



## Journal of Basic Writing

Negotiating Textual Authority: Response Cycles  
for a Personal Statement of a Latina Undergraduate  
**Marcia Z. Buell**

Arguing Academic Merit: Meritocracy  
and the Rhetoric of the Personal Statement  
**Steven Alvarez**

Beyond the Bridge Metaphor: Rethinking  
the Place of the Literacy Narrative  
in the Basic Writing Curriculum  
**Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix**

Inviting the "Outsiders" In: Local Efforts  
to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions  
**Jessica Schreyer**

Diving In or Guarding the Tower:  
Mina Shaugnessey's Resistance and Capitulation  
to High-Stakes Writing Tests at City College  
**Sean Molloy**

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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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Editors' Column	I
Negotiating Textual Authority: Response Cycles for a Personal Statement of a Latina Undergraduate <b>Marcia Z. Buell</b>	5
Arguing Academic Merit: Meritocracy and the Rhetoric of the Personal Statement <b>Steven Alvarez</b>	32
Beyond the Bridge Metaphor: Rethinking the Place of the Literacy Narrative in the Basic Writing Curriculum <b>Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix</b>	57
Inviting the "Outsiders" In: Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions <b>Jessica Schreyer</b>	83
Diving In or Guarding the Tower: Mina Shaughnessy's Resistance and Capitulation to High-Stakes Writing Tests at City College <b>Sean Molloy</b>	103

## 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 written permission for including excerpts from student writing.

We prefer that contributions be submitted as Word document attachments via e-mail to: hopekcc@aol.com and Cheryl.Smith@baruch.cuny.edu. If electronic submission is not possible, mail five copies of the manuscript and abstract to:

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

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

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

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

## EDITORS' COLUMN<sup>I</sup>

The articles in this issue cover diverse ground. They include two explorations of writing the personal statement and one article on the role of the literacy narrative in basic writing classrooms; an investigation of contingent faculty perspectives and experiences; and an archival study of Mina Shaughnessy's relationship to high-stakes testing. Yet despite this diverse subject matter, they intersect on the question of *spaces* for basic writing and the experiences that writers and teachers have as they move within those spaces. These articles return us, in particular, to the familiar space of the margin as they consider how voices of students, faculty, and scholars in Basic Writing cross points of access in higher education, and how those voices are received.

In considering the mobility and reception of voices in the field, the six authors featured here document and theorize the experience of being heard, read or misread, understood, and accepted or contested in the academy. What does it *feel* like to project a voice—to author and shape realities—in the valued spaces of higher education? Does it feel motivating? Validating? What questions and resistances emerge, both for the author and audience? What are the forces that determine the feeling of inclusion for writers attempting to fashion an academic identity and move into new institutional spaces, and where do those forces shut down opportunities of inclusion?

Our first author, Marcia Z. Buell, calls this feeling of inclusion “welcome,” and in “Negotiating Textual Authority: Response Cycles for a Personal Statement of a Latina Undergraduate,” she explores the dynamics of welcome through a profile of one student revising a personal statement for graduate study. Buell focuses primarily on how “intermediary respondents” understand a writer’s purpose and audience in academia and, based on their understanding, how they influence the writer’s revision choices. In looking at the influence of intermediary respondents, Buell examines “how basic writers learn to reconcile the authority of institutional voices with their own goals, needs, and emerging understandings of institutional discourse.” Working with a Latina student, Buell uncovers a particular dilemma that basic writers of color may face in this negotiation of authority: “even if students learn to affirm a perspective of color in basic writing or college composition courses, color-blind discourses, which close off exploration of minority experience, might be reinforced.” Buell’s article unveils the effects

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This Fall 2012 issue of JBW goes to press late and thus marks events and sources from 2013.

of the color-blind impulse on basic writers and the audiences for whom they compose, including the intermediary respondents who leave an almost invisible but indelible mark on a writer's process *and* product.

Staying with the genre of the personal statement, Steven Alvarez looks at the rhetorical challenges basic writers face in arguing their own merits for high-stakes opportunities such as graduate study, grants, and internships. These statements, Alvarez asserts, are designed to position the author in esteemed academic spaces and promote his or her potential value to those spaces. In "Arguing Academic Merit: Meritocracy and the Rhetoric of the Personal Statement," Alvarez tells the story of assigning the personal statement in his classes to help students think about both their self-positioning in the academy and "education's basic operating principle of meritocracy." By opening up students' awareness of how academia shapes its student body and assigns worth, Alvarez hoped his students would better appreciate how individuals advance in the system and, along the way, learn to "play the game strategically." While students did increase their awareness of structures of power and inequality, and while many gained rhetorical advantage in writing their personal statements, some also "held themselves responsible for their own educational failures, and less often challenged the responsibility of teachers or schools for failure." Alvarez considers students' assumptions about themselves and the educational system, and argues that the personal statement helps students increase both their rhetorical savvy and their awareness of power, access, and reward structures in academia.

In our third article, Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix extend the discussion from the personal statement to the frequently assigned and discussed literacy narrative in "Beyond the Bridge Metaphor: Rethinking the Place of the Literacy Narrative in the Basic Writing Curriculum." Hall and Minnix trace their experiences doing a curricular revision during which "the literacy narrative became a site of conflict." They argue that the genre of the literacy narrative can get drained of its value—in particular, its political import can be diluted—when it is "treated as a bridge to academic writing, or worse as a means of 'easing students into' academic writing." The authors discuss the restructuring of their basic writing course into a regular composition course with a one-credit studio attached; the added time made room for rethinking the role of the literacy narrative and its relationship to the larger sequence of assignments. Hall and Minnix explain: "By slowing down our course, we were able to use the literacy narrative as a wedge, ultimately creating a space for our students in the world of academic literacies." As a result, they could reconceptualize the



pedagogical benefits of the literacy narrative beyond merely serving the role of a bridge, or route of access, to forms of academic writing that may be more valued in our schools.

Next, Jessica Schreyer moves us from considerations of student voice to faculty voice in “Inviting the ‘Outsiders’ In: Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions.” Schreyer argues that the increasing reliance on adjunct labor, and its importance to our students’ experience, makes it even more crucial to continually re-examine the “quality of life for faculty, and the quality of education for students.” What can be done to enhance adjunct instructors’ sense of inclusion, recognition, and engagement in the departments in which they work? Schreyer looks in particular at the diversity of experience and perspectives among the adjunct populations at many institutions and the challenges such diversity presents. In response to these challenges at her school, she developed a project for supporting contingent faculty with professional development and improved communication with faculty at all levels. She explains the benefits: “As I began to formally recognize the expertise and experience of contingent faculty in my own department, I believe it was a move toward professionalizing their work, which in turn will hopefully lead to better material conditions for them.” For contingent faculty, as for so many of our students and their advocates, access to positions of respect from which their voices are heard is critical to basic writing’s project of inclusion and equity.

Finally, Sean Molloy confronts issues of access at our field’s very foundations: at City College during the time of open admissions, Mina Shaughnessy, and the SEEK program she oversaw. In “Diving In or Guarding the Tower: Mina Shaughnessy’s Resistance and Capitulation to High-Stakes Writing Tests at City College,” Molloy begins to untangle Shaughnessy’s complex and evolving position on the hot button issue of high-stakes tests: their role in the conversion and exclusion of populations of hopeful students, and their effects on both teaching and learning. As Molloy tells the story of City College during open admissions and the trajectory of Shaughnessy’s career and influence, he unearths the constraints, conflicts, and capitulations that shaped Shaughnessy locally as an administrator and globally as a foundational voice in our field. Scholarship has sometimes been critical of Shaughnessy’s work and its influence, but Molloy argues that few of us can entirely transcend the conflicts she embodies between “diving in” and guarding the tower. As Molloy asserts, “Even as we know that guarding the tower will hurt our students, we are constantly pressured and shaped by institutional neuroses that can be hard for us to see.”

With this claim, Molloy brings our focus back to how basic writers and their advocates experience their academic lives. What are the pressures in the spaces of basic writing and how do they operate on the voices and identities of the individuals who populate those spaces? From the experiences of one student writing a grad school application; to one teacher working with a class of writers; to program administrators working on curricular redesign, adjunct working conditions, and the purposes and applications of assessment, this issue explores the spaces of change, movement, and access—and the voices, opportunities, and resistances they generate.

— **Cheryl C. Smith** and **Hope Parisi**

# Negotiating Textual Authority: Response Cycles for a Personal Statement of a Latina Undergraduate

Marcia Z. Buell

*ABSTRACT: This study examines how Bakhtinian notions of response cycles, or interactions between writers and their respondents, shape textual possibilities. Within response cycles, intermediary respondents offer feedback on writing before it is submitted for evaluation, and end readers evaluate the text in some final, often high-stakes way. Through open-ended interviews and textual analysis, this case study explores how intermediary respondents draw on their own understandings of institutional expectations to encourage or inhibit the possible voices and perspectives that basic writers can bring to their texts. Specifically, this case study documents how Lucinda, a Latina undergraduate at a large Midwestern university, muted ethnic and social affinities she hoped to convey in a personal statement for admission to an early education program when she understood her writing center tutor to view such representations as negative in the eyes of the university. Though the negative implications of these affiliations were not noted by another respondent, Lucinda's textual decisions raise questions about how respondent expectations of color-blind discourse impact representations of ethnicity and writer agency. The study also questions how basic writers negotiate their own textual authority in light of the authority they attribute to their intermediary respondents.*

*KEYWORDS: response cycles; intermediary respondents; color-blind discourse; personal statements; basic writers; ethnicity and writing*

Scholarship in basic writing tends to focus on students in writing classrooms or writing centers and on the policies or politics connected to these sites. To some extent, basic writing students are considered those in need of basic writing classes, though this definition is contested. One key argument is that learning to write is not contained once and for all in a class, but occurs with all the writing students do in academic, personal, or professional contexts in college and beyond (Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen, and Glau 56). Writers in the academy produce texts in complex social environments, where they have to learn genre and disciplinary expectations, understand the immediate demands of rhetorical situations, and apply writing strategies developed both in and beyond the writing classroom (Roozen), while negotiating the social context of the larger institution in general (Ybarra,

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“Cultural Dissonance”). For writers of color, these challenges may be exacerbated because the social context of academic writing privileges what are called color-blind discourses, which seek to erase ethnic perspectives in favor of narratives of meritocracy and individual accomplishments (Barron and Grimm 59; Lamos 132; Martinez 585; Ybarra, “Latino Students” 162; Villanueva 6), and require students of color to “to write as though their color didn’t matter” (Barron and Grimm 59).

Because writing occurs within social contexts, writers, whether basic or experienced, develop approaches to textual production through exchanges between readers and other respondents in what may be called response cycles, which occur over time and across multiple participants (Bakhtin). In response cycles, writers draw on feedback and reactions to their texts, both in their present contexts and in reaction to comments they have received in the past, but in ways that cannot always be traced directly (Ede and Lunsford 168; Bakhtin 94). Because respondent perspectives vary, writers must negotiate potentially conflicting interpretations of the writing task and goals. When basic writers are outsiders to institutions of higher education (Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen, and Glau 60), they face special challenges in negotiating competing conceptualizations of discourse offered by respondents, and in determining how their own voices intersect and ideas might be expressed when they differ from the voices of those they deem to be authoritative. Consequently, writer agency is socially constructed, not strictly individually determined, and develops through interactions surrounding texts.

One complicating factor to negotiating with authoritative voices, as Ede and Lunsford argue, is that multiple respondents can play various roles in the shaping of text, so that not all readers exert the same influence on a text. Though the dividing lines are not often clearly delineated, texts can be responded to by *end readers* or by *intermediary respondents*. In formal academic writing, there is often a point where the writing is evaluated, either in the form of grades or through other actions, such as acceptance into a program or awarding of a fellowship. Those who make final judgments can be called end readers. Before texts reach end readers, writers frequently share them with other readers, though these readers may not be directly aligned with educational institutions. Such readers, whether sanctioned by the university or not, can be called intermediary respondents, that is, respondents who work with writers to shape texts but do not pass binding, gatekeeping judgments on the texts or writers. Some intermediary respondents, such as friends or family members, know the writer well and respond through their

shared histories while others, such as writing center tutors, may respond as strangers fulfilling an institutional role. Whether well-known or stranger, intermediary readers interpret text through their own stances, including the evaluative or critical ones often found in academic writing, but also including supportive, advisory, or even adversarial positions (Ede and Lunsford 168). Though their influence is not often directly seen in finalized texts, intermediary respondents are very present in writing processes, as they influence textual construction through articulation of their own understandings of institutional expectations and through their interpretations of, or alignments with, institutional documents and doctrines (Prior). In ideal contexts, the intermediary respondents can correctly anticipate what end readers will want in a text, but because departments and programs privilege their own ways of knowing and expressing in local contexts (Casanave), intermediary readers must use their own imperfect knowledge of academic expectations when responding to a writer's text.

Because perceptions of desirability in writing can vary subtly across contexts, (see for instance Joan Graham's account of competing evaluations of essays written in a psychology class) and because intermediary respondents cannot know all the permutations of desirable writing features, generalized writing guides, such as handbooks or "how to" manuals, might be used to articulate perceived norms of textual production. Such documents articulate generalized expectations of how texts should appear and what can or cannot be included. If intermediary respondents have little experience with the ways end readers evaluate or interpret particular texts, they might draw on these generalized concepts as doctrine. This allows for standardization of forms of writing but, as arguments about standardization contend, while some ways of knowing and expressing are supported, others might be suppressed (Gunther 68), even though such discourses might fulfill the writer's larger purpose or represent bids for agency. For example, available advice on personal statements in the widely used Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) suggests that students write about what they know and put a unique spin on their experience (Brizee and Doran, "Personal Statements"). This advice cues students to position themselves as offering something special to the programs to which they apply. Yet, in the guidelines from Purdue University OWL, color-blind discourse gains prominence because following the suggestion to write from a unique perspective is the prohibition warning students away from discussing "minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates to it" (Brizee and Doran). Instructional statements, such as those coming from

OWL, illustrate how agency in explorations of cultural and power positions might be discouraged if intermediary respondents and end readers adhere to “color-blind racist practices that are subtle, structural, and apparently nonracial” (Martinez 588).

With personal statements, which fall within what John Swales calls “occluded genres,” writers know little about how these texts are received by end readers, and intermediary respondents might not be privy to genuine evaluation processes of personal statements either. Consequently, writers might shy away from writing about their experiences of race or class because they are not sure how to frame their discussion within a “compelling” narrative, even if there is evidence from departments or programs that such discussion would be welcome. Furthermore, writers might feel compelled to insert statements that they do not accept, or to omit or understate ideas they feel are important, because of fear of how the texts will be read and evaluated (Ivanic 230). In this way, basic writers, lacking confidence in their own authority on the page, might be especially inclined to write texts they ultimately disown or only partially own (see, for example, Suresh Canagarajah on accommodation strategies).

This case study examines how cycles of response, textual negotiations, and conflicting interpretations of welcome for minority students impacted the writing of a personal statement for Lucinda,<sup>1</sup> a Mexican-American student who was applying for admission to an Early Education program at a large Midwestern university. Welcome can be defined as a sense that diverse perspectives and experiences will be entertained as valid points of inquiry and ways of knowing, and that interest in minority students would play out to more than just a concern about enrollments. At the time this study took place, the university had an undergraduate enrollment of about 30,000 students. According to university records, about 6% of the students claimed a Hispanic or Latino/a ethnicity, compared to about 60% Caucasian enrollment. In the College of Education to which Lucinda was applying, Latinas also represented about 6% of the students, whereas Caucasian students represented about 70% of the students.

Lucinda wrote her application to position herself as a Latina deeply invested in improving the education of Latino children. When she started writing the application, Lucinda saw her career goal of becoming an educator of Latino youth as inextricably tied to her own identity as a Latina.<sup>2</sup> In other words, she did not see herself as becoming an educator for the population at large, but saw herself as specifically working for a disadvantaged segment of the wider Latino community. Nevertheless, Lucinda shifted away from

representing the deep ethnic connection of her goals and moved toward a more superficial representation because she understood a writing center tutor to say that her stance on Latino/a educational concerns was too negative and possibly too militant to be acceptable to reviewers in the College of Education. This interpretation of what the College of Education was looking for contrasted sharply with Lucinda's own views, which she had formulated through seeing the departmental statements, web pages, and advertisements promoting diversity. For example, she had seen posters recruiting teachers of color by illustrating how relatively few teachers looked the same as their students, had noted that diversity was central to class titles for some of the required courses, and had seen that the application for admission included questions addressing diversity. Nevertheless, she moderated her stance after consulting with a writing center tutor, coming to believe that writing from a strongly Latina perspective would diminish her chances of acceptance into a mainstream program. This illustrated the contradictory sense of welcome Lucinda encountered in her process of applying to the College of Education, where the desire for increased minority numbers was clear but a larger institutional openness to minority perspectives was not.

In looking at negotiations and responses around Lucinda's personal statement, this study questions textual interactions that occur outside of the classroom, but touches upon salient classroom writing concerns, such as how basic writers learn to reconcile the authority of institutional voices with their own goals, needs, and emerging understandings of institutional discourse. It argues that even if students learn to affirm a perspective of color in basic writing or college composition courses, color-blind discourses, which close off exploration of minority experience, might be reinforced, albeit inadvertently, through intermediary respondents engaged in writing instruction across the university. In exploring misinterpretations due to privileging of color-blind discourse, this study will suggest how basic writing instructors and administrators can help students negotiate competing and sometimes conflicting definitions of welcome for minority students, and suggest ways for intermediary respondents to understand the impact of their responses on agency and representation of non-mainstream identities.

## **Methodology**

As part of a larger study, this case study initially sought to explore the impact of response on the shaping of text for non-mainstream students. Though we often define response pedagogically as peer-response, Bahk-

tinian notions of textual production show that response manifests itself in many forms across time. I was particularly interested in exploring how non-mainstream writers represented cultural and ethnic identities as they engaged in cycles of response for the texts they produced. Lucinda joined the study at the suggestion of Dr. Flores, who served as her advisor in the Minority Student Office.

For the larger study, Dr. Flores had suggested six students from Latino/a backgrounds whom he knew from the Minority Student Office. Lucinda and one other student responded to the initial recruitment letter asking students to participate in an ethnographic study about their writing practices. I met individually with participants and asked them to bring in texts they had worked with recently or were currently working on. I primarily used open-ended interviews; after supplying initial questions, further discussion depended on the topics and concerns participants nominated. I also used text-based interviews, during which themes from previous interviews were revisited over time with texts as prompts to discussion (see Prior 305).

Lucinda and I met for interviews about once a week for nine months. To understand her writing contexts, I also observed her in classes and meetings with a professor for a research project. She shared text from all these contexts and we discussed how what she wrote related to class contexts and how she felt about what she was writing. Initially, I had sought to gain a broad picture of her response networks to see if she used them the same ways across settings. The focus of the study moved to her personal statements when, early on in our interviews, I asked her to tell me about important writing she had done recently and Lucinda brought up her experience with her personal statement for application to the College of Education. Though ultimately she succeeded in gaining admission to their Early Education program and was doing quite well at the time of the interviews, the process of writing the personal statement remained salient for her. The account of her application essays also stood out for me in that it showed how complicated textual negotiations can be in high-stakes writing where personal, ethnic, and institutional perspectives of writers and respondents push up against each other.

Since I had intended to explore response as a multi-faceted concept, with Lucinda's permission, I also sought perspectives from people who had read her text or had experience evaluating application essays. She noted that she had shown a draft to Dr. Flores a couple of weeks prior to taking it to the writing center, as she found him very accessible and easy to talk to about her concerns at the university. Because Dr. Flores was a native Spanish speaker, Lucinda felt he had a good understanding of differences between English and



Spanish ways of expressing ideas, and could therefore understand what she was trying to say if she expressed it with Spanish inflections. In writing the essays, she felt she had important things to say about how she, as an educator, would try to help impoverished Latino children overcome devastating social problems and critically interrogate their social status. However, she did not feel she was expressing her ideas effectively, and so had taken the essay to Dr. Flores because she admired the way that he could find sophisticated phrasing, stating that “he gave [her] the words” but kept her ideas intact.

I had hoped to also talk with her writing center tutor, but Lucinda did not recall the name of her tutor. Though I made several inquiries, I could not locate her tutor from the writing center because records from sessions were confidential. In the end, I relied on Lucinda’s repeated recall and interpretation of the interaction to examine the textual moves she made based on her understanding of those interactions. It is possible that her tutor would have provided different representations of the advice she gave and may not have meant what Lucinda heard her to say. Writing center research indicates that visitors to writing centers do not always have a clear sense of the goals and approaches that a tutor employs in a given session (Clark 38-39), and that especially where discussions of race and ethnicity are at play, there may be miscommunications about how discourse expectations encourage or inhibit student voice (Grimm; Bokser 53). This analysis is not meant as a critique of the writing center tutor’s advice, but as an exploration of Lucinda’s understanding and uptake of that advice in articulating an ethnic perspective within a mainstream university context.

Following an active interview format, Lucinda’s experiences and analyses were co-constructed through our interactions, thereby becoming “a history in-the-making, complexly unfolding in relation to what had taken place in the past, to what is currently being made of the past, and to immediate prospects for the future” (Holstein and Gubrium 32). The telling and retelling of her story shaped our interpretations in ways that may not have been realized before she participated in the study and may not remain if she continues to reflect on her past writing practices and develops future ones.

### **A Skilled but Hesitant Writer**

In response to questions about her background during our first interview, Lucinda discussed how her family had emigrated from Mexico when she was ten years old. Her parents did not finish high school, had a poor command of English, and wound up working in factories or restaurants.

Later, her father became disabled and was unable to work outside the home. Lucinda, the oldest child in her family, saw higher education as a way of breaking out of the cycle of low wage work and of encouraging her siblings to further their own educations.

On many levels, Lucinda was actually quite adept at writing applications. As a high school student, she had been a Golden Apple scholar and in exchange for her volunteer teaching had received a four-year college scholarship to pursue a career in teaching underserved minority students. What is more, the Golden Apple Scholarship was just one of several scholarships she had applied for and received. In the end, Lucinda completed four years of college without having to use any of her parents' money and was even able to help pay family expenses while attending college on scholarship. All of the scholarships and internships she had received had required written applications. In this sense, she had experience in and success with the genre that she was attempting; still, she did not view herself as a skilled application writer, nor as a skilled writer in general. Despite her success in obtaining scholarships, Lucinda downplayed her abilities, attributing her successes to a felicitous alignment of her goals to become an educator in Latino communities and the objectives of the scholarship programs. This downplaying of her own writing strengths reflects Raul Ybarra's observation that Latino/a students tend to blame themselves for struggles with writing and not to take credit for their accomplishments ("Latino Students" 165).

Because she was interested specifically in serving Latino/a communities, Lucinda had been attracted to the Elementary Education program of the university. Course titles, brochures, and fliers posted in College of Education indicated that the program was actively recruiting minority students interested in serving minority populations. She also understood more broadly that since Spanish speakers represented one of the fastest growing populations in the country, schools would have a need for devoted bilingual and bicultural educators. Nevertheless, despite her sense that she fit a category of student that the College of Education was actively seeking, Lucinda felt nervous about her application. She believed she met the minimum GPA and test score requirements, but saw those scores as being fairly low given the competition for space in the program. Thus, she believed that her application essay needed to be very well crafted to help ensure her admission. Moreover, she, like many minority students, did not want to be accepted merely as an "affirmative action" case. She sought a way to make her experiences and sense of commitment speak to her abilities to become a good teacher for a specific population in need of dedicated educators.

As Lucinda attached high stakes to enrolling in the program, even after Dr. Flores had read the early draft, she wanted to edit for grammatical errors, problematic phrases, and points that needed clarification. She therefore decided to take her personal statement to the campus writing center. At this writing center, generally tutors ask what a writer wants to work on during the session and they try to limit comments to that request. However, sometimes they will point out what they notice, or when faced with broad requests such as help with grammar or wording, make suggestions that cover other aspects. In Lucinda's case, she had hoped to get specific language-based feedback, but the tutor directed the conversation toward how the essay seemed to elicit pity and how application essays should emphasize positive achievements. The tutor's comments mirrored the center's documents, which drew on the advice from Purdue University OWL to be upbeat, emphasize positive achievements, and only address race or ethnicity if there was a clear reason for doing so (Brizee and Doran). Below, I will discuss in detail how this expectation of a positive, mainstream voice impacted Lucinda's self-representation; here, I will only note that she made significant changes to her responses to the essay questions as she tried to make them more upbeat and positive and, consequently, she presented a less critical view of her observations and experience.

To an extent, because of Lucinda's previous success in writing applications, her understanding of how to write and seek response on multiple drafts, and her awareness about using campus resources, she can be viewed as an experienced, not basic, writer. Nevertheless, her lack of skill in negotiating feedback marks a different kind of basic position, defined by Roz Ivanic as lacking authority to have a voice (26). Initially, Lucinda understood the tutor to imply that her stand on Latino issues had been "militant," which was the term Lucinda used when first discussing the tutor's response, though in later interviews, she changed the description to "bitter" and "negative." Although the tutor was not associated with the education program, Lucinda interpreted her comments as reflective of a view that might be found in the College of Education, which primarily served white suburban middle-class students. In meeting with the tutor, Lucinda lost sight of her initial perception that the College of Education was actively recruiting minority students and instead began to doubt if perspectives like hers would be welcome in the program. Because her visit to the writing center came about a week before the application due date, and despite the intensive work she had done on the essay until that point, she changed the content of several portions of her personal statement within the span of a few days, and she submitted it

to the College of Education with minimal editing or other outside input on the revisions. Ironically then, her submitted version masks the adept writing moves of seeking additional readers and writing several drafts that Lucinda made in the process of writing the application.

What follows are discussions of the changes Lucinda made to her text based not only on her possibly incomplete understanding of what her tutor advised, but also on her negotiations of the minefield of contradictions surrounding expectations of color-blind context. As Victor Villanueva points out in his article "Blind: Talking about the New Racism," within a color-blind genre, nominating race or ethnicity as a topic of discussion meets resistance and questions of relevance in that it challenges cultural notions of individuality and meritocracy (3). Nancy Barron and Nancy Grimm note that such resistance might not be intentional, but a factor of trying to help students be academically successful within dominant discourses. In this case though, the perimeters of success are murky, since addressing diversity seemed to be a key interest of the College of Education. While Lucinda may have already understood problems with bringing color-sensitive topics into other contexts, she was not prepared for it to be contentious in a program that appeared to welcome minority students, not to fill a quota, but for what they could bring to the education community.

Such a conflict of ideology may have been more easily resolved for students who were more accustomed to ideological contradictions of academic settings. As a first-generation Latina student who sometimes doubted if she belonged in the university, Lucinda saw her authority as slight in comparison to those who were more enculturated within the academic institution. Since the writing center tutor represented an authoritative institutional voice, Lucinda may have gotten the message, whether intentional or not, that linking experience to ethnicity was not an accepted practice in the academic world (Martinez 586; Villanueva 5) or, more cynically, as pointed out by Theresa Lillis, that experience of ethnicity was sectioned off from inquiry within the academy (63). Lucinda understood the audiences she wrote for in her other applications prior to entering the university, but instead of imagining a similar audience, her interaction with her tutor compelled her to address one perceived as indifferent, if not hostile, to ethnic self-representation. At the same time, admission was crucial to her and if effacing some of her ethnic perspective assured her getting into the program, she was willing to do so, which is not an uncommon move when student writers bid for agency (Ivanic 160; Canagarajah 117). Nevertheless, success for Lucinda raises the question of what was lost in the process (Martinez 585).

## **Toning Down Cultural Complexity and Critique: Pre and Post Writing Center Drafts**

Lucinda's application elicited short essay responses to four questions covering a range of topics related to education. These questions required Lucinda to write about what led her to seek a career in education, to explain experiences with diversity and assess why teachers should value it, and to discuss the roles teachers could play in fostering service to communities. Though writing the essays had been challenging for her, she felt proud of her ideas, stating, "this is what I had been thinking about all my life" (Interview, March 10).<sup>3</sup>

To illustrate her understanding of the tutor's response, I excerpt the introduction of the draft Lucinda showed to the writing center tutor as well as some reflective comments she made during our interviews. I then present an excerpt from her revised copy, written after consulting with the writing center tutor. After discussing the initial essay in depth, I turn to drafts and submitted sections for two other questions to illustrate how Lucinda acted on what she understood to be advice about toning down an ethnic perspective. Finally, I complicate this response by showing how Dr. Flores interpreted the drafts and submitted essays.

Lucinda wrote this section in response to the following prompt: *Describe personal experiences that led you to pursue a career in education in the specific area to which you applied.*

### **Draft Version: Introductory Paragraph**

Teaching has always been a natural instinct for me. I don't remember ever wanting to have any other occupation. My personal experience of immigrating to the United States to search for "the American Dream" increased my desire to teach and give back to all the wonderful opportunities I have received in this country. I was born in Mexico and lived in a small rural town. When I was ten, my family immigrated to the United States to seek better opportunities. It was very difficult to transition from a small, slow, rural town to the large metropolitan Chicago. In Chicago, we were temporary living at my aunt's apartment, where all five members of my family had to share a room with only one piece of furniture in it, a mattress to sleep on. Immediately, my parents began to work to provide for the family. Even though they were legal residents their salary was still under minimum

wage. Immigrating to the United States gave me a unique insight about the importance of pursuing a career in Elementary Education.

When reflecting on her feelings about this section, Lucinda initially saw her reference to the hardships of immigration as doing what a personal statement ought to do in that it made her stand out from the other applicants. She wanted her readers to infer that she would be empathetic to her future students because she could understand about growing up in an impoverished home. Also, she understood that because of the university demographics, most of the other applicants would be from white, middle class backgrounds and would be anticipating teaching in fairly affluent suburbs. In one interview, Lucinda explained that she had talked about growing up poor because, “In a sense I felt that nobody else had this type of experience, I mean I'm sure, if anything they're gonna be like, oh yes, I volunteered and blah blah blah and through this experience I wanted to be a teacher or something like that, and they're gonna talk about the teacher that *inspired* them. But, I mean, like none of them probably would have had this as a reason, so I definitely wanted to write about that” (Interview, June 4). She knew her immigrant experience would be unique among the student applications and thus could be viewed favorably in the admissions process; however, the response of the writing center tutor caused Lucinda to lose confidence in the approach she had taken.

She reported that her tutor had questioned whether this sort of introduction was meant to elicit pity. Once it was put to her that way, Lucinda could see where outlining her experience could be problematic, explaining:

And in a way I did agree with the lady in the writing center in that it was like ‘Hey, here I am, pity me.’ Like now that I think about it, that was probably what she meant – ‘like I've gone through so much, you have to take me in your program’ - which is the point of course! (We both laugh) You want to get there. But maybe she thought I would have an advantage over everybody else and nobody wants to hear about your personal problems. I don't know (Interview, June 4).

Presenting the conditions she experienced and having that move seen as negative exemplifies how color-blind discourse impacts writing agency. Lucinda wanted to discuss how coming from an impoverished immigrant background helped her to build resilience and empathy for students. To do this, Lucinda had written about her experiences as an immigrant growing

up in a working class neighborhood, and thereby referenced negative aspects in detail to show them as the impetus for her interest in becoming an educator. Consequently, to answer the questions on the application, she had to stray from the genre expectation to be upbeat in order to adhere to another genre expectation to discuss a unique aspect of her background; however, this uniqueness was read through color-blind expectations of the tutor and interpreted negatively, as asking for pity. Lucinda may not have fully linked her experience with an explanation of how she would apply what she had learned to helping her future students, which could be read as a flaw of the essay. Yet, it can be argued that her merits included a passionate concern for furthering educational access, interest, and success for the Latino segment of the population, along with a first-hand understanding of some of the difficulties that Latino immigrant students might encounter. These merits were overshadowed by the call to be more positive, and though she could have been guided in negotiating the tensions between being positive and representing her unique experiences, strategies for such negotiation were not explored in the writing center consultation. Instead, the discourse on being positive dominated other writing possibilities, prohibiting Lucinda from articulating her experience as significant.

When I asked her if she had felt that she was asking for pity or sympathy before visiting the writing center, she commented: "No, not until she said it. I was very proud of it," though she expressed some concern that readers may have thought, "this girl, she thinks too much about her own culture" (Interview, June 4). This is a telling statement about the challenges of writing against color-blind discourse. Lucinda was aware that reference to her culture could be read negatively if overemphasized, but she did not anticipate a problem with the message she hoped to convey. Because she could not convey her underlying purpose to her writing center tutor, upon hearing the perception that she could be asking for pity, Lucinda deleted much of her discussion about immigrating to the United States and focused on text and ideas from her second paragraph, which talked about the importance of having supportive elementary school teachers who understood students from different cultures. This revision contradicted her initial desire to avoid being another applicant who wrote about the teachers who had inspired her. While she could acknowledge the important role of teachers in her schooling and in her desire to go further, she lost the portrayal of what she herself endured in becoming educated. This shift can be seen in the introductory paragraph in her submitted version:

Submitted Version: Introductory Paragraph

When I was ten my family decided to immigrate to the United States to seek better opportunities. It was very difficult to switch from a small rural town to the large metropolitan city. As an elementary school student enrolled in the bilingual program, I noticed the value of having an understanding teacher. My elementary school experience was very rewarding because of my teacher's willingness to help me proficient in the regular classroom. Teacher's readiness to instruct made me realize the desire to learn is the foundation to continue to learn. As an elementary student, I also noticed that there is a significant demand for teachers. Elementary school is the building point of children's educational career and it should be a pleasant experience so students can enjoy attending school for the rest of their lives. Elementary schools need teachers that can not only understand and relate to the students but can create a positive impact, which they can carry with them for the rest of their lives. The care and support I received in elementary school will be very influential in my own strategies in education so that children can emulate it and take it farther in life.

In this version, she de-emphasized the struggle with poverty and material constraints, and by limiting attention to her immigrant experience, she effaced her foundation of empathy for the population she wished to serve. The essay also masked her alignment with the goals of the Education Program to diversify its own student population, because her expression of the immigrant experience and her ensuing resilience were muted.<sup>4</sup>

Lucinda noted that even beyond the first question, she tried to introduce a more positive tone to all of her responses, believing that the tutor had found her to be negative and perhaps militant throughout the essay. Her tutor's response confused Lucinda because the College of Education actively recruited minority students, but she understood her tutor to say that the university was not really interested in minority perspectives. This conflicting sense of welcome she perceived plays out in the changes she made to the second question, which (ironically) asked about views of diversity.

The question read: *Discuss how your experiences or lack thereof have influenced your ideas of cultural/racial/ethnic diversity (language, people with disabilities, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, etc.).* It should be noted that the question itself embodies conflicts in ways to address diversity at an institutional level. The phrasing of the question could suggest the assumption that



diversity is something a student encounters (or not) as opposed to lives, and especially for students of mainstream backgrounds, issues of diversity may not be discussed at a level that goes deeper than surface reflection (Villanueva, "Blind"). As more than 70% of the students in the Elementary Education program come from the European-American middle class, the question suggests that applicants will likely need to think about diversity from an outsider perspective and begin to imagine how, as teachers, they can work effectively with students whose backgrounds might be different from their own. It does not seem to suggest that applicants should also consider that their classmates would be from varied backgrounds and that understanding of diversity was integral to the college and graduate-level classroom as well as to the elementary school one. Also, though students are requested to link their own experience of diversity to their ideas about how it works in the classroom, they are given the caveat to write about their lack of experience with diverse environments, which can encourage simplistic conceptualizations of how we are all different but how we are the same underneath.

The parenthetical suggestions serve to expand the notion of diversity, suggesting to applicants that they may have experience with diversity that they have not realized, but in expanding the definition, cultural/racial/ethnic diversity becomes conflated with language difference. However, language may not be the only source of difference in multicultural encounters. Applicants who come from non-mainstream ethnic backgrounds may legitimately wonder how welcome their perspectives are with a question that both acknowledges and subdues difference.

In Lucinda's initial draft, she talked about the challenges she faced as a young immigrant and how the understanding of her teachers had helped her find a place in school. She wrote of her early immigrant experience, "At times, I did feel left out and thought that I would never fit in with my classmates. Through time they began to accept my difference consequently facilitating my school career. Immigration gave me an exclusive insight of the importance of cultural and racial diversity." Then she discussed how this taught her to make all students feel valued, and expressed her willingness to incorporate inclusive approaches to her future teaching as a result of the challenges she felt as a student.

However, after her visit to the writing center, Lucinda changed her essay to focus on serving as a Golden Apple Scholar volunteer ESL teacher for a summer program. She noted that she had expected to teach Spanish speakers and had been surprised to find a class of Polish immigrants. Nevertheless, in this class, perhaps because it was an enrichment summer course, cultural

barriers broke down almost immediately and she wrote about acceptance coming about through goodwill and smiles. In her revised essay, fostering appreciation for diversity came across as something easy and pleasant. She wrote that she initially felt uneasy about instructing students who did not speak the same language, but after learning to slow down when she spoke, she was delighted that students accepted her, stating: "I tried to make simple communication through smiles. Later, in lunch the students talked to me and welcomed my differences. The fact that I did not know a word in Polish did not stop us from learning about each other."

Lucinda shifted her representation of herself as a student who had been challenged to gain acceptance into that of a teacher who walked in the door ready to be accepting. Given that she was applying for an education program, in some ways the shift to the perspective of a new teacher was strategic. She could show her teaching philosophy and apply an abstract question to real circumstances. In addition, intentionally or unintentionally, she wrote through institutional color-blind discourse, reaffirming that difference should not matter. In her submitted essay, acceptance of others was easy and mutually desirable among students and teachers. The key difference between the first and submitted drafts, then, was that in the first she referenced difficulty she had experienced as a cultural outsider and extrapolated from that experience a message about a teacher's role in creating a welcoming environment in the classroom. But in the second version, she wrote as a teacher, presenting an easy, pleasant encounter, where respecting difference was almost a game. The submitted version on diversity masked her understanding of how hard teachers have to work to assure that classrooms are inclusive and welcoming.

Her essays on her desire to become a teacher and on diversity illustrate how Lucinda changed her account of her own experiences to accommodate the expectation of color-blind discourse that her intermediary respondent had suggested might work better for the application. For the third question, which elicited her insights and aspirations more than her own experience, she offered pointed critical views of society in the first draft, but toned them down considerably in the submitted version. With the submitted version, she shied away from writing anything that could be considered militant and in turn erased much of the social critique her first draft addressed.

The question itself compounded several potential topics: *Identify and discuss some experiences that influenced your ideas about the importance of developing inquiring and reflective minds, effective application of technology in the schools, and the teacher's role in fostering a commitment to community*

*service (social, political and religious organizations, i.e., boy scouts, girl scouts, walkathons, UNICEF collections, etc).* Lucinda broke the question into several parts, since she did not see them as connected, but wrote most about the commitment to community service. The question required the applicant to discuss the teacher's role "in fostering a commitment to community service," which Lucinda interpreted as eliciting discussion about how teachers can help their communities, and she focused her answer on the needs of Latino/a communities she knew. This may have been a different interpretation than the one intended by the question, which likely was asking how teachers can help students become involved in community service, but without necessarily requiring teachers to be in any way connected to the community served. Lucinda did not even consider the second interpretation. For her, teaching was equivalent to community service, and both connected to her personal experience of community.

In the first draft, Lucinda discussed how children she had grown up with had made destructive choices of "gangs, drugs, and violence instead of school." She then talked about the potential of education to "secure our future with great minds." Beyond just academic work, she wanted students to critically analyze their social situations, stating, "in the Hispanic communities there is an immense need to teach the future generation of the Latino community to develop their analysis on their social status. Latinos continue to be at the bottom of the social pyramid because of the lack of Hispanic teachers and role models." She portrayed community involvement and connection as essential: "Together as a whole we as Latinos can move up." Additionally, she made a specific plea to help women learn that they do not have to depend on a man to be successful. Lucinda concluded the draft with a clear articulation of her passion in her projected role as a teacher, professing a great hope that, "by seeing that I care for their community, students will maybe see the importance of involvement."

In terms of basic content between the first and revised drafts, Lucinda's responses to questions about community needs and community services were somewhat similar. The most significant change was that, in the submitted draft, because of her concern about sounding militant, negative, or bitter, Lucinda removed critical statements that challenged the social positioning of Latinos. She still mentioned poor choices and limited opportunities for teenage girls, but she also stated, "children fall through the cracks because they lack positive family and moral support." To make up for this lack, she wrote about how she would help her students think about positive and negative choices. Significantly, however, she downplayed the

image of a community working together. She wrote about herself as a savior teacher instead of a community participant, a shift that coincides with the privileging of individualism found in color-blind discourse. She concluded the essay with her taking on the burden of improving society: “if I can create reflective minds I can improve the social status of communities.” Instead of hoping for a “future secure with great minds,” she predicts that “if students use their own learning in the classroom experience and apply it to their everyday life, their future will be more pleasant.” Although she did not remove all references to the tough conditions she knew her students would face, she shifted away from showing “pride in her community,” and omitted hopeful parts about how Latinos/as could work together to elevate their status. The disappearance of the sense of pride and community action highlights the question of how a writer can present ethnic affinity in color-blind discourse without being read as displaying too much pride or being too connected to a sense of community and calls for communal action.

### **Negotiating Contradictions in Cycles of Response**

Given that the College of Education professed a commitment to diversity (albeit potentially a contested one as indicated in the essay questions) and Lucinda had a sense of how she would contribute to that expressed goal of diversifying, it may be hard to understand why she accepted the tutor’s reading that the essay sounded like it was eliciting pity. It is also possible to demonize the writing center tutor or assume that she had responded the way she did because of her own discomfort with expressions of ethnicity. In contrast, as opposed to representing individual discomfort with expressions of ethnicity, the tutor could have been promoting color-blind discourse because it was sanctioned by the writing center materials and presented in guidelines for good writing. For discussing personal statements, the writing center uses Purdue University OWL’s suggestion to avoid talking about a disadvantaged background unless there is a good reason to do so. While it is arguable that Lucinda had a good reason to discuss a disadvantaged background, perhaps this reason was not articulated clearly enough in her tutoring session to counter the perception that discussion of personal hardship was not a desired component of normalized academic discourse.

For Lucinda, the writing center had the institutional sanction of being a place where tutors knew about writing and therefore she attributed institutional authority to what the tutors said. When asked about her discomfort in changing the essay, Lucinda questioned if she herself, as a first generation

undergraduate, had the expertise to challenge the advice she was given by a graduate student who already held at least one academic degree and had been hired by the writing center. Additionally, Lucinda never described her tutor as showing discomfort with displays of ethnicity, but rather portrayed her as genuinely interested in helping Lucinda and knowledgeable about both writing genres and the way the university worked. Lucinda's experience and perceptions coincide with Grimm's (1999) assessment that writing center tutors may not intend to perpetuate dominant discourses, but they do so because being "interpellated" into the institution, they "have internalized the belief that a particular form of discourse is 'right' or 'natural' or 'better,' and that those who depart from this form are 'wrong' or 'not normal'" (69). It is important to note that while expectations of color-blind discourse can permeate academic settings, in this case, Lucinda responded to how her writing center tutor imagined university expectations, or at least how Lucinda had understood her tutor to imagine them, since comments can be misinterpreted during writing center sessions (Clark). Even if she had misunderstood the advice from her tutor, she muted her ethnic affiliation because she saw her tutor as speaking authoritatively and representing the views of the institution.

Though Lucinda encountered conflicts with color-blind discourse through her consultation with the writing center, she did not encounter them when Dr. Flores read her early draft. Perhaps because of his direct experience with minority student applications, Dr. Flores had a positive response to her self-identification as a Latina who would have an insider view of the issues that her students could face, though he commented that he would have liked Lucinda to show how she would apply the insights she had gained through her experience of growing up poor. He did not read her references to ethnicity negatively and had been surprised when I reported that Lucinda felt the essays had been read that way. Prior to discussing the texts, he had told me that he advises students to write genuinely but also to consider how their texts would appeal to potential readers. He found that Lucinda's first draft struck that balance for an audience interested in educating minority students and had read her views on minority education and diversity as doing exactly what a personal statement should do in presenting her personal experience with the issue in question. In the interview, I asked him if he noticed anything that would support a reading of the essay as militant or negative; he responded that what came through in both essays was her desire "to help this sector of the community that needs people to help and be dedicated to them."

Reflecting on the two versions of the essay, he commented that from his perspective as a counselor/administrator, details about her early immigrant experience would be good to know, as it would give him a rounded picture of what she had been through and how she had developed resiliency and strength. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that he also had encountered admissions officers in law or other professional schools who would respond by saying the details of her early immigration experience gave the impression that she was being a “cry baby” and asking for pity, which coincided with the tutor’s assessment; however, he did not believe that readers in the College of Education would respond that way because he believed that the College of Education was making an effort to value the contribution that minority students could bring to their programs. In comparison to the view suggested by the writing center tutor, his understanding of the institution reflected a wider, less monolithic view of the university and the expectations for personal statements to academic programs.

Although Dr. Flores saw the importance of Lucinda showing her experience and discussing its significance, he noted that expectations of academic writing in general impact how students can express their sense of commitment to the underserved. This challenge is shown in the following exchange with Dr. Flores. I began the interview by asking what jumped out in the essays. Dr. Flores called the second essay better in that more attention seemed to be given to structure, but stated that while he saw Lucinda as making the necessary moves to conform to an academic standard and create a more organized essay, he recognized that her passion for teaching in her community was toned down and her voice had become less personal. He found that Lucinda’s first drafts had a sense of genuineness but the submitted ones, while still sincere, were more “Lucinda a la Americana.” As he analyzed his own responses, Dr. Flores pointed out the difficult positioning for a student like Lucinda when demands for academic discourse cut off expression of lived experience, passion, and commitment. Discursive expectations that limit access to such expression complicate how non-mainstream students can position themselves in the academy, because students are asked to be true to themselves on the one hand, but to conform to a more circumscribed way of knowing on the other.

Dr. Flores had given me permission to discuss his responses with Lucinda to help her reflect on the application experience. When she and I met after my interview with Dr. Flores, I was summarizing how he had said that the first essay really showed who she was but the second was a version of Lucinda “a la Americana,” meaning that it moved toward a more

mainstreamed style of academic discourse but also lost some of its passion. Lucinda picked up on this as a question of identity representation, as shown in the following exchange:

M: Dr. Flores described the second as, he said more plasticity, but what he meant was like the first one was really you and the second one was like...

L: A coated me—a sugar-coated me? (We both laugh.)

M: Sugar-coated? Yeah, did you feel that way in writing that?

L: Yeah, I did. I was really mad that I had to change it and by that point I was like, oh this isn't me and I tried so hard not to be negative.

Though Lucinda owned her ideas, she felt something rang false in the strongly positive tone she tried to adopt. Lucinda expressed awareness that she needed to appear positive, but upon reflection, felt that she presented herself as overly positive and distanced herself from that voice, claiming, “it isn’t me.” At the same time, she disowned her original voice of the essay, feeling it could be read as depressing. Though she wished she did not have to change the essay, she did not entirely dismiss her tutor’s reading of her paper and could see the validity of not presenting herself as disadvantaged and asking for acceptance because of that. The problem seemed to be that by bringing up an impoverished background and talking about children who fall through the cracks in a neighborhood, the essay called attention to what she lacked as opposed to what she could offer. Lucinda could see the value of competing ways of representing herself, but she ultimately evaluated her writing and the voice she should put forth based on how she understood her tutor’s response to her text. Her tutor advocated color-blind discourse, which neutralized how Lucinda could reference her own experience. Her own response complicates her agency because she was unsure of how to write in her own best interests and how to claim authority in her text. As often happens with basic writers, she could not show herself to be a critical thinker because she did not feel qualified to question her tutor’s understanding of academic writing, and instead questioned her own understanding of the College of Education’s calls for diversifying. Again, Lucinda’s choice supports Ybarra’s claims that basic writers might be quick to blame themselves for flaws in their writing. Lucinda may have correctly read the College of Education’s bids to foster diversity, but she could not reconcile the conflict between her self-representation in response to those calls and the views of someone in authority who read her self-representation as too negative for the genre.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

Lucinda's case illustrates complex but often invisible processes of textual negotiations wherein intermediary readers play a role in shaping text, but intermediary readers, like writers, imagine and sometimes mis-imagine the expectations of end readers. These negotiations occur in writing classrooms, but also take place at other sites of writing instruction where clear markers of authority may be hard to determine. As sites of informal instruction such as writing centers take on greater roles for remedial and WAC assistance (Robinson 6) and become one of the only sites in a university where students learn about writing personal statements (Newman), it is crucial for educators to understand how response can foster competing perceptions of institutional authority. Intermediary respondents in such contexts may not always be thoroughly familiar with particular writing expectations, but because they hold some institutional authority, they can make less experienced writers feel like welcome members of the academic community or, as in Lucinda's case, like educational outsiders. Lucinda's textual decisions had resulted primarily from her interactions with an intermediary reader whom she trusted could speak with institutional authority about her essay, but who did not personally know Lucinda or the program to which she applied. This, coupled with her sense of doubt about her own writing abilities, caused Lucinda to downplay her Latina identity when writing her application essay, even though she saw it as germane to her projected career.

Lucinda's case of conflicted agency represents how challenges in negotiating institutional voice and power are compounded for basic writers in particular when, even if they act as good students in seeking out educational insiders as respondents, they encounter contradictory perceptions of what academic discourse welcomes or allows. Even though Lucinda's first drafts had flaws, they showed her to be a critical thinker who understood difficult immigrant conditions, challenges to acceptance of diversity, and the potential of education to mediate social problems. Had this understanding been bolstered, it could have helped Lucinda represent her intellectual acuity. As it was, in the second drafts, she could still present a passion for teaching but represented herself as less prepared academically than she really was, a move that fortunately did not impede her application.

Tutors in writing centers, in addition to basic writing instructors in general, need to be mindful of how basic writers might attribute expertise to them because of the potential to misunderstand feedback or to view what they suggest as a hard and fast rule. Writing center sessions can cover a lot



of ground, and while some students take away very concrete approaches to a particular text, they may also encounter ideologies about writing and power that silence as much as give voice (DiPardo; Grimm). Inquiry into how students interpret and negotiate the advice of their writing center tutors and other intermediary respondents, and how they understand their respondents' positions in relation to the academy, can be productive areas for further research.

Deeper understanding of the role of intermediary respondents can serve writing classrooms as well. In writing classrooms, we often help students attend to audience concerns, but we do not often show how audience response to text impacts the construction of future iterations of a text. Sometimes we address this shaping of text through peer review, but in peer review, students often read each other's work as just that—students reading each other's work. They may not understand other roles that can be available to them or even have a sense of how to read through possible positions such as advocate, critic, or facilitator (Ede and Lunsford). Furthermore, if basic writing students see themselves as educational outsiders, they may not feel they have authority in their own reading or responses and may view their peers as being equally unqualified. Consequently, as intermediary respondents, they might read for technical correctness, viewing the texts of their peers as static and linked only to the immediate purpose at hand.

In addition to learning how to interpret response more broadly, the complexities of color-blind discourse expectations can confuse or inhibit students who seek to write from a racial or ethnic perspective. While recent scholarship suggests that classroom instructors seek ways to incorporate racial, cultural, or ethnic expression into the classroom (Crisco; McCrary; Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen and Glau), it is possible that, like Lucinda, students might encounter seemingly authoritative respondents in other areas who are not convinced of the value of such expression. Finding authority to give voice to such concerns requires students to understand that concepts like color-blind discourse are actually in flux across the university so that generalized statements, such as avoiding discussion of minority background, can be purposefully challenged by examining expectations in individual departments or programs and seeing where such discourses might be competing. However, basic writers need practice in understanding how competing discourses can be negotiated with authority. Though basic writers may use an array of response networks, such as having a friend read over a paper or engaging in a classroom peer review, they may not be practiced in analyzing responses and weighing them against their own writing goals, or

in discerning the layers of institutional authority embodied in institutional offices and programs.

To increase awareness of the impact of response cycles, at least for some writing tasks, attention to response can be taken beyond the classroom. Basic writing students can be asked to trace their own response networks to uncover who might be giving them feedback and how they interpret such feedback. If they notice multiple respondents (family members, friends, writing center tutors, student services, instructors or professors) responding through different perspectives and speaking through various levels of expertise or institutional or personal connection, they can begin to address questions of identity representation and agency in ways that further their own goals while also meeting institutional expectations.

It could also be beneficial to offer students some practice with locating writing within a larger institutional context as opposed to just the local classroom context. For instance, students can explore interactions with intermediary respondents by crafting personal statements in basic writing courses. As Lucinda's experience indicates, personal statements are rhetorically complex intersections of audience and purpose, but they are a kind of "occluded genre" (Swales 18) in that they commonly are required but seldom taught. When students write personal statements, they must articulate how they see themselves fitting into the larger university and project who they can become based on who they currently understand themselves to be. In a sense, they have to supply the narrative while also advancing a focus or way of reading the account. In looking at how personal statements can be constructed and read, basic writers can practice negotiating textual interactions and explore how to gain authority in discussing points they feel should be brought to the fore. It might even be possible to have students research reading and evaluation processes of faculty for departments to which they want to apply before they have to submit high-stakes applications. By learning more about how the institutional positioning of a respondent influences how she or he reads texts and by seeing how interactions with respondents shape texts, basic writers can become more active and authoritative participants in their own cycles of response, which in turn can lead to them feeling more welcome within academic institutions.

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## Notes

1. All names in this study are pseudonyms.
2. Lucinda preferred Latina as an identity term. Though she used the term Hispanic in her own writing, most often when she referred to herself, she used Latina.
3. The use of direct quotes from speaking and writing has been approved by the university IRB. However, the name of the university for program or writing center documents are not named to maintain participant anonymity as specified by the IRB.
4. In actuality, the application essay was just one episode in repeated cycles where Lucinda felt silenced in her education classes because she perceived that the students, and sometimes the teachers, were not interested in what she or any Mexican American might have to say. Her experiences suggest that a repeated lack of acknowledgement of ethnic voices could cause individual writers to question and eventually censor displays of ethnic affiliation, even when they are central to the student's academic goals.

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# Arguing Academic Merit: Meritocracy and the Rhetoric of the Personal Statement

Steven Alvarez

*ABSTRACT: This article presents a pedagogical model for a sequence of first-year composition (FYC) assignments that encourages students' first-hand interpretations as insiders into the workings of educational meritocracy. I focus on how students negotiate the personal statement, an institutionally privileged genre for the discovery and definition of individual differences, characteristics, and aptitudes. I offer a Bourdiesian model of analysis of the rhetorical tactics students use to legitimate their cultural capital as academic merit. The tactics students enact become topoi for their own rhetorical analyses and arguments, which prove significant when competing for institutional resources.*

*KEYWORDS: personal statement; ethos; topoi; habitus; meritocracy; autoethnography*

The education system failed me for a long time, for as long as I can remember I have loved school. But I remember when trying to read and write. English was my second language, and its words and sounds were unfamiliar to me, which made it difficult to comprehend. Most of the time when reading at school I could not pronounce the words properly. I used to get aggravated and would give up. When reading aloud at school, I'd come across an unfamiliar word, and my first reaction was to look up or just stop reading, waiting for my teacher to recite the word for me. I then continued with the next word. Thinking back now, I believe that my teacher should have made me repeat the word. Instead she let me continue.

—Sharon Romero<sup>1</sup>, accounting major, from her memoir fieldnotes, later revised into her personal statement, “Playing the Game”

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When Sharon Romero, a student in my First-Year Composition (FYC) course at Municipal College, finished writing her third draft of her personal statement, “Playing the Game,” she felt she finally had something that expressed what she wanted to communicate, though she still had nagging doubts about how she came across to her audience. She was concerned that her story was too personal and that it might upset her audience of educators. Was she blaming them or herself for her educational hardships? Romero’s intentions were to craft this personal statement for future graduate admissions committees, and she knew the importance of setting herself apart from the pool of applicants. She worried that her admission in her statement would portray her as an under-qualified, weak candidate, but she also didn’t want to seem too proud or entitled. She felt she worked hard, harder than many of her classmates, and she didn’t want a handout. She wanted to earn what she felt she deserved.

As Romero’s dilemma illustrates, arguing one’s merits to an administrative academic audience poses a number of rhetorical challenges. This article narrates the story of how students like Romero, including basic writers or students with basic writing histories, make arguments about their educational trajectories. The students in my Municipal College FYC courses in the spring and fall semesters from 2008-2012 composed personal statements combining autobiography and social critique as they considered their professional audiences and rhetorically situated their ethos around life goals and ambitions. The semester’s assignments focused on educational meritocracy and culminated in students composing personal statements. Students tactically emphasized and minimized aspects of their merits as they understood them in the context of higher education. The task prompted a tangle of specific “character” choices they had to negotiate. Some students mentioned their grade point averages, while some pointed to their merits in athletics, community work, or military service. Financial hardship was also a major theme (but one that students rarely emphasized right away). Students made diverse tactical choices within the constraints of the genre when narrating their merits to the institution.

Personal statements often recall self-presentations. Posing as an unofficial yet professional genre of self-expression in the academy, the personal statement invites students to elaborate on varied interests, academic background, extracurricular activities, goals, and plans. Rhetorically, however, the personal statement serves as a privileged instrument for the definition of individual difference when accounting for personal attributes to an institutional audience. Students discern that arguing a meritorious ethos

is a political act—the institutionalized competitiveness of meritocracy is something they intuit after years of playing the game.

Personal statements often recall high school experiences of first engaging the system of applications to college and for scholarships—a process that often lacks transparency. As topoi, its commonplaces situate a rhetorical and political arena wherein students become visible to the professional world of administrators and enter a reflexive space for social engagement. At the same time, students also know the competitiveness of the job market, which they see as directly related to the educational credential market. The ever-rising costs of tuition and increasing numbers of student debt defaults commodify the educations that our FYC and BW students experience. In such economic circumstances, students struggling with writing feel greater urgency to narrativize their merits in ways that make them more eligible for scarce resources.

Inspired by the possibilities of the personal statement, I designed a writing course for students to critically examine education's basic operating principle of meritocracy. While personally sustaining, the autobiographical writing that students produced also upheld a political and rhetorical institution-serving agenda (Feldman; Pari and Shor). Students' motives in arguing their merits ultimately reproduced hegemonic values of academic meritocracy, which influenced their positioning in the academy and the possibilities for its renegotiation. Arguing their academic merits, students came to a greater awareness of the meritocratic ethos and how it worked to sometimes include or exclude them and structure inequality. In the process, students gained rhetorical advantage in learning better how to play the game strategically. They learned, for instance, that meritocracy is structured like a game, and players develop a feel for the game by either receiving coaching or uncovering the game through critical engagement and reflection. Thus they learned to claim the language of meritocracy as public discourse. Yet as most FYC students wrote their initial forays into the subject of merit, they held themselves responsible for their own educational failures, and less often challenged the responsibilities of teachers or schools for failure. Students rarely questioned competitive educational structures or social privileges. If the games weren't legitimate, so the reasoning went, then everyone would go to college. Most students backed away from critiquing meritocracy, leveling fault on individuals not responding to the game with greater self-interest. Some students, however, were more critical of educational institutions and the meritocracy game in their personal statements. They argued that the competitive individualism of meritocracy was a game not everyone knew how to play.



I read two FYC student examples through the lens of *habitus*, the transposable dispositions and predispositions that organize practices and representations (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*). Habitus reveals how certain topoi can situate students' literacy practices to represent competitive social success and failure in the personal statement. Both students articulate their educational encounters with the competitive individualism of meritocracy and demonstrate acute sensitivity to audience in arguing their ethos. They assert their individuality while affirming the legitimacy of schools to assign and assess merits. The genre demonstrates the astute arguments writing students at all levels deploy, using their histories as proofs to their arguments. Students' observations, fieldnotes, journaling, and finally, their personal statements articulate their encounters with competitive individualism in education and bring greater transparency to what administrative audiences credit as personal merit. Such depth of observation into the educational meritocracy has significant potential for rhetoric and analysis in FYC and BW classrooms where students do not always recognize the importance of institutional structures shaping power in their day-to-day lives.

### **Autoethnography for Exploring Academic Merit**

The course design came about through my investigations into the social practices of literacy, and also my history with meritocracy as a first-generation college student. During my undergraduate composition studies at the University of Arizona, and under the guidance of Roxanne Mountford, I had conducted similar ethnographic fieldwork into my own educational trajectory, and I recall learning a great deal from writing this way about my parents, my neighborhood, and my ethnic identity. Drawing from my positive undergraduate autoethnographic experience, I established FYC courses that linked the expressive writing students practiced most fluently and the writing they would practice as university students. Encountering students who came from immigrant families like my own, as well as first-generation college students like myself, I found that my favorite composition assignments engaged students in looking to their lives as arguments. Students' critical literacy for reading the world was always a Freirian concept that spoke to me. And yet, I had the same frustrations of many instructors who hit the walls between students' languages and the standardized English of the academy.

The theoretical implications for bringing autoethnographic methodologies into BW and FYC classes are profound when students question

their social positions as actors in the world and in the classroom (Shor). According to Ira Shor and other practitioners of critical pedagogy, student writing improves with personal uses of literacy. On this student-centered path, I advocate for writing projects that document and archive qualitative research among a class of ethnographers. Students as audience members ask questions for clarification and offer suggestions for adding details or restructuring. Sharing their fieldwork data, students explore their educational histories through the eyes of their classmates as well as their own, and this guides them for coding, critical analysis, and genre awareness (Grenfell, Bloome, Hardy, Pahl, Rowsell, and Street; Hardy; Macedo and Freire; Van Maanen). As educators, we must begin first by thinking about our students' diverse cultural perspectives as they arrive to the institution, and, equally as important, ask students to write about the shaping institutions in their lives—what they question and value, and what their education means for them (Mahle-Grisez 64). The anthropological-Deweyian basis for this practice speaks to students' social experiences and the strengths they bring as veteran participants in a rich cultural, institutional life (Crowley 16-17).

The personal statement is the rhetorical space for students to speak their strengths to their institutions. For the final assignment of the FYC course, students draw from their fieldnotes to compose personal statement essays for internal Municipal College scholarships. For purposes of evaluation, I conclude that the personal statement emerging from autoethnographic research is a practical alternative to standardized writing assignments. Personal statements include students' interests, academic backgrounds, extra-curricular activities, and both long-range and immediate goals and plans—things some have articulated only in thought. Further, personal statements combine astute observations with reasoned arguments. What BW and FYC writers construct as their meritorious ethos represents self-reflection and social analysis. Autoethnography links writing about personal experience with wider cultural significances in the writer's autobiography (Chang; Ellis). When cast as research, students' autoethnography captures *topoi* students know well, forging a basis for critical reflection and authority (Kirklighter, Moxley, and Vincent; Van Maanen).

### **Laboring to Learn: Building from Fieldnotes on the Meritocracy**

Municipal College (MC) is a public college located in the eastern, outlying neighborhood of a major metropolis in the United States. The commuter campus's 18,000 undergraduates hail from 120 countries and speak over

sixty languages. Historically, the college has had a tradition of graduating first-generation college students. According to school statistics, most of the students who attend MC work over 30 hours each week—approximately 67% work part-time. Both of the students I focus on in this study worked, one part-time and one full-time.

I developed this course design with the support of FYC mandates for general education curricula incorporating interdisciplinary methods for composition at MC. The college had redesigned its general education curriculum in 2008. FYC classes since then had been clustered around cross-disciplinary themes, including writing about social sciences, “hard” sciences, music, media studies, and for my cluster, ethnography/autoethnography. The course design underwent several drafts before emerging as a template for future FYC instructors. I have used the course design from 2008-2012 to teach similar writing units to elementary and high school students across the country and in Mexico.

Unlike the other themes in the FYC curriculum, the ethnography course model was not to build a course mixing a content area with composition methods, but rather it was toward a method of composition and research as content. Other instructors had taught the course and experimented with designing qualitative research projects centered on issues of service learning, gender, and race. I piloted FYC courses themed around “Autoethnography and Education” so that MC students would write about their experiences as “practices” in school settings. Taking a cue from the ethnography *Learning to Labour* by Paul Willis, I steered class discussions, informal writing assignments, and fieldnotes toward students reflecting on resistance to academic authority and scrutinizing the playing fields of meritocracy. Helping students to find moments of unlevel playing fields in meritocracy yields many of the same insights Willis fostered among London’s working class youth, while prompting critical thinking about language, audience, and rhetorical production.

Resisting academic authority, however, can place students in a precarious position. FYC students who have been exposed to the data in Figure 1 below (typically distributed to them by their high school guidance counselors) are apt to reflect on career choices and the increased wealth college graduates earn compared to those who do not attend. Some students may be less familiar with such research, but they sense the data to be true because they know how the game operates, and they understand that school success in some form translates later into economic well-being. Dominant discourses interpret the data to make arguments supporting ideologies of personal re-

sponsibility to succeed or fail in a game where everyone supposedly plays by the same rules. Dominant discourses also make arguments for the economic returns of increased academic credentials.

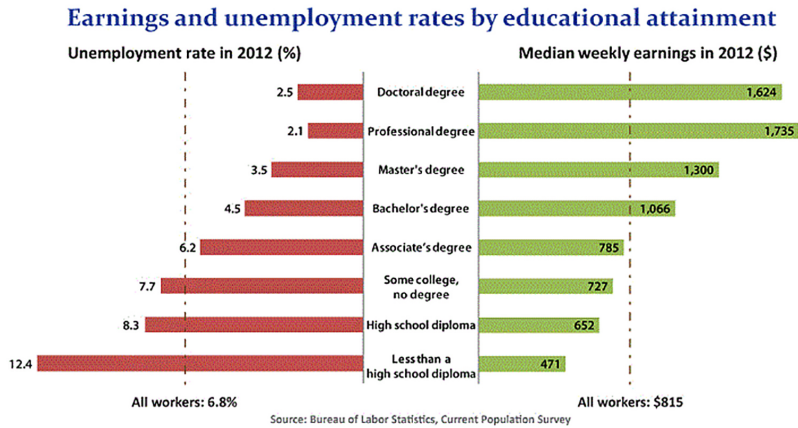


Figure 1. “Education Pays,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012

Many if not most MC students lived at home with their parents, were the first in their families to attend college, spoke languages in addition to English, and mostly attended Municipal City public schools. All were familiar with the process of applying for specialized high schools and college programs. They understood that game. Students answered with extensive free-write sessions appraising specialized high school and college tests, the differences between public and private schools, and what they felt standardized test scores measured. Five minute free-write sessions on each topic were interspersed with volunteers reading their reflections to the class. In the time between free-writes, students exchanged writing with one another and composed timed responses. Students shared their responses and spoke to differences and similarities they noted in their classmates’ observations. Identifying with classmates revealed their shared attitudes toward a meritocratic system: the ramifications of the future weighed heavily when they considered conforming to a standard, and when determining how to argue a competitive academic disposition.

Beginning with the diversity of views on their educations, I organized low-stakes assignments where students assessed what they knew of competition for entrance into prestigious selective institutions. Growing up in a metropolis, most students of course had firm opinions regarding privilege; specifically, they took for granted that social class produces inequalities.

They argued with or against meritocracy from complementary perspectives. It was clear to them that on the one hand, meritocracy reproduces social inequality, and on the other, it individuates agency and personal freedom.

Reflexive, informal writing became a basis for more formal autobiographical writing, such as the personal statement. Classroom discussions were especially effective for examining student *habitus* as social practices and dispositions. For example, we explored the dispositions that lead students to submit to school rules, or to challenge them. Students who play by the rules increase their competitive positions in the meritocracy game, while those who decide not to play are deemed marginal players, or not in competition at all. Several MC students recounted being disciplined over uniform violations. Most students had received some form of detention at some point. I asked if it were ever fashionable to break the rules. One student mentioned that he got a kick out of disrupting class when he was in elementary school. In middle school he stopped, though, for fear of jeopardizing his future. Some students in class agreed that “cool” students broke rules in order to show (although they don't always know it) how rules were not effective at disciplining all students—and some students afraid to step out of line secretly cheered on these rule-breakers. Students formed bonds of playing against the established games of schools. In other words, while schools promoted certain behaviors and success models (sit in your desk, raise your hand, work hard get good grades), these “bad” students, again valorized by their classmates, promoted negative models of behavior and success: disrupting class, vandalism, and confronting the teacher's power head-on (Willis II, 29, 96). Students desiring success in the meritocracy game cannot follow such patterns or develop this *habitus*. If so, they risk losing future credential opportunities.

My FYC students revised their informal writing into different formal assignments. Assignments included as formalized fieldnotes, interviews, and a media documentation about their schooling experiences. The ethnographic method was a natural fit for the pedagogy of critical literacy I envisioned. But soon I realized that my assignments could have even more relevance to MC students' lives.

I had a fortunate coincidence of stumbling upon the personal statement assignment. In the spring of 2009, I became aware of the importance of the genre for FYC students when a young man came to my office hours one afternoon seeking advice about writing one. He was applying for campus scholarships, and he needed guidance on what to include in his statement, and he also asked if I had samples he could examine. At the time, I did not. I must admit, I had been unaware of MC's local scholarships for students

until he first pointed them out. I had little experience advising students at MC, and I never looked into practical advice to give students about funding. I really was ignorant on the matter altogether.

A personal statement assignment for FYC seemed justified by way of the value it would have in students' dossiers. The genre offers an opportunity to interpret one's personal story from the viewpoint of self-observer. I was also struck by what would be required of the student to complete these applications successfully. Not least, I realized the pedagogical potential of using the genre to teach argument with personal experience and reflection. I began to assign the personal statement in all my FYC courses at MC from that point on. Students in my FYC courses could use their personal statements for campus scholarships—a book scholarship and miscellaneous \$1000 scholarships. For these MC internal scholarships, FYC students would focus on the criteria as established by donors: how MC helped in students' career goals; and how extra-curricular and volunteer community activities and experiences in the MC community related to students' career plans. Acknowledging the financial possibilities of arguing one's merits also reinforced the economics of the rhetorics of meritocracy in practice and their very real consequences for students.

### **The Personal Statement and Bourdieu's Habitus: Mapping Dispositions**

Social theory research sees language as a primary means for inculcating the games of social structures (Bourdieu; Clark; Gee; Grenfell, Bloome, Hardy, Pahl, Rowsell, and Street; Willis). Such researchers conceive the hierarchical nature of schooling as rungs for inspiring individuals with competitiveness and towards the normative practices of social class (Bourdieu and Passeron; Brint and Karabel). Pierre Bourdieu's logic of practice describes habitus as a game articulated through agents' motives for gaining advantageous positions in competitive fields of culture (*Practical Reason* 98). Habitus thereby systematizes internalized dispositions that mediate between social structures and individualized practical activities, shaped by the former and regulating the latter. Internalized dispositions result from these routinized interactions and shape the practices through which social fields are embodied and reproduced. Figure 2 diagrams the fields of communication in micro and macro contexts. Contexts inculcate habitus as individuals operate according to their learned practical sense and bodily dispositions. Arrows in the model indicate social forces impinging on and reflecting local and larger social fields. The arrows

also indicate the formation of habitus at points of impact between macro and micro forces in communicative contexts. Macro and micro forces situate contact zones of actions, messages, social status, linguistic forms, and audiences. For Bourdieu, social agents develop habitus according to their “feel for the game” (*In Other Words*).

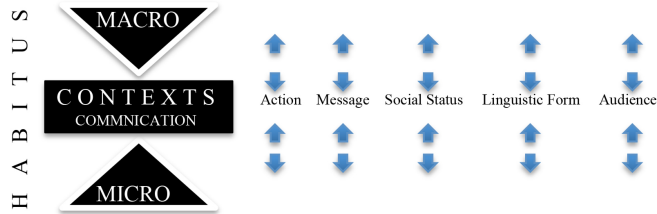


Figure 2. Bourdieusian model of situated rhetoric

The pedagogical significance of any self-reflexive inquiry lies in its ability to uncover networks of power circulating through macro and micro discourses. To uncover the layers of habitus is to study the self as situated within particular social and cultural worlds. By way of data accumulated around “the self,” such a pedagogy reveals how society, cultures, and institutions shape personal and collective experience (Bazerman; Feldman). The personal statement affords rhetorical space for demonstrating social awareness as it relates to lived experience and the reactive dispositions necessary for the game of meritocracy.

As an “administrative” sub-genre of professional writing, the personal statement is rhetorically crafted for standardization. It is writing generated for a meritocratic system, affirming the institution’s legitimacy to ascribe merit to habitus. But it is also autobiographical. Unlike the literacy narrative, which too often becomes just another school genre devoid of contextualized purpose and audience, the personal statement affords an opportunity to teach students about institutional rhetoric in practice with specific purposes of analyzing socialized individualism. The personal statement also provides an interesting twist on a pedagogical and rhetorical dilemma by making explicit the constructed nature of ethos in relation to institutional audiences. It provides a corrective to both the sterility of academic discourse and the romanticism of personal writing. Rhetoric in such cases is not only persuasion; it also inheres the necessity of perceiving available persuasive tactics (Bourdieu and Passeron; Burke; de Certeau).

The administrative functionality of the personal statement also has more relevance to students' lives and learning experiences than traditional rhetorical analysis essays. The personal statement communicates a uniquely academic voice, and the *techne* of rhetoric plays an important—if not more important—role of connecting to audience in comparison to traditional academic “essay-text” literacies (Gee; Street). When students make arguments based on lived experiences to win administrative audiences, they strive for sincerity of their merits as ethos. Students argue for personable dispositions deserving merit, while maintaining the formality of distance. The embedded conflicts within the genre make it an apt assignment for students researching the games of institutional inclusion and exclusion. Nevertheless, the genre tends to produce a conservative habitus from students that rarely challenges schools as perpetuating social inequalities. Rather, students bring up points such as their volunteer histories or recount bootstraps narratives. Some students include more about their families than others, and some describe academic awards and honors. Because the personal statement criteria request the information, some students describe financial hardships.

MC students in the FYC course prepared for the personal statement assignment by forming groups of three to research scholarship opportunities on campus. One group found advice fliers from the scholarships office, which we together examined as a class. Students were cautioned by the flier's author(s) to pay close attention to audience:

In writing the statement, consider the audience implied through the application materials and the reading you have done on the granting agency. The personal statement should address this audience directly while creating a full picture of who you are, as a student, an intellectual and an individual. The personal statement should not be a resume in narrative form. You can, however, use the statement to explain or contextualize any gaps or weaknesses in the academic record, and do so in ways that makes these appear either as inevitable or as strengths.

The text further clarified that “A good personal statement will make the committee members want to meet you; it should also induce the scholarship selectors to think of you as the perfect recipient for their award.”

As we read this in class together, I saw a few students gulp. “The audience, notice what it says about audience,” I said.

“What does it mean ‘express directly to the agency’?” one student asked. I had to open that question to the class to see what they thought.



One student said it was a place to help others; another—a business major—clarified that it was more akin to a not-for-profit corporation. With that I spoke of the structures of boards of directors. I asked students to imagine the number of personal statements someone on the board of directors at a major granting company would have to read. “How would you reach this audience? How would you get their attention and persuade them that you are the best candidate?”

That was a hard one for students to answer.

And rightly so. The advice in the flyer pointed out that students must do research into their audience, the readers they will attempt to charm with a sense of their charisma, and what the writers of the advice expect from personal statements. In a few double-spaced pages, students should be “creating a full picture” of themselves so that their intended audiences can appreciate them as students, intellectuals, and individuals. Students should be able to synthesize their ambitions and goals into a few paragraphs that charm in such a way as to make them seem “naturally” qualified candidates. Students who accomplish this do so by shrewdly positioning themselves, emphasizing and minimizing certain personal characteristics, while negotiating the appropriate levels of formality to address their audience. While charming committee members so as to seem likeable, they must also maintain a respectful distance. In strategizing their rhetorical tactics, students must be aware of the major criteria of importance to the granting agency and should do research into what the scholarship requires. With all this planning and strategizing, it was plain to see a great deal of critical work went into writing these “statements,” which are actually more like brief academic, paraprofessional autobiographies. Students intuited the double bind, and I too pondered the dilemma of writers trying to argue their academic merits while learning to navigate institutional and professional mazes.

Amid these anxieties, students grasped the competitive lengths some individuals went to stay a step ahead of the pack. Several FYC students realized there were herds of college admissions applicants applying for few openings, and that gaining distinction from among the scores of applicants who scored high on the SAT exams, earned good grades, won honors, and had strong merits based on community service and leadership was a difficult task.

Students’ fieldnotes overwhelmingly reflected deep-seated ideas about meritocracy and attending college. One MC student wrote, “There are lots of reasons not everyone wants to go to college. The biggest one being that not everyone studies hard enough or works hard enough to first pass high school.” Similar comments comply with the competitive nature of schooling. Such

compliance legitimates meritocracy as it legitimizes those who pass through the system. Compliance also individualizes failure and its rehabilitation. Individuals who continue to fail do so based on their own inadequacies, and not those of their institutions. Individuals who comply with institutional structures—or the rules of the game—reproduce the structures as they compete. Those who embody the legitimate habitus move forward, and those who do not get left behind. Institutions purport to classify students by merit. Students internalize failure and success as individual aptitudes measured by meritocracy, and even more so by the personal responsibility to succeed or fail. Democracy generates aspirations, whereas the free-enterprise capitalist economy generates stratification and anxieties (Cintrón; Clark; Spring).

When judging their own merits against their peers, students notice how their limits differ from those of their classmates. If some students have more intelligence, more talent, more drive, could schools be responsible for scholastic distinctions? Are some students not naturally gifted? These questions are the subjects of much debate, of course. For students, additional questions will arise, including how the meritocracy game means entering into asymmetric symbolic-economic structures, and how students locate themselves within the institutional hierarchies. Students typically answer these questions with more nuanced questions concerning the institutional motivations that lead certain students to accede to and others to resist the games of meritocracy. What does it mean to either play or concede the game? How do institutions solicit play? How could students' language(s) create academic opportunities?

Below, I offer samples of personal statements composed by MC students Janet Mullens and Sharon Romero. Mullens and Romero each argue with distinct ethos, but they both similarly reaffirm the legitimacy of schools to assign and assess their relative merits. Both represent similar relations to the meritocracy game, though each to different extents affirming and/or critiquing the meritocratic hierarchy-machine. Both are also single mothers of daughters. Mullens and Romero write about the importance of being academic role models and providing for their children. The gendered aspect of their personal statements calls attention to additional layers of structural inequalities in education.

### **Janet Mullens: Playing Within the Game**

Janet Mullens, age 37, of Irish and Italian descent, had hopes of becoming a high school English teacher when she graduated MC. She worked part-time as a teacher's aide at a high school near campus. She was a single

mother of a ten-year-old daughter and had come back to college after “many years away from school, living life.” She would begin her student teaching a couple years after this course, in the fall of 2008.

Attending college, Mullens claimed, also had positive effects on her future students and her daughter. She specified the importance of parents fostering and developing the academic habitus for their children. For Mullens, examining the merits of success entailed giving meaning and importance to the strategies different people used to learn. As a future teacher, Mullens did fieldwork at her student teaching site to reflect on her daughter’s and her own educations. She learned to appreciate how individuals acquired knowledge through available resources and the importance of researching opportunities. Her fieldwork exposed her to the social inequalities of available school resources.

Mullens described herself as a “non-traditional” student when she explained how a disability in her previous career led her to return to college. In the introduction to her personal statement she writes:

Previous to attending college full-time, I was recovering from a chronic back injury. Unable to continue working as a retail store manager for a children’s clothing company, I went out on long term disability and decided to return to school to obtain my degree as well as a second career in teaching. Before starting my first semester I became a volunteer learning leader at my daughter’s elementary school.

Mullens had hurt herself at work, and this prevented her from performing the same type of labor in which she had made her career. In short, going to college marked a “career-change opportunity,” as she termed it. Mullens also credited her work and volunteer experiences with making her a responsible student. The “good worker” habitus is, in fact, essentially identical to the “ideal student” habitus—prompt, stimulated, attentive, responsive, and respectful.

We can see that in terms of ethos, Mullens’ argument for her merits claim college as necessary for predicting academic success for her and her daughter. She speaks to her audience as a mentor, mother, and teacher, her voice establishing her credibility:

Returning to college at a more mature age is extremely rewarding. The focus on attaining my goals has not wavered because of the life experience I have attained. The motivation comes from many areas

in my life; however, the most important of these is my daughter. She sees the dedication I have to school and fulfilling responsibility. When her school is closed she may have to come in with me to a class or two. This gives her access to her future at a young age. She acquires an inside view of college at an age that most children will not conjure up an image of what college holds in store. Hopefully her visits will prepare her and enable her to overcome the fears most teenagers have about choosing a college and a career path. She sees me as her closest female role model; the importance of returning to school becomes a valuable lesson in perseverance for her as well.

Mullens cultivates the academic habitus for her daughter by exposing her to college early in her schooling, demonstrating an intergenerational investment of valuable cultural capital. In addition, Mullens narrates how she came to her major at MC and her practical experience of learning about education through the hands-on experience of volunteering in her daughter's classroom. Mullens establishes a sincere voice, demonstrating that she is engaged with education as both mother and schoolteacher.

In her statement, Mullens distinguishes herself with her career change and family values, pointing to the positives of education and thereby praising the meritocracy. This "unconscious" set of etiquettes could only be critically examined if the game of meritocracy had become the focus of scrutiny. Students' emerging awareness of their competitive academic dispositions revealed the social construction of habitus. Students like Mullens learned the rules of the game and played accordingly, thereby reproducing the game. Mullens's statement speaks to this game discourse, but does not necessarily speak against it. She understands how to compete, and she is teaching her daughter how to compete. She had also assigned personal statements to students for her student teaching at a local high school.

### **Sharon Romero: Critiquing the Game**

Unlike Mullens, Sharon Romero spoke against the competitive nature of the meritocracy game. I began this article with an epigraph quoting from Romero's personal statement "Playing the Game," a powerful introduction paragraph developed from one of her fieldnote journal entries. In that fieldnote describing a memory, Romero recounts the disappointment she felt during her early years as an emergent bilingual student. Romero, 25, had transferred from a two-year college as an Accounting major. She was

originally born in Honduras but emigrated to the U.S. when she was eight. She was a single mother of a six-year-old daughter and worked part-time as a server at a restaurant, closer to the central business district. Romero had completed her degree but her composition course credits did not transfer. She had put off English at MC, she said, “because it gets me down when I want to get finished with school.” She had taken two BW courses at her community college, which she felt added an additional year to her two-year degree. Romero had no time to waste, she said. Her immediate goal was “to have a career so I can support my daughter and get her what she needs, when she needs it.”

As a student in my FYC course in the spring of 2008, Romero made profound discoveries about herself as a writer in the course, about her migration to the United States from Honduras, and her English language insecurities. Romero was one of my most promising students, and last I saw her on campus in spring of 2010, she said she had only two more semesters left until graduation. She finished all her writing classes, but she admitted she squeezed in time to work on a poem here and there. Three years later, she has since graduated from MC and enrolled in a graduate program at another public college. She has informed me via email that she is working on a Master’s degree, and is still working over thirty hours a week at a sports bar and grill, but she can see the “light at the end of the tunnel.” Romero’s personal statement begins:

Somewhere along the line I lost myself. Blaming it on education was my solution. If the mentality I have today applied then, the situation processing, in the struggling to better myself, would not exist. I know you the reader, are asking yourself, “What does she mean?” Explanation in the best way possible: Not being able to pronounce the words I was reading correctly made me fall in the category of not being able to spell correctly. If I can’t pronounce it, how can I spell it? You see, heading for doom from the beginning. Cried many nights because I am a smart girl who endured the most fatal limitation, vocabulary. Not having a voice for a very long time, it pains me. I used to have so much to say with such little words; still struggling with this fact, I don’t let it hold me back, and I speak my mind at all times. I learned to speak up.

Romero powerfully dramatizes her agency as she overcame the challenge of increasing her English vocabulary. She places blame on education early

on in her experiences as a student but later internalizes her “deficits” as her own once she has learned to compete. As her vocabulary expanded, so did Romero’s confidence in meritocracy, though she doesn’t go so far as to account for any assets in her bilingualism.

Romero both challenges and reinforces the game of meritocracy as she transitions from formerly excluded to competitor. When competing with native English speakers early on in her schooling, Romero deeply recalls the unlevel linguistic playing field and the structured inequalities of meritocracy. Romero’s current position as a player in the game, however, champions meritocracy. She continues:

Education systems are built to better all ways of living, so where did I go wrong? I can honestly say now, I went wrong, allowing the education system to fail. I should have demanded more, should have asked why I need to learn this in life. So what if a teacher gave up on me. So what if a teacher pitied me. So what if a teacher looked at me with lost hope. This should only have made me stronger not weaker, (I know this now). I should have fought hard to put myself on top of the game, as some may say it. I should have taken all the negativity and made it into something positive. I should have been optimistic instead of pessimistic.

Today I am optimistic. I don’t look down on this education I’m receiving because college taught me to see how schools work. It’s opened up my eyes. That’s true education, and I value it very much.

Romero’s personal statement pinpoints that she had come a long way in her education, arriving at critical awareness of “how schools work.” She recognizes the social games of merit, yet she also affirms that “[e]ducation systems are built to better all ways of living.” Romero’s early schooling experiences learning English caused her to blame herself for failure rather than the inequality structured into schools. As she gains more experience in the game, however, she turns the game of meritocracy around when she demonstrates agency and an alternative narrative including her rights as a student. Learning how to compete created options for her, and also opened Romero’s eyes that as a student she “should have demanded more.”

The ethos of Romero’s personal statement gains sincerity through the narrative of her overcoming obstacles and taking challenges head-on, the primary one of which was assuming the academic habitus and learning to play the game, positioning her as a contender. Romero mentions she “went

wrong, allowing the education system to fail” and in a rhetorical move gestures toward her audience and her awareness of its and her own complicity in perpetuating the game of merit. Even further, she speaks directly to power, to her audience of administrators, instructors, and donors when she writes the refrain, “So what if a teacher gave up on me. So what if a teacher pitied me. So what if a teacher looked at me with lost hope. This should only have made me stronger not weaker.” Romero challenges her audience to judge her on her merits without knowing her obstacles in life.

Romero’s fieldwork in the course explored her immigrant history, and also her difficult experiences learning English. For her daughter, she wanted more. She had studied her daughter’s school through field visits and taking photographs during different school events. Romero also interviewed her mother and used the data from this to compose a profile of her life in Honduras. She reflected much on the language differences between English and Spanish in her family, and how her daughter was much more fluent than she in English. Romero’s fieldnotes at times were written as poems and other times as dialogues between characters, often in Spanish. She channeled all this material gained from her fieldwork data into her personal statement. The profound sincerity in her voice borders on accusation, yet returns to the idea of reinforcing the meritocratic game, now that Romero had learned to play. Her sincerity affects strong *pathos*. Yet, like Mullens, she reinforces meritocracy, despite critiquing it. As she has learned the game, she plans to compete in it, rather than re-structure it or be excluded by it.

### **The Ethos of Merit Distinct from Meritocracy**

As social actors, students inhabit a cultural economy of ambition, a system that measures how limited available resources satisfy limitless aspirations. This cultural economy is structured in patterns that resemble games that social actors play in different fields to secure resources and positions of power. Some students learn earlier than others how to compete in different fields, and some students never compete because the game excludes them before they fully learn how to participate. It is important to engage students to write from a vantage point critical of themselves within their institutions. Students should all research admissions policies and resources on campus such as student services, clubs, organizations, events, health services, and libraries. They should also further explore requirements for differing majors, as well as classes students recommend and do not recommend. Likewise it is important for students to assess and write about their past and projected educational trajectories.

BW and FYC students will eventually have to immerse themselves in the academic languages of their respective majors or disciplines. In spite of immersion, the wake of these assignments runs short. After our BW and FYC writing courses, our students, without a doubt, will rush to complete essays for a deadline and, once complete, let them fall to the wayside. Such is the brief lifespan of college student prose. It's true, students may keep their essays after the semester ends, but rarely do they return to them and revise them; to do so and to submit them for another class might be considered an act of plagiarism. Portions of personal statements, however, can form professional genres ranging from cover letters to proposals. When I assign the personal statement, I intend FYC students at MC to produce a piece of professional writing that would outlive the course while putting research into rhetorical practice. Also, the importance for BW and FYC students to articulate what they are studying early in their studies, what their goals are for the future, and how they plan to get there cannot be overstressed. BW and FYC students especially benefit from writing about their educational and college experiences and critically engaging with what it means to be college students.

Throughout my teaching, I have studied how students' relations to academic writing have varied, from ease and comfort in handling "college-level" writing for some, to the dread and conflicting anxieties—a rhetoric of despair—which writing generates for others. Some professors in multiple disciplines worry that composition instructors are not teaching students how to write (Fulkerson). These instructors neglect to acknowledge that the linguistic and cultural competences of academic discourses are not students' first languages (Gee). Instructors best serve students by scaffolding academic writing with students' lived experiences and current rhetorical practices. This self-reflexive turn of writing about education at school requires BW and FYC writers to link their dispositions and autobiographies with critical thinking and analysis, and to remain grounded in a form of academic discourse.

According to the MC General Education goals for student writing at MC, the professional success and personal satisfaction of twenty-first century citizens require fluency with a broad range of modes of communication. Fluency further gets clarified as students taking ownership of language to develop a capacity for both critical analysis and considered reflection. MC students certainly do own their language when they think of it as fun or relevant, but as I have argued here, students rarely have that sense of ownership with academic discourse because, namely, it is written at—and for—school, and with little connection to students' lived experiences. Success, then, becomes falsely reified through the language of institutionally legitimated merit. In



the two cases of Janet Mullens and Sharon Romero, these students act within a self-reproducing narrative in which success is the finish line instead of a milestone on a timeline of growth; and in this way, success operates as an ideology that runs counter to the educational principles of curiosity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Mahle-Grisez 48).

Such a bleak outlook does not bode well for writing pedagogies that are not “economic.” However, there are ways to reinterpret successful writing, such as the Accelerated Learning Program of Peter Adams, and encouraging arguments for BW’s reinvention (Horner; Otte and Mlynarczyk). In the United States, the progressive movements of the 1960s led to affirmative action and open admission policies at many universities (Tsao). The fights for equity successfully made higher education accessible to women, ethnic minorities, and people of the working class. Nevertheless, the system of competition for institutionally legitimated credentials as a form of qualification-capital has not itself adjusted significantly. Credentials increasingly have become the mode of advancement for the meritocracy of the American social order. Historically, we can say this is how certain groups beginning early in the twentieth century were denied academic advancement because of institutionally enforced merit requirements (Brint and Karabel).

Schools reproduce the prevailing relations of production where ideologies of social mobility teach students to blame themselves if they don’t move up the ladder. Schools do, after all, provide the credentials needed to spark opportunity, to move up the ladder, but whether or not one is able to pass (maybe with merit-interest) through the corridors of power and mobility shifts to individual achievement. This begs the question of whether we are back to issues of access and equity. In the case of MC students Mullens and Romero, they determined what personal qualities appeared most meritorious to their intended audience of scholars and university professionals. As observed, not all MC students agreed with Bourdieu’s deterministic theories of stratification and domination, or his game models. Often these students waged forceful, logical debates, contributing to strong class discussions, especially as they considered agency enacted as tactics not completely determined by history and social structures. Such differences of institutional definitions of merit reflect ideologies that deserve to be critiqued in and through the genres of professional writing and are important points for discussion with BW and FYC students.

The underlying cultural imperative of competitive individualism in schools contributes to the idea that students’ failures come from within, not from without. The same goes for success. This effect of the credential system

enforced by educational institutions legitimates meritocracy. Schools qualify individuals for mobility, or at least that is the hope. And when those hopes aren't met, there is a "process of adjustment of hopes to opportunities, of aspirations to accomplishments, and in particular the work of disinvestment required in order to accept a lesser success, or a failure" (Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* 166).

Janet Mullens and Sharon Romero each reflect this aspect of readjustment in their career choices and lives. Their writing about changes in life choices have produced qualitative inquiry for each, in addition to writing with purposes and for audiences. Both students engage their histories with the structures of institutional notions of merit, and what they want their educations to do for them in their futures. Their beliefs in meritocracy are not socially determined in the sense that they exercise no agency in their personal statements. Rather, Mullens and Romero enact beliefs in the power of education to reward agency. Such beliefs from students are sometimes founded on truth, sometimes not, but the rewards motivate them to continue to work hard.

Self-reflexive study of educational motivations challenges beliefs about schooling, offering plenty of fuel for college writers of all levels. To rhetorically craft such fieldwork of the self into genres is an aspect of the compositional process. While fieldwork may take shape as literacy narratives and memoirs, I advocate for the personal statement as another important genre for BW and FYC instructors to assign. It is a short assignment, and it could be offered as the final piece of writing for students to compose at the end of a semester when compiling portfolios of their work. A cover letter, in addition, could further supplement additional elements of professional writing for students to become familiar with and to practice for various applications for academic opportunities around their campuses, such as scholarships, grants, internships, or applications for studying abroad or graduate school. These gains, of course, arrive only after having explored the meritocratic system and the institutional rewards for those who play the game effectively.

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## Notes

1. Names of students, their institutions, and their locations are pseudonyms. Information included from my biography as recounted in the article is factual.

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# Beyond the Bridge Metaphor: Rethinking the Place of the Literacy Narrative in the Basic Writing Curriculum

Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix

*ABSTRACT: Critical analysis of the literacy narrative assignment within the context of the other genres in a basic writing course complicates understandings of the political import of the assignment. While several advocates of the literacy narrative have argued that it has the power of what Jean-François Lyotard has called *petits récits*, the authors argue that the relationship of the literacy narrative to other genres can also diminish the value of the literacy narrative and create what Lyotard has termed a “*differend*.” While still arguing for the value of the literacy narrative, authors present a narrative about curricular reform that demonstrates how students can learn to recognize how this genre circulates within the power/knowledge of academic writing. This critical reading of the literacy narrative genre leads the authors to call for a reconceptualization of the assignment as a productive “*conflict*” that can be utilized to reshape the entire curriculum of the course while still cultivating the skills of argumentation and analysis outlined in the course outcomes.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; developmental writing; genre; literacy narrative; academic discourse; retention; differend*

A recent discussion on the WPA-L Listserv asked “Is the Literacy Narrative Dead?” (July 25–28, 2013). The overwhelming majority of voices who joined the discussion corroborated other scholars who have argued that the literacy narrative is indeed alive and well, though perhaps in need of “updating” or “constructive criticism” (Haswell), relabeling (Macauley) or at least reconceptualizing.<sup>1</sup> Gerald Nelms calls it a “learning reflection” (27 July) and others gave it similar naming variations, but the striking point is

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that almost everyone believed it has tremendous value in the college curriculum. Nelms argued that it is a useful pedagogical tool for the following three reasons: 1) it helps students “become more metacognitive about their learning”; 2) it helps them “integrate learning about writing into their prior knowledge about writing”; and 3) it is a “scaffolding device” to help students with cognitive overload (25 July). The liveliness of the discussion demonstrated the wide and still evolving (and we would argue relevant) uses of the literacy narrative in college writing courses; indeed, faculty use this loosely-defined genre in first-year writing (FYW), technical writing, general education, and pre-service English Education courses. Digital literacy narratives are frequently taught and students are increasingly comfortable with multimodal methods of producing texts. Students in other disciplines also produce literacy narratives (think medical narrative, math narrative, political narrative) to connect content to lived experiences.

As the comments on WPA-L verify, the literacy narrative genre is shaped by issues of institutional access, cognition, transfer, and the political import of the genre. These issues overlap, of course, but our experiences and research into our own curriculum point to a particular configuration of these issues: the threats to the genre’s political significance when it is utilized in classrooms that emphasize authorized and powerful genres of analysis and argumentation. This problem is particularly acute for basic writing courses like the one that we shall describe here, which is a mainstream FYW course (English 101) with a studio, rather than a non-degree credit bearing, or traditional remedial writing course. This course, English 101A, requires faculty to foster the identical analytical and argumentative writing skills of our mainstream course. In courses like these, the value of the literacy narrative can easily be lost when students move to assignments framed by more traditional academic genres. We can perceive this loss of political importance when the genre becomes, as it often does, treated as a bridge to academic writing, or worse as a means of “easing students into” academic writing.

We would agree with the consensus from the listserv discussion and other scholars around literacy narratives—they are useful, relevant, viable, fluid but in need of some critique. This is the story of how our institution revised its basic writing curriculum and the structure of the course, and in particular how the literacy narrative became a site of conflict that challenged us to think about its connection to the entire curriculum. Ultimately, we advocate that the literacy narrative be the focal point for the whole curriculum. In short, we complicated the notion of what a literacy narrative is and how it can be more useful in first-year and basic writing courses by considering



it as a “problem space” genre. Charles Bazerman argues that “Taking up the challenge of a genre casts you into the problem space and the typified structures and practices of the genre provide the means of solution. The greater the challenge of the solution, the greater the possibilities of cognitive growth occurring in the wake of the process of solution” (291). Thus, slowing down our curriculum by both restructuring the class (adding a 75-minute studio) along with revising the curriculum (complicating the sequence of assignments while focusing on the literacy narrative for the entire course) allows us to grapple with the disjuncture in a curriculum between a literacy narrative assignment and more traditional academic genre assignments.<sup>2</sup>

Bazerman’s description of the problem space of genre also encouraged us to ask two specific questions about the literacy narrative. First, *how accurately does our curriculum frame the problem to which the genre offers a typified response?* Second, *how might highlighting the curricular problem of the genre and working with students to develop critical responses to it increase possibilities for intellectual growth?* What we discovered was that the ‘problem space’ of the literacy narrative is one that can be more accurately described as constructed by the particular place that it occupies in the larger sequence of assignments in our classes, or in the practices that make up the activity system of our classrooms.

Before we elaborate on the curriculum, we need to describe the restructuring of the basic writing course. Essentially, we eliminated our basic writing course and created a regular composition class with a one-credit studio attached. The curriculum of the basic writing course modeled the goals and student learning outcomes of regular first-year writing; however, the assignment sequence was slightly different and one way we slowed the pace down was by adding the studio (taught by the same instructor). The results were dramatic: retention rates jumped from 46% to 81% over a five-year period after implementing the new model. These results have produced a high level of support from the English department and the college and university administration, and the studio model of the course recently won the Council on Basic Writing Award for Innovation. In addition to the studio model, we require a weekly teachers’ collaborative meeting led by an experienced instructor of basic writing. Pegeen Reichert, for example, writing on student retention, has noted that increased face time with faculty is a critical success factor for first-year students (668). Furthermore, Vincent Tinto notes “actions of faculty” are critical in enhancing student retention (5). We believe that the increased face-to-face time with faculty in our basic writing studio along with a revised curriculum that included a literacy narrative in addition to the regular analytical assignments of the course did

seem to accomplish this goal of increased persistence and retention. But while retention and continuation improved and while the new course was highly valued, our research also uncovered some deep ambivalences about the curriculum, particularly the literacy narrative assignment.

Although the efficacy of this curriculum for our institution is clearly supported by our research, when we looked back at interviews with faculty, we found that the numbers did not capture a central point of tension in our curriculum—the use of the literacy narrative as a bridge to genres of analytical writing. As with many freshman-year or basic writing courses, our curriculum begins with a literacy narrative that is followed by the first of several textual analysis assignments. Our curriculum development team proposed the literacy narrative assignment because, in theory, it provided an approachable transition to college writing. In this sense, the assignment reflected research on academic discourse, meta-cognition, and prior genre knowledge as necessary in students' transitions to college thinking and writing (Bartholomae 1985; Bazerman 2009; Perkins and Salomon 1988; Wardle 2007; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi 2008; Devitt 2007). Noting the importance of narrative genres as prior genres for students, we began by using the literacy narrative in a pretty traditional way—as a low stakes entry-level assignment for a basic writing class. In fact, it was this initial assumption that the literacy genre would bridge to academic genres that enabled us to realize that by slowing down the curriculum and spending an entire semester on one genre we could actually create the critical awareness necessary for writing in academic genres.

Literacy narratives are nothing new in writing curricula, particularly in basic writing circles, as evidenced by the recent WPA listserv discussions about its use. Nor is it our intention to argue that the genre in and of itself produces critical literacy. Rather, we want to argue that critical literacy develops through placing the literacy narrative within the context of academic genres that ultimately shape student writing in the academy. By slowing down our course, we were able to use the literacy narrative as a wedge, ultimately creating a space for our students in the world of academic literacies. We worked with students on the precarious position their literacy narratives occupy in academic writing and challenged them to develop genre knowledge and awareness by making connections (comparison, metaphors, analogies, classifications) from the literacy narratives to other academic genres through our sequence of assignments.

We will argue that our understanding of the literacy narrative genre takes place within an activity system and context of genres, and that our

students use this genre to develop critical understanding of how their narratives participate in these systems and contexts. Research on the function of genres in activity systems by Bazerman, Russell, Spinuzzi, and others has illustrated how genres play a significant role in both producing and reproducing activity systems. Describing activity systems as “ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction” (510), David Russell illustrates the vital role of genre in activity systems. As Russell illustrates, “Genres are not merely texts that share some formal features; they are shared expectations among some group(s) of people. Genres are ways of recognizing and predicting how certain tools (including vocalizations and inscriptions), in certain typified—typical, reoccurring—conditions, may be used to help participants act together purposefully” (513). This understanding of genre as “shared expectations” leads us to consider the perception of the literacy narrative by both our students and faculty and to read the literacy narrative within the activity system of the FYW classroom and within the larger activity system of the university. To paraphrase Russell, we want our students to ask themselves “How can writing a literacy narrative (rather than some other kind of writing) help me gain access to this new system (college) that I want to be part of?”

### **The Literacy Narrative, the *Differend*, and the Problem with the Bridge Metaphor**

Over twenty years ago, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater talked about how students’ academic literacies “cannot be untied from a student’s overall literacy: the package comes complete” (xvi). She recognized that each individual student “evoke(s) a wide range of literacies to make meaning of their experiences” (xvi). Literacy narratives permit students to draw on their experiences in ways that lead to academic writing and thinking. Or so the argument goes. Mary Soliday talks about the plot of a literacy narrative as one that returns us to that place where we acquired “language, either spoken or written” (511). In this way the narrative serves as what Victor Turner calls “liminal crossings” between worlds, enabling writers to both “articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages” (511). It is this act of interpretation, of being able to objectify one’s experience against the mettle of another’s (and of another genre even) that helps students gain agency in how language might work for them. For first-year college students, the literacy narrative assignment gives them a real opportunity to write and reflect and compare their own literacy experiences in a new domain.

Our students' literacy narratives, as well as those models we bring into the classroom, are not innocent by any means. They can serve to be transformative or even transcendental, but they can also exacerbate existing deficit beliefs about education and self-worth. In our curriculum, making the literacy narrative the focus of the course gives us an opportunity (more time) to help students recover from such possible losses of innocence that might occur, thus coming to a more grounded knowledge of how critical literacy might work for them. Laurel Johnson Black argues that if students feel the power of "that movement forward" in their own literacy narratives, they might come to "feel the power of the turning concept, the academic idea" (25). She directly links the personal agency of the literacy narrative to academic thinking.

Our proposals for curriculum reform began with the recognition that our understanding of the literacy narrative as a bridge to academic writing notion not only did *not* link or bridge to the next assignment but in fact, it often interfered with the academic writing that students were expected to do. We knew there were potential traps in romanticizing a literacy narrative as a way of easing at-risk students into college—giving them a chance to tell their stories, linking those stories to a larger context, and so on, and then assuming they would just slide right into academic writing with few adjustments. Indeed, others have cautioned about some of the potential problems with literacy narratives in college writing. Kara Poe Alexander, for example, has examined and challenged the literacy narrative because it can reify dominant archetypes in the story. The master narrative (success story), Alexander argues, has a common archetypal plot: follows conventional patterns of narration, corresponds to prevailing cultural representations of literacy, helps organize reality, and shapes our understanding of ourselves (609). These "success stories" romanticize literacy or worse, "paint it as pragmatic and utilitarian, a means to economic, cultural, social, and political success" (609). When students write what Jean-François Lyotard would call *petits récits* or little narratives, Alexander argues that these tend to be unsanctioned, artistic, imaginative, and concrete. She argues that our very assignments may lead students toward the archetype rather than toward the smaller more significant and revealing little narrative.

Writing teachers are thus charged with problematizing that ubiquitous "master" narrative that students lean into and also to add nuance to what is perceived as a pretty straightforward assignment. In the first iteration of our new basic writing course, for example, students often told stories of "being saved by one great teacher or coach or family member or counselor." They

went on a quest, faced obstacles, and one day “saw the light” because of “X” and now they are here, living (hopefully) “happily ever after.” Sometimes the quest was given gravitas by a tragic event (car accident, shooting, death of friend or family member, etc.) making the arrival at college a more dramatic accomplishment and the apex of literacy achievement. We were discouraged by the preponderance of “unexamined” narratives as they tended to lack any nuance or critical reflection. Furthermore, where do you go from there?

We began to think of first-year college students as not only entering a new domain of social learning but also a new “cognitive apprenticeship” where previous learning could “become integrated with other existing or parallel developed functional systems to create a new functional system” (Bazerman 290). Now we wanted to revise the curriculum so that learning critical analysis on a personal and familiar genre—a narrative about one’s own experiences—had the potential to both increase learning and to internalize such learning in a way that transfers to other domains (the next composition course or writing task in college). Like Alexander, we began with the premise that literacy narratives allow students to harness the power of the *petit récit* and challenge the discourses of academic power that would exclude them from the university. In other words, if we could move students away from the “master narrative” trajectory that they seemed to navigate toward and encourage them to be more “unsanctioned, artistic, imaginative, and concrete” (Alexander 609), we could open up a problem space and truly use the literacy narrative as a “cognitive apprenticeship” (Bazerman 290).

As we developed and taught our curriculum, we realized that the literacy narrative itself was not our only problem. We next witnessed students encounter significant difficulties when they moved from the literacy narrative to the textual analysis assignments, and we observed instructors begin to question the role of the literacy narrative in our English 101A curriculum. What we learned was *the assignment that we considered the least difficult was actually the most challenging to teach effectively and created the most difficult “problem space” in the class*. This challenge came not from the assignment itself but from the gap in the sequence between this assignment and the analytical genres of the curriculum that followed it in our sequence of assignments. Students were asked to move from the personal but critical voice of their literacy narratives to assignments that were almost wholly text-focused, such as textual and contextual analysis assignments that develop an interpretive claim rather than an argument grounded in experience. This assignment, which had been designed to create a bridge to academic writing, actually ended up constituting a gap for quite a few faculty.

The problem space of the literacy narrative assignment is most clearly perceived when we look at its relationship to the genres that surround it. Within a First-Year Writing (FYW) classroom focused on analytical writing, a literacy narrative can very quickly be perceived as lacking the power or value of other genres. This is not to suggest that literacy narratives truly lack power, but to point to the material and symbolic constraints that shape both their circulation and their linkage to other genres of academic writing. Important national projects, such as Cynthia Selfe's *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives* and the multi-lingual literacy narrative collection at DePaul University's *University Center for Writing Based Learning* (UCWbL), illustrate that the power of literacy narratives is constrained and fostered by the spaces of their circulation and reception. Writing researchers such as Selfe have granted the literacy narratives of a varied group of students, citizens, and intellectuals such a space, a space that only until recently has been reserved for the literacy narratives of high-profile intellectuals. Such projects illustrate the value of writing to our students, but also illustrate how writing gets "valued" through processes of circulation and representation.

Our experience with our curriculum project led us to consider how the literacy narratives of our students can challenge power and grant access to academic discourse by considering another, central concept from Lyotard: the *differend*. Lyotard defines a "differend" as

a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. . . . Damages result from an injury which is inflicted upon the rules of a genre of discourse but which is reparable according to those rules. *A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse.* (xi, italics added)

While our students do not occupy as juridical of a space as the subjects of Lyotard's analysis, his description of how genres are judged resonates with our discussion of student literacy narratives. Lyotard's understanding of a "wrong" is useful here as it illustrates the role of value and hierarchy in contexts of genre. For Lyotard, the force of genre lies in its ability to shape our ends and objectives: "We believe that we want to persuade, to seduce, to convince, to be upright, to cause to believe, or to cause to question, but this is because a genre of discourse, whether dialectical, erotic, didactic, ethical, rhetorical, or 'ironic,' imposes its mode of linking onto 'our' phrase and

onto ‘us’” (136). Genre is therefore hegemonic, and Lyotard describes “hegemonies of genre” (141) as spaces of agonistic conflict where genres “fight over modes of linking” (141). However, he also notes that the hegemony of genre presents possibilities for addressing differends and articulating other possibilities through other genres.

Lyotard’s argument is useful for understanding the relationships of value that shape genres within activity systems and the conflicts of value which can arise when particular genres exercise their hegemony. As students and instructors in our course grappled with how literacy narratives and the analytical genres of textual and contextual analysis are valued, we began to perceive the literacy narrative as a site of conflict, or a *differend*. One faculty member expressed this differend perfectly when she worried that “there’s too much focus on narrative writing only, especially when they’ll be expected to work in different forms and genres.” For example, the perception of the literacy narrative as not being “academic” or as lacking academic rigor illustrates, for us, the possibility of producing such a wrong. In this case, the literacy narrative is not only judged by the rules of another genre, but is given value in a discourse about academic writing that is not accessible to students. To address this differend requires developing opportunities for students to “link” (29) the literacy narrative to their work in other academic genres and use their literacy narratives to critically examine and even challenge academic discourse.

In addition to some of our faculty’s uneasiness, we also harbored our own fears that students who expressed their literacy experiences vividly in their literacy narratives might experience a diminished communicative agency when it came time to write a textual analysis. In this important sense, our initial experiences with the course exhibited an important differend, one where students needed to link the language and rhetorical skill of their literacy narratives to analytical genres that ran the risk of silencing them. This silencing could be considered “damages” incurred as a result of a wrong committed, to use Lyotard’s language. The possibility existed that students in our course could move from an early recognition of their literacy and agency only to find in the next paper that it is this very type of literacy and rhetorical agency that is not highly valued in the academy.

The assignment sequence below illustrates the differend our instructors were experiencing.

- **Literacy Narrative**—reconsideration of familiar “stories” about what literacy is and how it works—analysis of one’s literacy narrative and

how that was shaped by literary, textual, cultural factors

- **Textual Analysis**—analysis of writer’s rhetorical strategies (literary, textual, cultural factors that shape a text) for a particular audience and purpose
- **Text in Context Analysis**—focus on the text and its relationship to a larger context (i.e., author’s biography, historical or cultural situation surrounding the text, a particular theoretical approach such as feminism or psychoanalysis, the literary tradition to which the text belongs). Focused research required.
- **Revision and Reflection**: students revise one analytical essay and write a cover essay that explains how they have improved their essay through the revision process.

The previous curriculum above illustrates an approach taken by most of our instructors. Here, the literacy narrative was conceived as a “bridge” between the prior genre knowledge of our incoming students and the genres of analytical writing. The course began with the literacy narrative, but then moved directly into the same assignments of textual analysis that are used in our regular composition course.

Because this curriculum utilized the exact sequence of assignments of our mainstream English 101, with the exception of the literacy narrative assignment, it created a strong sense of curricular coherence between the two courses. However, we noticed during faculty interviews that the role of the literacy narrative in the course was a continual topic of conversation, and our interviews compelled us to revisit the curriculum. Genuine contention over the literacy narrative indicated that the relationship between the literacy narrative and these genres seemed incommensurable, and created the perception that the literacy narrative served as a way to ease students into academic writing or cultivate their attitude towards writing. In other words, the literacy narrative was preparatory to the work of academic analysis. We found that several faculty expressed confusion about “bridging the narrative and the analysis essay” and several echoed the sentiment of one faculty member who urged, “cut literacy narrative and focus on analysis and comprehension.” Others, however, noted the power of the literacy narrative as a bridge assignment. As one faculty member expressed it, “The narrative essay works as a boost of confidence in their writing skills and their worth. So starting with analysis might crash their spirits right from the start.” These differing views illustrate the perceived values of literacy narratives and how their place within a sequence of assignments affects this value. To further com-



plicate matters, when students were asked directly about the “helpfulness of literacy narrative assignment to future writing,” 80% of those surveyed rated the assignment seven on a scale of one to ten, with ten indicating “Strongly Agree.” Slowing down our curriculum was definitely working, but the literacy narrative assignment had created a pedagogical conflict that challenged the coherence of our curriculum.

In sum, the *wrong* suffered by students was that the idiom (Lyotard’s language) that regulates this conflict was not the one the students used or knew. They were victims because the dominant genre of academic discourse was what “addressees” (university faculty and even FYW teachers) valued while we (the basic writing curriculum developers) valorized this literacy narrative idiom. The linkages between the literary narrative and academic writing became “unsuitable” or wrong. *Damages* occurred when the hegemony of one idiom invalidated or denied that of another (our students’ literacy narratives). What was at stake was “to bear witness to differences” by finding idioms for them (Lyotard 13). And this led us to rethink the place of the literacy narrative in our curriculum.

### **The Case for Keeping the Literacy Narrative in English 101A**

Despite the difficulties encountered when faculty moved from the literacy narrative to the first analytical writing assignment, we saw significant value in continuing to assign a literacy narrative for our developmental writing students. The basic writing teachers met weekly for their teachers’ collaborative meetings and continued to discuss the value and problems with the literacy narrative. When these instructors worked with students on developing their literacy narratives and analyzed the literacy narratives written in their own and each other’s classrooms, we continued to see their efficacy in enabling students to think critically about accessing academic discourse and to develop a “rhetorical stance” (Booth 141) towards the work of the course. The following section highlights some of the patterns we found in the students’ literacy narratives and reflections on the assignment that encouraged us to argue for a larger revision of the course.<sup>3</sup> Reading through students’ writing, we used an inductive methodology or grounded research method in which we devised the following categories or themes from the emerging patterns in the students’ writing. In sum, we read and coded for dominant and recurring ideas/themes, using a sort of conceptual sorting based on the frequency of the patterns. We found five commonplace rhetorical moves that reaffirmed our use of the assignment, while challenging

us to rethink how the assignment was sequenced, and how we might use the literacy assignment in a larger way.

**1. Meta-reflection on one's own literacy.** Almost all writing classes ask students to reflect on their writing: What did you change? How did you change "x?" Why? Show me....and so on. Kathleen Yancey argues that reflection is a form of theorizing that "doesn't occur naturally to most learners...[as such] it requires structure, situatedness, reply, engagement" (19). In the 101A course, students write a literacy narrative and then revise it with this sort of meta-reflection incorporated (bold print, font changes, footnotes – choose your technology) into the paper. One student who was writing about the power of a word (in this case the "N word"), relates a story in which someone calls his uncle "nigga" in his presence. His literacy narrative, then, traces the historical and cultural uses of this word and how he felt its use (the word "nigga") affected the people in his presence. He adds this sentence in his revised literacy narrative: "In my mind I thought it would be okay to say [the word 'nigga'] after Alex [a classmate] said all black people had the right to say the "'N word.'" In explaining this revision, he defends adding this sentence because "it completes my initial thoughts in a sentence...reminds readers where I got my information...and helped me understand that literacy is something that happens progressively and is changed by interpretation and false accusations." He goes on to compare the casual use of the "N word" to talking about God in class. His analogy is that both words (God and nigga) provoke emotional responses yet "allow readers the option of understanding that words can be significant in more ways than one." He continues about how he has learned to "seek literacy in our everyday lives."

What seems significant about this example is the depth of analysis about one's own literacy events and one's own writing. As the student's reflection indicated, the student linked literacy to rhetorical context and connected a personal literacy experience to a "socio-literate" context (Johns 20). By reflecting on the power of his rhetorical choices to shape an audience's reaction and fulfill a particular purpose within a particular context, the student illustrated a deepening understanding of the analytical practices of our courses. In our regular composition classes there are required reflective activities and the requisite peer response. But because the pace of the class is so much faster, we do not pause to fully explore (or even teach) some of the revisions. Such revisions are expected, though often accomplished in a fairly superficial way. There may be "structure, situatedness, reply, engagement" as Yancey requires, but in 101A the pace slows. There is more repetition, more time on all aspects of reflection. Because we can use the full 75-minute studios to

devote to unpacking these literacy events in local and global ways, it is not unusual for students to write more about their revisions and to relate those to other contexts. For example, this student added the above-cited 24-word sentence and then commented on three aspects of that change in three sentences and sixty words. Because a significant amount of the course is spent on reading one's own literacy events against the grain and contextualizing them with the experiences of others (in class and with published authors), students build cumulatively on this ability to sustain reflection and to articulate it clearly. A student slows down and re-reflects because there is more time to think and to let ideas of change percolate. In the process, students learn to learn, become more self-aware, and demonstrate in concrete ways that they can change the way they do things. The student in this scenario experienced a cognitive apprenticeship by being cast into the "problem space" of the genre and the challenge of the solution was substantial enough to also produce cognitive growth.

**2. Becoming critically aware of language.** A student whose father is an English teacher bemoaned his childhood because he hated to read and argued with his father constantly. When he did finally "take to reading" through Calvin and Hobbes comics, he moved on to Hawthorne, Steinbeck, and others. And he discovered that "as I read more and more I came across quotes, sentences, paragraphs, excerpts, and novels that inspired me and morphed the way I viewed the world. I envied the authors of these works of art." He began to use the "structure and style of the [authors'] essays....to come up with my own ideas." He discovered that "it was too hard to write about something you didn't care for." In the process of this discovery, he came to value writing outside of the classroom as a way to improve writing in the classroom. This young man was more eloquent than many, but he captured the feelings shared by most students that "extraneous wording" does not help, "that I have flaws in his writing, and that practice is critical to improving one's writing." Like the student who looked at the effect of the word "nigga" on himself and his family, this student came to value the right word at the right time and to examine the effects of language on his audience. As the student writing on the "N word" wrote, "I believe the "N word" upholds various meanings, and we have to know when and where it is appropriate."

Another student wrote that "going over your words once more, I have come to realize while revising my literacy narrative that when I analyze topics that I have experienced and lived through, I am able to bring a whole new meaning to the table when expressing my thoughts and when scrutinizing details." She believes this "enables me to bring a whole new message to my

essay. It is solely for this reason that I find my voice, enveloping a sense of critical observations and opinions.” She credits this “insight” to what enables her to bring analysis to her story...and by “increasing analysis in my essay, I managed to express further, all the things I was thinking while I executed the actions I did.” Like the student who understood the problems with “extraneous wording,” so too this student recognizes that analysis combined with narrative is a sort of synergy that produces deeper insights. Students, in this sense, begin with a self-concept as a “student” and are encouraged to re-envision themselves as writers.

**3. Reconsideration of value of journals.** Many of the students had kept journals as teenagers, but rarely had they used these journals to really clarify their ideas and experiences. Most students’ literacy narratives talked about journal writing as a sort of youthful diary—a place where they wrote about their friends, love lives, car accidents. But they did not realize until they began revising these journals and writing about the journals that they actually had been using journal writing as a way of clarifying feelings. Now they began to journal as a way of practicing a chemistry lab write up or trying out some opinions prior to a class discussion. As one student wrote, “the more I wrote the easier it got. I was getting comfortable with writing everything that came to my mind...now, when I go to do other forms of writing, it is easier to write a first draft because I have become comfortable with expressing my thoughts and opinions through writing.” Talking about the value of journaling as if it is a new or “significant truth” is not our intention. It reminds us of John Schilb’s caveat to those of us in the field to not argue that what is already a commonplace is somehow new or different if it is not—particularly if it is not the “essays’ main thesis” but rather a secondary one. “Calling it a truism can save time” (297-8). So while we are not arguing that journaling is new or controversial, we are corroborating this truism. Journaling is a valued practice in the field of composition studies. It is not the main point or most significant commonplace we discovered. But it is always reassuring to have students claim yet again the power of journaling in many aspects of their academic lives. That said, this is the most orthodox of our “commonplaces.”

**4. Pragmatic consequences of not being able to write well.** Perhaps it comes as no surprise that almost none of the students in English 101A are English majors. They are comfortable telling us that they “do not write well.” Some are math and science majors, thinking they will not have to write. Imagine their surprise when they find out they still have to produce writing in a genre (the lab report, for example) that they do not think of as writing (that would be the “essay” or “research paper”). Some students are

nontraditional students returning to school. One student's experience was particularly dramatic—he enlisted in the Navy because he could not write well. Since English was his second language, he always felt he was a weak writer. In the Navy, his division officer asked him to write his “own evaluation” for a promotion. He carefully followed the format, describing “how good of a sailor I am.” He “read the outline...seeing what I needed to be done [sic].” As he went through the list of traits, he wrote a brief explanation of each trait he possessed. He did not get the promotion because, he was told, the other sailor competing with him wrote better. After his stint in the Navy, he returned to college and wrote “I know now what writing can accomplish for me and where it can take me in life.” Most students just talk about struggles in other classes at our university. But occasionally a student like this one tells a more dramatic tale of loss, of status, and of financial consequences. The very foundation of the literacy narrative is to disrupt something that is taken for granted: one's own relationship with literacy events. Most students know on some level that they have suffered some consequences because of their struggles with writing. But few of them have interrogated such a premise for an entire semester. So the semester long focus on one's own literacy events and on how to contextualize them within a larger context tends to produce more than a few “aha” moments. In this case of this former Navy recruit, the consequences take a turn toward the dramatic. In most students' cases they are less portentous.

**5. Integration of sources (one or more secondary texts) into one's own literacy narrative to elaborate on the experience, extend an argument, validate a point.** This is probably the most useful part of the literacy narrative in terms of development of academic skills that will transfer to a new situation in the academy. Students often read a text like Jimmy Santiago Baca's “Coming into Language.” One student who writes that he comes from a privileged background argues for why in spite of the differences between his life and Baca's there is much to learn from him. He relates his own stress in performing “writing” to how Baca felt. The majority of the students manage to find significant connections between their own literacy experiences and the authors they read who are writing about writing. We use literacy narratives like Baca's and also texts like *American History X* (film), Robert Heilbroner's “Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgment,” and Sam Keen's *Your Mythological Journey: Finding Meaning in Your Life Through Myth and Storytelling*. Students read such narratives with an eye not only towards textual analysis, but also as a site of comparative practice. In this sense, students analyze texts like Baca's from their perspective as writers,

thinking through their own choices while analyzing the narrative choices in the essay. Students slip with ease into finding compelling ways to use other voices to do what we want all our students to do when they bring outside experts into their papers: they elaborate, validate, extend, and complicate their arguments. Because they do this, they are prepared for the next course where research may be a main focus.

The commonplaces that we found in literacy narratives and reflections confirmed our theoretical rationale for beginning our course with the assignment. These patterns of student response illustrate for us the value of the literacy analysis assignment in promoting the meta-cognitive knowledge of the writing process that we see as a central outcome of our course. But our experience also underscores the value of indirect measures of program assessment—such as our instructor interviews and student surveys—for deepening our understanding of the local conflicts that occur within our curriculum. What we discovered in examining this curricular conflict (the abrupt transition or rupture in moving directly from a literacy narrative to academic writing) was that there was value to the literacy narrative as a concrete, accessible paradigm of access to academic discourse, and that the assignment could allow us to examine this conflict with our students in meaningful ways. We looked back upon Bazerman’s understanding of genre as a “problem space” and his contention that the greater the problem of negotiating this space “the greater the possibilities of cognitive growth occurring in the wake of the process of solution” (291). Our initial question of “bridging” from the literacy analysis to textual analysis assignments transformed into a question both more applicable to our students’ lives and more sophisticated: how might we enable our students to understand how their own texts, and the literacy narrative in particular, come to be valued? We went, as we shall discuss below, from thinking of the literacy analysis as a bridge to thinking about how we might frame the entire curriculum around this assignment.

### **Re-Valuing the Literacy Narrative in English 101A**

As Elizabeth Wardle found in her longitudinal study of transfer in FYC,<sup>4</sup> “*meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies* in FYC may be the most important ability our courses can cultivate” (“Understanding” 82). Wardle suggests that “rhetorical analyses of various types of texts across the university” and “auto-ethnographies of their own reading and writing habits” (82) foster students’ meta-cognitive reflection. Wardle’s well-known study “‘Mutt-Genres’ and Goal of FYC,” further substantiates this claim by

pointing to the thin correspondence between classroom genres in FYC and the disciplinary genres students encounter beyond FYC. For Wardle, students often write “mutt genres”: “genres that do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author” (777). The recognition that our classroom genres are often “mutt genres” that do not promote high-road transfer challenges writing teachers to shift their content of their classrooms so that they are “about writing” rather than “how to write” (784). In our case, we found that the value of the literacy narrative lies in its ability to serve as the basis for a course “about writing,” but that this value depends upon the hierarchy of the literacy narrative in the context of genres that are utilized in the classroom. As we analyzed our qualitative data from our study of English 101A, we began noticing that the literacy narrative challenged our faculty to make their courses “about writing” initially, but shifted in the next assignment to the role of teaching “how to write” a textual analysis and often never revisited the literacy narrative. The result was, for several of our faculty, the perception of the literacy narrative as bridge, or as a means of “easing into” academic writing.

Our analysis of the literacy narrative assignment prompt convinced us of the social value and action of the genre. The impetus for the circulation of the text is embodied in the genre itself. Students are asked to place their literacy experience within a social or cultural context and to develop a thesis that draws out both the consequences of this context for their literacy and the role their literacy can play in addressing this context. Within the conventions of this genre, the depiction of experience and reflective reasoning serve as evidence to support this thesis, and the prompt encourages the function of representing oneself as a writer because or in spite of the cultural contingencies that have shaped one’s literacy. By comparison, the social function of the textual analysis assignment, the second in the sequence of assignments in our traditional 101A classrooms, manifests itself as interpretive and disciplinary. The prompt calls for an analytical thesis that presumes that the claim is the author’s and does not call for or privilege personal experience. Evidence from the experiential process of reading is not valued, but evidence in the form of quotations and discussions of details of the text are. In addition, the organizational conventions of the essay are structured around distinct points of evidence that support the analytical thesis rather than around narrative events. Topic sentences, for example, present particular points that support and explore the thesis rather than introducing new points in the narrative experience.

In an important sense, the problem space of the literacy narrative is one that we were able to perceive most clearly as students and faculty both made the transition to the textual analysis assignment that followed in the course sequence. To introduce the literacy narrative to our sequence of assignments means critically thinking through our students' experiential socialization through using the genres. We came to our conclusions that bridging the gap between the different rhetorical contexts involves *reframing* how literacy narratives are taught within sequences of assignments. Through analyzing our curriculum, we have come to the following recommendations for recognizing literacy narratives as a "problem-space" genre and rethinking the place of the literacy narrative in the writing curriculum.

First, *assigning a literacy narrative does not create an easily recognizable or negotiable bridge between students' prior genre knowledge and the academic genres of FYC*. We have become wary of the bridge metaphor, as it sets up the false expectation in our faculty that students easily move from the literacy narrative to the other genres in our courses. In fact, assigning a literacy narrative can heighten students' awareness of barriers to academic access rather than facilitate an easy transition. Bridging between the literacy narrative and the analytical and argumentative genres of FYC requires working with students to negotiate differences in voice, organization, and style. In addition, it requires that instructors possess the ability to speak meaningfully about the relationship between the literacy narrative and the set of analytical or argumentative genres students encounter throughout the rest of the course. At the programmatic level, this means that placing a literacy narrative on a required or recommended departmental syllabus requires faculty training and pedagogical resources.

Second, *literacy narratives do not function well as "add-on" or "optional" assignments for already developed curricula, as they radically change the perceived continuity between assignments*. To attach the literacy narrative as an additional assignment to an established course might very well create intense difficulties for faculty and students. The theorization of the literacy narrative as a genre that promotes student agency and meta-cognition makes its adoption as an assignment tempting, but adopting it singly, without reconceiving the additional assignments in the course can create confusion and resentment towards the assignment by both faculty and students. In particular, designating the literacy narrative as "optional" could extend faculty perceptions of it as being of lesser value and rigor than the more recognized genres of analytical or argumentative writing. Assigning the literacy narrative as an add-on assignment can create significant problems for Writing Program Ad-



ministrators in terms of curricular coherence, as some well-meaning faculty will opt out of the assignment because they feel it has little to do with the genres and standards of academic writing. As the comments from our own faculty interviews revealed, faculty perception of the purpose and scope of the literacy narrative plays a direct role in whether or not the literacy narrative is presented to students as an easy bridge into the “more important” work of academic analysis and argument or as a significant part of the curriculum. Seeking to mitigate these feelings by making the assignment optional does not change this perception, but in many ways simply makes introducing a literacy narrative into the curriculum unwise, as it highlights its subordinate status to faculty.

Third, *while meta-awareness of writing and increased rhetorical agency are hallmarks of the literacy narrative assignment, they can be diminished by the rhetorical messages our assignment sequences send to students.* The differences between the functions, conventions, and contexts of the literacy narrative and the analytical and argumentative assignments that surround it challenge faculty to pay attention to how students perceive the literacy narrative’s relationship to other assignments in the course. Placing the literacy narrative in the context of three analytical assignments, without exploring its relationship to them, can send a clear message to students about the place of the literacy narrative within the hierarchy of value of academic genres. When placed first in the sequence of assignments, for example, students could perceive the literacy narrative as an “easy first assignment” that prepares them for the “real” or “valued” writing of the course. But when they have to shift abruptly to an academic textual analysis, students may struggle with what counts as evidence, how to distance themselves from a text and “feign” objectivity, how to let go of the sense that their own experiences are important and relevant only sometimes, or that they can use personal experience to enliven a textual interpretation, and finally, that they have been somehow “misled” by the relative comfort of telling their literacy stories only to find out that they have little value or use in college writing.

### **A Re-Envisioned Curriculum**

In important ways, the sequential relationship between the literacy analysis and the textual analyses of our course have led us to reconceive our developmental writing course as a course “about writing.” From our initial understanding of the literacy narrative as a first bridge to academic literacy, we have moved towards an understanding of the assignment as a framework

for the issues of literacy, access, and genre that shape our entire curriculum. In the space remaining, we will attempt to provide an overview of our current proposals for curricular revision. In contrast to our previous curriculum, which moves from the literacy narrative to the analysis of literary and rhetorical texts, we argue for the efficacy of a process-portfolio model based on the following assignment sequence:<sup>5</sup>

- **Literacy Narrative:** follows our previous assignment, but includes more explicit analysis of the audiences, purposes, and contexts of students' literacy narratives.
- **Rhetorical Analysis of Published Literacy Narrative:** analysis of the rhetorical and literary strategies of a published literacy narrative that asks students to develop an analytical claim concerning why and how the literacy narrative might be valued by specific audiences.
- **Contextual Analysis of Published Literacy Narrative:** analysis of a published literacy narrative through the cultural lens provided by texts that address the cultural context and situation of the published literacy narrative.
- **Revision of Literacy Narrative:** revision of student's literacy narrative that applies selected strategies learned through analyzing published literacy narratives. This project asks students to also locate a concrete audience for the literacy narrative and to employ rhetorical strategies that speak to the specific context of this audience.
- **Reflective Essay:** semester reflection that asks students to reflect upon how their work in the course, and their vision and revision of their literacy narratives, speaks to the outcomes of the course.

It seems obvious in hindsight that the sequence needed to change. And considering the slow awakening, the gradual discussions of revision, these proposals are consistent with both of our understandings of how Writing Programs should pursue change—err on the side of conservatism. When you change a curriculum you change the teacher training, the web site and resources that accompany it, the textbooks, and articulation between courses. When a university teaches thousands of students in FYW each year, the problems of too rapid curricular changes have escalating effects. So this was a big moment for us—to re-envision a new curriculum.

Students can create a portfolio that builds upon the initial meta-awareness of literacy that they develop through the literacy narrative with each additional assignment. This could be achieved by beginning with a student

literacy narrative that was heavily revised and adapted at the end of the course sequence, after students have developed both rhetorical and contextual analyses of published literacy analyses. In the first unit of this sequence, students begin by developing their own literacy narratives individually and in workshops. At this initial stage, students encounter published literacy narratives and those available through institutional archives as examples, but not as texts to be analyzed. Faculty work with students on developing a controlling idea, structuring their narrative, and balancing meta-reflective discourse about their reading and writing experiences with evidence from their experiences. Throughout this process, students develop a vocabulary of techniques and rhetorical strategies that help students name the rhetorical moves they are making in their narratives.

The meta-awareness of writing and reading generated in this first unit sets the stage for the next two assignments, which introduce students to rhetorical and contextual analysis. These assignments meet the course outcome of close analysis of textual and contextual strategies, but they maintain different genre functions. Students develop a rhetorical and contextual analysis of published literacy narratives and write in an analytical genre, but two key elements of these assignments help ensure a sense of continuity from the literacy analysis. First, each assignment is framed as an opportunity to explore how and why writers convey their literacy experiences, how their narratives are valued by different audiences and in different contexts, and how their narratives address specific cultural ideologies and exigencies.

Second, throughout the process of developing these analyses, students are given the opportunity to write short reflections about the rhetorical strategies and rhetorical situations of the published literacy narratives and their own literacy narratives. During the contextual analysis unit, for example, students might be encouraged to locate the “representative anecdote” (Burke 59) of the narrative and explore its relationship to the cultural context of the narrative and then reflect upon their own “representative anecdote” and cultural context. A student writing a contextual analysis of Gerald Graff’s “On Disliking Books at an Early Age” might analyze the negative role that schooling plays in Graff’s literacy narrative in their contextual analysis and then reflect upon how their own relationship to educational institutions has played both positive and negative roles on the development of their literacy.

Through the process of developing a portfolio around their literacy narratives, students begin to see the relationship between the literacy narrative and the analytical genres of the course as complementary rather than ancillary. This perception can be strengthened by asking students to

revise their literacy narratives after developing the skills of rhetorical and contextual analysis in the previous two units. The portfolio asks students to consistently reflect upon the relationship of the texts they are analyzing and their literacy narrative, so in a sense students have been readying themselves to revise their literacy narrative throughout the course. To foster their critical literacy further, students should be challenged to revise and adapt their literacy narrative for a specific audience. Students are encouraged to seek out audiences both within and outside of the university for their literacy narratives, and to think critically about the narrative and rhetorical strategies necessary to illustrate the value of their experiences.

### **Beyond the Bridge**

While the literacy narrative is often characterized as promoting student engagement and agency, our experience assigning the literacy narrative in our English 101A course makes us wary of the bridge metaphor often used to describe it. Like all genres, the literacy narrative gains its power and meaning from its relationship to other genres and the hierarchies of value that shape particular contexts of writing. Writing a text about oneself (the familiar part) and turning it into a sophisticated critical analysis is a problem-solving skill that transports to other areas of learning. Whether we talk about familiar genres or about cognitive learning leading to new development, we have the power and the ability to design curriculum that enhances transfer. Edgington, Tucker, Ware, and Huot argue that this is the kind of power that WPAs have the choice to engage in—the power to implement and design solutions that focus on the “integrity of the learning situation” (73).

The price of remediation is not cheap—nor does it come without risks. Our university had to reduce class size from 25 to 22 for this basic writing course and then assign an instructor to teach 22 students a semester with 11 of them in one studio and 11 in the other studio. The workload reduction is from two sections/6 credits/50 students to one section/4 credits/22 students with two studios (same 22 students just meeting them in different configurations over the week). Because this course structure was so expensive, and because it essentially replaced a traditional remedial course with a studio session, it was a risky venture for our program, one that we needed to show worked pedagogically and in terms of student retention. One could argue that this is really the story of how our institution invested more intellectual and financial resources in developmental writing, what that investment

looked like at the beginning, and what we hope it will look like in the future. That, for us, is only part of the story.

The other part, one that we would have perhaps missed had it not been for our interviews with our faculty, is the relationship of the literacy narrative to the larger activity system of our writing classrooms. Teaching the literacy narrative played an important role in creating meaningful learning situations for students. As one student told us, “I have come to realize while revising my literacy narrative that when I analyze topics that I have experienced and lived through, I am able to bring a whole new meaning to the table when expressing my thoughts and when scrutinizing details. . . . This insight allowed me to develop more on analysis instead of just telling my story.” In order to ensure the integrity of these situations, we learned that we must always critically examine the relationship of this important genre to the assignment sequences of our classrooms.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Notes**

1. We noted only one post that argued that the literacy narrative is unproductive.
2. When we talk about slowing down our basic writing course, we find it is difficult to separate the structural changes to the course (the 75 minute studio that increases face-to-face time with the instructor) from the revision of the curriculum (taking one assignment—the literacy narrative—and making it the focus of the entire course). The initial changes to the course involved adding the studio and beginning the course with a literacy narrative assignment, thus slowing down the pace and adding valuable time for drafting, revising, and discussing readings. But we are

**also** advocating for a slow down in the curriculum itself by focusing on the literacy narrative for the entire semester.

3. These writing samples were collected when the literacy narrative was only the first assignment in the sequence. The curriculum had not been revised to make the literacy narrative the whole curriculum. But the writing samples were powerful enough to compel us to consider keeping and expanding the literacy narrative in the basic writing curriculum.
4. We are using FYW (first-year writing) throughout this essay except for this one section where we use FYC (first-year composition) because Elizabeth Wardle uses FYC in her titles to both referenced articles here.
5. A version of this assignment sequence was recently piloted at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where Christopher Minnix is Director of Freshman Composition. The focus of this sequence is on helping students link their literacy narratives to analytical genres by using the literacy narrative as a basis for critically questioning the way that reading and writing are taught. This sequence begins with the literacy narrative and moves to a rhetorical analysis of a published literacy narrative, as in the curriculum discussed here, then moves students to a comparative analysis of different perspectives on literacy, and an illustration essay that asks students to define their own perspective on how literacy should be fostered in the classroom. The sequence ends with a portfolio project that asks students to revisit their literacy narratives and speak to how their attitudes and ideas about their literacy are developing.

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# Inviting the "Outsiders" In: Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

Jessica Schreyer

*ABSTRACT: An adjunct turned writing program administrator reflects on her professional journey and describes efforts to improve the teaching environment amongst composition faculty—primarily part-time—within her department. Based on a local program review, a pilot faculty relations plan was implemented that addressed two major areas: offering more professional development opportunities and creating improved communication across the composition faculty. Interviews and surveys conducted with the faculty emerged affective themes that demonstrated adjunct faculty indeed felt more valued in their roles during and after the plan's implementation, while some remained uncertain about their job stability and place within the university. The author concludes that by attending to the professional needs of adjuncts and heightening awareness around the challenge of contingency labor in teaching, universities and departments can tap into the deep reservoirs of knowledge and experience adjuncts bring to their teaching and build positive futures for basic writing professionals while working for institutional change.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; contingent faculty; teaching; professional development*

When I was hired to teach several sections of basic writing to supplement my part-time professional writing job, I eagerly took the opportunity to hone my skills as a teacher. Despite having worked as a teaching assistant during graduate school, I was unaware of the variety of issues facing professionals in contingent labor positions in academia. Over time, I learned through experience and discussions with others just how complicated these positions could be. While I was grateful to be in a department that valued and supported part-time faculty in many ways, it was still a position on the fringes. Over the course of five years as an adjunct, I was an insider in the world of contingent faculty, which often seemed to be on the outside of the rest of the university.

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While I initially did not understand the crucial role contingent faculty play in composition programs at most universities, I quickly noted the obvious: in an ideal situation, universities would have a comprehensive team of full-time faculty teaching within writing programs. Through my research, I unearthed the rationale for why this does not happen. Most often, financial limitations, whether real or perceived, are offered as the reason for the heavy reliance on adjunct faculty. Indeed, now more than ever, the importance of adjuncts is not limited to English Departments; part-time faculty play an important role in college teaching across the curriculum. To me, this makes it even more crucial that we carefully examine our own programs to better understand how our environment influences the quality of life for faculty, and the quality of education for students.

Therefore, when I became a writing program administrator (WPA), I wanted to focus on ways we could improve the working conditions and offer more fulfilling teaching experiences within the writing program. To do this, I started by observing and noting what was currently happening within our department. I then surveyed adjuncts about their experiences and what they would like to see improved. Following initial responses and observations, I implemented a pilot plan to improve relations with the Composition faculty at my university. At the conclusion of the pilot, I did more extensive interviewing of the adjuncts to determine if this local effort improved their experiences; these interviews about how and if the pilot influenced their satisfaction within our Composition program are the focus of this essay. Ultimately, themes emerged about how this local effort changed instructors' experiences within our department. Primarily, the faculty reported that the implementation of the plan enhanced their perceptions of their expertise being recognized within the department and they felt more engaged in a professional community of teachers. Unfortunately, it did not address the most critical issues facing the contingent faculty, including pay, stability, and promotion.

Even though my own history as an adjunct helped me understand the contingent faculty experience, it is vitally important to acknowledge that I write from a privileged place now. This privilege makes it more difficult for me to truly recognize the current issues contingent faculty address in their employment. James Sledd, who tirelessly advocated for fair and stable working conditions, notes that efforts to make change are usually hampered by those who benefit from the continued underemployment of others, "The privileged—whether compositionists, literati, or higher administrators—have resisted such change in the belief that it would deny them their

privileges” (279). While my desire is that I am not a part of this group Sledd identifies as those who protect their own privilege by suppressing progress, the fact that I am in a full-time, tenure-track position means that I cannot fully understand adjunct employment at my institution in the same way I could before.

## **CONSIDERATION OF NATIONAL CONTINGENT LABOR ISSUES**

Before zeroing in on our local composition program, I would like to contextualize contingency in composition. It is no secret that discussion of contingent labor conditions has been especially important in English studies because of its long-term reliance on adjuncts. Locally, our program is no exception to this. Therefore, English Departments should be attuned to the needs of their adjuncts and the challenges inherent in teaching part-time, including:

[C]ontingent faculty often carry heavy teaching loads and teach at multiple institutions to make a living. They are routinely subject to last minute teaching assignments. They typically have less of a professional community to interact with about the discipline and teaching of writing. They rarely have any institutional ‘place,’ either physically in terms of an office where they can work with students or figuratively in terms of a voice in departments or the institution. (Strickland 132)

As Strickland recognizes, finding an institutional place is important to most of our professional identities. Our conception of place locates us within a profession, a specialty, a department, and a university. When faculty do not have opportunities to interact with others within their discipline, or even to think more broadly about how best to teach within the varied institutions of which they are a part, then these conditions do not support long-term program consistency. On the other hand, when faculty have a stable position within an institution, they will better understand the students’ needs and have more time to devote to developing their pedagogy and working with students. The best long-term planning requires encouraging universities to better fund programs and create full-time (ideally tenure-track) positions for composition faculty. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost half of the faculty members employed in the US are part-time. While in past years it has been primarily focused in the humanities, the use of adjuncts is becoming more common in the sciences as

well. Work continues from a wide variety of places—including the National Council of Teachers of English, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the Modern Language Association—to study, understand, and advocate for and with contingent faculty.

The difficulties that adjunct faculty face as a group within higher education do not go unnoticed in the composition studies community. In fact, *College English* devoted an entire issue to the topic in March 2011, addressing issues such as the current status of contingent faculty, experience of contingent faculty through activity theory, and barriers to contingent faculty's full participation in English studies. The editors specifically noted that the publication of this issue came 25 years after the Wyoming Resolution, which was "one of the first and certainly among the most significant efforts to recognize the status and working conditions of contingent faculty in our discipline" (McDonald and Schell 353). After momentum was created by a group of graduate students and faculty members at the 1986 Wyoming Conference on English, the Wyoming Resolution—which outlined fair and appropriate working conditions and benefits for composition faculty to ensure quality programs—was adopted at CCCC's annual business meeting in 1987. This led to further discussions about working conditions within composition, which spurred the creation of CCCC's *Statement of Principles and Standards in the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*. This statement covered two categories: 1) Professional Standards That Promote Quality Education and 2) Teaching Conditions Necessary for Quality Education. As these initiatives suggest, compositionists have been eager to find ways to improve conditions for all faculty for some time. In 1991, James Sledd, an important forerunner in this movement, questioned the usefulness of the efforts to improve conditions through the Wyoming Resolution; he asks, "in the five years after the once-so-promising Wyoming Resolution, why has so much talk produced so little action to check the exploitation of composition instructors? Second, what can be done, if anything, to right this wrong" (269). His critiques about conditions for adjuncts—lack of status and benefits of tenure-track faculty—remain today. So, I feel we must continue to extend potential solutions to Sledd's question—"what can be done, if anything. . . ?"

In spite of the support of professional organizations and attention to this issue in our professional literature some 25 years after the Wyoming Resolution, labor conditions have "never moved to the forefront of Composition scholarship" (Scott 4). Others agree that even with attention by prominent compositionists<sup>1</sup>, "little progress has been made toward ensur-

ing that the majority of positions in academia—and, more specifically in English studies—are consistent with the spirit of the Wyoming Resolution” (McDonald and Schell 353). The working group that created NCTE’s Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty in 2010 explains, “we believe it is necessary to fully involve faculty members who do not have tenure-line appointments in the programs that employ them” (Palmquist, Doe, McDonald, Newman, Samuels, Schell 357). Since part-time faculty often comprise a large percentage of those teaching composition, their needs should be at the forefront of any efforts to improve teaching conditions. Using the CCCC position statement could be one way for programs to set short and long-term goals for their programs and the faculty in those programs. For me, the statement provided a way to open the conversation about best practices in composition programming.

While much work has already been done to state the need for reform for adjunct faculty and how to achieve it, there remains a need to discuss the unique local situations facing universities and the faculty who work there. In response to the development of guidelines for working conditions that were being developed in composition studies during the early 1990s, Elizabeth Rankin encouraged scholars to begin “using local action research to create a context for change.” She advocates that compositionists study their own institutional environments to learn more about the programs we teach in and ways to improve them. She explains, “we not only get to know our local academic communities, but we also create within those communities a context for positive change” (70). This challenge truly resonated with me as I considered the writing program at our university. Further, I am encouraged when reading about recent WPA efforts, such as that of Jeffrey Klausman, whose work demonstrates the value of researching adjunct conditions. He notes that while advocating for equitable labor systems for adjunct faculty is an important long-term effort, in the short-term “something more we can do is make explicit this kind of research, which sheds light on how the realities of adjunct faculty working conditions impact efforts at building a writing program” (369). I understood that my efforts would not dramatically change the adjunct working conditions at my university; however, to create the best localized program possible, I knew it was essential to better understand our program, as well as the needs and experiences of the people working in it.

## **THE LOCAL CONTEXT FOR COMPOSITION ADJUNCTS: TEACHING WRITING AT RIVERSIDE UNIVERSITY, 2009-2012**

Riverside University hosts approximately 1,600 students and resides on a beautiful campus in the heart of the Mississippi River Valley. The university sits in the center of a generally non-diverse (primarily Caucasian and Catholic) community, yet boasts an extremely diverse student body. After a trying time in the 1990s, the university emerged from financial crisis into a thriving college dedicated to the education of historically underserved populations, including first-generation, minority, low-income, and underprepared students. At the same time, the University administration focused its attention on developing a small but strong core of majors in two tracks: liberal arts (including English, communication, natural sciences, and philosophy), and pre-professional programs (including aviation, nursing, accounting, and education).

The English Department includes five full-time, tenure-track faculty members; I am the only one who specializes in Composition and Rhetoric. Several of the full-time faculty members teach within the composition program, although generally only one or two full-time faculty teach composition during any given semester. Therefore, most of the composition sections each semester are taught by six or seven part-time adjuncts<sup>2</sup> who each teach one to three sections. This ratio of part-time to full-time faculty is just slightly higher than the national average of fifty percent. Many of these adjuncts teach a variety of writing classes, and our writing series is similar to that of many of universities of our size, ranging from basic writing to research writing. Faculty have noted that teaching a variety of writing courses helps them to have a good understanding of the writing curriculum, and how to help students grow as writers as they move through the curriculum.

In addition to many of our adjuncts teaching a variety of our writing courses, we've been particularly lucky that the majority of them have taught at the university for a number of years, and there is generally a very low level of turnover. This helps maintain stability in the program, but it also provides one important benefit for adjuncts: the ability to maintain fairly consistent teaching schedules each semester. This allows adjuncts to make plans in other areas of their lives and is particularly important to those who teach at another institution as well. While small, this is one working condition that adjuncts have consistently noted as important. Further, the adjuncts' office space is located in the same hallway as the full-time faculty, which leads to spontaneous interactions of both a personal and professional nature.

## **Adjunct Faculty and Students in Our Composition Program**

From my perspective as the Writing Program Administrator, the varied experiences and backgrounds amongst our adjuncts has been a true benefit for students enrolled in our writing courses. Students are able to enroll in a section that will best suit their learning needs, but all sections are working on common goals. This occurs because, as a whole, the adjuncts are willing to learn and discuss composition theory and pedagogy, and are open to new ideas to implement in their classes. This has allowed us to continue to adapt the program in ways that will best benefit the students.

In fact, while this range of experience and perspective strikes me as a true benefit, it can also make program development challenging, as all of our faculty—full-time and part-time—have varied teaching and educational backgrounds, theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, and reasons for teaching at the university. Despite those differences, there are some similarities that can help in program planning. For instance, all of the composition instructors have at a minimum a Master's Degree with experience teaching English. Looking deeper, Steve and Charles<sup>3</sup> are retired high-school English instructors who wanted to continue teaching part-time. Their experience includes teaching literature and composition. Steve is also a prolific writer of prose and poetry on the local and state level. Stan is a long-time college instructor who holds a Ph.D. and works at several colleges in the area. Carol has taught both composition and ESL. Ray works in a staff position at the university, while also teaching one to two courses each semester, and has ESL teaching experience as well. In addition to having Master's degrees in English, June and Ray both have undergraduate Secondary English Education degrees, although each only taught at the high-school level for a short time. As for other employment, June and Steve teach part-time at multiple colleges each semester, and Ray has another full-time job. Most of these adjuncts have been teaching at the university for over five years, which has led to the ability to build community and consistency within the program. I imagine that the variety of instructors here would be found in composition programs at schools like ours across the country.<sup>4</sup> On a personal level, I have found my conversations with them about teaching methods have allowed me to think about our composition program as a whole, as well as my own teaching. I have also been encouraged that even the most senior instructors (in age and experience) are open to trying new things.

Not only are the instructors in our program varied in background, so are the students. That being said, the majority of students at the university

enter as basic writers who have struggled with writing in the past and have had limited experience with writing and revising. In addition, some of them have difficulty reading and test at an early high-school reading level. I have found that defining basic writers, both at our university and nationally, is perilous, as Alice Horning and Jeanie Robertson noted, the importance is to “move the definitions away from a focus on error and toward helping writers develop their ability to probe and express their ideas effectively in writing” (53). This suggestion has compelled me to resist a simplistic view of basic writers at our university and instead consider the types of writing activities that will benefit our diverse student body. One third of the first-year students take the basic writing course each year. So, despite my resistance to classifying and defining basic writers, it is true in fact that basic writers are identified in a fashion that may not take into account their unique experiences. This identification usually comes solely by test scores and grade point averages, which can be problematic. Still it is worthwhile to note that while students at our institution are initially placed by these standardized numbers, they also move into or out of basic writing in a variety of other ways. For instance, students have opportunities to bypass basic writing into the general composition course. Although many students may not be aware of this option or assertive enough to take advantage of it. Importantly, our composition faculty are reminded each semester that as the writing professionals, they should utilize their judgment to recommend students for alternative placement.

When considering our student population, it then becomes even more important to consider the support provided to contingent faculty. They are serving a group of students with varied needs and abilities, and they are coming to this teaching experience with varied personal, educational, and professional backgrounds.

## **DEVELOPING A PILOT TO ENHANCE FACULTY RELATIONS LOCALLY**

Before I considered specific ways to improve faculty relations within our program, I studied best practices in program review and reform. As I embarked, I consistently focused my eye on the local context. While I am well aware of the problems with contingent labor nationally, what was most important to me for this review was to learn what was happening in our local situation and how I might help create positive change. Therefore, I realized that while my research was informal action research, I wanted to do



the best I could to utilize some of its basic principles. To gain these insights, I developed a somewhat loose research system that involved various types of data collection. Margaret Riel explains action research and the systems of inquiry developed to gather and process information; she states, "Action research is a process of deep inquiry into one's practices in service of moving towards an envisioned future, aligned with values. Action research is the systematic, reflective study of one's actions, and the effects of these actions, in a workplace context" (paragraph 1). These reflective practices then allow the researcher to consider ways to share the results with others as well as to implement program change. Such a system could assist me in developing an ongoing agenda for continuous improvement of our faculty relations as I pursued short- and long-term goals of professional and organizational change. I hope that by sharing the process I used to implement this pilot program, others might consider ways to improve their own local contexts for the benefit of its students and faculty.

I started with the premise that each adjunct needed the opportunity to share their own perspectives about his or her teaching, experiences, and professional goals, rather than me simply making sweeping generalizations based on national surveys and research. Arnold emphasizes that, "before assuming we know what's best for what is obviously a highly diverse population, it might be more ethical to ask individual faculty members how they would define themselves and what role they want to play in our writing programs" (420). Listening to the needs of faculty, as described by them, will not only positively impact them, it will also improve composition programs as a whole. If we truly want high-quality programs, we must discuss not only the needs of students in the programs, but the needs of the faculty as well. Attending to the working conditions of adjuncts should be at the forefront of attention for writing programs. As Art Young explains, "One way we can ensure that composition is taught effectively is to enhance the working conditions of all who teach composition, even as we experiment and develop models for establishing collegial communities of professionally vigorous teachers and scholars" (101). Therefore, my strategy for considering what change should be implemented within a pilot faculty relations plan started with a general question: *What is the current experience of adjuncts within the English department and how might it be improved?* In order to study this, I first conducted a local departmental scan and took notes on what I saw as strengths and weaknesses. Next I developed a series of open-ended questions and interviewed each of the adjuncts. The interview included questions about their perceptions of their role at the university and within

the department, specific ways we could improve the composition program, as well as ways that their working conditions could be enhanced. I then developed a proposal for a faculty relations plan and shared it with the adjuncts. During the course of the next academic year, I implemented this plan as a pilot. Following the pilot, I again interviewed each adjunct using open-ended questions. Based on this input, I have been refining our faculty relations activities.

I would like to note that one potential problem with the interviews I conducted is that they were not anonymous. It is therefore a possibility that the adjuncts may not have felt comfortable being extremely upfront about issues they face in their working conditions, particularly with the person overseeing the composition program. I hope my personal relationships with each person would allow them to feel comfortable sharing their true concerns, but I am aware that this may have actually been a barrier to the most candid responses. In the future, I would like to do another program review through a focus group conducted by an outside individual.

### **Areas Addressed through Pilot Faculty Relations Plan**

As I developed the pilot plan, I used the survey data from the faculty to determine a course of action. Generally, faculty felt that their experiences and expertise were respected. They reported that we had by and large provided stability in the number and times of classes adjuncts teach, and interacted with each other on a personal level. That being said, there were definitely areas that needed reform. For instance, adjuncts noted that they often felt uninformed about the trajectory our students had after the composition courses and the way they would use writing in those courses. They felt that there could be a stronger communication of the goals and strategies used within the courses, as well as more communication about how they could work with our specific population of students. They also noted feeling separate from the rest of the faculty and that they lacked opportunities for communication with other faculty. They desired a forum to discuss issues they were facing as teachers, and more specifically, teaching writing at our university.

Based on this information, I piloted a faculty relations plan which addressed two major areas: 1) Offering more professional development opportunities for Composition faculty, and 2) Creating improved communication amongst the Composition faculty.

*Offering more professional development opportunities for Composition faculty:* Creating more relevant and timely opportunities for professional

development was one area addressed. At the time, there were no professional development opportunities tailored for composition faculty. Based on adjunct input, I created a special professional development workshop series focused on writing; when creating this series of workshops, I wanted to identify topics that were relevant to the writing instructors first, but also that would be of interest to instructors in other disciplines. Recognizing their vast teaching experience, I asked adjuncts to present on topics they specialize in. Adjuncts have presented on a wide array of topics of interest to faculty across the disciplines, including incorporating successful peer review, helping students make the transition between high school and college writing, conducting successful student-teacher conferences, and finding ways to manage the grading load. The workshops offered a time for people to showcase their teaching methods as well as current pedagogy and theory in composition studies. The professional development series reinforced the connection of our writing program with current research in composition. Much effort was also put into scheduling the workshop for times when the most writing adjuncts would be available, as well as videotaping the sessions so those who could not attend in person might still participate.

*Creating improved communication amongst the Composition faculty:* The preliminary surveys indicated that we needed more personalized contact throughout the semester. Therefore, during the pilot, I implemented a relationship management system similar to one I had learned while working in fundraising with high-level donors. The system—which includes face-to-face discussions, e-mails, and forums for discussion—helps to ensure that people feel valued and heard.

Since the university administration had done a good job of physically locating the adjuncts' shared offices on the same floor as the other English faculty, it lent itself naturally to encouraging a sense of comradeship between the adjuncts and the WPA. During the pilot, I initiated more individualized conversations about their teaching and experiences, and I became more mindful about initiating frequent contact with them, particularly those who identified a desire for that contact. I also began sending out an e-newsletter to the team of faculty teaching composition approximately every other week. This newsletter included information about online seminars the adjuncts could participate in, helpful hints about upcoming campus dates, positive stories about student successes in one of the composition classes, and recognition of the adjuncts for their continued commitment to the program. Finally, I made an effort to individually orient each adjunct to the many programs on campus that were relevant to their students and

provided reminders about significant resources. At significant times during the semester, I contacted them to explain resources that may be useful to the students at the time.

Based on the surveys, I realized that holding two meetings instead of one would ensure everyone was able to attend one session at their own convenience. The meeting topics were also more focused and included discussing course outcomes, pedagogical strategies, and long-term goal planning. We also built in time for recognition of instructors.

The ultimate goal of the faculty relations plan developed was to create an environment for student success that includes satisfied instructors. The following section assesses the results that emerged following the pilot of the faculty relations plan.

## **REVIEWING THE PILOT FACULTY RELATIONS PLAN: FINDING OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE LOCAL TEACHING CONTEXTS**

Following the pilot, I interviewed the faculty again about their experiences. From these interviews and observational data, affective themes emerged that demonstrated adjunct faculty indeed felt more valued in their roles during and after the plan's implementation, while at the same time some of them remained uncertain about their job stability and place within the university.

### **Professional Development Workshops Led Faculty to Feelings of Respect for their Expertise**

The faculty expressed that they found many aspects of the faculty relations plan empowering because their professional expertise had been respected. For example, in relation to a series of professional development workshops led by part-time faculty, Steve explains, "Of course, sharing before one's peers is scarier than talking to the general public. Frankly, it should be a professor's responsibility to share in this matter." Further, "there is generally a good turn-out. And, after a hard day, that's saying something. It also shows collegial respect, giving us an opportunity to share our expertise in some area. Often schools hire outside speakers, you use in-house people." While I was initially concerned about asking faculty to take the time out of their schedules to plan and present these programs, clearly the invitation made them feel involved in the department in new ways. After the first semester, an anonymous online survey link was sent to all participants; 89% of the

attendees stated they would recommend attending to a colleague. One attendee stated on the survey, “We really have fun during these sessions. They are energizing! The sessions encourage us to share. When one shares, both people grow. That’s what a lot of departments lack—sharing. Many people in some departments don’t even know everyone in the department. This is a way to remedy that lack. Last time there was a lot of interaction. It was comfortable, and as I said, ‘fun!’” The fact that people were enjoying these sessions was reassuring, and the interviews with the faculty reinforced that I need to continue exploring what types of programs and topics will be relevant and interesting.

### **New Communication Methods Led to Feelings of Being Valued**

The faculty stated that they utilized the opportunities that came from the faculty relations plan to ask questions or express concerns to me as the point person for composition. June states, “It has been helpful since a single person was put in charge of maintaining the link for the adjuncts.” They expressed that having a single resource person allowed them to get quick answers to questions or concerns about their teaching or deadlines. In addition to communicating more general information, these conversations also allowed us to develop personal relationships within a teaching community. Carol explained the importance of having open discussions to feel supported, “Having an administrator who is open and responsive to concerns and problems, as well as who will take time to listen to ranting when things don’t go as planned, makes me feel valued as a teacher.” These conversations made me realize that the concerns I had in my own class were experienced by others, and it also allowed me to learn techniques that were effective with our diverse student population. I took pride in being a part of such an engaged group of teachers.

The majority of the faculty pinpointed the newsletter as one of the most encouraging and helpful additions to the program. In the past, adjuncts who could not attend meetings or find time to meet with the full-time faculty often felt out of the loop. This newsletter allowed important information to be sent in a timely manner, and further, for stories to be shared amongst the group. Several of the faculty also noted that they appreciated the positive words of thanks that were included, and felt that they had not had this appreciation expressed to them so directly before.

## **Curricular Input and Autonomy Led to Feelings of Ownership for Program Success**

The faculty noted that they appreciated the autonomy they have historically been allowed in the teaching of their composition courses. By taking time during meetings and seminars to discuss the goals, the adjuncts felt more at ease during their course planning. Even though we have a common textbook and shared outcomes, Steve explains, “I feel like we have lots of flexibility in meeting our course goals; it would be a mistake to demand a certain approach; I find that there are many types of opportunities here for us as teachers. I have flexibility in the curriculum. There is support for my teaching and it is clear that the full-time members of the department respect each of us.” Faculty are given leeway in addressing course outcomes through assignments of their choice. June echoes Steve’s perspective, and states, “I feel autonomous and appreciate that autonomy. As an adjunct, it feels good to know that the department trusts my expertise in identifying strategies to meet the student learning objectives.” I realized that by being even more descriptive in our statement of goals for each composition course during and after our meetings, faculty felt empowered to teach in the ways that work best for them. Carol notes, “I feel valued when I am asked for my input.” By taking time for discussions and input about the curriculum, all composition faculty are involved and active in shaping it. I also took steps to ensure there was follow up on suggestions made during the meetings, which faculty stated gave them a sense of ownership for the composition program’s success and direction.

## **WPA Insights Following Post-Pilot Adjunct Interviews**

The pilot faculty relations plan provided me with insights into our composition program and the faculty teaching in it. I learned about the faculty’s motivation for teaching, and was reminded about the importance of advocating for and recognizing the expertise of adjuncts within the university; I identified goals for the upcoming year, including planning professional development opportunities, improving communication channels, and continuing discussions about curriculum and planning.

While this faculty relations plan led to improved communication and recognition within the department, it did not provide changes to the most critical working conditions such as position stability, pay, or benefits. Obviously, these are key issues in any employment position, and are particularly

important when considering adjunct faculty. Therefore, when weighing the effects of this pilot, it was a very small local change. While it is disappointing that I could not influence these major conditions, it should still be noted that any program to improve conditions for contingent faculty is important to undertake. It is worth the effort to make small, local changes. These changes will also, hopefully, draw attention to the commitment and hard work of part-time faculty within the institutions.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR RIVERSIDE UNIVERSITY COMPOSITION PROGRAM'S FUTURE**

Writing courses are often taught by contingent faculty with few resources and little voice on curricula. In an era when universities need to enhance retention of all students, and students have many demands placed on them to be productive writers across the disciplines, it is crucial that programs and supports are provided for composition students and instructors to be successful. While contingent faculty may rightfully express dissatisfaction with their working conditions, most are very committed to student success; this commitment was made all the more clear to me during an interview with June. She states, "I feel like teaching is my mission and that I belong here. I get my students because I have lived lives like theirs, and I love this college." This comment demonstrates how important it is to attend the ongoing needs of adjunct faculty at our university, and to make large-scale, long-term advocacy for composition faculty a priority. These goals can co-exist with efforts toward small-scale, local programs. June identifies with our mission and, in part because of her own background, she is a great fit with the program. This kind of connection is invaluable to the success of our students.

This pilot plan was implemented to enhance faculty relations within our writing program. Through directed programming and communication, we have worked at improving conditions locally. This led faculty to feel increasingly valued within the department, which will help improve our composition programs. Ideally, such efforts will also enhance the classroom experience for students, helping them achieve the student learning outcomes we have set. Finally, as a compositionist, I know I must continue to attend to the needs and concerns of all faculty, both on a local and national level, so our basic writing programs flourish. Of course, to be most effective, advocacy must come from a variety of sources to be effective, including contingent faculty themselves, full-time faculty, and organizations such as WPA, CCCC, and NCTE. Personally, simply taking the time to listen to the stories of the

contingent faculty at my university has made me more aware of the issues they face, as well as to imagine ways that I can advocate for and with them.

On a long-term basis, the pilot emphasized the need for me, as WPA, to continue advocating for and with contingent faculty by remaining engaged in scholarship and work that supports good working conditions. This need was reinforced by my post-pilot interviews; June states that even when she is satisfied with her position, “Being an adjunct has negative connotations, and at times I feel like I am less important than full-time employees.” Another faculty member, Stan, envisions a future where those teaching writing are promoted within institutions to stable positions: “In this department, I feel my qualifications are respected and that I am not treated as a second-class citizen, as often happens to compositionists. I like to imagine a world where hiring composition instructors is about hiring into full-time positions. So, even though my experience is generally positive in that I feel respected and receive positive feedback, I am still aware that in a contingent labor position I am always waiting for the hammer to fall.” These two comments reinforce the complex nature of the adjunct experience and the need for our continued dedication to the Wyoming Resolution’s goals.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAMS**

My own journey of being an adjunct, and then moving to a full-time position, has led me to a deep personal appreciation for the commitment and work that adjuncts offer to institutions. Consequently, I am not satisfied with the small steps I have been able to take from this new position as WPA, because I know my voice is just one, but I am still hopeful. If enough people are engaging in these conversations, progress can be made toward excellent working conditions for all faculty. I am also optimistic that if enough people who have privilege advocate for and with others, change will happen more quickly.

Through dedicated efforts of faculty and administrators, we can aspire to a future where all faculty are working in conditions that are fruitful for themselves and students alike. I look forward to continuing to being a part of these efforts, and ask others to join in for the benefit of basic writing programs everywhere. When I reflect on the work we’ve done to improve adjunct conditions in our small English department, I have come to realize that it is impossible for me to solve all of these issues in a short time, or to imagine that the small steps we made through a pilot program considerably changed conditions. However, by understanding adjuncts’ motivations and



their perceptions of their work, perhaps I can have a better understanding of each of them and the ways I can help support them in their teaching. That does not decrease the urgency of solving the larger issues that adjuncts face.

Many of the gains in basic writing have blossomed from work on the local level, and perhaps this local work can help these gains happen for adjunct faculty as well. The creation of the faculty relations plan that was discussed in this essay stemmed from my earnest desire to create a more positive local working environment for adjuncts within our department. By contemplating the constraints adjuncts encounter, and by extracting the affective themes of their words, I hope I have offered an example of a small, simple, and low-cost plan that institutions can take to *immediately* address some of the needs and desires of adjuncts. I am optimistic that recognizing and affirming the work of adjuncts at our institutions will help others understand just how critical their work is to students. As more people within the university system see the importance of this group of faculty, light will be shed on the need to continue to improve working conditions more globally.

As we work towards change, we must also consider how we want our composition programs to continue to develop. David Smit notes that we must reconceptualize what it means to be qualified as a teacher of writing. In fact, many of our adjuncts may have extensive expertise to share under these guidelines, with a focus moving from coursework as a credential to “focus on what potential writing instructors can actually do: in their own writing, in response to the writing of others, and in designing ways to help novices understand the intricacies of the discourse practices of particular communities” (179–180). As I began to formally recognize the expertise and experience of contingent faculty in my own department, I believe it was a move toward professionalizing their work, which in turn will hopefully lead to better material conditions for them. While I cannot even begin to suggest that our program will or has created drastic changes in working conditions, I am optimistic that it has added to the conversation in a way that continues to honor and respect the work being done by contingent faculty. I hope that other writing program administrators will take the time to truly learn about what the adjuncts in their department desire and need from their positions, and also investigate how the conditions at their university influence the composition program and its students.

As we strive to make progress on the goals recommended within the Wyoming Resolution that was drafted almost three decades ago, we must realign our vision within the current academic culture. The New Faculty Majority constituents note, “any efforts to transform college work forces should

seek to improve the lives of adjunct faculty members already employed by those institutions, rather than replacing those people with others hired for newly created positions” (Schmidt 7). Indeed this statement rings especially true for me, as I was one of those fortunate people who entered a full-time position after years of adjuncting for one institution. Because of my own path, I feel obliged to continue advocating for, and assisting, other adjuncts as they make their own career paths in academia. Part of this obligation, for me, means supporting their professional goals, and doing what I can to help create a positive working environment. Daniell’s commentary on Sledd’s dedication to all faculty, reflecting a fifty year commitment, resonates strongly for me: “And wouldn’t he remind me, as he has reminded the profession, that we cannot talk honestly about improving the teaching of composition until we improve the working conditions of those who teach it” (219). Sledd’s unwavering advocacy is a model for compositionists, and especially WPAs; while I don’t want to *replace* opportunities for others to advocate for themselves, I realize there are times that I may have a voice and they do not. By listening and attending to the professional desires and expertise of adjuncts, universities can tap into the deep reservoirs of knowledge and experience they bring to their teaching. Opportunities for adjuncts to demonstrate this expertise and commitment may provide conduits for making justifications for improved material conditions. Through our combined efforts and respect for each other, we can move towards a positive future for our Composition program, and for the faculty working within that program.

## Notes

1. Prominent composition scholars such as Ira Shor, Eileen Schell, Patricia Lambert Stock, James Sledd, and Carol Crowley, among others, have been advocates of equity and improved conditions for contingent faculty.
2. Within this local context, contingent faculty refers to part-time adjunct professors.
3. Faculty and my institution are referred to using pseudonyms
4. The Coalition on the Academic Workforce recently published a report that is useful in exploring the makeup of the adjunct faculty community (*A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members*).

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# Diving In or Guarding the Tower: Mina Shaughnessy's Resistance and Capitulation to High-Stakes Writing Tests at City College

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*ABSTRACT: Mina Shaughnessy continues to exert powerful influences over Basic Writing practices, discourses and pedagogy thirty-five years after her death: Basic Writing remains in some ways trapped by Shaughnessy's legacy in what Min-Zhan Lu labeled as essentialism, accommodationism and linguistic innocence. High-stakes writing tests, a troubling hallmark of basic writing programs since the late-1970s, figure into conversations involving Shaughnessy and her part in basic writing administration as today we continue to see their effects. This article explores how Shaughnessy shaped the rise of such tests at City College, and asks whether they also shaped her. Relying on archival sources, and using Shaughnessy's 1975 "Diving In" speech as a framing lens, I examine the diving-in pedagogy that was developed in the City College SEEK program where Shaughnessy taught from 1967 to 1970, and which formed the foundation for her open admissions basic writing program starting in September of 1970. Next I trace the roots of the first high-stakes writing test at City College and Shaughnessy's conflicted responses—from 1968 when Shaughnessy mocked traditional essay exams as "attic furniture," to November 20, 1972 when she embraced this high-stakes test as a valid measure of her basic writing program and the abilities of its students.*

*KEYWORDS: Basic Writing, high-stakes tests, washback, SEEK, diving in, guarding the tower.*

*I would not hesitate to guarantee [successful] results if we could but suspend our institutional neurosis about standards long enough to meet these students in all courses where they are rather than where we think they ought to be and proceed to give them a good education." (Shaughnessy, 1971 Report 17)*

On a Sunday morning in San Francisco in December of 1975, Mina Shaughnessy electrified three hundred writing teachers with her sly, subversive speech (Maher 162-166). Mocking developmental education models that labeled adults as underdeveloped children, Shaughnessy traced instead

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a four-stage developmental scale for teachers, explained through the eyes of a hypothetical open admissions college writing teacher ("Diving In" 234).

Initially shocked by the "incompetence" he sees in his students' writing, Shaughnessy's teacher at first refuses to "radically lower the standards" of the past; he centers his emotional energies on "guarding the tower" from his own students, "the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong. . . ." (234-35). As a result, his classroom becomes "a peculiar and demoralizing contest for both student and teacher, since neither expects to win" (235). As the teacher's "preconceptions of his students begin to give way here and there," he evolves up to a "converting the natives" stage; there, he still sees his students as empty vessels and he teaches as a mere "mechanic of the sentence, the paragraph and the essay" (235-36). When he realizes that the rules of language have been arbitrarily constructed, Shaughnessy's teacher enters her "sounding the depths" stage, where he begins to observe "not only his students and their writing but. . . himself as a writer and teacher" (236). He questions why his students, after years of standardized testing, have never been taught to doubt or discover (237). He learns that "teaching at the remedial level is not a matter of being simpler but of being more profound, of not only starting from 'scratch' but also determining where 'scratch' is" (238). At the highest stage, "diving in," Shaughnessy's teacher learns "to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence" (238).

In 1946, a 22-year-old Shaughnessy had moved to Manhattan—a graceful, aspiring actress from Lead, South Dakota with dreams of Broadway stardom (Emig 37-38; Maher 1, 29). Now, almost three decades later, Shaughnessy's "Diving In" speech awed and deeply affected her audience (Bartholomae 67; Maher 165). Letters poured in asking her to give more talks and for copies of the speech; Edward Corbett pleaded to publish it (Maher 165-67). Shaughnessy had now become a rising star within the field that she herself had christened as "Basic Writing."

Shaughnessy achieved astonishing success and amassed remarkable influence and power in only eleven years at CUNY. But after a painful, two-year battle with cancer, her career was cut tragically short. Shaughnessy's friends and colleagues were overcome by grief; many grieve still. After her death in 1978, Shaughnessy left behind a remarkably complex legacy that still endures in powerful and conflicting forms thirty-five years later. Many scholars (perhaps most notably Jane Maher in her carefully researched 1997 biography) have defended Shaughnessy and her legacy; indeed, the sheer

weight of tributes led Jeanne Gunner in 1998 to theorize Shaughnessy as an iconic “ur-author” of the basic writing field. Gunner sees Shaughnessy’s legacy as having been built into a troubling origin myth that continues to exert “a controlling influence” on subsequent diverging discourses (28-30). Shaughnessy’s tremendously influential *Errors & Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing* was published to widespread acclaim in 1977 (Harris 103). But criticism of *Errors* was muted until Min-Zhan Lu charged in 1991 that Shaughnessy had propagated “an essentialist view of language and a politics of linguistic innocence.”<sup>1</sup> After Lu, a series of scholars have criticized Shaughnessy for her formalism and accommodationism.

Yet both admirers and critics have recognized Shaughnessy’s deep, unresolved conflicts. Ira Shor finds a “duality” in her work, with “one leg in traditionalism and one in experimentalism” (1992 98). In his archival study, Bruce Horner observes Shaughnessy “walking a kind of tightrope” (26). Mary Soliday and Mark McBeth both view her as a pragmatic and often oppositional “intellectual bureaucrat” who worked with limited agency within a large, complex system (Soliday 96; McBeth 50). Still, even Soliday notes Shaughnessy’s “almost obsessive attention to grammar” (74). Lu recognizes a gap between the constructivist “pedagogical advice” in Shaughnessy’s diving-in speech and her essentialism in *Errors* (1991 28). Lu also lauds Shaughnessy’s commitment to both “the educational rights and capacity of Basic Writers,” and their right to choose “alignments among conflicting cultures” (1992 904). Ultimately, Lu sees Shaughnessy as promoting a politically naïve, essentialist view of language—a view that: 1) separates “language, thinking and living,” 2) seems to offer seductive “practical, effective cures,” 3) promotes a pedagogy of accommodation and acculturation, and 4) thus serves to empower the very “gatekeepers and converters” who Shaughnessy gently mocks in “Diving In.” (Lu 1992 891, 905, 907).

Maher, Horner, Soliday, and McBeth have examined Shaughnessy’s work as a SEEK coordinator and WPA at City College. But George Otte and Rebecca Mylnarczyk observe that Shaughnessy soon became far more powerful: by 1975, she was “an associate dean of the City University overseeing the development of assessment tests in writing, reading and mathematics” (10-11). And in terms of Shaughnessy’s material legacy, the use of writing tests as high-stakes assessments has been a troubling hallmark (perhaps the hallmark) of basic writing programs since the late-1970s. In applied linguistics and education theory, “washback” is the term used to describe the positive or negative “influence of testing on teaching and learning,” and “negative washback” refers to the unintended and sometimes even uncon-

scious ways that tests can harm instruction, instructors and students (Cheng and Curtis 3, 9-10). Since the 1950s, researchers have observed that tests can distort curriculum as teachers and learners “end up teaching and learning toward the test” (Cheng and Curtis 9; Hillocks 189). But the deeper impact of testing may be on teachers themselves. If Basic Writing has struggled for forty years to escape essentialism, obsession with grammar, linguistic innocence, seemingly practical “cures,” and the separation of “language, thinking and living”—then high-stakes writing tests are obvious culprits.

I began visiting CUNY archives to learn whether Shaughnessy used her success and influence to shape the rise of minimum-skills writing exam systems at CUNY and whether the rise of those same exam systems also shaped her. This essay is the first part of that larger story. I suggest here that Shaughnessy’s “diving in” and “guarding the tower” describe not just an aspirational evolution away from a pedagogy trapped by preconceptions, fear, and shallow, fixed expectations. They also define a central, unresolved internal conflict that raged within Shaughnessy herself. As she drifted away from the profound, critical, student-centered, diving-in pedagogy of City College’s remarkable SEEK program, Shaughnessy reshaped her basic writing program to become more and more focused on the mere mechanics of sentences and paragraphs—aligning her courses with the demands of the new high-stakes writing test and pressuring basic writing teachers to become the very converters and tower guards that Shaughnessy later mocked in “Diving In.”

### **1967 to 1969—Diving In as an Untenured Lecturer and SEEK Coordinator**

In the spring of 1967, Shaughnessy was hired as an untenured lecturer in City College’s small, new “Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge” program (Volpe Apr. 1967). Before she even started work in September, Shaughnessy was promoted to be SEEK’s English Coordinator (Shaughnessy June 67). A year later, poet Adrienne Rich joined the SEEK faculty and the two women quickly became close friends. Conor Tomás Reed interprets Adrienne Rich’s 1971/2 poem “Diving into the Wreck” as a view “of Rich’s life and work in her SEEK classrooms, hidden in plain sight” (Rich 2013). In Rich’s poem, a diver descends into a deep, black ocean: “I came to explore the wreck./ The words are purposes./ The words are maps./ I came to see the damage that was done/ and the treasures that remain.” Perhaps Shaughnessy’s “Diving In” referred to her friend’s poem and their



years together as SEEK teachers. In any event, those SEEK years established Shaughnessy's reputation as a caring teacher and able administrator; and her SEEK experience became the foundation of her basic writing program (Skurnick 1978 11).

In the 1960s, CUNY four-year colleges only accepted applicants with academic (or "Regents") high school diplomas (Renfro and Armour-Garb). This was also true in practice for CUNY's two-year colleges (Gordon 91-92). By 1967, 58% of all New York City high school students were Black or Puerto Rican; but these students earned only 5.3% of the total academic diplomas awarded—disqualifying the vast majority of them from admission to any CUNY college (L. Berger 1968 1). In 1963, CUNY's new Chancellor Albert Bowker—coming from a University of California system that already afforded "open access" to its two-year colleges—began to search for ways to expand access at CUNY (Gordon 90, 93-95; Edelstein 1-2). In June of 1964, CUNY's first "College Discovery" program placed 230 students with mixed academic records into CUNY community colleges. The results were not encouraging. The one-year retention rate was 64% (148/230). Only 24% (36/148) of the remaining students had an acceptable average of C or higher. At the two year mark, only 11% (25/230) were expected to transfer to senior colleges (1966 CUNY Master Plan 25).

City College launched its Pre-Baccalaureate "Pre-Bac" Program in September of 1965 with 113 Black and Hispanic students recommended by counselors at nearby high schools (Special Committee Minutes; 1966 Master Plan 29; Ballard 2013). About two-thirds (75/113) were full-time students, carrying 17 to 18 hours of classwork, with an initial emphasis on English, mathematics and romance languages (Levy 1965). The Pre-Bac Program had been proposed by Allen B. Ballard, a young political scientist and historian, who himself had struggled with the isolation and frustrations of being one of the first two African-American undergraduates at Kenyon College (Ballard 1973 4-8; 2011 216-17; 2013). Ballard, joined by psychologist Leslie Berger and mathematician Bernard Sohmer, designed the new program; Berger became its first administrator (Volpe 1972 765; Saxon; Ballard 2011 219). The Pre-Bac program was holistically supportive and student-centered, integrating supportive yet challenging courses with financial support (including stipends), counseling and tutoring—all to "develop an attitude in the student that will enable him to find pleasure in educational accomplishment and that will provide him with a reasonable expectancy of achieving professional status after graduation" (L. Berger Dec. 1966 3). The program integrated supportive teaching into challenging courses by adding one or two clock

hours; students in these stretched courses were “expected to complete the college syllabus for the regular credit course” (L. Berger Dec. 1966 2-3; Ballard 2013).<sup>2</sup> Berger also questioned traditional teaching methods; he saw the program as “a challenging experiment in creative teaching” (Dec. 1966 3).

After one year, 72% (81/113) of the Pre-Bac students were still at City College. Just over half of these remaining students had an average of C or higher (L. Berger Dec. 1966 3). This success quickly captured Chancellor Bowker’s attention and support. The June 1966 CUNY Master Plan labeled the Pre-Bac Program “quite promising” (29). That same month, State Assembly members Percy Sutton and Shirley Chisholm secured a million dollar appropriation (Blumenthal; Schanberg; Edelstein 1). In a July 14th meeting, Bowker endorsed the City College Pre-Bac model and asked Brooklyn and Queens Colleges to start similar programs (L. Berger July 1966 1). On August 15, Bowker confirmed that the newly named SEEK Program was moving forward, now funded by \$1.4 million; eight hundred recruitment letters had already been sent to the community agencies that would nominate the new SEEK students (Bowker 1).

That same summer, seventeen year old Marvin White was desperate to attend college—but it seemed impossible. She had grown up in the Dyckman Houses project in the Inwood section of northern Manhattan where her working-class home life had been troubled. Since she was eleven, she had been responsible for cooking dinner, doing laundry, grocery shopping, and caring for her little brother. Neither of White’s parents had graduated from high school. Afraid that attending college would make it hard for her to find a husband, they discouraged White from applying and they refused to help to pay tuition. White had just earned a Regents diploma from Julia Richman High School but her grades were low. Seeking help at a local social service agency, she learned about the new SEEK program. White had often admired the towers of City College rising on the hilltop above St. Nicholas Avenue when she visited her aunt and cousins in East Harlem. “I loved seeing that school up on the hill so when I heard I might have a chance of getting in I filled out the application.” White was admitted in the summer of 1966 as one of City College’s first SEEK students (M. White).

In theory, incoming SEEK students were screened for potential college ability; but in Berger’s program, virtually all were found to have it. Of the 190 fall of 1966 City College SEEK students, 84% (159/190) were retained for at least two semesters (L. Berger 1968 83). The key was to dive in and meet the students where they were: “Teachers and counselors work very closely with each student on a personal and highly individualized basis” (L. Berger 1966

2). Marvin White's first college class was a summer literature and writing course taught by Barbara Christian, then a young doctoral student. White remembers that the course exposed her to many new authors, including Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Christian started with short lectures, but most of the class time was discussion. "There was no test at the end; just reading, writing and discussing. It felt heavenly. It was all I imagined college to be" (M. White). Christian was a "fantastic, loving teacher in the class, but also outside the classroom." She spent time with her students; she invited them to her home "to talk about ideas and literature; it was like a salon. When we were there so long that we got hungry, she made us dinner" (M. White).

White struggled during her first year, earning marginal grades. As a SEEK student, she faced hostility and condescension from some teachers and from some students admitted under the traditional standards. There was also arguing at home. And, she had never learned good studying skills. Betty Rawls, a doctoral student in psychology, became White's SEEK counselor. Rawls helped her "to understand what was getting in my way." When problems with White's parents made studying difficult, Christian and Rawls wrote a letter inviting them to come to Rawls' office and talk together. When problems at home worsened, and White found herself on probation, Rawls found her a place in a new SEEK dormitory at the Alamac Hotel (M. White).

Berger was soon promoted to be the University Dean in charge of CUNY's rapidly expanding SEEK Program and Ballard became the new City College SEEK Director (Berger 15 Oct. 1968; Ballard 1968). Ballard's version of diving-in recognized "the intrinsic worth of the students' own thoughts and writing, no matter how ungrammatically expressed" (1973 98). Substance always mattered: "the Black student brings with him both a creativity and a knowledge of the human condition unduplicable by white middle-class students" (1973 98). Echoing Berger, Ballard advised that "[e]very program should meet each student at his own level and lead him as far as possible academically without premature penalties or experiences of failure" (1973 98).

In its first four years, SEEK's experimental, student-centered pedagogy led to "almost constant revision" of the program (L. Berger 1969 46). Volpe recalled that "our SEEK English courses changed continually as we discovered more and more about the needs of the SEEK student and as we fought to extricate ourselves from the traditional approaches to the teaching of freshman composition" (Volpe 1972 769). For example, Shaughnessy traveled to the University of Iowa to study their long established writing workshop model in which "small groups of students [meet] weekly with an instructor, [discuss] the work submitted, and [offer] suggestions to each other on how to improve

it” (Wilbers 43, 97). Shaughnessy then created a similar workshop writing course in the SEEK program (Gross, 1969 at 2). She herself later remembered her teaching methods as closely aligned with this workshop model. She described a class of fifteen students who wrote essays in three drafts, offered each other peer review, worked with in-class tutors, and focused on issues of correctness only in the final draft—in order to finalize papers so they could be published together in a booklet that then became a text for the class to study together (Maher 210-11).

According to Volpe, the SEEK English courses were renamed “Basic English” in 1967 to avoid the “psychological blocks” caused by the “remedial English” label (Volpe 1972 769). (During the 1960s, the City College English Department sometimes used “basic” to describe mainstream, freshman-level English courses.<sup>3</sup>) In fact, the SEEK program did much more than change labels—most SEEK students tackled college-level work at once, either in mainstream courses or in SEEK “basic” stretched courses. In the fall of 1967, Shaughnessy placed 20% (35/175) of new SEEK students directly into the mainstream composition course (Ballard 1968 App II; L. Berger 1968 40). Shaughnessy placed the rest into a new three-semester SEEK English program: a two-semester “composition and literature” stretch course that covered “the work normally included in [the then mainstream] English 1” and a ten-hour, one-semester intensive “remedial” course (Ballard 1968 5). Shaughnessy retained the three-semester course structure in 1968-69 (L. Berger 1969 47). Her goals were: “first, to develop competence in the kinds of expository writing that most college courses require in term papers, research papers, and essay examinations; second, to develop an interest in literature as a way of exploring experience and as a pleasure in itself” (L. Berger, 1969 47).

SEEK’s basic English program successes were not measured artificially by writing test scores but by actual student success: retention, progress toward degree, and grades in mainstream courses. In 1968, Ballard reported that 83 SEEK students had taken the City College mainstream English 3 literature survey course and 77% (64/83) had earned at least a “C” (Ballard 1968 1). In Ballard’s view, the proof of Shaughnessy’s “competence is the success of our students in regular college English courses” (Ballard 1968 5). From September 1965 to June 1969, City College’s overall average SEEK student retention rates were: one semester (91.8%), two semesters (80.7%), three semesters (72.9%), four semesters (63%), five semesters (58.4%), six semesters (50.4%) and seven semesters (46.9%). Each of these rates was higher than comparable retention rates at any of the other six SEEK programs that were in operation across CUNY by 1969 (L. Berger, 1969 105). In April of 1972, the City College SEEK program

reported that 112 of the 557 Pre-Bac/SEEK students who entered City College by September of 1967 had graduated and 118 were still in attendance—a 41% retention/graduation rate. And 119 more SEEK students were expected to graduate in June of 1972, bringing the overall graduation rates for these early SEEK cohorts to about 40% (Frost).

As a SEEK coordinator, Shaughnessy focused teachers on the actual needs of SEEK students: “Whenever any of us turned away from these problems. . . , she would gently but forcibly bring us back to our students and their seemingly mundane world” (Kriegel 173). Soon after Shaughnessy arrived at City College, Marvin White asked for her advice about run-on sentences. “The thing about Mina is that she was so extremely kind and seemed so available” (M. White). After that, Shaughnessy often “sat with me and worked with me on my papers. She put into words precisely the way sentences worked and precisely how what I had written violated the conventions. She just talked to me about what I was able to do well and how I could understand and improve the things I wasn’t doing well.” White graduated in 1970; she credits her success to Christian, Rawls and Shaughnessy. “They taught me how to be a student—how to learn, how to study, how to sustain myself in what was then, very often, a hostile environment” (M. White).

In the fall of 1968, as Black and Hispanic students began to demand radical change, SEEK’s diving-in pedagogy was put to the test: teachers had to choose whether to support their students or to guard their tower. English professor Leonard Kriegel described Shaughnessy’s conflicted, yet supportive stance in 1968:

She had little patience with political rhetoric, but she had a great tolerance and an enormous feeling for the S.E.E.K. students. . . . For her, mastery of the art of communication was revolutionary. She was willing to ride with the minds and imaginations of her students. If they opted for revolution, they would have to create one.” (173)

In February of 1969, a Black and Puerto Rican student group issued five demands for reform.<sup>4</sup> Many (but not all) of these protesters were SEEK students (Kriegel 190; Ballard 1973 68, 123-26; Holder). Marvin White was among them (M. White).

According to Ballard, the five-demands protesters were also “supported by a group of Black and Puerto Rican [SEEK] faculty” (1973 123). SEEK English instructor June Jordan wrote an essay in support of the protests: “Universities must admit the inequities of the civilization they boast” (28). Christian

and Toni Cade Bambara were among supportive faculty who met quietly off campus with the “Committee of Ten” student protest leaders (M. White). Audre Lorde brought protesters soup and blankets (De Veaux 106). Ballard gave pro-demand interviews to *The Tech News* (“SEEK;” Simms). On April 21, 1969, unnamed “members of the English Division of SEEK program” challenged President Gallagher’s responses to the five demands with a series of pointed, probing questions which were reprinted in *The Tech News* (23 Apr. 1969 2). Shaughnessy herself worked with an “Ad Hoc Committee on Admission Policy” that on May 2nd recommended an early version of “open admissions” (Report 1-5).

Amid this chaos, Shaughnessy’s star was rising within CUNY. In 1968, Ballard praised Shaughnessy as “a splendidly innovative supervisor” and called her English courses “the heart” of the SEEK program (Ballard 1968 5). In 1969, Ted Gross reported that Shaughnessy “has become an unofficial consultant to many administrators throughout the University on SEEK problems” (Gross, 1969 2). Gross later praised Shaughnessy as having “served in one of the most sensitive and difficult roles on this campus during the 1968-1969 riots” (Gross, 1973 1).

### **1964 to 1969—The Birth of the City College Writing Proficiency Exam**

But, while the City College SEEK faculty was diving in to teach writing, the rest of the English Faculty was opting out. On May 23, 1968, the City College Faculty Council broadly reformed its curriculum and completely abolished any required mainstream first-year writing course.<sup>5</sup> Instead, future students would be required to take and “pass a qualifying writing test before” they could graduate (Volpe, 1968 1). The idea for this new proficiency test had been hatched in English Department meetings in 1964 and 1965 when the English faculty successfully proposed cutting required composition courses from two semesters to one so that they could move from a four course to a three course teaching load.<sup>6</sup>

In 1968, English Chair Edmund Volpe asked for faculty comments on the Proficiency Exam. Perhaps realizing that the new exam would most deeply affect SEEK students, Shaughnessy offered the most extensive response. She proposed a day-long writing exam with a morning of reading, open lunchtime discussions, and an afternoon of writing open-book essays. Shaughnessy argued that students were unlikely in any event to do their best writing “under examination conditions.” She concluded that the “curricu-

lum change offers a grand excuse for housecleaning and I am hoping that the traditional kind of essay examination will go out along with some of the other attic furniture” (1968 1-2). These comments show Shaughnessy as an intellectual bureaucrat—a WPA with limited agency who is oppositional in a limited, careful, and diplomatic way. She mocks the new test instead of openly opposing it; she tries to undermine the exam’s minimum standards focus by making it a more collaborative learning experience.

Shaughnessy also added technical notes about rater variability and cited an article about the tendency of raters to grade using general impressions—an early nod toward holistic grading (1). She was already studying testing theory and employing the psychometric concept of reliability. In one sense, this new testing expertise would help Shaughnessy to shape future testing systems at City College and across CUNY. In another sense, the Proficiency Exam was already shaping her—sponsoring her literacy in this new direction away from SEEK’s diving-in pedagogy.

City College’s creation of a minimum-competency writing test in 1968 anticipated a much larger educational trend. Kathleen Yancey notes that “the holistically scored essay” was the dominant wave of college writing assessment from 1970 until 1986 (1999 131). Still, writing proficiency test requirements were rare in higher education before 1972.<sup>7</sup> The nineteen-campus University of California did not implement mandated writing course exit tests (under Edward White’s guidance) until April or May of 1973 (E. White, 2001 315; Elliot 204-05).

City College implemented its new Proficiency Exam in November of 1969. Despite Shaughnessy’s hopes, it was very much a traditional kind of essay exam. Within three hours, students were required to write two 300-word essays in response to two out of three offered prompts. (Danzig, 1969; Danzig, 1973). It may be useful to pause and note that this birth of high-stakes writing tests at City College had absolutely nothing to do with student needs. To the contrary, the Proficiency Exam was conceived by English professors in 1965, approved by them in 1968, and designed and implemented by them in 1969—all based on the central assumption that students would otherwise successfully graduate from City College without meeting the faculty’s minimum standards for correct writing. The sole purpose of the new exam was to guard this departmental standard of correctness while simultaneously abdicating responsibility to teach it. In supporting the new Proficiency Exam, Volpe explained that the “responsibility for writing competence has been transferred, to the student, where it should be” (Volpe, 1968 1).

Shaughnessy was right to view such writing tests as “attic furniture” in 1968. Timed theme tests designed to produce formulaic five-paragraph essays were then at least a century old. According to Sharon Crowley, written entrance exams were introduced at some American colleges as early as the 1830s when rising college enrollments made oral exams impractical (64). A theme placement exam was in place at Harvard in 1873 or 1874 (Connors 184-85; Crowley 66). These timed theme exams were designed based on quill technology—predating widespread adoption of manual typewriters, pencils or even fountain pens (Yancey 2009). Of course, the tests have become ever more antiquated since 1968. Over thirty years ago, process writing models became broadly accepted within the field and personal computers began to make word processing programs widely available. Over twenty years ago, graphical interface word processing programs and editing tools became ubiquitous and the internet began to revolutionize how we construct knowledge. Over ten years ago, the explosion of complex and powerful Web 2.0 multi-modal publishing platforms and social networks redefined our understanding of composition, collaboration, audience, literacy, and rhetoric. Yet the tests endure.

### **1970 to 1971—Diving In as an Assistant Professor and Assistant Chair of English**

In September of 1970, CUNY implemented its controversial and historic “open admissions” policy, which had been approved by the Board of Trustees only ten months earlier in the wake of the City College protests. Access was dramatically expanded: CUNY admitted 34,592 students, 77% more than the 19,559 it had admitted one year earlier. More tellingly, in 1970, CUNY admitted 54% of all New York City High School graduates; in 1969, it had admitted only 29% of them (CUNY Data Book Fall 1970 1).

As a City College lecturer with no PhD and almost no academic publications, Shaughnessy normally would have had little hope for a tenure track appointment. But in the chaos of open admissions, normal faculty politics were temporarily suspended. In December of 1969, Shaughnessy was promoted to assistant professor. She was now 46 years old, having spent a decade as a part-time and full-time lecturer, and having spent the decade before that as a writer, editor and researcher (Volpe 1969; Gross 1969; Volpe 1970; Maher at 116). The new English Chair Ted Gross noted that Shaughnessy’s abilities had already “won her recognition, unusual for one of lecturer rank, throughout the college” (1969 3). Even for a promotion endorsement, Gross’s personal



admiration was remarkable: “A woman of rare and keen intelligence, poetic sensibilities, and humane warmth, she is an extraordinary teacher and a fine human being who has won the unstinting admiration of her students, her SEEK staff, and her colleagues in this Department” (1969 2).

By October of 1970—only two months into the first semester of open admissions—Gross was convinced that Shaughnessy had already built the finest program of its kind within City University “and perhaps in any university in the country” (Gross 1970). As such, Gross named Shaughnessy as “an Assistant Chairman in charge of all composition work in the English Department” (Gross 1970). Shaughnessy now administered all City College composition courses and all writing placement tests for incoming students (Shaughnessy 1970). She quickly expanded her program and asserted her authority over it. Enrollment more than doubled, from 402 SEEK students in basic English courses in the spring of 1970 to about 1,000 open admissions and SEEK students in basic writing courses in the fall of 1970 (Shaughnessy 1970 2). Shaughnessy’s Fall 1971 Basic Writing Report began with an organization chart that positioned her as the “Basic Writing Program Director” at the top of a substantial administrative pyramid. She was now also overseeing a Writing Center with a seven person staff, 11 teachers and 40 student tutors (1971 Report). She reported that 81 faculty members (including 33 tenure track faculty) were now teaching 3,231 students in 150 sections of basic writing courses (1971 Report 1, 6, 7). In October of 1971, Shaughnessy was awarded tenure (Gross, 1971).

Sitting on a hilltop above Harlem, City College was by far the oldest college in the CUNY system. Within its dark granite towers, neatly edged in cut white limestone, resided a cherished self-image of academic prestige and traditional standards. This self-image was now under assault; the defenders of prestige and standards rushed to guard their towers: both open admissions and open admissions students came at once under intense, unrelenting, internal and external attacks. Alice Chandler, a City College literature professor throughout the 1960s and early 1970s who went on to become the President of SUNY New Paltz, remembers many angry debates, all centered on standards: “People wanted open admissions to go away. . .they wanted basic writing to go away. . .they wanted underprepared students to go away. That’s not my opinion, I mean that’s documented. . .” (Chandler 2012). Chandler remembers Geoffrey Wagner as the most conservative English faculty member. In his rambling, sexist, and racist 1976 polemic, *The End of Education*, Wagner attacked basic writing courses because they taught “more about injustices of society. . .than the use of

punctuation" (143). More broadly, Wagner argued that high dropout rates proved that underprepared students could not be taught to meet City College's traditional standards. But he also asserted that these standards had been relaxed during Open Admissions to "almost-total forgiveness" (130-31). To Wagner, open admissions students were damned if they failed; City College was damned if they succeeded.

Since about 1967, Shaughnessy had asked SEEK instructors to complete narrative mid-term reports for each student (Shaughnessy Oct. 1971). In fall 1970, she continued the practice; reports for 56 sections of basic writing survive. Forty-four of the listed Fall 1970 sections are "English 1" classes, previously labeled within SEEK as remedial or preparatory. Most instructors (including Shaughnessy) included some formalist notes in their comments. But many entries ranged far beyond surface mechanics. Soliday finds these reports to be "crammed with stories about students' lives, observations about language learning, and descriptions of coursework. . . ." (93). A rich source, they show a large group of teachers with differing approaches all diving in to meet the needs of each student, engaging with their ideas, and pushing them to become better writers. Kenneth Craven was among the most creative commenters; his English 1 class report includes many short quotes of excellent student writing (Craven, 1970 Reports). Adrienne Rich's report reflects the depth and breadth of her English 1 writing class. She notes that one student needs "to write a lot more, loosen up, broaden out. I feel these neat, dutiful papers got her thru high school English but her work lacks conviction. Her short story, however, looks more promising." Rich commends an ESL student who "grapples with zest" with English and who "uses language for thinking and exploring." She wishes another student "could get more in touch with his imagination in writing" (Rich, 1970 Reports).

In a March 1971 English Department newsletter, Shaughnessy complains that the "standards over which so many now stand guard" create institutional expectations that remedial writing teachers should immediately solve grammar and usage problems (6). "For this reason, teachers feel under pressure to do a quick job of producing correct writing since the ability of producing correct writing is often unconsciously accepted as proof of educability, a kind of proof sought after by most critics and some well-wishers of open admissions" (5). Writing teachers, Shaughnessy tells her colleagues, sense that the priorities should be different. Completely distinguishing writing from mechanics, Shaughnessy worries that students and teachers can be "caught up in a Catch-22 dilemma—a student can use up so much energy mastering the mechanics of standard English that he misses the

chance to learn how to write, but if he doesn't master the mechanics he may not have a chance to write" (5). This formalism squanders the enthusiasm of new students who "stimulated by the advance to college, by the exposure to new ideas and by a new awareness of themselves, . . . find they must stop to work out the A, B, C's of correctness" (5). Writing teachers are aware, she adds, "that real growth in writing begins when a student sees a connection between himself and the words he puts on paper," but they are tempted to focus on the constantly demanded correctness, becoming sidetracked until it is all they do, "which means almost inevitably the neglect, at a crucial point, of the deeper and ultimately more important resources the students bring into the classroom" (5).

Other CUNY writing teachers agreed that direct grammar instruction was both ineffective and outdated. In 1972, Rich argued that students must be able to trust that their writing is being read by a collaborator, "as opposed to a grading machine out to get me for mistakes in spelling and grammar" (269). Donald McQuade recalls now that after he began teaching writing at CUNY in 1970, he quickly developed a pedagogical emphasis on writing process: "we knew we shouldn't waste time teaching grammar because that's not a skill: it's information, it's a form of manners. And the whole notion of teaching writing by privileging grammar seemed to all of us misguided. So we didn't subscribe to that. . . we thought that was wasted effort" (McQuade 2013). In 1976, McQuade labeled a "Back to Basics" approach by some English teachers as defensive, elitist, and an abandonment of "the integrity of their professional commitments" (8). A 1977 *New York Times* article that featured Shaughnessy, Bruffee, and other CUNY writing teachers, noted that all their approaches reflected the "solidly documented" rule that "it is virtually useless to teach the rules of grammar in isolation from writing" (Fiske 51).

### **1970 to 1972—Diving In Across CUNY as Shaughnessy Grew More Powerful**

In the early 1970s, other forms of diving-in were developing across CUNY as writing teachers—many newly hired to serve the surge of open admissions students—developed new ways to teach writing. In 1970, Robert Lyons brought a new writing pedagogy to Queens College from Rutgers that centered on close, serious readings of non-literary texts (McQuade 2013). That same year, Andre Lorde introduced a "remedial writing through creative writing" course at John Jay College (Lorde, quoted in Rich 1979 60). Kenneth Bruffee developed his radical, student-centered, collaborative

learning pedagogy at Brooklyn College (Bruffee 1972a, 1972b, 1988).<sup>8</sup> (In 1972, Bruffee even chastised Peter Elbow for being insufficiently committed to collaborative, student-centered learning communities [Bruffee 1972b 458, 464].)

In about 1971, Shaughnessy invited other CUNY WPAs and writing teachers to begin to meet and talk (McQuade 2013). The group soon began to hold regular monthly meetings on Saturday mornings, where they discussed reading assignments such as Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bruffee 1988, 5-7). McQuade now remembers those years as "the most exquisitely engaging teaching time in my entire life, because you could talk about what wasn't working, openly and candidly." Shaughnessy quickly became the WPA group's informal leader. At academic conferences, she assigned her colleagues to attend different sessions so they could cover everything and then confer (McQuade 2013). McQuade recalls: "There was no question who was in charge of our lives, intellectually. It was Mina. . . . She was like an orchestra leader. But she was also the soloist. She was an extraordinary human being, an immensely powerful woman and dynamic presence in our intellectual lives. . . . Everything gravitated around Mina."

Asserting her growing agency and authority, in the fall of 1971 Shaughnessy effectively overruled City College's 1968 decision to abolish required mainstream composition; she also positioned her basic writing English 3 as a new *de facto* mainstream composition course. In the previous fall (in alignment with administration expectations) Shaughnessy had placed about 45% of incoming students (1,000 out of 2,200) into basic writing courses (Shaughnessy, 1970; Skurnick 1978 12). Now, Shaughnessy placed 2,900 students—94% of all incoming students—into basic writing courses (1971 Report 2). The fall of 1970 and 1971 student populations were not essentially different.<sup>9</sup> Shaughnessy simply recalibrated the placement process. The immediate impact on the English Department was profound. In 1969, only 32% of all City College English Courses were writing courses. By January of 1972, 50% were writing classes—all administered by Shaughnessy. Soon after, 70% would be writing classes (Gross 1972 at 1; 1980 at 9).

Shaughnessy's placements also overloaded the registration system. Due to lack of classroom space, all fall of 1971 English 3 placements were postponed at least one semester (1971 Report 2). (Placements into English 1 and 2 were mandatory; placements directly into English 3 were only recommendations [CCNY Bulletin 1971-1972 84].) Gross scrambled to find ways to compromise, especially as the English Department was facing budget cuts and layoffs of seven faculty positions (Gross, 1972). But Shaughnessy was undaunted: "I am

persuaded that our high enrollment in Basic Writing courses is an accurate reflection of student needs” (Shaughnessy “Mid-Term Spring Report 1972” [1972 Report] 3). Moreover, she reported that she had double checked the efficiency of her fall of 1971 placements and found them to be 87 to 90% accurate (1971 Report 6). Having tripled the size of her program with these new placements, Shaughnessy then demanded more resources, regardless of budget cuts. She complained about increased class sizes and poor room assignments (1971 Report 14-15). In a January 1972 newsletter, Shaughnessy complained again:

Certainly the greatest peril we face at City is the limitations not of our students but of our budget. . . .At City College, the number of students in basic writing classes has tripled since last fall without any commensurate increase in classroom space. . . .In three semesters, under grossly inadequate conditions, we have begun to see how open admissions might be made to work. The decision of whether it will be allowed to work now rests with those who have the power to set public priorities. (7-8)

Shaughnessy reduced her English 3 placements slightly for new students in the spring of 1972. Still, she placed 82% of new spring freshmen into basic writing courses. And she argued that pressure to reduce basic writing placements, as well as the college’s failure to provide adequate resources, both represented “a decline in the standards of the college and a disadvantage for our average and above-average students, who would be required in all other senior colleges to take a semester of writing” (1972 Report 1, 3). Shaughnessy also argued openly that mandatory composition courses should be formally restored (1972 Report 4). In the fall of 1972, Shaughnessy’s lieutenant, Blanche Skurnick, placed 98% of incoming City College students (2,120 out of 2,165) into basic writing courses (Skurnick 1973 1). Skurnick would continue to place “no fewer than 90% of each entering class . . . into basic writing” for the next five years (Skurnick 1978 13).

If basic courses had meant mainstream freshman courses in the 1960s, and SEEK basic English courses meant stretch versions of mainstream courses, Shaughnessy’s 45% placement rate in 1970 had changed the practical meaning of her new “basic writing” to be closer to “remedial” or “preparatory”. But her expanded placements starting in 1971 restored some of the old meaning: now virtually all City College freshmen would be placed into basic writing courses.<sup>10</sup>

In any event, Shaughnessy was no longer a mere intellectual bureaucrat. Her 1971 writing course placements effectively overruled the decision of her department and City College to abolish freshman composition—and no one at City College overruled her.

### **1971 to 1972—Shaughnessy’s Growing Conflicts about Guarding the Tower**

Shaughnessy’s de facto revival of mandatory composition could have meant the demise of the Proficiency Exam. This high-stakes writing test, after all, had only been created as a necessary substitute for writing instructor judgment because mandatory composition courses had been eliminated. In 1972, the Proficiency Exam was not yet established as a fixed, unchangeable metric. Similar tests were still rare in other college systems. Indeed, Chandler (who was the Proficiency Exam coordinator in 1972) even suggested that the exam might be eliminated in 1973 once “the last of the students who entered college when no writing was required have been graduated” (Chandler July 1972 5). Chandler also noted that whatever “we finally decide to do about the Proficiency Examination, a better system of checks and balances on students progressing through Basic Writing 1, 2, and 3 is probably needed and is, I believe, being created” (Chandler Jan. 1972 2). Nonetheless, the traditionally trained Chandler also endorsed the exam as “a valuable gauge of the success of the Basic Writing Program and a useful contribution to the educational process at [City College] because of the emphasis it places on clear and correct writing. . . .” (Chandler Jan. 1972 2).

In 1968, Shaughnessy had hoped to clean out the “attic furniture” of traditional writing tests. But now, she did not try to eliminate the Proficiency Exam when she had the chance. Conflicted, she instead began an elaborate dance—trying to hold the test at a safe arm’s distance. She accepted it as a “check on the efficacy of [her] program” (Volpe 1972 771). Yet, Shaughnessy called the exam “a far from ideal measure, requiring that students produce essays on topics they have had no time to prepare for. . . .” She admitted only that it “offers some indication of their control of formal English and their ability to organize a short discussion on an assigned topic” (1971 Report 10).

In another compromise, Shaughnessy required all students who completed the basic writing sequence to sit for the Proficiency Exam; but she did not require them to pass. “Since the exam certifies a proficiency level

for graduation, it is not expected that all students will pass it at the end of English 3” (1971 Report 10). In fact, as many as half of the English 3 students simply refused to take the Proficiency Exam at all and Shaughnessy did not enforce her own requirement (Chandler, Jan. 1972 at 2-3; Meyersohn).

By accepting the exam with reservations, Shaughnessy allowed City College to gather information about how basic writing students fared on it. But she carefully lowered expectations as much as possible, warning that passing rates would likely drop over time as more students with low placement test scores worked through the basic writing sequence (1971 Report 10). “A student who begins in English 1 and moves after two semesters to English 3, for example, is seldom at the same level of skill as the student initially placed in English 3. The gaps in preparation, in other words, are greater than the time we have to close them” (1971 Report 16).

Then, in July of 1972, Chandler reported surprising good news: a group of mostly basic writing students had just done slightly better than a group of pre-open admissions seniors on the Proficiency Exam—a potential symbolic victory (1). With these flattering results, would Shaughnessy now fully embrace the exam?

No. She wrote back to Chandler:

[T]he Proficiency Exam. . . still has many of the shortcomings of in-class examinations, especially for students with hang-ups about exams (that is, almost all “remedial” students). It is not unusual, for example, to have a student who performs well on writing assignments in class fall down in this kind of examination, where the stakes are much higher. This exam tests the ability of students to write under pressure; it does not test their “over-all” ability and should not therefore, be the basis on which we evaluate the whole achievement of a student or of the Basic Writing Program. (Aug. 1972 2)

In short, Shaughnessy attacked the Proficiency exam as both unreliable and invalid—in part *because* it was a high-stakes test. Marilyn Maiz was Shaughnessy’s assistant and close friend from 1971 to 1978. Looking back now, Maiz believes that Shaughnessy’s August 1972 memo to Chandler reflected what Shaughnessy basically believed about the Proficiency Exam (Maiz 2013). Chandler agrees now that Shaughnessy was right about the many weaknesses of the exam, but she also reads Shaughnessy’s stance as a political one in which Shaughnessy was protecting her program and her students from the external interference created by this exam (Chandler 2012).

In her 1971 Report, Shaughnessy also urges against adopting any fixed minimal standards for basic writing students. Foreshadowing her “Diving In” speech, Shaughnessy argues for flexible standards for students who have “worked steadily . . . shown significant improvement, and may even at times have produced writing that, in its quality of insight and imagination, is superior to that which more easily meets the traditional ‘standard.’ Can we, in short, penalize the student who has kept his end of the bargain and who has succeeded in terms of his own baseline?” (17). The answer, Shaughnessy suggests, depends on whether City College views remediation as solely the responsibility of her program, in which case an English 3 student “who cannot deliver a sample of writing that meets the old standard is out.” Instead of this minimum standards approach, she urges City College to see remediation as a collective responsibility and a process that continues beyond basic writing courses—in which case that same student should be allowed to continue his studies despite failing to meet a fixed minimum standard,

knowing that, with sweat, the gap between the absolute standard and his performance will narrow and finally close.

This is the way every SEEK student I know has grown—by plugging, by patiently re-making habits, returning again and again to fundamentals but expanding each time the area of mastery, by reaching plateaus that look like standstills and having setbacks that look like failures—but moving, always in the direction of mastery until, finally, there is a sense of an undergirding and a feeling of control.

So confident am I of the capacity of poorly educated students to make this gain that I would not hesitate to guarantee such results if we could but suspend our institutional neurosis about standards long enough to meet these students in all courses where they are rather than where we think they ought to be and proceed to give them a good education. (17)

Shaughnessy’s argument here closely anticipates her “Diving-In” speech four years later. Shaughnessy’s politics and her pedagogy in the 1971 Report were still centered on diving in to meet students where they were, to recognize the insights and imagination in their work, and to embrace the messy, recursive writing and learning process in which deep successes can seem to be surface failures.

But by late 1971, there were also signs that institutional neuroses were affecting Shaughnessy and her basic writing program. From 1967 to early 1971, the SEEK and basic writing instructors had compiled brief narrative



mid-term reports describing the progress of each student (Shaughnessy Oct. 1971). However, as McBeth has observed, Shaughnessy revised the mid-term reports in October of 1971. She replaced the SEEK program narrative reports with a 23-question form that required teachers to first assess each student's abilities as poor, fair, good, or excellent in ten different categories of surface error.<sup>11</sup> This none-too-subtle administrative push towards an emphasis on formalism corresponded with the skills that were now important on the Proficiency Exam. Shaughnessy instituted new departmental mid-term exams as well (Maiz 2012). While she apologized to her basic writing teachers that "[f]inal exams don't seem to make much sense in writing courses," Shaughnessy nonetheless required timed departmental final exams in English 1 and 2. She continued to use the Proficiency Exam as a final exam in English 3. These tests were medium-stakes exercises: each teacher could give them "whatever weight they wish" (Shaughnessy Dec. 1971). (And it appears that many English 3 teachers gave the Proficiency Exam very little weight, since up to half of their students refused to take it.)

In the fall of 1970, Shaughnessy had used a one-semester basic writing course structure. She had placed about one-third of incoming students into English 1, "Diagnosis of individual writing problems, introduction to grammatical features of Standard English, introduction to description, narration and analysis." She had also urged about one-tenth to take English 40, an elective writing workshop course (Shaughnessy Sep. 1970 1-2; CCNY Catalog 1970-71 82-83). In the fall of 1971, Shaughnessy eliminated English 40; she extended SEEK's three-semester course structure to all new students and placed 94% of them into those courses. But the two-semester SEEK college-level stretch course was now replaced by a more formalist sequence: English 1, "The Sentence and Paragraph" focused largely on sentence-level mechanics. English 2, "The Paragraph and Short Essay," focused largely on paragraph level development and clarity. Only English 3, "Academic Forms," now focused on producing college-level term papers and book reviews—as well as answering essay exam questions (1971 Report 3-5).

Shaughnessy also abandoned her 1969 plan to create a writers' workshop basic writing course modeled on Iowa's example. Instead she converted the workshop space into a writing center available to help all students (1971 Report 12). The Writing Center added a substantial element to Shaughnessy's new program. She and others promoted it as an important innovation. However, by late 1971, Shaughnessy began to impose a highly formalist pedagogy on the Center, using a sixteen-page set of instructional "modules" for the center. Only the final module, on reducing repetition, moved beyond sentence-level

correctness.<sup>12</sup> Shaughnessy promoted these sentence mechanics modules as being “equal [to] a regular course in first semester English” (1971 Report 11).

All these changes pulled Shaughnessy’s program away from the student-centered, creative, flexible, holistically supportive model of the 1960s SEEK program. In increasing alignment with the new Proficiency Exam, Shaughnessy was reshaping her basic writing program toward a top-down, minimum skills pedagogy that served instead to mollify institutional neuroses about traditional standards. Basic writing was moving from diving in, and toward converting the natives and guarding the tower.

### **November 20, 1972—Shaughnessy’s Validation of the Proficiency Exam**

In January of 1972, Shaughnessy worried that critical “soothsayers within and outside the college. . . .continue to invent statistics to fit their cataclysms” (Jan. 1972 at 7). Nine months later, Dan Berger, a young researcher in the City College Office of Research and Testing, published just such a cataclysmic report. Employing “multiple regression analyses,” Berger concluded that English 1 in 1970 had: 1) not improved students’ subsequent grades in any way and, 2) had not made students more likely to stay in college (D. Berger 1, 5, 8-9).

To understand the pressure on Shaughnessy to defend her program, simply imagine the Berger Report in the hands of her conservative colleague Jeffrey Wagner. And, although Berger’s data was thin, his findings also directly attacked Shaughnessy’s reputation as an able WPA whose program helped students stay in college and succeed in mainstream courses. It was especially grating to her that Berger found a Freshman College Skills class to be more valuable than her basic writing course (Maiz 2012; D. Berger 8). So Shaughnessy carefully assembled a response (Maiz 2013). With help from statisticians, she challenged Berger’s methods and conclusions. But she had no numbers showing actual student success—no hard evidence to counter to Berger’s gloomy multiple regression analyses (Shaughnessy Jan. 1972 7). Even if Shaughnessy could have assembled proof of direct success, amid the growing institutional neurosis about standards, conservative critics like Wagner would counter that grades had been watered down and teacher assessments could no longer be trusted.

And so, in a direct reversal of her position only two months earlier, Shaughnessy publically embraced the Proficiency Exam. In her November 20, 1972 memorandum to the “Open Admissions Working Committee,”

Shaughnessy writes that “[t]hus the Proficiency Examination, concluding the Basic Writing sequenc[e], simultaneously ‘tests’ the student’s ability to write as he completes this sequence and the success of the Basic Writing instruction he has received” (4).<sup>13</sup> Shaughnessy goes so far as to claim that the Proficiency Exam produces “advanced” writing: “This examination is composed, administered and read by members of the English Department. . . .who will presumably judge as competent only the kinds of writing which they would find acceptable in their own advanced courses” (4).

Shaughnessy had been experimenting with objective tests as placement tools. The bulk of incoming Fall 1971 incoming students had been placed into writing courses based on two 20-minute placement essays; all 4,000 essays were read by a group of 20 English teachers (1971 Report 5). For Spring 1971 freshmen, Shaughnessy tried several objective tests to try to lighten this reading load (1971 Report 6). A surviving 1971 nine-page, multiple-choice placement test includes these categories: subject-verb, run-on sentences, pronouns, verb forms, parallel construction, logical connectives, vocabulary and paragraphs (English Department 1971). As of Fall 1972, Shaughnessy planned to place two-thirds of incoming students solely by objective test scores, reducing the placement reading load to 1,000 essays; she hoped to increase placement by objective tests in the future (1972 Report 2-3). Now, in her response to the Berger Report, Shaughnessy also validated objective tests as a writing course *exit* assessment:

We test the student’s grasp of standard grammatical concepts initially in the objective grammar test given to entering students as part of the placement exam. A semester later, if the student has been placed into English 1, his understanding of the principles of agreement, punctuation, verb form, and spelling will determine whether or not he will go on to English 2. Thus at one point in our sequence, we use those aspects of writing that lend themselves to objective testing as a primary evaluative tool. (5-6)

Shaughnessy’s validation of multiple choice tests as the “primary” exit assessment for English 1 courses was a remarkable shift from the complex, sophisticated, narrative-form teacher assessments she had used in SEEK courses and her basic writing English 1 courses until the spring of 1971.

Yet, even as she validates these tests in this memo, Shaughnessy’s deep conflicts burst to the surface. She recognizes that “we have discovered that the weakness of traditional approaches to writing is that they concern

the written word rather than the process of writing.” She asserts that “we cannot divorce the writer from his text.” And she adds that an “[e]valuation of writing courses will serve no purpose unless it helps us to create better writers. . . . whatever evaluations are made should address themselves to the writing process itself” (5). Remarkably, Shaughnessy espouses a complex writing process pedagogy as a central requirement for writing assessment, while at the same time she argues for the validity of a timed, prompted writing exam—the very same exam which she had rejected as invalid, unreliable and harmful only two months earlier. By comparison, Lyons and McQuade resisted proficiency exams at Queens College (McQuade 2013). McQuade notes now of writing process “Well, that’s what we thought we should teach, rather than teaching the five paragraph theme or some other restrictive, formulaic method like that.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite her sharp, internal conflicts, Shaughnessy had now publically redefined her entire program as measurable by this single timed-essay test: writer and process utterly divorced from product. Shaughnessy’s reversal soon would have profound effects for her program. The Proficiency Exam—conceived, designed and implemented by the English Department with the sole purpose of guarding the granite and limestone towers of City College—would now be the capstone event of the three-semester basic writing sequence; Shaughnessy had fully authorized administrators to use these exam results to judge both her program and its individual students.

### **1973 to Now—“An Endless Corridor of Remedial Anterooms”**

In *Errors*, Shaughnessy warned that colleges “must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation” to unprepared students, leading them “into an endless corridor of remedial anterooms” (293). Yet in the fall of 1978, CUNY would implement a massive, system-wide, high-stakes, basic-skills testing system. For the last thirty-five years at CUNY, writing exam cut-scores have governed course placement, advancement, retention and (since 2000) admission for just over 1,400,000 first-time CUNY freshmen. Somewhere close to half of these students have been labeled as basic writers and placed into tens of thousands of basic writing course sequences where they have been required to pass more high-stakes timed writing exams or fail and repeat each course.<sup>15</sup>

A few months after she reversed her stance on the Proficiency Exam, Shaughnessy gave an address at the CCCCs convention in New Orleans, entitled “Open Admissions and The Disadvantaged Teacher.” There she said:

In how many countless and unconscious ways do we capitulate to the demand for numbers? . . .

In how many ways has the need for numbers driven us to violate the very language itself, ripping it from the web of discourse in order to count the things that can be caught in the net of numbers? How many young men and women have turned from the wellsprings of their own experiences and ideas to fill in the blanks of our more modest expectations? All in the name of accountability! (402)

In this speech, Shaughnessy's internal conflicts again surface painfully. She denounces being forced to "teach to quick pay-offs that can be translated into numbers so that the ranking and winnowing of human talent can go on apace." She concludes: "We cannot teach under such constraints; our students cannot learn" (402).

But what were "the countless and unconscious" capitulations Shaughnessy sensed in herself in early 1973? Did they include: Her validation of the Proficiency Exam a few months earlier? Her new departmental basic writing course mid-term and final exams? Her new mid-term teacher reports that required cataloguing surface error weaknesses for each student? Her formalist Writing Center modules? Her new sentence/paragraph/essay three-semester course sequence? Her validation of multiple-choice tests as the primary exit assessment tools for English 1? In a larger sense, were all these capitulations also evidence of the internalized, negative washback effects of the exams themselves? As Shaughnessy shaped writing tests at City College, were they also shaping her?

In *Uptaught*, Ken Macrorie writes that, as a beginning writing teacher in a college course with an exit exam where his students produced "dead" writing, he had been unable to see that the institution was causing students to produce this dead language because he was already "developing a protective blindness" (11). In his 2001 study of primary and secondary writing pedagogy in five states, George Hillocks found that mandated writing assessments deeply affect "rhetorical stance, instructional mode, and writing process" among teachers (190). Even long-time testing advocate Edward White recently recognized that "the unintended consequences [of "rising junior" writing exams] have been unfortunate to some and devastating to others" (2005 at 31). In a 1991 case study of mandated testing (including decontextualized grammar tests) of primary school students in Arizona, Mary Lee Smith found that a mandated testing system made teachers feel "anxiety, shame, loss of esteem and

alienation” (8). As they focused on narrow test preparation, these experiences became “incorporated into the teachers’ identities and subsequent definitions of teaching” (8). As the tests “de-skilled” teaching, and as critical thinking was “sifted out of the curriculum” (11), Smith found that teachers became unable to “adapt, create or diverge” because they increasingly perceived the received curriculum as beyond “criticism or revision” (10).

Shaughnessy’s conflicts between diving in and guarding the tower may feel familiar to many basic writing teachers today. In some sense, we are torn between diving in and guarding the tower in every paper comment we make, every student conference we hold, every lesson plan and syllabus we craft, and every rubric or assessment we accept, reject, or endure. Even as we know that guarding the tower will hurt our students, we are constantly pressured and shaped by institutional neuroses that can be hard for us to see, in part because so much of the politics that governs our teaching is invisible to us—concealed within hidden transcripts and buried beneath moth-eaten myths about student needs and capacities.

The Proficiency Exam of City College was promulgated in November of 1969 by the English Department to guard the towers of City College as waves of new students (many of them Black and Hispanic) threatened its traditional standards. At first, Shaughnessy mocked this test as useless “attic furniture.” As a SEEK teacher, she imported the Iowa workshop model to SEEK writing classes; she taught multiple-draft, process writing; she even “was willing to ride with the minds and imaginations of her students [when] they opted for revolution.” From 1968 to November of 1972, grounded in SEEK’s diving-in pedagogy and surrounded by a community of open admissions writing teachers who were also diving in across CUNY, Shaughnessy resisted the City College Proficiency Exam in various ways. Yet, as she grew powerful—and while the Proficiency Exam was still weak—she did not fight to eliminate it. Perhaps she was confident of her power to control the Proficiency Exam for her own ends. Perhaps she unconsciously capitulated to the neurosis about standards that was swirling around her. (She called it “our institutional neurosis.”) Perhaps she did not foresee how testing systems would soon grow powerful, marginalize and exclude students, narrow and distort writing instruction, and change teachers as well as teaching. In any event, Shaughnessy chose to dance with this devil, holding it at arm’s length as she stepped gracefully forward and backward, moving to the complex music of institutional politics in the chaos of open admissions. And once Shaughnessy began this dance, she would find herself drawn ever deeper into the welcoming arms of her seductive partner.

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## Notes

1. (1991 37). As Joseph Harris has noted, John Rouse sharply criticized *Errors* in 1979 for (among other things) promoting the teaching of grammar although Shaughnessy knew “it has no support whatever in research evidence” (Rouse 3; Harris 102-04). I also read Peter Elbow as gently criticizing Shaughnessy in 1981: “[l]earning grammar. . . takes energy away from working on your writing, and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing...” (169). Elbow then recommends *Errors* as a readable study and analysis of common grammatical mistakes (172).

2. Although not limited to English classes, Berger's 1966 course model anticipated core concepts of the 1992 Arizona State writing course stretch-model (Glau 79-80).

3. In 1968, Assistant Professor James Ruoff described the proposed mainstream English One elective as a “basic writing course,” which he distinguished from the English 5 “remedial” writing course (Ruoff). City College English Department Minutes in 1967-68 also refer to mainstream composition courses as part of a “basic literature” sequence. The February 9, 1967 Minutes expressed unanimous support for a “basic literature sequence” that included “the principles of composition.” The April 4, 1968 Minutes discussed a new English 1 composition course that would “be an introduction to literature,” including “basic elements... such as symbolism, irony, point of view, etc.”

4. According to *The Tech News*, the demands were: 1. A separate school of Black and Puerto Rican Studies. 2. A separate orientation program for Black and Puerto Rican students. 3. A voice for SEEK students in the setting of all guidelines for the SEEK program, including the hiring and firing of personnel. 4. That the racial composition of all entering classes reflect the Black and Puerto Rican population of the New York City high schools. 5. That Black and Puerto Rican history and Spanish language be a requirement for all education majors (Watson).

5. Although these reforms later would be seen as concessions to student demands (Kriegel 198-99), *The Tech News* reported them as top-down revisions based on CUNY's Master Plan—all with almost no student input ("Curriculum Revisions: Students Disregarded").

6. In 1964, worried that students' writing skills might suffer because they were teaching fewer writing courses, several faculty urged creating a more rigorous final exam for the new composition course "to ensure that no student be graduated from City College who cannot write correctly." (Minutes, 3 Oct. 1964 at 2; attached Ad Hoc Committee Report at 1). The Composition Committee then proposed using an objective grammar test portion of the final exam as a new kind of high-stakes test—any student scoring less than 60% on this part of the final would automatically fail. (Minutes, 18 Mar. 1965). Soon after, an unnamed professor first proposed a high-stakes, college-wide, writing proficiency test graduation requirement (Minutes, 1 Apr. 1965 2).

7. The University of Georgia was the first college system to implement proficiency tests on a large scale, imposing minimum skills proficiency reading and writing tests for sophomores across its thirty-three campuses starting in 1972 (E. White 2005, 31; Ridenour 338, 343). The University of Georgia example demonstrates the seductive power of such testing systems. They quickly "affected instruction and curricula throughout the university system" (Rideneur 333). After trial testing in 1971, tests were at first implemented piecemeal; but the institution then developed a single coordinated program (Pounds 327). Soon, the University of Georgia created additional basic skills tests that it used as freshman placement and course exit tests (Rideneur 332). By 1978, Georgia had abandoned its open admissions policy and was using the minimum skills tests as admissions tests (Rideneur 334).

8. A broader history of these remarkable, early 1970s CUNY diving-in teach-



ing models would be valuable, including the work of Harvey Wiener at LaGuardia Community College, John Brereton at Queensborough Community College, Richard Sterling at Lehman College, and many others (Bruffee 1988 4; McQuade 2013). The most unstinting opponents of old teaching methods and grammar-centric formalism were perhaps critical scholars; Ira Shor began teaching at the then two-year College of Staten Island in 1971 as part of a student-centered, “collectivist” basic writing program led by Teresa O’Connor (Shor 1972, 1974, 2013).

9. In fall 1970, City College “admitted 2440 first-time freshmen, of whom 37% had [high school] averages under 80%; in 1971, 2878 first-time freshmen, of whom 53% had averages under 80%; and in 1972, 1924 first-time freshmen, of whom 49% had averages under 80%” (Faculty Senate News 1). These figures (and Shaughnessy’s placement figures above) roughly match CUNY Data Books for 1971 and 1972, but they exclude freshman admitted under special programs—mostly SEEK students, of which there were 751 admitted to City College in the fall of 1970, 363 in the fall of 1971, and 355 in the fall of 1972 (Fall 1970 CUNY Data Book 9-10; Fall 1971 CUNY Data Book 12; Fall 1972 CUNY Data Book 13).

10. Six years later, despite her efforts, Shaughnessy recognized that the meaning of “basic” tended “to get translated into ‘remedial’ when the chips are down” (“Basic Writing” 177). The label “basic writer” would quickly become subject to powerful institutional politics. Joseph Trimmer noted in 1987 that 900 colleges defined “basic writer” in 700 different ways (4).

11. (Shaughnessy, Oct. 71 and attached form: “Mid Term Report, Term Ending Jan. 1972.”) The categories were: subject-verb agreement, verb forms, intra-sentence punctuation (commas, quotations, apostrophes, etc.), inter-sentence punctuation (fragments, splices, comma faults), pronoun reference and case, adjective and adverb forms, possessives, spelling, syntax in simple sentences, and complex sentences, including subordinating constructions.

12. (“1971 Report” 11-14, App. D). Modules 100 to 119 covered parts of speech: subjects, adjectives, conjunctions, etc. Modules 200-212 covered only verbs and verb tenses. Modules 300-303 covered subject-verb agreement. Modules 400-402 covered punctuation. Modules 500-503 covered spelling. Modules 600-605 covered sentence mechanics. Appendix D was recovered by Mark McBeth from Shaughnessy’s office files at City College. Page fifteen is missing.

The Appendix was a draft, with some modules in the sequences left blank.

13. Although Blanche Skurnick and Marilyn Maiz were listed as co-authors of the 20 Nov. 1972 memo, Maiz remembers that she had no part in drafting it and Shaughnessy was the principal drafter. Maiz recognizes now that the document was produced on Shaughnessy's typewriter (Maiz 2013).

14. By comparison, Chandler remembers that the City College literature faculty knew nothing about the newly emerging theories of writing process: "Traditionally, unlike Mina, who comes in sort of, by a side path, we're trained. We imitated our faculty, who imitated their faculty, who. . . back in the 13th Century in Oxford were doing the same thing—which was that we [were] looking for a superb final product. We [didn't] care how you got there" (Chandler 2012). White recalled a similar situation in California in 1972. English department chairs there collectively embraced new mainstream writing course exit tests in part because they were all literature professors who understood nothing yet about writing process, in "the days before composition studies" (White, 2001 310, 315).

15. First time freshman totals are compiled from the CUNY Office of Institutional Research Data Books and Admissions Reports. I have found only limited CUNY writing test pass rate information. In the fall of 1978, 54% of CUNY's 32,300 first-time freshmen were placed into basic writing classes after they failed the placement exam (Lederman, 25 June 80, Table One). From 1991 to 1997, over 62% of all CUNY fall-semester, first-time freshmen failed the writing test (CUNY Data Books 1991-1997). Many transfer students have also been subject to these testing systems. Until 2010, all CUNY rising juniors were also required to pass additional high-stakes writing proficiency exams.

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