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## THE NEED FOR CONCEPTUALIZING AT ALL LEVELS OF WRITING INSTRUCTION

Two types of programs exist on many campuses, basic writing classes for those generally characterized as native speakers, and ESL classes for those characterized as nonnative speakers. After completing one or the other of these two remedial sequences, both groups of students then meet in regular freshman writing courses, and they are joined there by students from similar backgrounds who were placed into the freshman level without having been identified as requiring either kind of remediation. This surely does *not* mean that once students enroll in the freshman course that their instructors can assume that all linguistic interference features have been eliminated. But it does mean that the students have achieved a level of performance upon which they can now build with greater independence than they might have been able to at an earlier time.

Necessarily, in the levels preceding the freshman course, attention has been paid to linguistic forms that differ in systematic ways from the conventions of Edited American English. But, increasingly, teachers of both ESL and basic writing classes have been coming to understand that teaching the *conventions* of writing is not a sufficient prep-

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aration either for the traditional freshman writing course or for the courses in the students' majors that will follow. These conventions need to be taught within a larger conceptual framework.

Since students will be required to undertake more and more rigorous conceptual tasks as they proceed through college, one way to examine how well ESL students have been prepared to meet the demands of regular college courses would be to compare their performance in freshman composition with those who have come out of basic writing courses and students who have been placed directly into the freshman course. It would be nice and neat if we could say that each group had a different linguistic history and we could thus compare the effects of their linguistic histories on their performance. But such neat classifications do not exist, and it is perhaps even more interesting to see whether students whose native language was not English performed differently in the regular freshman composition course depending on whether they had needed and had received some type of remedial instruction, basic writing or ESL, or whether they were placed directly into the traditional freshman course. Even such a comparison becomes problematic, because we would need to know how long each individual lived in the U.S., when their study of English began, under what conditions, what the language of the family household is, and surely many more factors that one can think of. Regardless of these language and family histories, all these students are now being asked to perform in the same classroom setting, and their performances will be compared with each other as they are instructed and evaluated. It seems reasonable to ask, then, how the ESL students will fare in comparison with the others, and, further, how instruction in ESL classes can or should be modified in any ways to help these students achieve the goals of regular college courses.

### **Language Background as a Basis for Placement**

To provide a basis for considering these issues, I would like to present some findings from a section of freshman composition I taught in the spring of 1988 at City College. A breakdown of the language history backgrounds that I have for 21 of 25 students who were in this composition course is provided in Table 1.

One question that interests me is whether it is possible to ascertain why these students received these different placements, three in the ESL sequence, four in the basic writing sequence, and five directly into the freshman course. One clear distinction is that the four placed in the basic writing sequence all started to study English between the ages of 5 and 7, while all three placed in the ESL sequence started to study English after the age of 13.

**Table 1**

<b>Placement history for freshman course</b>	<b>Age of first study of English</b>	
	<b>5-9</b>	<b>12-28</b>
From ESL sequence		Three (13, 14, 28)
Basic Writing	Four (5, 6, 7, 7)	
Direct Placement	Three (5, 8, 9)	Two (12, 15)

So those placed in the basic writing sequence were closer to the natural language acquisition stage when they started to study English than those placed in the ESL sequence.

The picture, though, isn't so clear when we look at the distribution of the five placed directly into the freshman course. Three of the students were between the ages of 5 and 9 when they started to study English, similar to those placed in the basic writing sequence, and two others were 12 and 15, roughly the same ages as two who were placed in the ESL sequence, 13 and 14. So, it seems reasonable to ask whether there were factors other than linguistic competence that affected the placement of these students. Could there have been some manifestation in their writing in the placement tests of the ability to handle questions on a conceptual basis that overrode the importance of the linguistic features? I don't know the answer to this question, but I can speculate about this based on an analysis of the performance of all these students in the regular composition course.

### **Interpreting Tasks**

In order to compare the performance of students coming from ESL classes with students coming from basic writing classes and students who were placed directly into freshman composition classes, I looked at their performance on three types of writing tasks undertaken in the freshman composition course: summary writing, comparison-contrast, and analysis. On some taxonomies of cognitive complexity, these types of tasks would represent consistently higher levels of abstraction. However, the hierarchical arrangement of such tasks is strongly dependent upon how the individual interprets the task, so that, for example, summary writing for some students could include analysis and evaluation if these students see the summary as something they could refer to at a later time. Such students would not then treat summary as a rote recounting for another as audience but would include their own evaluative comments so that they could reconstruct their interpretations of the material. Similarly, comparison-contrast could also be structured

either from a factual or an interpretive perspective. Thus, individual interpretation of the demands of a task will strongly influence how the task is defined and carried out (Sternglass 1988).

### Assessing Cognitive Complexity

Before looking at the work the students produced, it is important to consider an extremely important issue that Mike Rose raised in a recent article: just what is the relationship between writing and models of cognition which have been applied to writing? In particular, he questions the suitability of applying Piaget's stage model, especially the concrete and formal operations stages, to an analysis of students' reasoning abilities as demonstrated in writing. Rose argues that Piaget was studying formal logic, while a study of writing entails other dimensions as well:

Much problem solving and, I suspect, the reasoning involved in the production of most kinds of writing rely not only on abstract logical operations, but, as well, on the rich interplay of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic associations, feeling, metaphor, *social perception, the matching of mental representations of past experiences with new experiences*, and so on. And writing, as the whole span of rhetorical theory makes clear, is deeply embedded in the particulars of the human situation. It is a context-dependent activity that calls on many abilities [emphasis added]. (285)

Howard Gardner supports these contentions in his consideration of "multiple intelligences" when he points out that

[s]omewhere between the Chomskian stress on individuals, with their separate unfolding mental faculties, the Piagetian view of the developing organism passing through a uniform sequence of stages, and the anthropological attention to the formative effects of the cultural environment, it ought to be possible to forge a productive middle ground: a position that takes seriously the nature of innate intellectual proclivities, the heterogeneous processes of development in the child, and the ways in which these are shaped and transformed by the particular practices and values of culture. (326)

What these studies point out to us is that our approach to teaching our students to handle increasingly complex cognitive tasks and to demonstrate their ability to do that through writing is not a simple matter. Although the ability to analyze is a significant conceptual tool, it need not be presented solely as an abstract logical operation.

The ability to analyze can be fostered by drawing on students' past experiences and helping them see the relationship between these experiences and new experiences so that they can draw larger, even societal implications from them, in other words, to go, as Jerome Bruner has suggested, "beyond the information given." (416)

### **Examining Student Writing**

In an attempt to investigate student responses to tasks that had the potential for including larger, societal implications, I analyzed three sets of student papers. In the particular class I taught, the theme of the course was autobiography, and the students read autobiographical accounts, wrote about them, and constructed their own autobiographies, so the potential to "match representations of past experiences with new experiences" and to reflect their "social perceptions," two characteristics Rose encouraged be included within a study of writing, existed in the tasks the students undertook. Because of both the nature of the assigned readings and the students' own range of cultural experiences, another dimension posited by Gardner, "the ways in which [intellectual processes and heterogeneous processes of development] are shaped and transformed by the particular practices and values of culture," was also incorporated into the tasks.

I decided to look at the students' writing from two perspectives, after having selected out for analysis the writing of all those students in the class who were nonnative speakers of English. First I grouped the students into two categories: those who had initially been placed in some remedial track, either basic writing or ESL, and those who were placed directly into English 110, the freshman writing course. As I have noted, of the nonnative speakers in my class, four had come through some or all of the basic writing track, three had come through some or all of the ESL track, and five had been placed directly into English 110. So in this case, the remedial population consisted of seven students and my traditional population consisted of five students. (Notice that the nonnative speakers constituted 12 students out of a class of 25.)

The second basis for analysis was the degree to which students drew implications from the readings and their own experiences which were tied directly to the experiences themselves and the degree to which they could construct larger generalizations that went beyond the scope of the particular experience. Let me say at the outset, as David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky have cogently argued, when college students are asked to explain the significance of an experience, they are able to do so. There was not

a single student in my class who could not function at an analytic level and draw implications from the experiences described in *writing*. This finding is consistent with Dixon's argument questioning whether narratives can in fact be easily separated from abstract thinking (10) and is also supported by the 1984 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress which found that 84% of 17-year-old high school students in the United States could "search for specific information, interrelate ideas, and make generalizations." However, there were rather dramatic differences in the ways in which the students from basic writing or ESL tracks performed in relation to the students placed directly in freshman composition in discovering and presenting larger conceptual implications.

I must note that I was missing a few pieces in my data set. For the summary writing, I lacked two papers, one from a basic writing student and one from a student placed directly in English 110. In the comparison-contrast task, papers for two basic writing students were missing. Since my population sample is very small, I am presenting my findings both in terms of percentages and numerical figures for each group. The figures I will be citing here represent those who completed the tasks at the most complex conceptual level.

The students started out at roughly the same level of analysis. In an early task calling for summary writing, 33% (that is, two) of the students coming from the remedial tracks, including one from the ESL track, developed implications that went beyond the particular experience they had read about, as did 25% (that is, one) of the traditional students. About a month later, comparing their own experiences with those of an anthropologist visiting Africa, 20% (that is, one) of the remedial students (including none from the ESL track) drew larger implications, as did 60% (that is, three) of the traditional students. The greatest variation between the two groups came in an analytic task describing a significant change in the experiences of a Black woman whose autobiography they had read. Here 29% (that is, two) of the seven students in the remedial track (including one ESL student) drew wider-ranging implications, while 100% (or all five) of the traditional students were able to do so.

### **Implications of the Study**

Although I am talking about a small sample of students and I am looking at their writing from a particular perspective, I do believe that some important, preliminary implications can be drawn. The first is that by the time the students entered the freshman course,

from whatever route, they were roughly equivalent in both linguistic and analytic abilities. All produced writing that contained some features of nonstandard usage at the sentence level when treated as examples of formal Edited American English. All the students also produced writing that showed them capable of producing analysis based on the experiences they read about or their own experiences. But, they did not all demonstrate the same rate of growth during the semester, if one can characterize growth as the ability to transcend the particular experience and see its implications within a larger conceptual framework.

If, even in a course where students were encouraged to integrate their own experiences and values into a broader interpretation of the events they were writing about, students are still tied to a consideration of the particular event itself and are unable to discover and/or present a relationship between that particular event and its larger societal or intellectual consequences, they will not be prepared to synthesize and evaluate the more abstract or remote materials they will encounter in their later educational experiences.

### **Applications for Instruction**

How do these implications then translate themselves into considerations for educational practice? They suggest to me that there may have been some fundamental differences in the prior experiences between the students placed in the basic writing and ESL tracks from those placed directly into the traditional freshman course. Certainly, by the time they came to the freshman course, both groups of students had had experiences that enabled them to master enough of the conventions of Edited American English to warrant placement there. Both groups had had sufficient experience with reading and writing tasks to be able to handle the process of analysis when requested to do so and given opportunities to practice. But, it seems likely that the students coming through the two remedial tracks had not had enough opportunities to consider and practice writing about larger issues and questions posed by instructional materials they had interacted with.

I do not believe that many students would automatically consider larger issues when confronted with a typical reading-writing task in either a developmental class or a traditional class. But, if suggestions could be made to students throughout these sequences of courses, through classroom discussion and/or in writing tasks, that they should consider the further consequences of the issues or experiences they are reading about, they will be beginning the "training period" that Mike Rose notes that scholars



of Piagetian theory such as Bruner (416) have found “can have dramatic results on performance” (284).

If we can think of our students’ experiences as recursive, if we can take advantage of having the opportunity to work with a group of individuals over several semesters, we can provide opportunities to our students to practice complex cognitive activities throughout these courses, without demanding that they handle them all expertly at every stage. Vygotsky’s idea of “the zone of proximal development” applies directly here. In this view, individuals, under the guidance of those more expert than they, can be shown to be capable of performing at a level just beyond their present level of independent competence (84–87). These students may not yet be able to handle these complex cognitive processes independently, but their ability to do so lies in their immediate future. Such a belief leads Vygotsky to conclude that “the only ‘good learning’ is that which is in advance of development” (89). What is needed is the opportunity to practice that Mike Rose has called for. It is crucial that students feel safe to take risks, realizing that skills previously mastered may decline temporarily while they are attempting to master new processes. Settings must be provided where such risk-taking is not only permitted but valued.

### **Instituting a Spiral Curriculum**

Moreover, we can foster the introduction of new ways of initially looking at issues and experiences that are especially relevant to our students’ own lives and cultural backgrounds. Students can begin to consider implications beyond their particular experiences during their semesters in the remedial tracks. The freshman writing course is not a “bridge” course—the bridge between acquiring linguistic and analytic competence in the sequences preceding the freshman course and the conceptual demands of synthesis, evaluation, and construction of original interpretations and ideas that will be fostered in upper level courses (Sternglass 1989).

Rather, all of these courses, remedial and traditional, should be conceived of as part of a “spiral curriculum,” to use Bruner’s term, in which all kinds of conceptual and linguistic activities are introduced and practiced at each level. As long ago as 1960, Bruner proposed the hypothesis that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (413). The performance of students would, naturally, be expected to improve in each level of instruction, but the demands should be the same at all levels. The central point is that conceptual as well as linguistic activities need to be practiced, and



two- or three- or four-semester sequence of instruction gives our students the incredible opportunity to repeat these experiences more and more productively.

In actuality, this should not be very difficult to accomplish. Nudelman and Schlosser, for example, pointed out in 1981 that

students can be taught to use their personal experiences as the first step in the process of composing an expository essay. The most crucial link in this process—one that is often overlooked by composition teachers—is the students' ability to conceptualize, to form generalizations *that extend the personal reminiscence into the more objective world at large.* (497, emphasis added)

Notice this last point, "to extend the personal reminiscence into the more objective world at large." It is the building of this connection that should be begun during the remedial sequences.

Charles Cooper sees this process as one that evolves naturally. In a 1985 study, he demonstrated that it is virtually impossible to produce autobiographical writing without writers examining, analyzing, and evaluating their experiences. And he was talking about a study that looked at the writing of 9-, 13-, 18-year-olds and older adults. Cooper says:

It's not that writers must wait until their 50's or 60's to evaluate remembered incidents. And it's not that only Pulitzer prize-winning journalists and other experienced writers can integrate evaluations of experience into autobiographical writing. Some 9-year-olds can do it. Nearly all 13-year-olds can do it. And, in my experience, all 18-year-olds can do it. Across that age range, though, what begins solely as external evaluation interrupting the story develops into evaluation embedded in the ongoing story and, finally, integrated, subtly, into basic narrative clauses. This progressive refinement is the major part of the story of the development of autobiographical writing. (5)

Thus, Cooper sees the integration of the evaluative aspect into the writing as part of a natural, developmental process, and the ability to embed these evaluations is already in place for 18-year-olds. We have the opportunity to foster the further natural development of these abilities by encouraging our students to apply an evaluative and analytic stance to their own experiences and the experiences of others so that they see how these experiences reflect larger societal issues.

## Examining Student Writing

Two examples of the beginnings of such applications from the writing of my students illustrate the potential of this approach. These two students had almost diametrically opposed perspectives, one fatalistic and the other critical. Both these students were examining the experience of a telephone operator interviewed by Studs Terkel and they commented on her experiences as part of their summary-writing task. The first student, Victor, a Hispanic student, had come to the United States from El Salvador at the age of 21. Now 29, he has completed the entire ESL sequence. He writes: "After all, I would say that operators learn how to live and work with their limitations even though they don't like certain restrictions in their job they know that their duty is to follow the orders of the company in order to perform well their tasks." Although we might object to Victor's too easy compliance with conditions as they are, we note that he has placed the telephone operator's job within a larger social construct, the company, and provided an analysis of the relationship between the two.

A completely opposite perspective is presented by Martin, a West Indian student from Jamaica whose first language was the Jamaican dialect and who came to the United States in 1982. Martin, who was placed directly into the English 110 course, wrote: "Heather seems to be troubled by the company policies that restricts communication between individuals, fosters anonymity, use the worker as tools, and work them at difficult and stressful tasks. She does not, however, gives the impression of having reached the point of actively opposing or disobeying these policies." Although Martin does not carry this aspect of the discussion further, simply raising the possibility of "opposing or disobeying these policies" implies the possibility of questioning the relationship between the employee and the employer. So, although Victor and Martin see these relationships quite differently, the point is that they see larger contexts within which the particular experience fits. To use Nudelman and Schlosser's phrase, they are carrying the specific experience "into the more objective world at large."

## Conclusion

If we can see the fostering of these connections as part of a natural, developmental cognitive growth sequence, we can build into our own sequences of tasks for our students, opportunities to take their own experiences and the experiences of others and apply them to large societal questions. Such opportunities will prepare

them to examine issues further removed from their direct experience, and will foster an examination that will be rooted in personal and humane perspectives, not simply from abstract, logical points of view.

We should not postpone asking our students to stretch their thinking on every occasion. As Vygotsky has pointed out, individuals' competence in handling demands will only improve if they practice appropriate activities under expert supervision. Students should be provided with appropriate reading/writing activities of real complexity at every level so that their examination of conceptual matters can be fostered at the same time that their control of linguistic features is being fostered, and they can experience the same kind of natural growth that they experienced in developing their native languages.

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