluate the project.

At the end of the term, we measured student gains. On the average, participants gained twelve percentile rankings on the reading test and correctly identified sixty percent of the errors on the editing test as opposed to forty percent on the pre-test. Increases in clause length and number of embeddings were statistically significant. Most importantly, average holistic ratings went from 2.41 (six being the highest score possible) on the pre-test to 3.57 on the post-test. The analytic reading of the samples focused on fifty-four variables, from spelling and possession errors to depth of embeddings and paragraph coherence, and studied the correlations among those variables. Gathering and studying the results of this analytic reading, which are described fully elsewhere,³ took considerable time and effort, but the details we were able to add to our student profile provided ample recompense. On the post-test, the pilot project students wrote more, averaging 147 words compared to 136 words produced at the first of the term. On the post-test, only seventeen percent wrote fewer than 100 words while fifteen percent wrote more than 200 words. These figures compare significantly with the twenty-seven percent who wrote fewer than 100 words on the pre-test and the

3. See the Ohio State University report, "The Ohio State University Remedial English Pilot Project: Final Report and Follow-up Study," Andrea A. Lunsford, June, 1977. The materials for this report and its predecessor are further elaborated in A. Lunsford's dissertation, "An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in American Colleges and Universities," Ohio State University, 1977.

one percent who wrote more than 200 words. Length of t-units and of subordinate clauses jumped about two words in each case, from thirteen to fifteen for t-units and from seven to nine for subordinate clauses. Furthermore, depth level of embeddings increased from 1.30 to 1.50. Topic sentences were stronger and more focused on the post-test, and errors were reduced. Spelling errors decreased from a mean of 3.8 to a mean of 2.8, run-on sentences fell from a mean of 1.0 to .58, and use of more sophisticated punctuation, such as semi-colons and colons, increased from practically zero to .25.

On the post-test, the sum of all errors made by pilot project students was 1,010 in a total of 11,172 words, or about one error in every eleven words written. This figure compared well with the pre-test paragraphs in which students made one mistake in every eight words written.

The results of the pilot project and the follow-up study of student participants encouraged us. Seventy-nine percent of the pilot project students completed the Freshman English course with a mark of C- or higher; another ten percent received D's. On the other hand, only thirty-two percent of the control group students went on to enroll in Freshman English; of the students who did enroll, only forty percent finished the course with a grade of C- or better. Our optimism was guarded, however. The pilot project and follow-up studies were based, after all, on only one hundred students. We expected our newborn Writing Workshop to serve at least two thousand students in its first year.

We began the final phase of preparation by hiring a full-time director for the Workshop, three full-time instructors, and a staff of experienced graduate teaching associates. All Workshop staff members volunteered for the teaching assignment, and all participated in a training course which focused on analyzing the strategies basic writers use, studying their cognitive development as indicated by their writing, and estimating realistic expectations for developing composition skills and controlling error. The pilot project had convinced us that student writers could make significant progress in even one quarter, but it had also convinced us that we could not expect too much improvement in such a short time.

THE WRITING WORKSHOP

Placement and Diagnosis. Our pilot project and Freshman English surveys led us to place all students with English ACT scores of fifteen or below in the Workshop. Because we had no current alternative, we

assigned students with scores of ten or below to a two-course sequence (English 100.01 and 100.02); students with scores between eleven and fifteen took 100.02 only. But we were decidedly unhappy with the use of the ACT as a placement tool. Pilot project evaluation revealed that, at the lower scores, the ACT English Test failed to correlate with student writing ability as determined by trained holistic markers. In other words, while the ACT can provide a general guideline for placement, the scores are not reliable for finer discriminations. The results of the first year Writing Workshop corroborated this finding and, as a result, students now write a one-hour essay. After reading the essays, we mark them for five large areas: coherence, basic sentence-combining (primarily coordination); sentence sense (use of subordination evident, but often resulting in flawed sentences), usage and agreement, and spelling. Students whose writing is deficient in coherence enroll in the two-course sequence; students whose writing evinces a sense of coherence but may be weak in other areas enroll in 100.02. When we find students whose writing shows a minimal grasp of all five areas, we enroll them in English 110, the Freshman English course. First results indicate that the addition of the essay question has indeed been worthwhile: as a result of the writing evaluations, 494 (or thirty-one percent) of the Workshop students were placed at a level different from the one indicated by ACT English scores alone.

In addition to the writing test, all Workshop students take the Nelson Denny Reading Test, the results of which have been consistent thus far: students in the 100.01 course read, on the average, at the ninth-grade level, those in the 100.02 course at the eleventh-grade level. When the students arrive at the Workshop, then, we know something, though certainly not as much as we would like, about what particular reading and writing skills they should begin to concentrate on.

Course Goals and Criteria for Success. During 1977-78, approximately two thousand students enrolled in one or both of the two Writing Workshop courses; during 1978-79 we expect that figure to grow to 2700. All students in the Workshop attend two classes (of fifteen students each) and one lab or conference hour weekly. Class work centers on pre-writing, writing, and rewriting activities as students share their writing assignments at various stages in the writing process. During the course of a term, students submit a number of paragraphs to be graded and then revised.

Our objectives are cumulative, both courses focusing on paragraph-

level skills. Five specific goals were set for students in 100.01: to write paragraphs (1) which respond to a particular topic, (2) which contain a topic sentence focusing on one main idea, (3) in which all sentences support the topic, (4) which fully develop the central idea using specific examples or facts, and (5) which present information in a coherent order. In 100.01, we correct mechanical and grammatical errors and teach editing skills, but we do not grade down for error. Instead, we emphasize the prior composing skills and encourage students to take risks, to experiment, to grow in their ability to write paragraphs which make sense. In short, we hold to Gilbert Ryle's view of error-making as "exercise in competency."

Course goals for 100.02 include those for 100.01, but in addition to the five paragraph-level objectives, we include three objectives which emphasize sentence and word-level skills: the student must (1) write clear, complete sentences which use subordination and co-ordination correctly, (2) use agreement and reference correctly, and (3) use words accurately and spell them correctly. The format of the 100.02 course remains the same as that of 100.01; students work on writing assignments in small class groups and in the lab. At the end of the term, students write a final in-class paragraph which is not subject to revision.

Staffed by teacher-tutors, our lab is minimally equipped with tape recorders, slide-tape cassettes, a large number of exercise-workbooks which are cross-referenced on file cards for easy student access, and individualized editing modules which we have developed in the Workshop. In both class and lab, instruction in grammar emanates from the students' own writing and responds to students' particular needs.

Funding and Staffing. Funds for the Workshop, which come entirely from within the University, are limited; we have no luxuries, only essentials. The director, three instructors in three-year, non-tenurable positions, and a very small clerical staff support a group of eighteen teaching assistants and lecturers, each of whom instructs three groups of fifteen students each week. However, a group of outside reviewers, who participated in a departmental self-study this year, recommended strongly that the Workshop positions be awarded to tenure-track assistant professors and that the teaching load be reduced.

First-Year Results. Although our first year research and evaluation is not yet complete,⁴ preliminary findings tell us that we have some good news and some bad news. On the positive side, Workshop students wrote longer paragraphs (137 words on the pre-test; 166 on the post-test) with fewer errors per paragraph at the end of the courses than they wrote at

the beginning (error-word ratio went from 1:14 to 1:16½). Average holistic scores for paragraphs, again based on a six-point scale with six the highest mark, rose from 2.4 on the pre-test to 3.0 on the post-test. Reading scores, on the average, climbed one grade level, from tenth to eleventh grade. Nevertheless, the improvement of Workshop students was not as marked as was that of the pilot project students. Several factors undoubtedly play a part in this finding. First, through an oversight, Workshop students had only thirty minutes in which to write the pre- and post-test paragraphs, compared to the forty-eight minutes which pilot project students were given to complete the same assignment. In addition, because the pilot project included students who scored 10 or below, our research had failed to tell us very much about the large number of students who scored between eleven and fourteen on the ACT English Test. As a result, we spent much of the Workshop's first year studying and learning about this group. And Workshop students attended class fewer times per week than did students in the pilot project.

Our worst news was that our Workshop students have not become the independent editors of their own writing that we had hoped for; error count is still too high. This finding has led us to modify Workshop procedures this year so that students do all graded writing *in class*. In this way, we are trying to sharpen our students' focus on error and give them much more practice on in-class editing.

Statistical figures seldom evoke for us the students present behind them. Perhaps we can concretize some of our figures by offering the paragraphs written by one typical Workshop student on the pre-test and post-test. We feel that these two paragraphs illustrate very well the statement one of our students made toward the end of his Workshop courses: "I guess you *can* teach an old dog new tricks, but it's a lot harder."

Pre-test paragraph.

When a teacher, who is new and frightened by her new job and her student. This poses a problem when she fail to keep control over her student within the classroom. Then to keep her class under control her needs to call another or a principal to control her class. Which causes

4. The first-year program and its evaluation will be thoroughly described and analyzed in a third in-house report currently being prepared by Sara Garnes. For further information about this report or either of the earlier two reports, contact the authors of this article.

student dislike and hated for the teacher. I feel this kind of teachers should not be teaching student on a high school level.

Post-test paragraph.

My worst teacher was ineffective because he could not relate to the class and he was always in his own little world. For example, he would pace the floor, look down at the floor while he was talking. He would very rarely look up at the class during his lecture. When somebody did get his attention to ask him a question he would go into a long explanation and then he would get lost in what he was talking about. Another example, is when you went to talk to him about your tests grades. He would at like he was not there and you would feel like you were talking to the wall. He could never explain why you got that grade on the test. This is why I feel he is my worst teacher.

Although the post-test paragraph still contains six proofreading errors (*at* for *act*, three comma omissions, *tests* for *test*, and a superfluous comma after *example*), the paragraph shows considerable improvement over the one this student wrote at the beginning of 100.01. Certainly we have no magic dust to sprinkle on our students, but we are convinced that, given time and effort, they can indeed become competent writers.

SOME FINAL GENERALIZATIONS

Now that our long period of gestation is over, and the young member of our University family has celebrated its first birthday, what have we learned? First, that basic writing programs, again like families, must be willing to change, to adapt to the special and shifting demands of their members. Concomitantly, we have learned that planning, no matter how careful, prudent, or intense, cannot assure prescience. We find, therefore, that we must expect about a two-year period of adjustment as the new program establishes itself, responds to growing numbers of students, and learns from its own successes and failures.

We have also learned that evaluation of a large program, while exceedingly important, is also exceedingly complex. Isolating significant variables and gathering data are difficult tasks in themselves. But those data must then be brought to life, related directly to our students, and then interpreted to widely diverse groups, including administrators, parents, newscasters, and politicians. Competent and thorough evaluation of a basic writing program requires both time and money, and these

must be included in the budget from the very outset of the program.

We have found, furthermore, that a term-by-term special appropriations budget such as the one we have is much too restrictive. We would recommend that developers of basic writing programs bargain for a regular academic budget from the start.

In spite of budget restrictions, we still hold to one concept which evolved from our preliminary research and which our first year has reinforced: successful basic writing programs will be ones that (1) are able to integrate written instruction within other University departments and (2) move beyond the campus to work with and learn from teachers in the secondary and elementary schools. Thus far, we have begun a cooperative program with the Department of Mathematics, and we are offering workshops in which University and secondary teachers share insights gained from their teaching of basic writers. But we hope to do much more to strengthen our ties with teachers both within and without the University.

Most importantly, we have learned that a basic writing program which hopes to improve student writing must hold to an experimental paradigm. When a program begins to do things just because "that's the way we've done them before," it takes its first step toward becoming ossified, shifting its attention from its students and their own unique attributes, and abandoning self scrutiny. As Mina Shaughnessy has so eloquently taught us, we can help students improve their writing skills if we will study those students and learn from them and with them how we may best teach them. By its very nature, such a mutual learning program demands an experimental paradigm.

Thus far, our staid and cautious approach to conceiving a new member of our University family seems to have been a fruitful one. The baby, demanding, of course, but healthy and growing, inches its way toward maturity. Clearly not a fleeting flirtation, the romance between the University and writing instruction may indeed be here to stay. And if the romance endures, can our students stay far behind?