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Open WORDS

Access and English Studies

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Editor's Introduction:
Putting the "Open" in *Open Words*

IN A SCENE FROM THE 1987 MOVIE *PRINCESS BRIDE*, WALLACE SHAWN'S Vizzini and gang, along with their captive, Buttercup (Robin Wright), have just climbed a rope to the top of a sheer cliff. Knowing that the Dread Pirate Roberts (Cary Elwes) is in hot pursuit, they immediately sever the rope and watch it vanish over the edge. The group soon realizes, however, that the Dread Pirate Roberts has not fallen. He clings to rocks below, and for what seems like the ninetieth time in the film, Vizzini declares "In-con-ceivable!" the scene in front of him. It's at this point that Indigo Montoya, played by Mandy Patinkin, utters to Vizzini what is absolutely my favorite line in the movie: "You keep using that word. I don't think it means what you think it means." I don't know if I have ever really stopped laughing about this line, and I have also found it particularly reliable over the years, especially as a response to words my stepchildren so often use—like "am" (as in "I am cleaning my room")—that so rarely conform to the reality of their (in)actions.

During the process of gathering the essays that compose this issue of *OW*, I found myself reflecting on Montoya's response. I considered how the line underscores ways reality continually fails to conform to Vizzini's ideals, to the worldview he's constructed for himself based on an overblown confidence in his own intellect. To put it another way, the moment in the film highlights Vizzini's hypostatized sense of reality as much as it does the Dread Pirate Roberts' surprising skills and persistence. Borrowing from Horace Kallen, Connie Kendall Theado, whose essay appears in this edition, might label Vizzini's use of "inconceivable" as "a truth made and not found," or at least an attempt to make a truth that aligns more conveniently with his own self-image and with how he has divined the world should conceivably behave. The Dread Pirate Roberts, on the other hand, represents a truth found, one that insistently refuses to cooperate with Vizzini's grand plans. Despite Vizzini's "dizzying intellect" (he holds Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to be "morons"), there is more to reality than his definitions can bound and explain.

In a way, the works collected here echo Montoya's response to Vizzini in their consideration of vocabularies that compose English Studies. In regard to words and phrases like "literacy," "illiteracy," "community," "basic writing," "ESL," and "success," this OW issue says to educators: "You keep using those words. We don't think they always mean what you think they mean." Collectively, the essays speak to ways mainstream teachers and institutions as well as those committed to developing and maintaining equal access in higher education might find themselves dwelling in a "truth made" (through the words and programs they use

to define their work and their students) to the exclusion of truths yet to be found. To find these truths, to be as open as we can be to the greatest diversity of learners, we need to continually ask if our words mean what we think they do. If we don't engage in this reflection, we may risk functioning as little more than credentialed Vizzinis, hapless foils to the passions and talents that are all around us.

"[E]ven as our definitional boundaries stabilize meaning," Kendall Theado writes in "Left Behind: The High Stakes of (il)Literacy in the 21st Century," those boundaries "nevertheless remain open to the possibility of destabilization and re-stabilization, to the possibility of a shift in meaning." She traces processes through which "literacy" has come to function as an unmarked term that arrests the meanings of and marks as deficient the "illiteracies" of non-elite classes. She indicates how we might trouble the terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" to discern the ideologies at work in the high stakes testing currently shaping our educational landscapes.

What we conceive as the landscapes comprising English as Second Language and Basic Writing instruction are troubled in both Diana Becket's "Graduate ESL Students, Generation 1.5, and the Basic Writing Class" and Lance Cummings's review essay "What's in a Name?" Both pieces call out the circumstances that resist any easy definitions of ESL or BW students. Cummings, for instance, highlights ways Basic Writing has defined itself in terms of open-access colleges in such a way as to eschew the struggles of student writers in more elite schools, like the Public Ivy in which he teaches ESL courses. In the same sense, Becket's essay underscores the ways BW programs often fail to conceive of unique and varying literacies that graduate students, Generation 1.5 students, and international students bring to the BW classrooms in which they have been placed and the strategies they rely on to position themselves as active contributors. Indeed, Becket's essay appears to squirm with complications, as the students in her case studies again and again destabilize the common categories developed to define their relationships to academia.

For Paul Butler, in "Forget about Community: Narrative, Ethnographic Writing, and (Alternative) Discourse," students' relationships with and within academia are too often restricted through writing pedagogies that offer a too narrow sense of the communities in which students participate. His essay confronts notions of discourse and classroom communities and reads them in the context of local communities. As a result, his students construct writing projects that allow them to enter into the perspectives of marginalized community members. For Lisa Mahle-Grisez, in "Reframing the Seductive Narrative of 'Success' in Open Admissions," such a movement into alternate perspectives is stunted by success narratives that open-access schools so often use to attract students. Her readings of marketing techniques expose the degree to which they position students as consumers rather than "writers

of their own narratives." Mahle-Grisez's analysis exposes the degree to which definitions of "success" insist on a product-oriented approach to higher education, an approach that effectively dismisses the important processes with which students and teachers must engage to create new knowledge and develop as critical citizens.

Together, these essays ask readers to pause for a moment (and often) and to consider whether the words upon which we build our programs and pedagogies really name what we think they do. The essays underscore the need to ask whether our definitions have come to rest too comfortably on a worldview that excludes truths found in favor of the ones we've become accustomed to, those constructed and practiced in the wake of our own intellects. Truth found, in this sense, comprises the diversity of human experiences of students not often considered part of the mainstream, students who like so many Dread Pirate Robertses can only impress us with their skills and courage if we do not dismiss them in our very attempts to name and empower them. If readers can take one thing from this issue, it is not to stop using our words because they might not mean what we think they do, but that we need to use them knowing they might mean more than we think they do in any given situation.

John Paul Tassoni
September 2010

Connie Kendall Theado

Left Behind: The High Stakes of (il)Literacy in the 21st Century

The more we learn about standardized testing, particularly in its high-stakes incarnation, the more likely we are to be appalled. And the more we are appalled, the more likely we will be to do what is necessary to protect our children from this monster in the schools.

Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*

An Idea Running Amok

EDUCATOR AND ANTI-TESTING ACTIVIST ALFIE KOHN SAYS THERE IS A monster in our schools: the reform efforts of the Standards Movement have breathed unholy life into the idea of accountability, an idea now incarnate, with the face of a monster and a name that is everywhere on the lips of Americans—high-stakes testing. And Kohn not only wants us to collectively inquire into what he describes as today's sudden and increasingly fierce demands for accountability, but he also wants to provoke action, to "energize and encourage those who have resigned themselves to the tests," by showing us the dangers we face by believing in monsters (1).

Without question, Kohn's case against high-stakes testing policies has successfully energized those who also judge the tests to be, as he flatly puts it, "bad for kids" (54). A growing number of educators and parents are organizing their efforts to fight the testing monster, rallying around a kind of grassroots "just say no" campaign that has importantly gained national support over the past decade or so (see www.fairtest.org). As someone who taught high school English in the public schools for ten years, a teacher who remembers vividly both the genesis and the gradual ascension of the State of Ohio's high-stakes testing mandate, I am convinced of the right-mindedness of Kohn's case, in particular, and of the social and political significance of the anti-testing movement, in general. That is to say that I am, like the vast majority of my former colleagues—experienced teachers who as yet persevere in a public school system overrun and overwrought by continually shifting and increasingly stringent state and federal testing legislation—already persuaded to the truths Kohn's arguments imply; namely, that the best thing for us to believe is that high-stakes tests are "bad for kids" and that, given this belief, the best thing for us to do is to "just say no."

That said, I am troubled by the practical advice Kohn offers teachers in his final chapter, "Fighting the Tests." Following closely on the heels of his alarming depictions of the testing monster at work in the schools, Kohn matter-of-factly advises teachers to "do whatever is necessary to prepare kids to pass the test and then . . . get back to the real learning. Never forget the difference between these two objectives" (51). A fundamental problem with Kohn's advice, as I see it, is that it misconceives acting "practically" as mere gesture, as perfunctory, rote or token action that has been somehow emptied of all belief. But even our merest gesturing to the testing monster, I would argue, necessarily forwards one or another of our ideas about literacy—beliefs about what literacy is and beliefs about what literacy can do for an individual, a group, or a nation. Put plainly, there is no such thing as "mere" gesture, no such thing as acting without belief. Like the ancients who buried their dead with a gold coin to pay Charon's fare and a honey cake to slake Cerberus' hunger, any complicity with the tests has a way of sustaining the bad-for-kids high-stakes testing policies we genuinely aim to undermine. Rather than just doing "whatever is necessary" to get kids to pass what we know is bad for them, we ought to instead inquire into the beliefs about literacy that underwrite the tests, beliefs that may in fact be working to keep us from just saying no to the monster in the meantime.

> "no such thing as 'mere' gesture, no such thing as acting without belief"

Of course, every age has its "monsters," ideas soaked through with human needs, interests and desires, which by our beliefs and our actions are embodied, empowered, and then unleashed into the world to run amok. And on the whole, I like Kohn's deliberate use of the word "incarnation" in the opening lines of his book; for, it importantly reminds me that any large-scale, legislatively mandated testing policy is, at bottom, the embodiment of an idea. An idea *realized*, that is "made real," within particular political, institutional, and historical contexts and in sure relation to the varying needs, interests, values, and beliefs of a given society. What's missing from Kohn's case is a theoretical framework that would help us interrogate the implications of his own provocative phrasing: how do our ideas, for good or for ill, become incarnate or made real? By what means are ideas animated, circulated, upheld or overthrown, and to what possible ends might they lead? Such questions were being asked by pragmatist philosophers like Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and Oliver Wendell Holmes at the turn of the 20th century. Their answer—that the meaning of any one of our ideas can be made clear by following its outcomes, by granting an idea its tentative truth and then asking ourselves forward-looking questions like, "What conceivable effects

of a practical kind would result if a particular idea were acted upon?"—helped establish a tradition of intellectual inquiry that informs my thinking about the effects of today's high-stakes testing policies and practices.

The connection between ideas and outcomes, between our theories about the world and our actions in the world we theorize, was a shared concern for these first-generation pragmatists. How these connections matter to our broader determinations of meaning and truth, (e.g., which of our ideas about the world are "true" ideas, and what is our process for knowing?), was of particular interest to William James and his student Horace Kallen, whose standpoints figure prominently here in my investigation of the high stakes of (il)literacy in the 21st century. The question of what literacy means, both for a nation's success and for an individual's ability to successfully access the rights and privileges extended to its citizens—including his/her ability to access the social, economic and legal institutions that make those rights and privileges possible—is a question long debated in this country. And it is this same question that once again takes on increased social and political import today, in the wake of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and the context of high-stakes testing mandates.

Broadly stated, this article advances a pragmatic re-reading of the meaning, use, and consequences of high-stakes literacy testing for today's test-takers in an effort to reestablish the critical connection between ideas and actions, between what we believe about literacy as a sociopolitical imperative and the real-world work being accomplished by the tests in service of that belief. Beginning with a brief historical example that establishes the theoretical framework for my analysis, the article moves to examine the various beliefs about language use, society and schooling that have shaped our contemporary understanding of literacy and work to underwrite our nation's current faith in the tests. In the end, I argue that contrary to the expectation that high-stakes literacy testing will help close the achievement gap, such policies and practices are instead complicit in remaking the ideological truth of the Great Divide, a way to both determine and explain which of our students will gain access to society by virtue of their passing a test and which will instead be "left behind."

An Idea Fulfilled: Meaning, Context, and the Making of Truth

> *The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. Truth independent; truth that we 'find' merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly, but then it means only the dead heart of a living tree . . . grown stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men's regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by transformations of*

> *logical and mathematical ideas. The ancient formulas are reinterpreted as special expressions of much wider principles, principles our ancestors never got a glimpse of in their present shape and formulation.*
>
> William James, *Pragmatism*

America's most "ancient formula" is also its most radical pronouncement of truth, conceived in 1776 by those who sought to reconcile the realities of war with the ideas of a new nation: *We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*. As one of America's oldest truths, the doctrine of natural rights has indeed "grown stiff with years of veteran service"; and yet, despite its petrification and in the ways that James suggests, no other truth has been, over the course of our history, so sharply debated or so frequently reinterpreted. When it comes to the nature of truth, self-evidence inevitably proves a most tenuous claim.

As a former student of William James, Horace Kallen knew well the pragmatists' view on the instability of truth. As a descendent of German Jews living in the US at the turn of the 20th century, Kallen's experiences likewise led him to understand well that the influx of southeastern European immigrants was making American nativists restless, and that, in their restlessness, many were reformulating the doctrinaire assumptions grounding the Declaration to better accord with their beliefs about the deleterious social, political, and economic effects of Second Wave immigration. In his 1915 essay, "Democracy versus the Melting-Pot," Kallen calls attention to what he considers a frank, not to mention dangerous, reversal of truth. "To-day," Kallen writes,

> the descendents of the colonists appear to be reformulating a Declaration of Independence. The danger comes, once more, from a force across the water, but the force is this time regarded not as superior, but as inferior. To conserve the inalienable rights of the colonists in 1776, it was necessary to declare all men equal; to conserve the inalienable rights of their descendents in the 20th century, it becomes necessary to declare all men *un*equal. (69, emphasis in original)

To clarify and counter the nativist logic funding this reversal of truth, Kallen offers a pragmatic re-reading of the historic event, reminding us that "to [the Signatories], the Declaration was neither a pronouncement of abstract principles nor an exercise in formal logic [but] was an instrument in a political and economic conflict, a weapon of offense and defense" (68). And here Kallen re-establishes the critical connection between meaning and context, between a set of ideas and the actions they inspire. That is, for Kallen, the meaning of the Declaration is held in its function—what it did—which was to afford the colonists sanction for refusing British authority. By rejecting the notion that there can be any final separa-

tion between the ideas expressed in the doctrine of natural rights and the actions it made possible, Kallen repositions its "truth" as a consequence, as an "idea fulfilled," verified in the colonists' experience, made true by what it accomplished, i.e., the actual, practical, meaningful conservation of their inalienable rights. Like all ideas, the doctrine was born of human necessity; and like all ideas, its truth was consequent to human belief and action. And while Kallen's opening arguments focus on an historic event, the remainder of his essay makes clear that his concern is for the future. For, just as the "truth" of the older proposition that all men are created equal is a truth made and not given, so too, Kallen reasons, the nativists' reformulated proposition that all men are created unequal will be *just as true* if it accomplishes its work in the world, if it becomes an "idea fulfilled."

Kallen's remarks are instructive: his refusal to separate ideas from actions, his conviction that what we believe matters to what we do. Likewise, Kallen's point in suggesting that the nativists' troubled proposition of inequality, a proposition rooted in racist beliefs about the inherent inferiority of southeastern Europeans, has the same revolutionary potential for truth as the Signatories' proposition of equality should not be missed. Even "false" beliefs or "bad" ideas have real effects, that is, they work, as James explained a century ago, just as perniciously in the long run as our true beliefs or good ideas work beneficially (520). If we are to better understand the meaning of high-stakes literacy testing for the 21st century, we must turn our attention there—to the real-world work being accomplished by the tests, to the consequences of our ideas about literacy.

"Which of our ideas about literacy do the tests work to make true?"

Which of our ideas about literacy do the tests work to make true? What actions are made possible by our having the "truth" about literacy? These are the kinds of questions that frame my inquiry into today's high-stakes testing practices and policies. James' observation that "the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything" underscores the humanist impulse that guides all pragmatic inquiries including this one, an impulse that refuses the easy split between theory and practice, between our ways of believing about the world and our ways of acting in it. All of our theories about the world, pragmatism insists, cannot help but add something to the world we theorize. The question we are thus obliged to ask ourselves, perhaps especially as college-level teachers and researchers invested in promoting "best practices" in literacy instruction and assessment, is whether or not our additions are worthwhile, that is, whether or not the world our ideas lead to is in fact a world worth having.

Choosing Literacy: Ideological Constraints and (Un)Marked Meanings

The idea and image of a public school system carelessly or, worse, deliberately leaving its students behind has clearly captured the nation's attention, and has a gone a long way to justify the use of high-stakes tests. "The quality of our public schools directly affects us all," former President Bush writes in his prefatory comments to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act,

> [y]et too many children in America are segregated by low expectations, illiteracy, and self-doubt. In a constantly changing world that is demanding increasingly complex skills from its workforce, children are literally being left behind. . . . We have a genuine national crisis. More and more, we are divided into two nations. One that reads, and one that doesn't. One that dreams, and one that doesn't. (2)

Pronouncements like these cannot help but give us pause, and perhaps should give pause. Not because Bush's lament is necessarily a reliable or "true" assessment of our 21st century reality, but because such a reality *if true* suggests something larger about how our conceptions of literacy work in the world.

What if we read Bush's pronouncement of truth—that we are a nation divided, with one half reading and dreaming and the other half mired in illiteracy and self-doubt—as a truth made, not found, as an indication that our ideas about literacy are accomplishing their work in the world, becoming ideas fulfilled? The idea that "illiterates" (read: those who fail to acquire the skills of written literacy) will somehow find themselves "left behind" is of course not a new idea. Such a possibility or, better put, such inevitability was posited decades ago by the Great Divide theorists, who hypothesized a causal connection between the advent of written literacy in 5th century BCE Greece and the actual restructuring of basic human thought processes (see especially Goody & Watt, 1963/1988; Ong, 1982). Like Bush, these theorists invested literacy with the power to, among other things, split the world in two. The strict literate/nonliterate dichotomy upon which the Great Divide model of literacy rests established contrastive grounds that both cut off certain probabilities for nonliterate societies (e.g., logic and abstract thought are withheld from primarily oral cultures) as they necessarily set up other probabilities for literate societies (e.g., history, consciousness, and democracy itself are the undisputed domains of literate cultures). And like the logic driving today's high-stakes testing policies, the logic of the Great Divide works to position the acquisition of literacy as finally a matter of individual choice, as the only reasonable thing to do. Take, for just a brief example, Walter Ong's interpretation of A.R. Luria's early fieldwork with illiterate peasants in Uzbekistan, where the ability to define, classify, and explain natural phenomena—hallmarks of abstract thinking—was regarded as "impossible without reading and writ-

ing" and so supplied evidence of an individual's literate relationship with the world (8). In Ong's memorable recounting of the scene, Luria asks: "'Try to explain what a tree is.' 'Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is, they don't need me telling them,' replied one illiterate peasant, aged 22. Basically, the peasant was right," Ong concludes, "There is no way to refute the world of primary orality. All you can do is walk away from it into literacy" (53).

To be fair, the Great Divide theorists were not concerned with the literacy/illiteracy antonymic pairing that is at the heart of Bush's lament and fuels today's debate over high-stakes testing, but rather with resurrecting an even older debate about the primacy of written literacy over orality and, by extension, the success of literate cultures over their nonliterate counterparts. Still, the literate/nonliterate dichotomy asserted by the Great Divide theorists is undoubtedly a "truth" that accommodates the literacy/illiteracy pairing. From the ancient Greeks' original "stupefying leap" into written literacy, to use Goody & Watt's phrasing (9), an entire system of other conceptual leaps is made possible. And while it is one thing to be an illiterate peasant in Uzbekistan somehow "stuck" in a culture that could not quite make the leap from orality into literacy, it is quite another to be an individual who, while living in a culture already saturated with literate practices, is yet somehow unable to make the leap from illiteracy into literacy. To be sure, there are profound problems associated with both scenarios—the first arrogantly draws our pity; the second dangerously draws our suspicion and too often our contempt.

What I am suggesting is this: today's idea and image of "no child left behind" is best viewed in James' terms, as a reformulation of the older idea and image of the Great Divide, a "reinterpretation of the wider principle" that literacy actually, meaningfully defines a society's or a community's or an individual's relationship with and in the world. After all, it is precisely the idea that such a divide exists that makes our leaving someone behind even possible. High-stakes literacy testing is merely the most recent expression of this wider principle and logic that has long funded the Great Divide model, simultaneously presenting the "illiterate" with a choice to "walk away" and, at least in my view, ultimately justifying our choice to walk away from those who either can't—or won't—make the leap into literacy.

Marking Meaning

Part of the real-world work being done by high-stakes literacy testing is ideological, an accommodation of a much broader historical and cultural process I am calling the "unmarking" of literacy's meaning, a process by which literacy, defined as "the ability to read and write," has attained its present non-ideological or neutral status within a modern US society that values its acquisition and institutionalizes it uses. My interest in focusing on the ways in which meaning is "marked" in the literacy/illiteracy pairing as a means to investigate the conse-

quences of today’s high-stakes tests for students, their teachers, and the field of postsecondary literacy research at large, is provoked by a claim literacy theorist David Barton makes in his book, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. "Illiteracy," Barton asserts, "a fairly pejorative term, is the natural or unmarked term [in the pairing] and literacy comes from it" (21).

Barton supports his assertion with evidence gathered through a careful survey and review of twenty English language dictionaries published during the 19th and 20th centuries for the appearance of four related words: literate, illiterate, literacy, and illiteracy. His findings are striking. According to Barton, the word "illiterate" is the oldest and most frequently used of the four terms, dating back to the mid-1500s, found in Shakespearean plays, and appearing in Samuel Johnson's *First Dictionary of English* (1755) and *Barclay's Dictionary* (1820) to the exclusion of the other three words. The word "illiteracy" first appears in Walker's *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1839), with the caveat that it is an "uncommon word," although Barton notes that its limited usage can be traced back to as early as the mid-1600s (20). The term "literate," Barton explains, which was originally defined as "educated or learned," is found in dictionaries only after 1894, and it is not until 1924 that the word "literacy," for the first time defined as "the ability to read and write," is cited with any regularity (20). From his research, then, Barton concludes that while "'illiteracy' dates from 1660, it is more than 200 years until 'literacy' appears . . . Its origin is given as being from the word 'illiteracy'" (20, emphasis added).

To be sure, Barton’s claim that "illiteracy," and not "literacy," is the older and unmarked word in the pair strikes those of us living in the modern era as surprising, even counterintuitive. Linguists, of course, have long theorized the notion of linguistic markedness and the ways in which marking conveys extralinguistic or "social" meaning through language. All spoken languages, in fact, include the formal option for marking some linguistic forms and not others, typically as a way to alert language users that a semantic shift has occurred. In English, for instance, the singular case of (most) nouns is unmarked and the plural case is marked, e.g., cat/cats. Robin Lakoff explains that, in general, the unmarked forms in a given language "tend to be both semantically and morphologically simpler than their marked counterparts" and thus to practiced language users, extra morphology implies extra meaning (44). Markedness is also a characteristic feature of certain antonyms, most notably the male/female forms of words, like the classic prince/princess pairing where the male form, "prince," functions as the unmarked term (i.e., the default term, neutral, universal) and the female form, "princess," with its extra morphology, functions as the marked term (i.e., the "other" term, non-neutral, exotic). For decades, feminist linguists (see Cameron, 1993; Lakoff, 2000; Romaine, 2000) have employed markedness theory to interrogate the hid-

den gender bias encoded by the unmarking and marking of male/female terms, arguing that these common linguistic constructions encourage us to see their equally constructed meanings as somehow inevitable and correct, as actually reflective of social reality. And it is because of markedness theory's ability to unmask or make clear the extralinguistic or social meanings of even our most ordinary words, like literacy or illiteracy, that I am suggesting Barton's unconventional, even counterintuitive, claim warrants further consideration.

Since the unmarked form is the one that, by definition, does not contain the derivational morpheme, we might reasonably expect the word "literacy" to be the older and unmarked term in the pair and the word "illiteracy" to be its derivational, marked counterpart. Barton's claim to the contrary reads counterintuitively, I think, because it points up a disconnect from the usual ways in which we discern the meaning of literacy, i.e., our modern tendency to assign "literacy" to the unmarked or default category, the universal condition toward which all progressive or modern societies must move. And while we might say that there are always exceptions to our language rules and simply leave it at that, I suggest that this particular exception opens a space for inquiry into the meaning of literacy as it has been traditionally authorized by the schools and is now currently ratified by today's tests. Doing so, however, requires that we proceed pragmatically, granting Barton's claim its tentative truth and then following its outcomes by asking ourselves forward-looking questions. How is it that literacy, a word that originates as the marked term in the pairing, has come to be regarded in modern times as the unmarked term? What beliefs about literacy in its relationship to society have participated with the redefinition of literacy's meaning as unmarked? What difference does this reversal in literacy's meaning make in the world and, more importantly, what difference does it make in the actual lives of today's test-takers?

From Margin to Center: Redefining Literacy as a Sociopolitical Necessity

Linguist Anne Freadman defines "definition" as "the tracing of boundaries rather than the discovery of an essence" (54). In other words, definitions impose lines between meanings, locating and stabilizing the semantic space where one meaning meets another. It is this stabilizing effect of our definitional boundaries that helps us conventionalize meaning, and it is this shared sense of meaning—of our word and our worlds—that helps to create what we conceptualize as the "real." However, even as our definitional boundaries stabilize meaning, they nevertheless remain open to the possibility of destabilization and re-stabilization, to the possibility of a shift in meaning.

According to Barton's research, the definition of literacy had noticeably shifted by 1924, signaling the transformation of its former meaning as "educated" or "learned" into its

modern meaning as "the ability to read and write." It is no mere coincidence that the redefinition of literacy's meaning emerged alongside the rise of US mass public education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period of monumental reorganizational efforts waged on multiple fronts—economic, political, social, and institutional. The semantic line of demarcation implied by the former definition of literacy as "educated" was simply outmoded or destabilized in a society where compulsory education laws ensured that all school-aged children—rich or poor, immigrant or native-born, willing or unwilling—were equally afforded the opportunity for a basic education. Consequently, the new semantic line of demarcation will re-stabilize the meaning of literacy squarely on the backs of the students: being "literate" signifies an individual's successful acquisition of reading and writing skills and being "illiterate" signifies his/her failure.

The 1924 redefinition of literacy's meaning is important in that it both represents and works to authorize a radical reorganization of the term's originally marked status. Long conceived as a sociopolitical necessity, as a way to chart and guarantee the forward progress of the nation, literacy and its standardization became a centralizing influence for the formation of the public schools at the turn of the 20th century. As one anonymous 19th century reformer put it: "Unity of speech is essential to the unity of a people. . . . nations of one speech, however formerly separated by differences of creed or of political organization, are essentially one in culture, one in tendency, one in influence" (as cited in Yarbrough, 122). Embedded within this late 19th-century perspective is a still-familiar claim: all matters of disunity—political, economic, and social—can be overcome through linguistic unification. And this belief, that sociopolitical unification will emerge as a direct result of the standardization of our language and literacy practices, has been a regular and powerful influence for the unmarking of literacy's meaning in the modern era.

Education historian David Tyack characterizes the 19th century as the "'Age of Institutionalization,' when agencies separated the insane into asylums, the poor into almshouses, the criminal into prisons. Fear of disorder, of contamination, of the crumbling of familiar social reforms such as the family, prompted reformers to create institutions which could bring order into the lives of

> "the quintessential model of order, where uniformity, punctuality, discipline, and industry were conceptualized as necessary for both survival and success"

deviant persons, and perchance, heal society itself by force of example" (72). The nation's strong impulse toward the standardization of literacy during this time period is itself a response to a generalized perception that the English language was being degraded and in need of rehabilitation. In turn, the public schools came to be viewed as the quintessential model of order, where uniformity, punctuality, discipline, and industry were conceptualized as necessary for both survival and success in the newly modernized nation. And as the schools became an increasingly powerful public institution, Tyack notes, the overriding curricular goal of "obedience to bureaucratic norms" was to be inculcated "overtly and with zest" (49, emphasis in original). It is therefore not surprising that literacy instruction, rigidly standardized in accordance with the current-traditional textbooks that were readily available to the schools, accounted for nearly 45% of the average school day and emphasized the "basic" skills of literacy—reading, writing, spelling, grammar and oral recitation (Tyack 49).

"The school itself," social historian Harvey Graff remarks, "took on new meaning" in this complex and rapidly changing late 19th century context, "and with it, literacy acquired new significance" (261). Literacy's "new significance" lies, of course, in its presumed ability to promote standardized linguistic unity and thereby erase, at least on the surface where visible and audible differences in language use exist, the vestiges of disunity brought about by an increasingly diverse and disorderly society. I would add, however, that what is erased along with any surface linguistic variation is the very markedness of the meaning of literacy itself.

UnMarking the Meaning of Literacy

My argument in brief is that literacy has attained its modern unmarked status because it has successfully avoided being named, becoming over the course of the last hundred years or so what literary theorist Roland Barthes calls an “exnominated fact.” Barthes forwards his theory of exnomination to explain the ideological process by which certain groups of people—and their ideas—are rendered invisible. “The bourgeoisie,” Barthes writes, “has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation. It makes its status undergo a real exnominating operation [and thus is] defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*” (138, emphasis in original). In other words, exnomination is an ideological process of unmarking. By avoiding being named (read: marked, made visible), exnominated groups can assume an apolitical, non-ideological status. They become *the* norm, and as such can remain “out of the field of interrogation and off the agenda for change” (Fiske, as cited in Lakoff, 54). In Barthes' example, the bourgeoisie, as the exnominated group, has no need to account for its beliefs, values or practices because these are already recognized as the normal, the neutral, the universal (i.e., the unmarked) standards by which all other beliefs, values, and practices are measured. This is ideology: the process by which the contradictions between material prac-

tices and their authorized social meanings are obscured, or smoothed over, and ultimately rendered invisible. While Barthes' term, in this example, is applied specifically to the ideological process by which groups of people avoid being "named," the theory itself is useful as a way to explain the ideological process by which the meaning of literacy has likewise managed to remain "out of the field of interrogation" and "off the agenda for change;" in my view, the ideological effect of a double exnomination. And while space obviously precludes a detailed account of the nation's 100-year march toward today's high-stakes literacy testing practices, a brief sketch of the two exnominations that have been instrumental in leading us here will prove useful. Underwriting both exnominations is our long-standing belief that literacy is the sociopolitical necessity as I have just described it, as the necessary means for and indictor of the general health and well-being of a modern nation.

In her book *The Language War*, Robin Lakoff suggests that, "The standard dialect itself is an exnomination. As long as you are speaking it, your choice is invisible, 'normal'" (77). In addition, the built-in ambiguity of the word "standard" further aids in its exnomination. In common usage, "standard" means both a measure of excellence (e.g., Her record time set the new Olympic *standard*) and the normal or average model or type (e.g., These are our company's *standard* hiring practices). Applied to a non-regional (read: neutral) dialect of English, Standard American English (SAE) arguably carries both meanings simultaneously. The exnomination of the standard dialect thus works to erase the inherent contradictions between these two meanings: SAE is imagined as both the dominant or "prestige" dialect *and* as normal or typical. And of course, such erasure necessarily works in the opposite direction as well: nonstandard dialects are imagined as both marginal and abnormal or atypical. The social authorization of the normalcy of the dominant dialect is the effect of its exnomination, whereby "normal" and "neutral" become mutually explanatory terms and any (real) class distinctions virtually disappear.

Linguistic theory also reminds us that all standard dialects are idealizations. Thus it follows that Standard English, as an idealized dialect, can never be anyone's "primary" language, i.e., no one is "born into" SAE. Instead, Standard English is an always-acquired "secondary" language, a school dialect, i.e., we learn SAE, its rules and its uses, through formal instruction. Coupled with its already exnominated status in society, the standard dialect can then be conceptualized paradoxically by the schools: Standard English "belongs" *originally* to no one and yet "belongs" *potentially* to everyone *at the same time*. A student can claim her right to "own" the standard dialect, of course, by becoming "literate," by choosing to learn the basic skills necessary for its acquisition—reading and writing—as these are apolitically and uniformly offered by the schools.

And here is where I am suggesting the second exnomination of literacy's meaning

takes place; for, the inherent neutrality ascribed to the standard dialect promotes the conceptualization of its acquisition as an ideologically transparent process as well. That is, becoming literate is viewed as an equally available option for all who exercise their educational "choice" to learn the basic skills of literacy. And since the acquisition of literacy has been so persistently, so ideologically, equated with securing access to the *status quo* and obtaining the social, political, and economic opportunities therein—an enactment of that which Harvey Graff has famously called the "literacy myth,"—the very choice to acquire literacy thus becomes both "invisible" and "normal;" that is, exnominated, a virtual *non-choice* for any who wish to remain unnoticed in the unmarked space of authorized, standardized language practices. Put simply, choosing to become literate in the 21st century *means* choosing to become unmarked—normal, typical, invisible. It is, after all, the condition of illiteracy in the modern era that "marks" an individual as occupying that marginalized space outside the norm, as needing to repeatedly account for her visibility or explain his atypical or abnormal language habits. And as Ong so pointedly reminds us, it is finally the "illiterate" who must choose to either "walk away" from her presumably deficient condition "into literacy" or, by implication, face the certain prospect that we will instead, and with all proper justification, walk straight away from her.

"occupying that marginalized space outside the norm, as needing to repeatedly account for her visibility or explain his atypical or abnormal language habits"

The real-world work being accomplished by today's high-stakes literacy testing policies boils down to just this: they facilitate the unmarking of literacy's meaning and thus keep the idea of literacy itself safe—narrowly defined as the "ability to read and write" and tightly linked to the standard dialect, outside the field of inquiry and, in turn, predictably off the national agenda for change. Turning our attention away from any sustained, politicized interrogation of the meaning of literacy and toward an equally politicized interrogation of those individuals who do not possess it, the tests not only ensure that the "non-proficient," the "illiterate," and the "marginal" will be seen, but also ensure that the idea of literacy itself will continue to circulate invisible and unseen, avoiding its name and evading its status as an ideological fact. In this way, today's high-stakes literacy tests also work to undermine the wealth of New Litera-

cy Studies scholarship that has debunked the old ideas about literacy championed by the Great Divide theorists (e.g., that literacy is separate from any context, a measurable psychological variable dependent on the acquisition of a set of discrete skills) so to reconceive literacy as a social practice inextricably linked to the values, interests, and needs of a given culture. And by forwarding the old ideas about literacy the tests are likewise implicated in (re)making the "truth" of the Great Divide itself, actively participating in the construction of a 21st-century reality that gives credence to Bush's lament by perpetuating our belief in a world where the readers "dream" and the non-readers "doubt," a society where literacy actually makes the difference, draws the line, divides the nation, and/or otherwise determines and explains which of our students will gain access to society by virtue of their passing a test and which ones will, instead and of course, be "left behind."

If we want proof that the system is working, proof that the old ideas about literacy are accomplishing their work in the world, *becoming ideas fulfilled*, we need look no further than the very youngest test-takers themselves. Benito Hernandez Garcia, a 10-year-old fourth-grader at a suburban school in Cincinnati who was interviewed on the eve of what is now known as "testing week" in Ohio, had this to say about his prospects on the tests and his position in US culture at large: "I feel confident [and] I understand more how to do math problems than other problems. But yes," Benito adds tellingly, troublingly, as if to confirm what the nation believes it already knows about the fate of those students who can't pass the test, "I feel left behind" (Amos and Kranz).

Perfect Worlds and Solving Names: Keeping the Quest for Educational Access Open

In August 2006, a *Houston Chronicle* headline read: "Official: No Child Left Behind Act Nearly Perfect." Echoing the sentiment of the Bush administration, former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced to reporters her belief that the 2001 Act is "close to perfect," adding that "I talk about No Child Left Behind like Ivory soap: It's 99.9 percent pure. There's not much needed in the way of change" (Feller). And while Spellings admits that it would be "foolhardy" to suggest that "we're not going to react to anything that we're learning over time," when pressed by the media about whether or not she meant that the law is truly 99.9 percent close to working properly, she replied "I think it is that close" (Feller).

A "perfect" law—or one that is nearly so—flawless and complete, without defect or omission. In other words, a law that works as hard at leaving nothing to chance as it reportedly does at leaving no one behind. A perfect system then, really, one grounded in a kind of classic *a priori* logic that seeks to guarantee an outcome by certifying its origins. And anyone involved at any level of public education these days likely finds this logic perfectly familiar.

It is the logic underwriting the Standards Movement and the rhetoric of accountability, the logic funding the tests, and a line of reasoning that many find compelling: the way to secure a bright future for the nation and its children is to define, once and for all, the "basics" of education and then, of course, just get "back" there. Close the gaps. Secure the future.

The problem is not that we shouldn't want to create a better, even a more perfect, world. Instead, the problem lies in the *a priori* logic being employed in service of that goal. A logic that by definition forgets "context" and the role human experience plays in the determination of the truth or falsity of any one of our ideas, and thus a logic that ignores the meaningfulness of Benito's self-revelation that he already feels "left behind," in all ways an expression of his experience with the tests. In our belief that national unity can best be achieved through linguistic unification and standardization, our belief that language variation represents a dangerous aberration of the norm rather than being the norm itself, we have installed a law that instead effects division and separation, marking some for the margins and others for full participation in society. But it is in our failure to account for experience—or, more precisely, our preference to abstract or "think apart" our ideas about literacy from the actual, practical, and meaningful difference they make in the lives of people—that we may find our greatest distraction to the radical proposition of truth implied by the title of the law itself. For, a law that is already believed by lawmakers to be "close to perfect" and "99.9% pure" leaves little room for serious and engaged conversation about what it is we might actually be "learning over time," despite former Secretary Spellings' comments to the contrary.

The pragmatists were concerned with the ways in which certain words or phrases foreclose debate about our lived experiences with a given idea or proposition of truth, and instead work to justify our theories about how the world just "is." James writes:

> You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part in magic words have always played. If you have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. “God,” “Matter,” “'Reason,” . . . are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. (509, emphasis in original)

Certainly Kallen was concerned that the nativists' reformulation of the doctrine of natural rights was more than just clever word-play, but instead had the potential to become *the* Truth of the American experience by serving as a kind of "solving name," a way to "close

the quest" for ensuring equal access to the inalienable rights attending a democratic society by naming the antecedent principle that ultimately works to keep us from it: according to the nativists, some people—presumably the white, middle-class, English-speaking descendents of Northwestern Europeans—are simply more equal than others. In ways similar, Kohn's campaign to encourage educators who have resigned themselves to the tests to inquire again into their effects suggests his concern that the national debate has been all but foreclosed, and that the "truth" implied by a single set of tests now has the potential to become *the* Truth of the American educational experience. With Kohn, we might well wonder whether today's high-stakes tests are becoming a kind of 21st-century "solving name," a way to "close the quest" for ensuring educational access by naming the antecedent principle that likewise works to keep us from it: only students who use the standard dialect in institutionally authorized ways will be granted a high school diploma, the long-standing measure of a "level" US playing field and the means necessary to access higher education and/or a living wage.

If educational reform under the auspices of NCLB is going to serve democratic purposes, that is, if the idea of increasing access and opportunity for students who are being "left behind" is to become an *idea fulfilled*, then we must more fully square the beliefs about literacy we hold today—that literacy is a situated social practice (see Street), that literacy empowers when it connects our ways of reading "the word" with our ways of reading "the world" (see Freire and Macedo), that the wide range of literacy practices we see in our classrooms suggests difference not deficit (see Heath; Rose)—with our actions about literacy. In other words, closing the "achievement gap" begins with closing this critical gap between the theory and practice of our ideas about literacy—not just in the classroom but also on the federal and State senate floors. The implications of our nation's continued faith in high-stakes literacy tests are clear: nonstandard literacy practices not only "mark" and make visible the students who use them but also, and in so doing, render their needs invisible. What we do about this particular real-world effect matters both pedagogically, in our efforts to innovate approaches that build on our students' knowledge of the spoken and written uses of language in order to meet the literacy demands of a university education, and politically, as a way to disrupt the prevailing assumption that an individual's acquisition of SAE is the modern universal pre-condition that makes possible any number of other achievements, including his/her ability to achieve access into those college classrooms.

The meaning of any one of our ideas, pragmatism teaches, is to be determined by the world it leads to, not by the world it comes from. The benefit of pragmatic inquiry thus does not lie in its ability to decide, once and for all, the question of what this world is going to be, but instead rests in the ways it can usefully re-orient us to the task. In his defense of pragmatism's value as a method of inquiry deeply concerned with the always human conse-

quences of our beliefs and actions, social historian Louis Menand writes:

> It is sometimes complained that pragmatism is a bootstrap theory—that it cannot tell us where we should want to go or how we can get there. The answer to this is that theory can never tell us where to go. Theories are just one of the ways we make sense of our needs. We wake up one morning and find ourselves in a new place, and then we build a ladder to explain how we got there. *The pragmatist is the person who asks whether this is a good place to be. The non-pragmatist is the person who admires the ladder.* (xxxiv, emphasis added)

Menand's remarks underscore the fundamental shift in our ways of knowing the world that pragmatic inquiry invites, a shift that commits us experientially to the world we theorize and requires us to take account of the difference our ideas are actually making in the scope and expression of people's lives. "The whole function of philosophy," James surmised, "ought to be to find out what definite difference it makes to you and me, at definite instances in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the 'true' one" (30). James' viewpoint necessarily applies to the work of contemporary literacy researchers, whose shared goal is to better understand and explain how our beliefs about literacy connect with our institutionalized practices so that we might make sense of the difference our theories are making in the lives of students. When it comes to the difference high-stakes literacy testing is making in the US today, the quintessential pragmatic question "Is this a good place to be?" is always a good place to start.

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Paul Butler

Forget about Community: Narrative, Ethnographic Writing, and (Alternative) Discourse

Introduction: Problematizing "Community"

ALTHOUGH CONVERSATIONS IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION HAVE often taken for granted the idea of classroom "communities," the assumptions behind such communities have been questioned by several scholars. In "Classrooms as Communities: At What Cost?" Roxanne Mountford challenges the generally idealistic portrayals of communities in the classroom, arguing that such ostensibly homogeneous sites have put some marginalized students at risk, notably women, gays and lesbians, and students of color. Countering Greg Clark's claim that classroom communities can become democratic sites through an egalitarian examination of difference, Mountford contends that students should not be forced to make potentially dangerous revelations in classrooms and proposes that they examine broader concepts of "culture" instead. In critiquing Clark's goal of creating "a community of differing equals" (72), she echoes in part Joseph Harris's article "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," where he questions the often "empty and sentimental" notion of community based too much on a "sort of organic unity" (13, 20). Indeed, the evolving ideas behind classroom communities reflect some of the disciplinary changes that have alternately embraced expressivist, process, collaborative, and contact-zone pedagogies, mirroring disciplinary conversations over homogeneous and heterogeneous classrooms built on academic discourse, consensus, dissensus, and clashing cultures, among other theories (see, e.g., Horner; Bruffee; Trimbur; Bizzell, "Academic"; Pratt). Mountford, for her part, suggests that the fundamental problem lies in seeing the classroom as an egalitarian community to start with, that is, "a democratic oasis in which confrontation leads to growth and collaboration leads to greater justice for all" (305).

Mountford's concern with *classroom* communities parallels longstanding disciplinary critiques of discourse communities—"sites" or "social groups" defined by their speech or writing and shared norms and cultural values (Killingsworth 194). Borrowing features from linguistic studies' "speech communities" as well as Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities," discourse communities, which can include classrooms, have been criticized by scholars for

being too utopian, hegemonic, dematerialized, and abstract (Harris 14; Horner 114-16; Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff 541). In a change that implies her own disillusionment with the idea of discourse communities, Patricia Bizzell, an early proponent of the concept, eventually abandoned that term, adopting in its place Mary Louise Pratt's theory of "contact zones," "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (34), and later preferred "alternative discourses." Reflecting the profound change in her thinking, Bizzell refers to academic discourse communities in *Alt Dis* as "conventionalized . . . language-using practices," distinguishing them from the newer "mixed," "hybrid," "alternative," or "constructed" forms of academic discourse that she and her co-authors now embrace (1-3). Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior, dissatisfied with hegemonic views of professional and disciplinary discourse communities, argue that "it seems important to move [away] from a discourse community notion of disciplines as unified social and/or cognitive spaces" (152-53). For Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff, the Bazerman and Prior move involves a turn to genre theory: "Teaching students how to analyze genres can provide discipline and focus to the study of discourse communities" (542).

Because conversations in rhetoric and composition often tend to conflate the concept of community—extending it not only to classroom and discourse communities but also to communities in service learning and "activist intellectual" scholarship (Adler-Kassner 82)—I argue that many of the distinctive aspects of classroom communities have been lost. In other words, much of the research on "community" in the field over the last thirty years or so has tended to blur the distinction between classroom communities, discourse communities, and other communities beyond the classroom (e.g., sites of service learning). The one common thread, however, is that all three uses of "community" assume that nothing truly important occurs in the university classroom unless it connects with communities outside that classroom, which effectively works to sever the classroom and the community. Indeed, even in his much-discussed work on collaborative learning, Kenneth Bruffee proposes a classroom "community of status equals: peers" based on what one finds outside the classroom in business or professional settings (642). Yet, as Bruce Horner notes, "[T]he contradiction between this community ideal for the writing class and existing social relations in the academy is seen not as symptomatic of the social relations outside the academy but of the failure of the academy to conform to the 'real world' of business, government, and so on." The inevitable result, writes Horner, is that *"the pedagogy [in writing classes] is one of acculturation to that larger 'community'"* (44-45; emphasis added).

The Importance of Discourse

These problematic notions of community overwhelmingly suggest that the real dilemma is

composition studies' privileging of *community* over *discourse* (and related terms). Thus, even as he acknowledges "the extraordinary rhetorical power one can gain through speaking of community," Harris nonetheless presages the field's lack of comfort with the use of the concept, suggesting it is insufficient to capture the reality of contested cultural forces. Proposing the alternative metaphor of a city and, subsequently, a public, Harris writes, "We have other words—*discourse, language, voice, ideology, hegemony*—to chart the perhaps less immediate (though still powerful) effects of broader social forces on our talk and writing" ("Idea" 13, 20; Teaching 108-09). In outlining the field's longstanding problems with some aspects of discourse communities, James Thomas Zebroski states that "the difficulties with the concept . . . have become increasingly apparent with time" (575). Zebroski offers Michel Foucault's discourse theory as a "corrective" that captures a complicated "network of power relations that can—even must—be entered" (575-76). While discourse is often defined simply as "language in use" or "language practices," Zebroski, invoking Foucault, complicates that definition, stating that discourse is "the power of language practices to constitute the object of which they speak" (529). Drawing upon Foucault (*Archaeology; Discourse*), Zebroski suggests that discourse, with its emphasis on knowledge and power, can effectively reverse the nature and substance of what some (like Clark) have construed to be the inclusive practices of communities:

> Discourses create by constructing, but also *by excluding, by making invisible, by prohibiting, by silencing*. Discourses regulate. Discourses draw our attention to a certain aspect of the world and in that attending, for a time, create the objects of that world. Discourses are epistemic—that is, they have the power of helping to create the social worlds in which we dwell. But each construction of some aspect of the world entails the exclusion, prohibition, even denial of many other parts of the world and ways of seeing the world. Discourse excludes far more than it produces. A discourse narrows possibilities. (Zebroski 532, emphasis added)

As Zebroski states, Foucault's notion of discourse necessarily includes power relations and concerns "the power of language to influence and constrain in a group" (Jolliffe 101-03). According to a Foucauldian notion of discourse, the question becomes whether a community—and its discourse—is more inclusionary or exclusionary. Clark emphasizes the inclusionary meaning of community, asserting that we should teach writing and reading within a community as a means of validating difference: "We can do that by teaching first a rhetoric that directs people to make space for the assertions of others as a part of the process of composing their own" (73). Thus, Clark intimates that it is possible to create a cooperative community in the classroom as part of civic engagement, which understands and appreciates differences, for example, in gender, race, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Part of that

engagement implies that a community, by definition, is centered on already shared values. According to M. Jimmie Killingsworth, discourse communities, which embody many of the same features of classroom communities, "share a set of values and behaviors that strongly affect discourse practices" (195). When Clark says that a classroom is a cooperative community, he assumes that those common "values and behaviors" can be transformed into an appreciation of the differences of marginalized members. In other words, he sees the constructive, rather than the limiting, side of a Foucauldian discourse that can create "the social worlds in which we dwell" (Zebroski 532).

Mountford, on the other hand, has a view of community almost diametrically opposed to Clark's: "The classroom is not an oasis," she writes. "It is not neutral territory" (306). Mountford suggests, in fact, that the apparent unity of a classroom is generally the result of the teacher, who dispenses authority in the form of grades and whom students are essentially trying to please. Clearly, Mountford's assertion goes hand in hand with those exclusionary and silencing aspects of Foucauldian discourse based on power. Indeed, this same view of discourse is echoed by Susan Jarratt who, in "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," writes, "Even when teachers announce the desire to create a particular climate, they can't neutralize by fiat the social positions already occupied by their students" (113). In an article that makes a case for conflict in the composition classroom, Jarratt, with Foucauldian ennui, worries about the uneven power relationships brought about by gender, race, and class differences among students. Her concerns focus especially on the "kind of composition class that places a high priority on establishing a supportive and accepting climate in which students write primarily about personal experiences" (105-06). Jarratt cites, for example, the following situations that contravene Clark's idea of egalitarian classroom communities:

> Heterosexual male students read aloud personal narratives about sexual conquest; women and other male students remain silent. [. . .] A female student reports two years later that she now feels resentment at having been "manipulated into a position of vulnerability" in a student-centered composition class whose instructor was male. (105)

Jarratt, in her concerns about power and silencing, is focusing on the limiting aspects of discourse enumerated by Zebroski, who states that "the study of discourse is not just a study of a set of any old language practices, but rather of *regulated* language practices—that is, language practices that emerge from and are controlled by institutions" (Zebroski 535). In problematizing classroom communities, Jarratt describes the same disquiet about a regulated institutional discourse that pervades the writing classroom. In this case, that institutional discourse, based in power relations, regulates in a way that favors dominant discourses at the expense of marginalized ones.

Discourse and the Personal Narrative

In light of the scenarios described by Mountford and Jarratt—and echoed by others—how does a teacher create a discursive classroom space safe for students writing personal narrative essays about topics requiring personal disclosure? Is it possible to find a discourse that does more than limit or exclude possibilities? In evaluating the exclusionary aspects of discourse, I decided to complicate the idea of the personal narrative in a classroom community with a more nuanced view of discourse (see Foucault; Schroeder *et al.*; Zebroski). Put differently, my goal was to determine whether the exclusionary force of discourse could, in fact, be opened up and redeployed more productively in a classroom setting. Part of my project was to rethink the notion of the personal, which concerns Jarratt because of what she calls a traditionally feminist-expressivist model of pedagogy, one of those associated with classroom communities:

> The expressivist focus on student experiences and concerns is an important starting point for feminist pedagogy. But my double concern about those feminist compositionists who advocate such pedagogies is not only that they are positioned unequally in the expressivist, but that they spend too little time helping their students learn how to argue about public issues—making the turn from the personal back out to the public. (121)

Moving beyond the “feminist-expressivist” model Jarratt mentions, scholars like Amy Robillard, Karen Paley, Candace Spigelman, and some of the authors of *Alt Dis*, among others, have recently revisited the use of the personal in academic writing. In calling for a “more complex pedagogy of narrative,” Robillard argues that the personal narrative is inextricably linked with analysis and argument, the genres she sees as most often favored in academic settings: “Every experience I’ve had with narrative—both writing and reading—leads me to believe that we cannot distinguish between narrative and analysis, between narrative and argument” (82). Bizzell confirms the resurgence of the personal in *Alt Dis* when she writes, “[The new mixed forms] have combined elements of traditional academic discourse with elements of other ways of using language, admitting personal experience as evidence, for example, or employing cultural allusions or language variants that do not match the cultural capital of the dominant white male group” (2). In his conclusion to the same collection, Chris Schroeder also highlights the importance of personal narrative, stating that “storytelling—not just for aesthetic pleasure but for cultural mediation and existential negotiation—becomes one of the fundamental acts of intellectual work, a means to rereading and rewriting the world” (186).

Spigelman, reflecting on Karen Paley’s use of ethnographic narratives, cites the benefits of the latter scholar’s “reflective, multilayered, first-person approach” and suggests that

in Paley's work "competing narratives overlap and complicate each other; participants' contrary interpretations enrich her account and bolster readers' confidence in the multiple 'truths' that might be gleaned" (79). According to Spigelman, ethnographic writing has had an enormous influence on personal writing in the academy: "Contemporary ethnographic methods not only have influenced the way compositionists report their research but also have encouraged greater use of personal reference in all types of scholarly writing" (11). That observation by Spigelman reflects the important intersections of ethnographic writing and the personal in the field, as documented by Bizzell, Jane Hindman, and others.

Writing Ethnographic Narratives

Given the connections scholars outline between narrative and ethnographic writing, I devised an essay assignment using precisely that lens. I chose ethnographic writing because, as James Zebroski and Nancy Mack argue, "Ethnographic writing . . . reports on reality, the reality of our students and the people important in their lives, but it does so from the perspective of the insider in the community. The writer tries to understand how these people construct their world and their knowledge of it" (196). Zebroski and Mack's view of ethnographic writing is echoed by Linda Brodkey, who suggests that "[t]he point of ethnographic research is to examine how, in the course of fabricating their lives, individuals also weave their material cultures" (26). On a more practical level, I was inspired by the work of Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, who write in their introduction to their textbook *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research* that "[b]ecause conducting fieldwork allows students actual contact with people and cultures, often ones different from their own, students tend to commit more of themselves to the topics they investigate" (vii.). In attempting to limit the scope of student projects, I find Wendy Bishop's work persuasive in *Ethnographic Writing Research*, where the author labels the kind of fieldwork research her students do—"*mini-ethnographies*, something between trial runs and pilot projects and actual microethnographies" (73).

To make use of ethnographic writing while testing the idea of a classroom community featuring principles of "discourse," I assigned a different kind of personal narrative to students in my first-year writing class at the community college where I was teaching. In her discussions of alternatives to traditional academic discourse, Patricia Bizzell argues in *Alt Dis* that "[b]ecause academic discourse is the language of a human community, it can never be absolutely fixed in form. It changes over time" (1). The narrative I assigned assumed a heterogeneous class, a group of twenty-three students diverse at least in the observable categories of age, ethnicity, and gender, and consisting predominately of first-generation college students, most with either full-time or part-time jobs to pay for their education. Situated in a

growing city with more than a half million residents, the branch campus where I taught had the fewest number of students in the entire community college system and was also its newest addition. The class had spent the semester discussing current issues from the class reader, *America Now: Short Readings from Recent Periodicals*, one of several textbooks accepted by the humanities department for teaching composition. As part of our discussion of such issues as homelessness, marginalization, and ethnic and sexual minorities, we spent time confronting stereotypes and assumptions that often arose because of their socially constructed nature. The discussion of these issues led naturally to the following essay assignment:

> In light of our extensive reading in *America Now* and our discussions of the role of ethnographic writing in composition, your five-page essay will take an alternative form, inflected with the clash of cultures and discourses we have discussed throughout the semester. In this essay, you are asked to assume the persona of a member of a marginalized group in our culture and to write your essay from that person's perspective. While the precise contours of the marginalization may vary, do your best to choose a person whose location in the "borderlands" (Anzaldúa) would be easily recognized by others. Think about what you are choosing to reveal as you assume the *persona* of another person. How does the nature of the essay change as you write about someone else's experiences rather than your own? What does it say about the role of ethnographic research as well as the nature of discourse, based in power relations and various types of cultural knowledge?

In designing an assignment falling in the genre of Bishop's "mini-ethnographies," I also asked students to keep a journal of their fieldwork notes as well as reflections of their experiences. I wanted them to think deeply, too, about the nature of our class discussions, in which we debated, for instance, the discourse of homelessness. The often heated discussions focused on our cultural discourse around contested issues and how it ends up getting constructed in specific ways. The discussions also covered tips on how to write interview questions, which we later vetted in small groups as well as during individual conferences. In the process of problematizing how to assume the persona of someone else, the class thought critically about what it would be like to be asked questions as part of a marginalized group. As Janet Alsup writes in the collection *Ethnography Unbound: From Theory Shock to Critical Praxis,* "In a postmodern world where the Cartesian conception of truth has been dismissed and intellectuals now believe in a multidimensional or contextual truth, a self-reflexive researcher stance seems to be a necessity when seeking or creating new knowledge" (222). In encouraging that same reflexivity, Mountford asks students to focus on differences in the communication practices—that is, the *discourse*—of various professional groups, a practice Mountford sees as rife with potential conflict:

> Language practices are often the source of conflict and misunderstanding among groups. Students could be asked to analyze such conflicts that turn on differences in language use, power, and cultural orientation. In their papers students could analyze the communication patterns of groups [that] have been a part of the professional writing in their chosen fields. (307)

Mountford goes on to suggest that students conduct ethnographic studies of different groups as a way of identifying the differences in their communicative practices. Her decision to focus on discourse echoes Zebroski's suggestion that studying discourse uncovers the networks of power relations that discourse seeks to cover up and makes them subject to human intervention: "We begin to disrupt the ability of discourse to produce the seemingly stable, static, natural world removed from human transformation" (Zebroski 535).

In evaluating various approaches to the assignment, I turned to an article by Kate Ronald, "On the Outside Looking In: Students' Analyses of Professional Discourse Communities." In her work, Ronald asked students "to use rhetorical analysis of texts as a way to understand the professional communities they study and intend to enter" (131). In completing their projects, Ronald's students adopted the persona of a member of the profession they wished to join. For my part, I hoped that combining the goal of asking students to observe the discourse of others while also writing from their perspective would take the project beyond the narrower realm of academic discourse and complicate the limitations of a "community" in broader discursive settings. I also wanted to incorporate Jarratt's goal in personal writing of "making the turn from the personal back to the public." This idea hypothesizes that a public discourse encourages students to learn something about different cultures, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, among other forms of diversity, and accounts for Jarratt's concern that compositionists who adopt feminist-expressivist pedagogy "spend too little time helping their students learn how to argue about public issues" (121).

In addition, I hoped students would gain a better perspective of what it means to be marginalized in our society and how that marginalization often occurs through the power of discourse in its exclusionary, silencing, and limiting aspects (see Zebroski 532). Because the writing assignment contemplated a more complicated notion of discourse in the classroom, I asked students to select a member of a group traditionally considered marginalized in our society—the homeless or poor; gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals; women, and people of color, for example. I also focused on marginalized or excluded groups because, as Stuart Hall writes, in a nod to Foucault's notion of discourse, "There is no moment now, in American cultural studies, where we are not able, extensively and without end, to theorize power—politics, race, class, and gender, subjugation, domination, exclusion, marginality" (286). Thus, with this assignment I tried to bring composition in line with notions of cultur-

al studies as well as Foucauldian discourse, based on unequal power relations, silencing, and invisibility.

In selecting the personal narrative as an assignment, I not only considered the resurgence of interest in the personal in composition studies (see Robillard; Spigelman), but also Brodkey's focus on the importance of stories as part of ethnographic writing. In her article, "Writing Ethnographic Narratives," Brodkey asks:

> Who tells stories? Who listens to them? What stories are being told? What stories are being heard? Where and when are stories told? These are questions that might well guide research and remind us to include the narratives told to ethnographers, the narratives they themselves tell, and those that other researchers tell. (47)

By asking students to adopt the persona of their subjects, I expected that they would discover useful aspects of narrative and discourse—in this case, learning about the way stories as well as language practices in different cultures are inflected with power and knowledge and the often invisible perspectives of the marginalized, the subjugated, the powerless. I also wanted the assignment to avoid the harmful or overly sanitized aspects of communities that scholars like Harris, Mountford, and Horner have brought to light. More important, I sought to test whether the exclusionary aspects of discourse could be recognized by students as they assumed another persona and then, in turn, altered or rethought their subject positions as they wrote in an unfamiliar or alternative discourse.

In discussing some of discourse's exclusions, I asked students about the ways in which they may have felt marginalized themselves in the past and how their status might affect the kinds of questions they asked their subjects. While students readily volunteered some of their own experiences as part of disenfranchised groups—ethnic minorities or older women returning to school and the workforce, for example—they were reluctant to consider themselves "marginalized," and only with prompting did they recognize how their own experiences might help inform more careful, empathetic, and reflective questions. That class discussion also allowed me to raise ethical questions about the politics of representation and speaking for others. As Bishop suggests, "These issues arise regularly in ethnographic writing research: Who speaks for whom, how, why?" (149). At the same time, we reviewed some of the ethical considerations involved in interviewing subjects and reporting their statements accurately and

> "allowed me to raise ethical questions about the politics of representation and speaking for others"

without bias. One question students asked was how to take accurate notes: whether it was necessary to use a tape recorder (an option some chose) or whether handwritten notes would suffice. We also discussed three ethical considerations included in Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's *Fieldworking*, namely, to respect participants by allowing them to make an informed decision about whether to participate ("respect for persons"); to protect participants from harm and potential loss ("beneficence"); and to choose participants fairly and without "creating undue pressure" ("justice") (142-43).

Student Response to the Narrative Assignment

Given the large demographic diversity in the class, I encouraged students to find their own subjects for the assignment. In asking students to locate these individuals, I started with an invention activity to generate as broad a group of potential interviewees as possible. We brainstormed a list of people who might serve as possible subjects, which they then discussed in groups. While we formed classroom groups to discuss almost every aspect of the assignment, students did not work collaboratively in interviewing subjects. Certainly, collaborative pedagogies are often adopted to promote more democratic relations in a classroom (see Clark). In his discussion of collaborative pedagogies, Bruffee states, "All that is new in collaborative learning, it seems, is the systematic application of collaborative principles to that last bastion of hierarchy and individualism, the American college classroom" (647). Yet as Bruffee himself recognizes, the classroom must be "organized appropriately" for collaborative learning to succeed. Otherwise, he warns, the practice can "perpetuate, perhaps even aggravate, the many possible negative efforts of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality" (652). Because students in the course offered widely differing views on social issues—including, for instance, a divide over who is responsible for an individual's homelessness—I realized that Pratt's "clash of cultures" could be used productively for collaborative writing. Nevertheless, as Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford acknowledge in *Single Texts/Plural Authors,* "Just as collaborative writing potentially challenges the hegemony of single, originary authorship, so do a mix of historical, social, theoretical, and pedagogical forces all centered on a destabilized author/writer" (119). In our course, that combination of forces was discourse and its ability to disrupt and destabilize conventional thinking.

The list of individuals my students chose to interview was diverse and challenging: one male student interviewed a bisexual woman; several chose members of the gay and lesbian community as subjects. Another male student took on the persona of a breast cancer survivor, and a few students interviewed the homeless or disabled. One student talked to a woman forced by birthright not to marry but instead to take care of her aging parents; anoth-

er interviewed a victim of domestic violence. Several students interviewed those who, as children, had been abused and removed from their parents' homes. Throughout the course of their research and subsequent writing process, students wrote journals about their feelings and experiences. Those journals, along with my observations during the crucial peer review process, form part of the basis for my discussion of this experimental assignment.

The first important barometer of student response to the assignment were the peer review groups in which students read and commented on each others' drafts. Although my normal practice had been to allow students to choose their own peer review groups, this time I assigned groups on a random basis. In their discussions, students seemed to feel the assignment was productive; they talked passionately about what they had learned about their subjects. Fellow students asked them questions about the identity they had assumed, based on the drafts they had written. They wanted to know more about the lives of the subjects they had interviewed. In subsequent journal entries, I learned that students felt at ease with the peer review process; many admitted they felt they learned more by adopting a persona than they would have in writing about their own experiences. Most important, student discussion of their writing in the context of an assumed persona was an exercise in discourse. While discourse can narrow possibilities, as Zebroski explains, it can also serve to expand or construct new ways of seeing by revealing the support mechanisms that make discourse possible. "By making visible these supportive mechanisms," Zebroski writes, "we do the very thing that the discourse exists to prevent: we make it visible, we de-naturalize it, its prohibitions, its exclusions and its taboos" (535). A few student comments reinforce the way the ethnographic assignment made discourse visible:[1]

> My experience with the writing workshop was helpful. I don't know what I would have felt if I were describing my life to people I don't really know. I am not the kind of person to just let my problems out in the open. I probably would have chosen a topic like a dog's life or something. [. . .]

* * *

> The narrative essay workshop felt very comfortable. I thought it was much better to do the essay on somebody else. I would have felt less comfortable if it were to be my own identity. First, the subject would be completely different since I have not experienced the problems my interviewee did. Also, if it were my identity, I wouldn't have liked for many people to read about it.

These responses suggest students were able to reflect critically upon the narratives and the discourses of the subjects they interviewed. Indeed, I saw evidence of this in my observations of the collaborative groups, where students eagerly responded to questions

1. All student writing referred to in this article is used with the students' permission.

about the lives of the subjects they had interviewed. Students talked about issues like homelessness, homosexuality, sexual abuse, and breast cancer with an openness that—if I'm reading their journal comments accurately—would have been difficult, or impossible, had those issues been their own. Furthermore, the workshop discussions illuminate the way in which discourse can be exposed and made visible along with "its prohibitions, its exclusions and its taboos" (Zebroski 535). This can be inferred from student comments about their perceived reluctance to engage with these issues had they reflected their own experiences. In essence, students were recognizing the power of discourse to construct the way we think about taboo or prohibited subjects like homelessness, incest, or homosexuality. By looking at the objects of discourse through an alternate lens, they were able to "try on" exclusions or taboos while maintaining a critical distance from them. How else, it seems reasonable to ask, might someone get closer to discourses of exclusion and taboo if one does not experience them personally? In this case, I argue, students' apparent distance from their subjects paradoxically worked to bring them even closer to the subject matter at hand.

Beyond the writing workshop, I wanted to gauge the overall effectiveness of the assignment based on the discourse students used. I asked students to write about what they had learned from their projects, and below are some sample responses that suggest the way in which discourse moves from what Foucault sees as a prohibition to a more epistemic function—one that creates alternative ways of "rereading and rewriting the world" (Schroeder 2002, 186). The first set of responses suggests the more inclusionary aspects of discourse enumerated by Clark— those that work toward validating difference:

> I had the opportunity to put myself in another person's shoes and really see what it is like to be in such a situation. Plus, it gave me the opportunity to get to know a person that otherwise I probably would have never met. [. . .]
>
> * * *
>
> I don't believe I would have ever chosen being a woman in the narrative essay. I would possibly have been a sports hero. What a life they have! The experience of writing from another person's point of view has led me to an understanding that there's more to understand about others. Everyone has a unique story and most really have a lot to say.

These student responses lend some support to Clark's claim that one can create an inclusionary community by asking students "to make a space for the assertions of others as a part of the process of composing their own" (73). Clearly, at least on one level, the responses suggest that students did use difference as a way to construct their understanding of the language or discourse of someone else. Yet the responses complicate that premise at the same time. The idea of a shared discourse community implies a shared set of values and

behaviors, according to Killingsworth. While students maintain a critical distance that seems to include an appreciation for the values and behaviors of others, they do not necessarily embrace or "share" them. The fact that one student apparently still hopes to emulate the life of a sports hero implies a disconnect between his values as a male who admires sports stars and those of the woman he interviewed, who appears to remain somewhat removed from him even after he assumed her persona. Therefore, the evidence complicates the idea of "inclusion" and seems to suggest, as Zebroski notes, that "each construction of some aspect of the world entails the exclusion, prohibition, even denial of many other parts of the world and ways of seeing the world" (532).

The second set of responses has to do with the way the private becomes public, a goal of the discourse Jarratt hopes to achieve by asking students to discuss public issues:

> The identity I assumed was not one I would ever want to experience nor can I begin to understand [the daughter's] reasoning, let alone his [that of the father, an alleged perpetrator of incest]. However, I felt quite comfortable discussing this issue as did she. I guess that's because I, myself, was not at all surprised because [incest] is a very common problem among daughters and fathers. In all honesty, when I was in high school—no kidding either—I would bet that seven out of ten girls experienced this very situation. I cannot tell you how many times I heard and knew of this happening. . . . This is a problem ten times worse than, say, "date rape." It occurs more often than not. [. . .]
>
> * * *
>
> In rewriting my narrative essay, I got a third look at what it is like to be homeless and to have to struggle like this man does. It was and still is very heartbreaking to read over my papers. I am the kind of person who feels deeply about this topic. I know that other people don't really care because they figure that if he/she got themselves into this situation, they can get themselves out of it. The first time writing this, in my mind, I was already thinking to myself all of the things that I can do to stay away from all of the awful things this man has been through. I feel very proud of my essay, knowing that this is the best essay I've written all year long. I also know that I couldn't have done it without this man who was kind enough to share his life story with me. [. . .]

These students echo a common refrain in their discussion of the assignment, citing the benefits of seeing life from another individual's perspective, a perspective on the borderlands between private and public. The student who made a connection between the stories of incest she had heard about in high school, those of the girl and father she interviewed, and her own "story" about incest being "more serious than, say, 'date rape'" shows a turn in what

was a private issue toward a public one. Clearly, the result is consistent with Jarratt's vision of a composition course in which students "come to identify their personal interests with others, understand those interests as implicated in a larger communal setting, and advance them in a public voice" (121). Also present is Jarratt's "weave" of public and private issues, a concept she borrows from Gayatri Spivak, who writes that the "[private] is the weave, or texture, of public activity" (qtd. in Jarratt 124). This Spivakian weave is present in the second respondent quoted above, who writes that "[t]he first time writing this, in my mind, I was already thinking to myself all of the things that I can do to stay away from all of the awful things this man has been through." The way the student makes the public issue personal is a weave that runs throughout many of the essays and suggests the reciprocal influence of public and private interests in this assignment.

The third category of response is reflected below and involves the relationship between dominant ideologies and identity, sometimes complicated by personal issues students would like to examine in greater detail:

> The subject I chose was different from what I [would have] chosen because he had to be homeless for a few months. I would have written about when I was carjacked at gunpoint. His suffering lasted for a few months and he was able to escape the terrible situation. He has the memories and worries it will happen again, but he has no real lasting effect. For me, I have the memories, and I always worry about it happening again. For me, going out in public, especially at night, is very difficult. . . . This essay has made me see how people who are homeless want to work, for the most part. They have no other choice and really can't do anything about it.

This student's response introduces a thread that runs throughout many of the essays: the recognition of how dominant ideologies shape attitudes toward race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity. In this instance, the student who assumed the persona of the homeless man seems to acknowledge a type of "blame-the-victim" ideology. Part of his realization that "people who are homeless want to work" (as well as his qualification of that statement) may have been informed by a heated classroom discussion in which many students expressed their belief that the homeless could easily find employment "because there are lots of jobs out there for anyone willing to work." For the "homeless" writers, students who wrote about incest, child abuse, and other family dilemmas, as well as most others in the class, there seemed to be an acknowledgment—never stated explicitly—of the workings of power relationships within society. The marginalized, the excluded, are where they are partly because of their relative lack of power in society. The student acknowledges this aspect in writing about the homeless man he interviewed: "They have no other choice and really can't do anything about it."

The student's conclusion, of course, does not obviate the need to address his cautionary statement about wanting to write about his own carjacking, a concern that calls to mind Foucault's *The Discourse on Language*, where the author writes that access to discourse is not granted equally to everyone in society:

> [N]one may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so. More exactly, not all areas of discourse are equally open and penetrable; some are forbidden territory . . . while others are virtually open to the winds and stand, without any prior restrictions, open to all. (224-25)

Foucault's cautionary note about unequal access to discourse parallels my student's desire to write about his own carjacking. Despite the way in which students learn about the constructive and silencing aspects of discourse in this essay, does the goal of creating a safe classroom space effectively prevent some students from narrating their own stories, thereby restricting their access to discourse? Does the ethnographic assignment teach them that some areas of discourse are inaccessible to or impenetrable by some, depending on one's position in society? Is discourse "forbidden territory" when one has not gained a proper entrée to social norms? By eliminating some of the falsely democratizing aspects of the community—ones that make it difficult for students to feel a true sense of openness during an assignment like the personal narrative—do we nonetheless open ourselves to the potential silencing of student voices?

While the assignment does, in a sense, narrow some possibilities, that is the very nature of Foucauldian discourse; therefore, I argue that students were not silenced by writing about the experiences of someone else. In fact, the narratives they wrote were, in a real sense, their "own" stories, answering the questions Brodkey's ethnographer poses: "Who tells stories? Who listens to them? What stories are being told? What stories are being heard?" (47). These stories were the students' interpretations of the lived experiences, the lived culture of another individual. However, by focusing the essay around discourse, the

> "it exposed the normalizing social narratives related through discourse—narratives of homelessness, illness, incest, and gender, for instance—opening them to fresh examination"

ethnographic assignment fundamentally shifted the genre of the personal narrative; it exposed the normalizing social narratives related through discourse—narratives of homelessness, illness, incest, and gender, for instance—opening them to fresh examination and inscribing them with new meanings.

Toward an Alternative Discourse

In *Alt Dis*, editors Patricia Bizzell, Christopher Schroeder, and Helen Fox attempt to sketch the parameters of "alternative," "mixed," "hybrid," or "constructed" discourse along with other collection contributors. While it is difficult to define precisely the contours of this alternative discourse, the prelude to *Alt Dis* suggests it is a blending of more traditional academic discourse with, for instance, nonstandard dialects or exhibiting, according to the editors, "stylistic, cultural, and cognitive elements from different discourse communities" (ix). In her article from the same volume, "The Intellectual Work of 'Mixed' Forms of Academic Discourse," Bizzell describes the way in which such alternative discourses are gaining an entrée into the traditional province of Standard English:

> [S]lowly, but surely, previously nonacademic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form new 'mixed' forms. These new discourses are still academic, in that they are doing the intellectual work of the academic—rigorous, reflective scholarship. . . . I think these new, alternative or mixed discourse forms are gaining ground because they allow their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse" (2-3).

The essays students wrote in my course reflect features of the new "mixed" discourse. In taking on the personas of their subjects, students experimented with style (e.g., the use of rhetorical questions, anaphora, and sentence fragments), incorporated features of nonstandard dialects (e.g., the colloquialisms of children and teenagers), and reflected the cultures of the marginalized individuals they interviewed (e.g., a male student whose prose captured the feminist culture of disease). The essays represent "alternative" discourse in another sense, as well. In her reading of Brodkey's article "Writing on the Bias," Spigelman is persuaded that the personal operates subjectively in that different narrators would write alternative versions of the same story. In analyzing this constructed nature of discourse, Spigelman concludes that "we need not, or more accurately, cannot expect that our students' personal accounts will capture their 'true' experiences" (66). For Spigelman, then, alternative discourse includes a crucial element of my classroom assignment: students, by adopting a different persona, write alternative versions that may be as "true" as any version they would write of their own experiences. In writing this constructed or alternative version, students blend their own academic discourse with the cultural and sometimes nonstandard discourses of subjects belonging to

different discourse communities. How can we say, in the end, that these alternative discourses are any less legitimate than a version based on their own experiences?

The students' narratives represent some of their most complicated writing during the semester and incorporate a blend of academic and nonacademic discourses. The excerpts below show how they wrestled with discourse, "rereading and rewriting the world" (Schroeder 186) in a way that avoided the "stable" and "static" world that Zebroksi argues the power of discourse normally produces. The excerpts illustrate what Schroeder means when he proposes "constructed literacies," a form of alternative discourse that he says "bring together competing and context-specific discursive practices into integrated acts of intellectual work" (186). In explaining his call for constructed literacies as a form of alternative discourse, Schroeder describes their pedagogical value: "From the perspective of constructed literacies, my function is to learn to listen to, and to encourage, the telling of these stories" (186). Here are some of the stories my students told accompanied by my analysis of their writing.

> [Emily assumed the persona of a homeless man.]
>
> Today I wake up, wondering if I will be able to feed this empty, growling, starving stomach of mine. This is a thought that goes through my head every day. I walk with my head down, hoping and praying that I will find some loose change on the floor. I sit in the hot sun on a corner holding my sign with the best words I can think of written on it. People passing by, not caring, not even looking my way, as if I weren't even there. Sometimes I wonder, "Why am I here?" I know that people think I am just lazy and don't want to get a real job, but they don't understand. If I were to apply for a job, what address would I put down? The second tree at the park? What phone number do I write down? The pay phone at Circle K? Nobody wants to hire a person who doesn't have a home where they can take showers, rest, and freshen up. Employers want clean shaven, nicely dressed employees.

Emily's writing from a homeless man's point of view is a good start in her effort to capture her subject's voice. The perspective of her homeless subject is clear as she attempts to show the reality of his world with intimations of his daily existence (e.g., walking with his head down; carrying on an interior dialogue in asking why he is in this situation; indicating the material reality of not having a physical address to list when he applies for a job). In this instance, then, Emily seems to uphold the Foucauldian notion of discourse creating the objects of the world—specifically, a world that seems hopeless, even Sartrean, because of the man's inability to extricate himself from his situation. Yet Foucault also discusses the exclusionary aspects of discourse. In his interpretation of Foucault, Zebroski writes that "each construction of some aspect of the world entails the exclusion, prohibition, even denial of many other parts of the world and ways of seeing the world" (532). In that respect, it seems, Emily's

writing could do more. While the persona Emily adopts seems believable, the homeless man also seems narrow, limited by his recitation of little more than the commonly accepted stereotypes about homelessness. What seems excluded in Emily's portrayal, then, is a sense of what constitutes her subject outside of his homelessness. For example, is there any sense of hope or aspiration he may have for a different future? The discourse of homelessness adopted here seems to exclude or deny a fuller accounting of the man's life. To bring in what seems excluded or prohibited by the discourse itself (for instance, the potentially positive aspects of meeting others in a similar situation) would make the writing richer and more complex, without relegating it to the common assumptions and stereotypes that control most cultural discourse about homelessness. Such a balance would help to bring out a fuller notion of Foucauldian discourse.

Jessica chose to interview a woman who, as the youngest daughter in a traditional Mexican family, was forced not to marry, but instead to care for her parents until they died, and, after their death, for her younger brother, who has Down Syndrome.

> For my graduation from junior high, I fixed the best dress I could find among my clothing and accepted an invitation from a boy in my class to go to the party, and since all my older brothers and sisters were allowed to go, I didn't think it would be a problem. Boy was I wrong! I asked for permission to go a few days before the dance. I was never given a "yes" or a "no"; instead, my mother sat me down and told me, "You are not going to go to any parties from now on." Her eyes were so cold and hard that they froze my tears before reaching my eyeballs. I asked the burning question that was killing me in silence: Why? What came out of her lips was what amounted to a life sentence. She explained to me that since I was the youngest of all her daughters, my responsibility was to take care of her until she died. She continued, saying there was no point in my going to parties or meeting people, especially boys, because I was not to have a boyfriend and I was never to get married, because she was planning on living for a long time. [. . .]
>
> I am 62 years old now and even though I don't have a family of my own, I have a miracle Down Syndrome kid under my care. He is 51 years old and still alive. That is the longest a Down Syndrome kid has ever lived. I think he is still alive because I gave him all the love that I always thought I would give to my own children.

This excerpt from Jessica's essay shows that cultural stories or narratives of power can effectively silence in ways unimaginable to a cultural outsider. Though on the one hand her narrative seems to be about the power and control exerted by a Mexican family, it is also clearly about far more: the inability of the daughter to use discourse to overcome her "life

sentence"; the relative silence, from what we can infer, of everyone around her (notably her siblings); and the way in which discourse conveys cultural stories and in doing so renders the listener powerless. In this instance, Jessica's subject was effectively rendered invisible by discourse, evident in the passive tense in which much of her story is written. Here, then, in an instance where discourse narrows possibilities, eliminating the ability of someone to construct discourse, to shape a different world. One thing Jessica might have tried to illuminate, however, is the way her subject's plight reveals not only the individual but the social power of discourse. Why was the woman unable to protest? What convinced her that she had no choice but to accede to the demands her mother imposed on her? Jessica's distance from the situation might have allowed her to address these questions in her essay. In this instance, adopting the persona of a marginalized other could have created more of a dialogic relationship between interviewer and subject and produced a more interesting account of discursive silencing. In addition, one recurring question is whether the woman Jessica interviewed ever resisted her destiny and tried to escape it, possibly when she was older. If not, how does the exclusionary power of discourse—the silencing aspect of language—prevent someone from finding a voice outside strong family or social pressures?

Laura wrote this account of a young girl whose mother, an alcoholic, often abandoned the children, a situation that led county employees to place the children in foster care.

> My auntie and uncle took us home. When we got there I was mad because I didn't want to stay. My house was dark; nobody was home. My uncle got mad. We went looking for my mom at the bars she goes to. We didn't find her, so we went home with my uncle and auntie. I was so happy. [. . .]
>
> We stayed at their house for about a week. Then my uncle took us to an appointment to see a lady. My aunt said the lady was going to ask us questions about our mom and for us to answer them honestly. We told the lady how our mom drinks a lot and how her boyfriend fights her, punching and kicking her and giving her black eyes and bruises on her body. My little brother told the lady how my mom's boyfriend had a gun pointed at her forehead and he said he was going to kill her.

It is clear that Laura has entered the classic area of discourse's "forbidden territory" (Foucault 225). Her account juxtaposes two difficult areas: a cultural taboo of child abandonment and the attempt to recount it through the eyes of a child. These difficulties manifest themselves in a rather unpolished writing style that imitates, in some respects, the innocent approach of a child, yet one, from the standpoint of the writing classroom, that would benefit from sentence combining or other efforts to increase writing maturity. Her excerpt reveals one of the potential dangers of an assignment emphasizing discourse: the limitations discourse imposes can result in similar restrictions on writing. Laura's essay makes us question

whether those areas of discourse that are not "equally open and penetrable" to everyone can end up limiting the nature and quality of writing. In addition, can Laura go only so far in her writing because of the cultural taboos of her subject matter? Perhaps more important, how can discourse capture the plight of taboo areas, open them up, and allow writers to portray them in a new light when we are constrained by the limitations imposed by social and cultural stigmas?

Todd interviewed a woman, then wrote as a breast cancer survivor.

> It was a warm summer morning when I first noticed it. The grass was green and the sky was blue. Birds were fluttering in the trees. That morning, like many before, was beautiful; but on that day—June 11—I found cancer in my body. [. . .]
>
> The day began like many others, with my regular morning routine of breakfast, coffee, and a shower. My routine was pleasant and my day had begun in the relaxed style I had perfected. With my breakfast and coffee finished, I jumped into the shower. Not paying particular attention to my bathing technique, which was habit, I noticed something odd. Under my arm, on the side of my left breast, I felt a lump. It was as if that moment stood still. [. . .]
>
> I checked and rechecked myself, not wanting to believe it was true. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I stared at my left breast and looked for the slightest abnormality. Although I couldn't see it, to my horror, I could feel it. A hard mass, about the size of a small marble, could be felt when I pressed it with my fingertips. It wouldn't go away despite the angle of my examination. I knew then it was real.

Todd's essay was one of the most successful in the class. One of the important elements of his essay was his use of an alternative or mixed discourse, blending elements of traditional academic discourse with the personal in a way that expresses how lives can change overnight with the discovery of an unexpected illness. The critical importance of how we react to the seemingly random nature of this type of event is the argument of Todd's essay. His use of the personal to make this argument constitutes an effective use of the new "mixed" discourse in that his overall claim rests largely in the narrative he constructs. One move Todd could have made—a move that would have benefited from greater development in all the essays—is a fuller exploration of the emotional aspects of his subject's plight. Certainly, the use of a mixed or hybrid discourse could have produced more internal reflection. One concern I have is that the nature of the alternative discourse essentially allowed, or perhaps encouraged, students to avoid some of the more complicating aspects of discourse in emotionally fraught areas. I question, too, whether this is one of the things we have to sacrifice in using a discourse approach to avoid the problematic aspects of community outlined by many scholars in the field.

Reflections and Implications

In his landmark essay "Social Class as Discourse: Mapping the Landscape of Class in Rhetoric and Composition," James Zebroski reminds readers of the significance of one of Foucault's goals in developing an archaeology of knowledge: "the disabling of what is arguably discourse's most important effect: its ability to naturalize the social world, to make its social construction invisible" (568). In their writing assignment, students came face to face with the way discourse renders others invisible and then normalizes that invisibility. By interviewing their subjects, they were able to look behind discourses of marginalization and, in turn, to reflect on the way the marginalized are excluded or silenced in our culture. Through their ethnographic writing in which they assumed the persona of someone else, thereby shifting their own perspectives, they had the opportunity to try on—and potentially disrupt—the discourses of marginalization that they had previously taken for granted.

> "came face to face with the way discourse renders others invisible and then normalizes that invisibility"

Another important result of the assignment was the reconsideration of the idea of community in the classroom. The narrative essay seemed to avoid some of the negative aspects of community that Bizzell, Harris, Jarratt, Mountford, and others have delineated. In her attempt to find a way to resolve the potential problems with classroom communities, Mountford suggests that "[t]eaching culture, not community is, I think, a way to be responsible to the deep differences represented by the gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation of our students without placing individual students at risk" (307). I would revise Mountford's goals by stating that teaching *discourse* should be the goal. I argue my assignment achieved that goal and, at the same time, accomplished much more. In setting forth her vision of a composition classroom free of student disclosures that invite recriminations, Jarratt writes:

> I envision a composition course in which students argue about the ethical implica tions of discourse on a wide range of subjects and, in so doing, come to identify their potential interest with others, understand those interests as implicated in a larger communal setting, and advance them in a public voice. (121)

I suggest that the assignment achieved Jarratt's vision by introducing students to alternative forms of discourse that could adumbrate a far more public circulation of their work. One change I would make is to aim for the students' writing to reach broader audi-

ences in the public sphere.

Even though the assignment achieved a number of my original purposes, I would revise it in the future by asking students to study the discourse of marginalized groups outside of the research they conducted during their individual interviews. In other words, to help students support their claims with more evidence, I would expand the representations of marginalization to include studying a broader sample of marginalized voices. For instance, I would encourage Todd to read more of the voices of breast cancer survivors or Emily to read more about the voices of the homeless. I would also place more emphasis on reading works by Foucault to help students obtain a more thorough theoretical grounding in his theories of discourse. The reason for reading the original source is that Foucault's work in and of itself gives insights into discourse that might complicate the notions of prohibition, exclusion and taboo that he writes about. It would also help students understand discourse as "the power of language practices to constitute the object of which they speak" (Zebroski 529).

I would also include *Alt Dis* as a required class text to give students more examples or models of incorporating alternative discourses in their writing. In that way, they would have a better understanding of some types of alternative discourse already being used in the academy. In addition, I would ask the class to study more of the challenges raised about ethnographic research and writing and the problems of speaking for others; this type of research would result in more in-depth discussions of the researcher's ethical responsibilities. Complicating some of these issues would make the entire assignment more relevant to students who adopt the persona of a marginalized Other. Doing so could also lead naturally to a follow-up assignment in which students would write a narrative about their own lives. This second essay would not only address but complicate the idea of silencing voices, asking students to question whether they have ever silenced themselves through their use of discourse.

Although the intent of the assignment was to write a personal narrative by adopting the persona of another individual, the experience with discourse that resulted from group and class discussions certainly evoked Jarratt's idea of a "public voice." Under the guise of a personal narrative, students argued about public issues involving their work, the representation of their subjects' voices, and the plight of those they interviewed. Those public issues fell consistently under the auspices of "discourse," regardless of whether that discourse originated inside or outside our classroom "community." The assignment thus resulted in a greater interanimation of personal and public issues, and the deployment of discourse in a way that allowed the differences of marginalized people to be safely and passionately discussed.[2]

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Reframing the Seductive Narrative of "Success" in Open Admissions

The Seductive Narratives of "Success"

THE NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS THAT HAVE DRIVEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP for the last century have also pervaded the discourses of higher education, even those of open access. Perhaps the influence of the private sector should be no surprise as many community colleges are products of the 1960s when a new American community college opened its doors each week just as the country experienced unprecedented economic growth (Floyd 218). Nevertheless, such narratives deserve examination, especially as they raise necessary questions about student agency and institutional motivation.

The typical hero narrative serves as one example. In the open-access institution, this narrative can take the shape of the student who "succeeds" despite her working-class background. It runs parallel to other narratives currently orbiting around immigration, class, and race. I've cringed during the last four commencements as my community college's president shouted into the microphone to the graduates: "How many of you were told you weren't 'college material' [deafening applause from audience]?" His question underscores the presumption that those students in their caps and gowns needed to be saved from their pre-determined futures because, until they found our community college, they were not going to be able to achieve the trappings of "success" in the conventional, middle-class sense: job, house, car, vacation, etc. (I do not place the word "success" in quotation marks to be pejorative; rather, I place it in quotes throughout this piece as a reminder that the "success" sold to students is a story—a fantasy—and when I use quotes around the term, I am implying all that the unreal fantasy means.)

Narratives of "success" make those invested in a more critical pedagogy[1] uncomfortable because they place the institution in the position of the hero and the teacher (as the institution's agent) in the de-facto position of the hero. Imagine no graduation, though. Without the cap and gown, is anyone the hero of the narrative? Or is it only through successful completion that the narrative can be fulfilled, as with most predominant cultural narratives (think American Dream)? And are we, as institutional agents, easily seduced by this Hollywood-style ending? Who wouldn't be?

I propose, though, that this blind drive toward "success" in open access can be damaging to the health of writing instruction. While campaigns for student "success" appear benign on the surface and indeed provide valuable data for quantitative analysis, their overreliance on the rhetoric of "success" results in devaluing any progress not measurable through persistence and attainment (retention and graduation), constructing a simplistic and entrenched middle-class notion of achievement. "Success," then, becomes a false, institutional construct reified through the language of national initiatives. In these cases, successful/unsuccessful students act within a self-reproducing narrative in which "success" is the finish line at the end of a race 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. In his article "The Coming Apocalypse," Richard Miller presents a definition of modern education that reinforces these principles: "Finding the limits of what we know is an abiding activity of higher education and an essential part of clearing space and time for future endeavors to better understand the human condition. But equally important is the effort to get to work in that newly cleared space" (148). Too often students in community colleges students miss the opportunity to sit in that space and "work," as Miller says, because they are moving so quickly through their studies.

On my campus, "success" is a faculty code. It refers to how many students got through your composition courses in a given quarter—what was your "success rate"? The answer one offers may prompt a raised eyebrow if the number is too high or too low. Less anecdotally, the use of "success" as a defining element in community colleges can be traced back some years in open-access scholarship. In 1994 Marlene Griffith and Ann Connor, both community college faculty, called for a different definition of success that transcends the 1950s junior college concept "of linear progression [that] ignores the reality of our student population" (129). They articulate what those of us teaching in open access see every day: an interrupted pattern for the community college student may actually mean success in the end.

Thomas Mortenson calls this latter pattern the "educational pipeline" in his 2005 article "Measurements of Persistence." Students stall or move right through this pipeline often

1. I acknowledge that I use the term "critical pedagogy" perhaps loosely here. The spectrum of critical pedagogies ranges from the liberatory work of Paulo Freire (1970) to the critical citizenship work of Kurt Spellmeyer (1993) to the liberal democratic work of Nell Ann Pickett (1988). While disparate in their practice of critical pedagogy, I believe most of those who identify as critical pedagogues would be uncomfortable with the premise that they "saved" a student with education. As David Seitz argues so well in *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness: Practicing a Pedagogy of Humility*, the root of critical practice lies in the smaller, teachable moments that often go overlooked. Enacting a pedagogy that recognizes these moments, he says, "keeps both teacher and students attentive to the situations before them, particularly in the connections between the students' research and the multidimensional dynamics of the critical writing classroom" (235).

depending on the type of institution they attend and the selectivity of the admissions process. For instance, highly selective colleges showed a 91.6 percent retention rate in first-year to second-year persistence, while open access colleges showed a 60.6 percent rate the same year. What his analysis of various data sets demonstrates, above all, is the malleability of data when considering persistence and time to degree. He notes, "College graduation rates for those who start college may be decreasing or increasing, depending on the data set used. Or, if one uses the longest data set (from the Census Bureau), college graduation rates may be unchanged over the last fifty years" (44).

Students in Mortenson's pipeline might not move in just one direction. Perhaps it could be useful to imagine the pipeline having valves and levers that create more of a maze-like flow, complete with disruptions and sharp turns. If we can imagine the pipeline as a narrative, such disruptions only work to make the story more interesting. Instead of becoming deterrents from a straight path, the disruptions become the stuff-of-life that make open-access students' lives so rich, and so complicated.

> "the disruptions become the stuff-of-life that make open-access students' lives so rich, and so complicated"

Marketing "Success"

Community colleges are peddling "success" to students through billboards and advertisements. This advertising discourse positions educational "success" as a marketable item before students walk onto campus. This position facilitates the construction of the student as consumer. In this way, "success" represents a lexicon of words designed to sell the institution and a version of the hero narrative to students. Tracing the use of terms like "success" can help us, as rhetoricians and educators committed to open access, mark a culture shift from an academic to an entrepreneurial and/or marketized model of higher education. How does the language of advertising position students within this marketized model? I suggest that the educational pipeline is sold as a product that is not congruent with how higher education operates once students are in school. We don't offer satisfaction, a warrantee, returns, or a money-back guarantee—the things consumers have become accustomed to in the marketplace.

The same phenomenon exists in other countries with different terms. In her 2008 critical linguistic analysis *Language and Power,* Andrea Mayr identifies that in Britain the term "enterprising" can be traced through job ads, university websites, and training literature to reveal how educational discourse has been transformed into managerial discourse. Mayr says

that the term "represents a culture change within business from bureaucratic to 'entrepreneurial' styles of management . . . . [I]t now permeates management discourse, which in turn has colonized the discourse of universities and many other public institutions" (28-9). She cites the University of Oxford as a primary example of embedding enterprise discourse into its advertising. One ad for Oxford states: "Among UK universities, Oxford is at the forefront of encouraging enterprise among students, teachers and researchers. It prides itself on its success in transforming enquiry and invention into commercial ventures" (30). "Enterprise" signifies the spirit of hard work and industrialism here, encouraged by the institution, which is also enterprising in finding funding. While Oxford uses the word "success" as well, notice that Oxford positions itself as the successful agent, not the student. The student is "enterprising."

Just as the word "enterprising" targets students in Britain, "success" targets students in United States advertising. For instance, billboards from Sinclair Community College in Dayton, OH, advertise:

"We Did It.
YOU CAN
www.sinclair.edu
Success Starts Here!"

The type is positioned to the right of a picture of three students wearing occupational uniforms. One woman wears medical scrubs, one man appears to wear a fire or police officer shirt, and the second man wears a polo-type, generic work shirt. Sinclair wants the synthetic personal pronoun "we" to represent these successful students and create camaraderie with future students, but it actually represents the institution in this ad. As Norman Fairclough, a critical discourse analyst who works with educational and other types of discourse, explains in *Language and Power,* pronouns such as "we" can signify a mass of people (128). However, in this case, the "we" represents the actual institution of Sinclair Community College, not individuals or a mass of people. These three students function as the corporate identity for the institution, as the model for "success" in their uniforms and in their occupational personas. The "YOU," again, refers to the mass of consumers; the students who want to be successful and to obtain occupations. Students may be targeted individually in the ad with the pronoun "YOU," but they function more as a collective customer base. And an insider/outsider attitude operates here, as well. Potential students, as the audience for the ad, are not part of the "we" because they have not "done it"—they have not yet succeeded. But they need education to succeed, like these three students, in order to be a valuable part of the workforce.

Sinclair is not alone. Many community colleges use "success" in their ads. Consider the following copy from Cincinnati State: "Go Ahead. Get There. It's All About Your Success."

North Carolina Community Colleges have an umbrella slogan for community colleges not just at one college, but for all colleges across the state: "Creating Success: North Carolina Community Colleges. Hope. Opportunity. Jobs." "Success" likewise begins at Metropolitan State Community College of Denver and Imperial Valley College, as their website logos indicate (Metropolitan State College: "Where success beings with you"; Imperial Valley College: "Where Success Begins").

"Success," as it is widely marketed by community colleges, sells education as a product. The tangible "success," narrative whether it be landing a job or transferring to a four-year institution, "begins" or "starts" at the community colleges that advertise it; yet, just because students begin that trek toward success, doesn't mean they finish. As the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) research reveals, fifty percent of entering students will not persist to the second year.

Students do not get to take home this product they may view as a durable good instead of a process, which could create disillusionment. Are students unhappy with the product they were sold, or are outside pressures too much to bear along with pursuing an education? Perhaps the reasons for lack of persistence are more complicated than we, or CCSSE, can imagine. The "success" narrative morphs into each student's unique situation after admission, making the ideal educational pipeline difficult to achieve and likewise difficult to trace in a survey, which I illustrate later in this article.

"Success": Persistence and Social vs. Cultural Capital

A reminder of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital helps to frame my later discussion of "success" and how it is constructed for institutions of higher learning through instruments such as the CCSSE. More background on CCSSE follows, but for the purposes of this discussion, CCSSE provides community colleges around the country with a survey instrument called the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE). Connecting persistence after the first quarter to the relationships between faculty/staff and students is part of CCSSE's mission.

Ryan Wells discusses precisely these relationship factors in his 2008 article, "The Effects of Social and Cultural Capital on Student Persistence: Are Community Colleges More Meritocratic?" He also points to the social and cultural capital that Pierre Bourdieu identifies in "The Forms of Capital" and uses those forms of capital as a lens through which to interpret data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study on persistence and attainment.

According to Bourdieu, social capital derives from the communities or networks in which a person interacts. A social network comprises the group or groups of people a person uses to gain footing, relationships, information, or knowledge within their realm of experi-

ence. Bourdieu states, "The reproduction of social capital is an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly confirmed and reaffirmed." (246).

Cultural capital, on the other hand, is the capital a person already has by virtue of their birth into a certain family and socioeconomic status, as Wells reads it. Yet Bourdieu breaks cultural capital into three categories: the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. Most appropriate to this discussion is the institutionalized state from which cultural capital emerges in the form of a degree. He explains how this cultural capital conferred by an institution then becomes economic capital, the very presumption on which both the SENSE survey and the "success" advertisements and logos are based. Bourdieu explains:

> With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time. (244)

Read through this lens, the SENSE survey constructs persistence in terms of a product – a piece of cultural capital to possess. Wells' reminder of Bourdieu's forms of capital and how they connect to open access is a welcome one, and I will apply it to the survey in what follows. But because Wells conflates the two categories (social and cultural capital) into one category in his analysis, I worry that he may generalize data into one larger, broader category than is useful. For instance, from the data the survey gathers, CCSSE claims one of the biggest factors in persistence remains the social networks students develop within the institution. This social capital is very separate from the cultural capital that constructs students' lives and institutional goals in Bourdieu's terms. By keeping social and cultural capital separate, unlike Wells, I allow space to account for students' multi-faceted identities and their complicated reasons for non-persistence.

> "space to account for students' multi-faceted identities and their complicated reasons for non-persistence"

Nevertheless, Wells supports his conclusion with data that seems true to my experience as an open-access educator: "Social and cultural capital have a smaller positive effect on persistence in community colleges than they do on persistence in 4-year institutions (i.e., individual background matters more at 4-year institutions, implying that community colleges may be more meritocratic)" (31).

So what role does social capital play in student persistence? According to *After Admission: From College Access to College Success*, authored by James E. Rosenbaum, Regina Deil-Amen, and Ann E. Person, social relationships and institutional structures hold equal responsibility for the lack of student persistence. They argue that complex institutional processes of registration and advising make it very difficult for students to persist when they are not insiders with social capital in the world of academia. By re-imagining institutional structures and making them more student-friendly as occupational and vocational colleges do, the authors argue that students may perceive they have a stronger social capital and feel more supported.

The social capital Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person want to create involves setting up structures for the first-generation college student to feel a part of the social network of higher education, assuming they will experience "success" as a result. Recommendations like those, though, rest on the understanding of "success" as persistence based on a feeling of belonging to the educational community. They find that "Community colleges use procedures that seem to be based on the assumption that students already have certain attributes – plans, motivations, information, social skills, and job search skills. Students who do not have them have difficulties in community colleges" (19). Yet, if students were attracted by the "success" ads on the websites and billboards that I discussed above, perhaps they do not value an undergraduate social network. Perhaps they came for the product: the uniform, the job, the successful transfer. In fact, Rosenbaum, et al. say as much: "All students are admitted to college, but remedial programs are the only accommodation for the new students. Obviously, this is not working. Students mistakenly expect to get a degree, when in fact, large portions fail every year, blame themselves, and do not realize these failures were easily predictable" (23). While Rosenbaum et al. blame institutional procedures for such failures, I suggest a critical analysis of the language that seeks to seduce students to the community college and retain them once there may reveal another area of blame.

CCSSE and SENSE

To investigate the narratives of "success" that pervade the public discourse of open-access institutions, I attend specifically to a discourse that perpetuates this language: the language of a predominant national survey created by the CCSSE. Headquartered at The University of Texas at Austin, CCSSE began its work to benchmark student learning and "success" in 2001 with the support of organizations including The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lumina Foundation for Education. These two funders also support the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which has been administered to first- and second-year students at four-year schools since 1998. While the two surveys have similar aims (to measure effective practice in

education and connect those practices to larger institutional outcomes), their method of delivery and target audience are different. NSSE direct mails the survey to students, but CCSSE asks faculty to administer surveys during class time. CCSSE makes results public, while NSSE's results are public at an individual institution's discretion. Community colleges can more readily compare their performance with peer institutions as a result. Each survey has an advisory board and is led by one director who is supported by an extensive research and administrative staff.

My college participates in CCSSE initiatives and the SENSE survey (Survey of Entering Student Engagement), as do 120 other community colleges in thirty states, according to CCSSE. For several years in a row, I received a big manila envelope around the third week of the quarter containing surveys to distribute to my students during class. They were accompanied by a strongly-worded letter from my assistant provost: the surveys must be administered during a certain week; they must be returned; they are important! The first few times, too busy with grading or planning or my stuff-of-life, I just complied. By the third time, though, I actually took out one of the surveys and read it. I started to wonder what the survey was measuring and if it was indeed possible to measure students and their eventual success or ability to succeed. Because people subscribe to different understandings of "success," it becomes a slippery point to measure through the course of a term, and I had to imagine, a broad, national survey.

CCSSE provides a myriad of assessment instruments from surveys to benchmarking to special focus groups, with the focus on student persistence and attainment—because the "success" for this initiative is defined as *persistence and attainment*. As two clearly measurable elements, persistence and attainment determine an institution's level of "success." According to CCSSE's mission statement, they provide a product in these assessment tools: "community and technical colleges need assessment tools appropriate to their unique missions and the characteristics of their diverse student populations. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is meeting that need" (CCSSE).

In the description of the SENSE survey, CCSSE explains:

> The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*) helps community and technical colleges focus on the "front door" of the college experience. Grounded in research about what works in retaining and supporting entering students, *SENSE* collects and analyzes data about institutional practices and student behaviors in the earliest weeks of college. These data can help colleges understand students' critical early experiences and improve institutional practices that affect student success in the first college year. (SENSE)

Once a college has the data from the survey, CCSSE wants them to use it to "improve

institutional practices that affect student success in the first college year," as stated above. What are the institutional practices that SENSE measures? According to CCSSE, the biggest impact on retention is the relationship students establish with faculty and staff. Therefore, the questions that SENSE asks students often deal with advising and relationship-building practices with faculty. However, the students who need this relationship spend little time on campus: the survey itself states that 76 percent of all students in community colleges enroll part-time, while only 24 percent enroll full-time.

Standard CCSSE measures of "success"—earning a degree, transferring to a four-year campus, or completing a certificate within a given amount of time (note the product-oriented nature of each item)—exclude those 76 percent of students. Often, those students do not follow the persistence pipeline to transfer or certificate. Can these 76 percent of students manage to persist without a strong relationship with faculty and staff? We know they often do.

Rhetorically, students are the audience for the survey, which is based on the premise that "When entering students perceive clear, high expectations from college staff and faculty, they are more likely to understand what it takes to be successful and adopt behaviors that lead to achievement" (CCSSE). As I alluded to earlier, (SENSE) is delivered to students of community colleges during the first few weeks of the quarter and hinges on a tacit understanding that "success" amounts to achievement, as evidenced from the mission statement quoted above. I suggest that this definition of "success" is a common, market-driven one that implies completion of a task, which could be viewed as contradictory to the cumulative knowledge building process of education. Reframing this notion may provide a more authentic vision of success.

The CCSSE's mission also involves helping community colleges assess their students and faculty—measuring them quantitatively so they can identify the obstacles to student achievement and use those numbers to validate federal and state funding for both institutions and initiatives. CCSSE sponsors or is connected to several "success"-based initiatives, such as the Starting Right Initiative for Student Success, the Entering Student Success Institute, and the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success. At one participating community college system, Lone Star, CCSSE's work has prompted opening a new office with a well-intentioned, yet seemingly nonsensical name using the term "success": the SEA (Success Encourages Achievement) Center.

Interestingly, CCSSE acknowledges its role, and perhaps its ambition, to shape the rhetoric and practice of "success" through the work of the survey. CCSSE says, "CCSSE and NSSE share a strong interest in institutional improvement and a strong companion interest in influencing the definition and public understanding of 'quality' in collegiate education" (CCSSE). In what follows, I address the following questions about the survey: How does the

survey language construct education as a product or perhaps even a commodity to be purchased? How does this commodification of education create dangerous implications for writing courses like those in my open-access college (and maybe in yours) that are deemed "gatekeeper courses?"

Benchmarking Success

In what follows, I analyze direct questions from the SENSE survey and connect that language to how the narrative of success is perpetuated. SENSE asks students questions in six categories, or benchmarks. The survey questions do not always specifically inquire about "success," but most, if not all, of the questions refer in some way to faculty or staff's impact on student persistence and success. The survey asks students to agree on five-point Likert scale.

In the "Academic and Social Support Network" Benchmark of SENSE, three specific questions target students' social network and hold implications for how students regard social capital:

"At least one other student whom I didn't previously know learned my name."

"At least one instructor learned my name."

"I learned the name of at least one other student in most of my classes."

If the students did not feel part of the social fabric of the institution, or perhaps if they cared if they were or were not part of this fabric (without Bourdieu's social capital), one would expect a lower rate of response to these questions. The response rate was fairly high, though. For instance, 81 percent of students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that another student learned his or her name; 86 percent of students "agreed/strongly agreed" that an instructor learned his or her name; and 85 percent of student responders learned the name of another student in his or her class. In the key findings summary, SENSE explains that, yes, "The majority of students respond positively to these survey items, reflecting the colleges' efforts to build support networks." SENSE continues in summative narrative by saying, "Still, there is evident room for improvement as institutions seek to ensure that all students get connected to the information, services and people that can contribute significantly to their success" (SENSE). Yet, would a stronger social network contribute to "success"? Over 80 percent of students report feeling connected, and yet half of all students do not persist to the second year. It seems that social capital could be less important than SENSE imagines.

In this way, perhaps the social capital aspect of persistence may be overestimated in the research and in SENSE. If students buy what the ads are selling, then they may not expect access to a social network. They expect "success" in the form of cultural capital (the degree), and they may not see belonging to social networks as a way to achieve that success. They expect their "success" to begin, as the ads say, when they take classes to obtain what they see

advertised on the billboard. In consumer terms, access to social capital might be a nice upgrade to the package, but it isn't in the base model product students have been sold.

> "education defies being defined as a product because it has so many spontaneous and unpredictable benefits"

However, education defies being defined as a product because it has so many spontaneous and unpredictable benefits. Using "success" and other market-driven terms to describe education creates the illusion of immutability. As Robert Haight contends in his article, "The Business Metaphor and Two-Year College Writing Instruction," the business metaphor so frequently used by business leaders, school administrators, politicians, and some educators themselves is attractive because it creates the illusion of certainty where there is uncertainty, sameness where there is difference, objectivity where there is subjectivity" (74). As Miller pointed out, the spaces of uncertainty and often discomfort can be the most active learning experiences.

The following statements from the survey directly refer to "success" in the High Expectations and Aspirations Benchmark of Effective Practice with Entering Students:

"The instructors at this college want me to <u>succeed</u>."

"I have the motivation to do what it takes to <u>succeed</u> in college."

"I am prepared academically to <u>succeed</u> in college."

By targeting students in the very earliest parts of their college experience, SENSE hopes to determine the biggest impacts on student persistence. The phrasing of question one, though, leads students to respond to a vague impression after a few weeks on campus rather than even one term's worth of relationship-building with faculty. For instance, at the point students take this survey, they may not have received feedback on an essay yet, which is one way writing teachers build rapport with students. Further, the question sets up an us/them dichotomy and undermines the very relationship that CCSSE deems elemental to student persistence. The question assumes that not everyone plays for the same "success" team here; instructors and students are not on the same side.

The results? Forty percent of students "strongly agreed" "that instructors at this college want me to succeed," and the majority simply "agreed" at 48 percent. According to these answers, 88 percent of entering students felt that instructors were not a roadblock to their success despite the fact that this question gave them a free pass to complain. They feel a part

of the social network, or at least they feel enough connection with their instructors to "succeed" in CCSSE's terms.

The next question about motivation garnered just as high scores. Ninety percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they had the "motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college," and 85.1 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they are "prepared academically to succeed in college." The majority of students view themselves as prepared, yet does that match faculty perceptions of newly entering students? Why do so many students see themselves as academically prepared and then do not persist?

In a recent 2008 presentation, Angela Oriano-Darnall, director of SENSE, echoed a statistic that reappears in literature across community college scholarship: "Community colleges typically lose half of their students prior to the second year." But 85 to 90 percent of students report they have the motivation and support to persist. It seems that most everyone except for the students themselves expects that they will not "succeed" in school. A more pressing question might be: Do students view themselves as learners who persist or as consumers who buy a product in this system? SENSE continues the advertisements' work of placing students in the customer position, as evidenced in the framing of the SENSE questions. For instance, consider the following three questions:

"A college staff member talked with me about my commitments outside of school (work, children, dependents, etc.) to help me figure out how many courses to take."

"An advisor helped me to select a course of study, program, or major."

The staff member, as the head of the noun phrase, does the work here—serving his or her customer. Imagine if the question were framed with the student at the head of the noun phrase: "I sought the help of a college staff member;" or "I spoke to an advisor." In these cases, the student would be positioned as the actor in the agree/disagree statements. As it stands, the SENSE survey linguistically constructs the student as the customer who receives the services. This construction just continues the pattern of student-consumer/institution-retailer. As consumers, they are certainly prepared to do the work—they've been practicing all their lives in a consumer-driven society. But once a student enters the pipeline, they discover their primary role is no longer that of a consumer but that of a learner, and they may be less prepared to assume that role in college than they imagine.

SENSE and the Writing Class

When SENSE asks students about writing and classroom work, it is generally about what their instructors do in the classroom. However, this is right in line with CCSSE's concern with the institutional practices that determine eventual "success" for students. The questions ask students to evaluate smaller-scale classroom practices, revealing SENSE's narrow conception of

assessment and understanding of what creates student "success." In the *Engaged Learning* Benchmark, students answer sixteen questions on a five-point, strongly agree/disagree Likert scale, including these three:

> "Prepare at least two drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in."
>
> "Participate in supplemental instruction (extra class sessions with an instructor, tutor, or experienced student)."
>
> "Receive prompt written or oral feedback from instructors on your performance."

Each question starts with an active verb to denote a process in which the student takes part. The student is the actor in the first two processes, but in the third process they "receive" the feedback. Instructors often use the words "participate" and "prepare" on syllabi to establish expectations and grading systems for the quarter, so students may be familiar with these words. I suggest that these questions are assessment-driven questions that really ask students about the practices of their assessors. Outcomes of courses or meeting larger disciplinary goals are not addressed—just the steps taken to get to the larger outcomes. CCSSE believes these micro-scale practices to be crucial to attaining social capital and ultimately student "success"; therefore, they measure them on the survey. Yet, the general education outcomes many community colleges have adopted pertaining to citizenship, sound thinking, and applying theoretical information remain unaddressed. Gerald Graff, in his 2009 article "Why Assessment?" has persuasively argued for measuring such outcomes across disciplines. He contends that the mixed messages students receive about what constitutes good work between and within disciplines necessitates strong, outcome-based assessment. This kind of assessment can connect disciplines and create coherent courses of study for students. Without it, he argues that "the disconnect between courses ultimately reproduces itself in the disconnect between college undergraduates and academic culture itself. It also widens the gap between the high-achieving few and the majority" (159). But SENSE does not assess as Graff would because it assesses institutional practices instead of what students learn. Because SENSE questions are ultimately unrelated to what, if anything, students learn, students respond favorably. They do not identify these issues as impeding their "success" perhaps because they don't envision their ultimate "success" being achieved through those practices.

For instance, only 28 percent of students say they *never* prepared at least two drafts of a paper before handing it in. (CCSSE summarized the findings of this benchmark using the "never" category to report the findings.) Twenty-seven percent reported *never* receiving prompt written or oral feedback from their instructors, and 69 percent never participated in supplemental instruction. Of course, one notable observation here is that CCSSE frames the results negatively by not reporting the positive percentage, which is that 72 percent of students across the curriculum did write at least two drafts of a paper before handing it in.

CCSSE doesn't target only English classes, so the 72 percent of students who responded positively to the draft question could be writing in other disciplines, too.

However, because students responded favorably to the questions, does not mean the questions are well-conceived. The questions above are prime examples of the market-driven language of the CCSSE survey. It reinforces the student-as-customer model of education at the end of week three of students' first term. It asks them, essentially, "Are you happy enough with what you purchased so far to persist?" But students do not know if they have succeeded in the term yet, nor do they have any recourse if they are unhappy with their purchase (other than dropping the course). When the student is the customer in this fashion, the teacher becomes the equivalent of the sales clerk that negotiates a relationship between the customer, the institution, and the even more nebulous "real world."

And this model has far-reaching implications for English studies as composition continues to be a prerequisite in most community colleges. The customer-clerk model is based on standardizing teaching practices in order to achieve "success," not learning outcomes as outlined by disciplinary organizations like NCTE, CCC, or the WPA. It is assessment at its worst: assessment that does not gauge learning or teaching; assessment that does not ask for student reflection. Haight addresses as much when he argues that such forms of assessment are convenient for those outside of writing programs because they simplify the messiness of learning to write. "One reason the business customers, as well as politicians, have promoted this view of education might be that it offers the greatest amount of control to those who do not inhabit the classroom. The role of education is solely to serve future employers" (76).

The value of success in English is different than the value of success in business information systems, for instance. Scott Leonard explicates this concern in his article, "It's Not an Economy, Stupid! The Education-as-Product Metaphor," when he states, "The production-consumption metaphor has a powerful and persuasive logic: the academic industry produces commodities of value, to wit, college degrees. Different models of these commodities sell unequally on the market" (68). The model of English studies, particularly literature courses, has declining value as Marc Bousquet (2009) and Richard Miller (2009) demonstrate in their work on the health and future of English as a discipline. Yet the value of writing persists as oral and written communication continue to be pillars of general education and as students are expected to carry strong writing abilities into their classes beyond introductory composition and into their eventual careers.

Leonard argues that faculty can make change by resisting administrative decisions to increase class size and reduce course offerings. He speculates about the positive changes and solidarity with students that might result from a faculty strike on behalf of student tuition increases instead of faculty salary increases (76). And he finally argues that change in the

higher education system can happen when teachers focus on their students in the classroom and fight for their rights on campus. Then, Leonard says, students "will stand up for us when we ask for relief from the purblind pruning of the "cost-cutters" (77). What Leonard says here about students sounded familiar to me, but it took me a while to figure out why.

Last year at a department meeting, I listened to a department chair encourage faculty to tell students to complain about conditions on campus to higher-level administrators, not faculty or chairs. The sentiment was that the institution would go to great lengths to make their customers (students) happy—to encourage their "success." The complaints needed to come directly from the customers, though, in order to make an impact. Leonard's concept of student involvement follows the same sentiment, assuming that students fall on the side of the faculty. Leonard says that when faculty take student interests seriously, students will reciprocate and help to make favorable change on behalf of faculty. But why is it so difficult for faculty and their composition programs to work effectively to change the academic industry themselves? After all, most of the students at an institution move through introductory composition at some point.

Historically, the composition programs at community colleges have been in no position to create substantive change in the discipline of English studies or within the institutions in which they reside. Over-burdened with growing student enrollment and fewer and fewer full-time faculty, the English departments that house composition programs find themselves in the position of alternately defending their legitimacy as producers of writing "products" (students) while creating an ideological argument against the production of the same. So as colleges position entry-level composition courses as gatekeeper courses—courses whose passage or failure often determine the persistence of students, English faculty accept that burden in return for a secure position in the curriculum. At the same time, faculty resist the standardization of their curriculum that theoretically would result in a consistent output of writing products. This resistance stems from the belief that growth in writing is not measured best by a test at the end of the quarter; rather, writing development is best measured by tracing the small gains, as well as the large ones, that all emerging writers experience over time.

As Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jeff Sommers argue in their 1999 essay, "Professing at the Fault Lines: Composition at Open Admissions Institutions," "Decisions about testing, course offerings, and bilingual education are being leveraged by ambitious political figures who use simplified arguments waged against the most vulnerable students in public education to shape opinion and garner support for their careers" (459). These decisions shape degree programs and course offerings, often limiting student and faculty choices in the interest of saving state money. In this regard, community college faculty may also have limited cultural capital in the community college and must become activists in order to preserve dis-

ciplinary interests, students' interests, and their own workloads. The pressure on writing faculty then increases, especially at two-year institutions where class sizes continue to rise based on epic enrollment.

Success as Recursive Practice

Even within such constraints, the power of language and conscious reflection should not be underestimated. Of course I want my students to "succeed" in my writing courses, but growing institutional constraints make it easy to forget to question the meaning of "success" and to bulldoze through the quarter pushing students along the academic pipeline. One of the problems with the notion of "success" when applied to the writing course is that the term "success" implies completion. But you don't complete learning how to write like you learn how to ride a bike, as my mentor used to say.

This notion of "success" as completion is a business-driven one, not a student-driven one or an education-driven one. The assumption by CCSSE and NSSE that students have the same definition of "success" implies a uniform demographic when community college students are the most diverse student population. It enables SENSE to construct questions about smaller communicative and managerial practices when the success of the democratic mission of the open-access college remains unexplored. For instance, SENSE assumes that increasing advising staff will increase student success and asks questions directly connected to that staff increase. Perhaps that equation is correct. I wonder, though, what it would mean for the success of the mission of my community college if SENSE asked students how, when, where, or if they participated as citizens in a college activity during the first three weeks of the quarter. Would that be viewed as a "successful" activity or an extraneous activity as the survey currently frames "success"?

Along these narrow lines, Rosenbaum et al. suggest limiting course offerings and bolstering "incentives" for students in order to increase "success." They suggest in *After Admissions* that a "rhetoric of exploration" (21) is not compatible with community college education. However, I argue (along with many in my field, I would guess) that a rhetoric of exploration is crucial to writing instruction. The most truly successful writing avails itself of all manner of exploration. In fact, even the most academic research paper explores. Writing successfully means inhabiting those spaces Richard Miller mentioned—those spaces in contention that need to be explored—the uncertain spaces. I want my students to succeed there most of all.

As writing teachers, we can foster language awareness in our courses. We can question and ask students to question how one fragment of language—success—acts as a false institutional construct. I suggest that we can work to create a more fluid notion of "success"

in our composition sequences *and* still value students' ability to enter the workforce. We are not serving students by remaining complicit in the market-driven language of success; in fact, positioning education and writing as a product damages the health of writing instruction because it negates the possibility for growth beyond the cultural capital students seek from the institution. And it reinforces a false impression of writing "success" in other disciplines which demand that composition courses churn out successful student writers. But writing teachers know learning to write happens over time. Often, the results are cumulative and do not appear until quarters or semesters later.

At one time, the idea of a recursive writing process was revolutionary. Consider how re-imagining a straight path to writing as a product changed how we conceive of teaching writing. By challenging the fixed notion of "success" in our writing courses, we can work to re-define it, as well. We can ask students to question what it is they value, what education means, and how their material conditions construct their lives. Asking students to re-examine what "success" means requires asking them to critically investigate their own language use and their membership in the myriad social and cultural networks surrounding education. My hope is for a recursive, student-led definition of success as a movement toward growth instead of a product. Perhaps higher education as a whole has adapted their language to the changing marketplace in order to communicate more effectively; however, as advocates for our students as human beings and for education as a process, we would better serve our students by positioning them as a makers and writers of their own narratives, not products of them.

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Diana Becket

Graduate ESL Students, Generation 1.5, and the Basic Writing Class

AT MANY OPEN-ACCESS COLLEGES, WHEN ESL GRADUATE STUDENTS and members of Generation 1.5 do not test into college-level composition courses, the only option that they have for continuing their education is to join native English speakers in the basic writing classes. There are advantages for members of Generation 1.5 in these classes because they share a high school background with recent native-speaking high school graduates, and many find a more comfortable learning environment in the basic writing class than in classes of international ESL students (Harklau, "Representing Culture"). However, scholars stress that international ESL students have a different academic orientation, which may have little in common with their basic writing peers because their "relation to English is culturally and linguistically different" (Blanton 110).

For readers not familiar with ESL pedagogy, the term Generation 1.5 refers to students who were born outside the United States and moved with their parents to complete their education in American schools. Graduate ESL students have already completed a degree in their native countries and have moved to the United States alone or with their families. They apply to open-access colleges for different reasons, and for many this results in a career change and the opportunity to work in the United States. Scholars refer to both groups of students as users of English as their second language (ESL), who belong to the second language (L2) community. Their native-speaking peers, in contrast, are referred to as students who belong to the American English-speaking, or L1, community.

Scholars have different opinions about the learning environments that will help both graduate and undergraduate ESL students to realize their full potential. Paul Matsuda comments that these different perspectives reflect "systemic" scholarly and administrative differences between professionals in composition studies and second language studies ("Basic Writing" 83). The complexity of this debate is beyond the scope of this article. However, the following description of the experiences of four ESL students, two of whom are Generation 1.5 students and two are international ESL students, illustrates some of the issues that are important for administrators and instructors of basic writing courses. These students are current examples of those who "for the last four decades" (82) have taken basic writing courses as a way to begin their college education. These students, however, "have remained periph-

eral in the disciplinary practices…of the basic writing class" (82).

The four students in this study, like most ESL students at this open-access college, are all women. Tham and Hien were born in Vietnam. Hien, is a graduate ESL student and had a degree in science when she emigrated with her family; she started taking courses at the college two years later. She had not spoken or written in English before she came to the U.S., besides completing grammar exercises in high school. Tham is a member of Generation 1.5, who moved to the U.S. when she was a second grader. She had always been a strong student in math and science classes, so she avoided courses that required much writing, and she took ESL classes throughout high school.

Raisa and Elena were born in Russia. Raisa, a member of Generation 1.5, moved with her family to the U.S. when she was fifteen. She attended ESL courses in high school, but she skipped these frequently because she could not relate to the instructor. However, she was successful in her other courses, and by the time she was taking classes at this open-access college, she found it easier to write about the U.S. than Russia. Topics that related to her life in Russia did not interest her, and she commented that she was "sick of Russia." Elena is a graduate ESL student. She moved to the U.S. from Russia when she was 21 years old and has a Russian degree in accountancy. She started taking courses at the college two years later. Her experiences of learning English as a foreign language in her native country were similar to Hien's experiences as a graduate student in Vietnam; like Hien, Elena had not spoken or written in English before moving to the U.S. Raisa, Elena, Tham, and Hien took the same placement test as their native-speaking peers, and their scores indicated that they were writing at the same levels of preparation for college writing as the native-speaking peers who also placed into the college's Basic Writing sequence.

Like the ESL students in these classes, these native-speaking peers represent a range of social and academic backgrounds. A native-speaking (L1) nurse in Raisa's course, who was taking classes to meet administrative requirements, had different perspectives from the L1 eighteen year old, who dropped out of high school in tenth grade, took the GED, and aimed to take an associate's degree in computer programming. At the beginning of the quarter, the native-speakers in the class regarded second language students only as immigrants to the U.S.; however, as the course progressed, they adjusted their perceptions when the L2 students contributed to class discussion. Raisa, for example, talked about the pressures she experienced in her American high school, and the group's perception of her, exclusively, as a foreigner changed to include ideas of her as a high school graduate. Raisa shared high school experiences with L1 high school graduates, and L1 mothers in the group identified Raisa as a member of their children's peer group.

As members of Generation 1.5, both Raisa and Tham were educated in American

high schools; however, they interacted with the class in different ways. Raisa has an outgoing personality and communicated orally in ways that held the interest of her peers; her errors in grammar did not interfere with this. In contrast, Tham, although she had lived in the States since second grade, only spoke when asked direct questions, but she understood everything that was said. She did not appear to have any contact with any of her peers including Hien, who is also Vietnamese. Hien had moved to the United States with her family and Elena had moved alone; however, both students had lived in the U.S. for two years before attending the college. Their interactions with the local community had taught them to communicate in individual conversations, but they never contributed directly to class discussion. Nevertheless, during peer review activities, they did make comments that were used by both native and non-native speaking students to develop their essays. Their participation in the class community was to read and comment on their peers' essays and to write their own, which were used in class discussion.

Tham, Raisa, Elena, and Hien were all born outside the U.S. and are defined as "ESL" students. However, having lived in the local community around the college for two years, students like Hien and Elena share roots with both their native-speaking peers and Generation 1.5 students, like Raisa and Tham. Although they may not speak and write standard American English, for students like Tham, who had attended English-speaking schools since second grade, English is their first language. On a daily basis, all these students interacted with different communities both on and off campus, and the American culture was their first priority. In the basic writing courses, they work with members of their equally diverse native-speaking peer-group. In light of the diversity in a basic writing class, it is difficult to separate the students into academic or social categories. Both native and non-native speakers belong to a distinct set of cultural and linguistic communities, but these communities intersect, and members interact with each other. As Matsuda writes, "the distinction between basic writers and second language writers is becoming increasingly untenable because of the

> "common interests that native and non-native speaking students share and discuss both in writing and in class interaction may be potentially more significant than their linguistic differences"

increasing diversity among second language writers and basic writers" ("Basic Writing" 83).

ESL and native speaking students share family roles in their social communities. Members of both groups of students could be parents of children who attend the same local school, for example. Elena writes in her essay about taking her daughter to the college daycare center, where she talked to native-speaking mothers about the way this is organized and became part of that community on the college campus. Students write about social and professional commitments to develop topics for their essays. As the quarter develops, the common interests that native and non-native speaking students share and discuss both in writing and in class interaction may be potentially more significant than their linguistic differences. Each student can be defined in multiple ways. Using the term "basic writing" as a label to categorize these students involves not only a "practical difficulty" but also the "ethical complexity of defining basic writers" (Matsuda, "Basic Writing" 83).

Educational background experiences are important for understanding all the students in these basic writing classes. Generation 1.5 students, like Raisa and Tham, are defined as "products of our own secondary education system"; therefore, high school must have had an important educational and academic influence on them (Matsuda et al. 153). These influences are different in various high school contexts, however. Some Generation 1.5 students, for example, have reported feeling marginalized in college because they cannot participate orally either in class or socially (Lay, Carro, Tien, Niemann, and Long). This isolation is an extension of their high school identity as outsiders who, through lack of communication skills, are not part of the peer group. Still, in other high school situations, Generation 1.5 students feel they have a choice: if they want to be identified with the native-speaking peer group, they need to stop working hard, "lighten up a little," and adopt the high school culture represented by the music students enjoy and the way they dress (Olsen 118). Motivating such Generation 1.5 students can be a problem for their instructors. In other contexts, though, high school instructors view the Generation 1.5 students' class participation differently; instructors might perceive 1.5 students as the "Good Kids" in contrast to their L1 peers (Harklau, "From" 35).

When these Generation 1.5 students move to a college setting, research studies report that they experience tensions with their international peers and professors. In Linda Harklau's study, high school instructors describe these students as the "Good kids" while college instructors perceive them as the "Worst" in the class ("From" 35). Jan, a Polish Generation 1.5 student in Llona Leki's study, moved to a class of international students, and he found that his international peers identified him as American, and his teacher found that his written work was full of slang and "street language" (29). From the perception of instructors of international students, Generation 1.5 students bring high school habits to college in their

affiliation with the image portrayed by their high school peers (see Reid). In the context of an academic intensive English program, Generation 1.5 students appear to lack motivation, and in contrast to international students, they make little effort to complete their assignments (see Muchinsky and Tangren). The educational background that international students, like Elena and Hien, share with students in intensive English programs may be an indication that their work habits are similar. The question that is important for the students in this study, though, is how far the interactions that students like Elena and Hien have had with their communities of their native English-speaking peers shape the way they perceive issues that students discuss in their writing.

The academic preparation that American high school graduates, like Raisa and Tham, bring to college classes is very different from students like Elena and Hien, who have completed a degree in their native language. There is very little published research on graduate students in basic writing classes, and perhaps one of the reasons for this is that it is not possible to identify their graduate status through the admissions process. All the students that are the focus of this report took the same placement test as all incoming students to assess their level of writing competency. Administrators place students who do not write at the college level in basic writing classes. As far as the institution is concerned, a high school graduation certificate is the entrance requirement. There is no form in the admissions process where students like Elena and Hien can record the fact that they are college graduates in their native countries; it is only when they start to talk and write in the basic writing class that such background information comes to light. Kristen di Gennaro in her study, "Investigating Differences in the Writing Performance of International and Generation 1.5 Students," writes that at her private urban university, "it is impossible to identity L2 learners," whether high school or college graduates, "exclusively from admissions information" (538). At her university, students complete a form where they answer questions about how long they have lived in the U.S. and "where they have attended high school." Placement test administrators use the students' answers on the form and their placement test scores to place them in the course from which they will benefit the most. It is possible that some of these students may have been graduate students.

Di Gennaro compares the placement test writing performance of students who graduated from American high schools with those who graduated from high school in their native countries. The results indicate differences in the characteristics recorded in previous research studies. Generation 1.5 students wrote at more length and with greater rhetorical awareness of American essay requirements, which is not surprising as they have recent experience in writing American high school essays. Nevertheless, in contrast to the observations by Reid or by Muchinsky and Tangren, no significant differences between the two groups reg-

istered on their placement tests "with regard to grammatical control, cohesive control, or sociolinguistic control" (Di Gennaro 552). This analysis of the placement test writing samples indicates that these international high school graduates and American high school graduates wrote at the same levels of academic competency.

The picture that emerges from these studies of Generation 1.5 and international students is a complex one, which suggests that categorization of these students is context specific. It is impossible to know whether the international students in Di Gennaro's study had degrees from their native countries; they had registered to take an American degree at a private urban university and the English placement test placement was part of this process. In the same way, Hien and Elena were placed in the basic writing class of an urban open-access college as the first step to realizing their academic goals.

The challenge for instructors of classes that include international students, Generation 1.5, and native-speakers is to find common ground between these the different groups of students. In this respect, the strong links between the underlying goals that professionals in both ESL and composition studies share are useful. Linda Lonon Blanton writes that L2 students must be "intellectually engaged in projects that require literate behaviors for their completion" (118). Marilyn S. Sternglass stresses that all levels of the basic writing sequence "should provide students with opportunities to practice analysis and synthesis" (259). As educators, both Blanton and Sternglass base their curricula objectives upon the goal of developing students' critical thinking, and this fundamental objective is one of the important goals of basic writing curriculum designers.

An analysis of the ways students work to complete these requirements must include "all students who are subject to the disciplinary and pedagogical practices of basic writing" (Matsuda 84). The international students, Elena and Hien, and the Generation 1.5 students, Tham and Raisa, are representative of the students who test into the basic writing classes at the open-access college where I teach. Tham and Hien were in the same class, but Raisa and Elena were in different sections; I taught all three sections. In this article, I describe the administrative process at the college and the basic writing courses taken by these ESL students, and I analyze examples of their writing. My goal is to begin to assess how Generation 1.5 and international students use the "disciplinary and pedagogical practices" of the basic writing class to develop as writers. This analysis may contribute to an understanding of the diversity of students in the basic writing classes.

Administrative Background at the College

At this open-access college of a large, state university in the industrial Midwest, if L2 students do not test into college-level courses, they have the opportunity of taking classes in one of the

three preparatory composition courses. The English Program recently piloted ESL sections of these courses at the college but discontinued them because, from an administrative perspective, there were not enough students at the different levels to justify the cost. Like the students in Di Gennaro's study, the students at this college completed a questionnaire where they recorded details of their high school backgrounds. Placement test administrators used these background details and the students' test scores to decide whether they would benefit from taking an ESL composition course before moving into the preparatory composition sequence. These ESL sections had a theoretical advantage for students who had learned English as a foreign language, as instructors could, potentially, draw on a common linguistic background in the class and use this as a way to introduce students to essay writing in the U.S.

However, the students came from a wide diversity of the linguistic backgrounds, which meant that they did not share a common linguistic or cultural background. Students from Vietnam and Eastern Europe, for example, had different experiences of learning grammar, and they did not share a common cultural background. As recent high school graduates, many of the Generation 1.5 students were orally fluent, and students who had recently arrived in the U.S. regarded them as members of the L1 community and were intimidated by their oral skills. As each student represented a different set of background circumstances and educational needs, the administrative identification of them all as "ESL" students who need "ESL sections" of the basic writing sequence was inaccurate.

The students submitted a portfolio of their writing at the end of the quarter, and the team of evaluators made the decision about whether they were able to move into the higher levels of the native-speaking preparatory sequence. Therefore, the students felt that an initial ESL placement identified them as being further away from their goal of a college education than an initial placement with native-speakers in the basic writing courses would do. Non-native speakers of English are nervous to be placed with native speakers in the basic writing class, but in high school they were accustomed to setting their educational goals upon being able to work in classes of native speakers. In general, both students who had relatively recently arrived in the United States, like the ESL graduate students Hien and Elena, and Generation 1.5 students, like Raisa and Tham, were encouraged by their placement in the basic writing class.

Basic Writing Course Design

These basic writing courses immersed these ESL students in the process approach to composition used in all the composition courses at the university. The ratio of students who are using English as a first or second language is different in every section. In general, the first

section has predominately L2 students and the third section predominately L1 students. Instructors introduce essay topics through extensive class discussion of the ideas in selected texts from many different perspectives, and this is a process that draws on the reactions of all the students in the group. The contributions that students make to class relate to the essay topics, and the extent to which students draw on personal experiences depends on many factors. In general, ESL students prefer to talk about their experiences in the U.S., and graduate ESL students do not refer to studies for a college degree in their native countries, unless these relate directly to the essay topics. They are completely immersed in understanding the American process approach to writing and relating their experiences to this. They only talk about background educational experiences in conversation with their instructors.

After detailed class discussion, students then work through a process of writing first a brief concept statement, then a draft for peer review, then a first presentation draft that receives extensive feedback from the instructor, and then finally, a completed, revised draft. Student texts are used throughout this process for class discussion of the ideas and how these could be developed. The goals of the courses are for students to think critically about the topic, relate this to their experience, and use this analysis to focus their essays in a way that is relevant for the basic writers in their class and for communities outside college.

The Writing Assignments

The issue of oral interaction affects all aspects of the writing process used in the class. With the permission of the students, their essays and less formal assignments are shared at all stages in the drafting process; therefore, an awareness of the audience of native-speaking peers (as well as the instructor) affects their writing. The following analysis focuses on the ways the students established themselves in their writing in the first presentation drafts of the second essay that they wrote for the second course in the preparatory sequence.

The assignment for the second essay in Tham and Hien's class was to describe a group of people who belong to a specific culture and discuss the problems they have integrating with other cultural groups. In class discussion, the students defined "culture" of a group as the shared experiences and values that link members of the group in significant ways. The texts reflected the problems that both native and non-native speaking groups have in this respect, and the students were free to develop any aspect of the topic in their essays. For example, both L1 and L2 students wrote about entering the American college culture from different perspectives.

Both Tham and Hien focused on experiences of integrating into American communities. Tham draws extensively on her experiences as a member of Generation 1.5 and writes about her life when she attended the local school. She uses these experiences to establish

herself in her essay as a commentator on the values she held as a young immigrant to the U.S. in contrast to the values she now holds as a college student, which are those generally accepted by all our communities. Her title establishes her thesis: "Responsibility Is at Every Stage of Life." The introductory paragraph develops this general reference.

> Life is a cycle of responsibility. It is a process everyone has to face as a human being. As people grow, they learn rights from wrongs and how to act responsibly and accept the consequences in the actions they make.

Tham uses her own experience as an example of irresponsible behavior, and looking back, she dissociates herself from the way she acted. She writes: "I regret what I had done as a kid." The reason for this is that she had chosen "a wrong direction that led [her] to a complicated future." When she was young, "English was considered worthless to [her] because [she] did not understand the rules." Instead of going to class, she "hung out" with her brothers and did "what they thought was 'cool'—smoking and drinking." She describes her interaction with her brothers in the past, but she focuses on a code of values that applies to all our communities.

She uses this framework of generally accepted societal values as a reference point when she continues to write about the community outside school. She disassociates herself from her actions when she was younger, and she writes: "Instead of wasting my life to learn to be 'cool,' I could use these times to learn being responsible for my community." She writes that family obligations are especially important, and remembers: "Sometimes, when I went out I bring shames to my parents." Her friends were able to help by "cooking, cleaning and receiving good grades." However, she writes, "As for me, I was behind." Tham establishes a code of values that relate to her American audience and uses this to contrast the values of her peer group in school. When I returned the presentation drafts with my comments for further revision, Tham gave me permission for photocopies of this essay to be used to discuss how to use examples from experience to develop ideas in an essay.

Hien also focuses on two contrasting cultures, the culture of Vietnamese immigrants and the Midwestern American culture. She immigrated as a mature graduate student to the U.S. but does not draw on her Vietnamese experiences; in contrast, she focuses on the cultures with which she was currently involved. Her role in the essay was not to evaluate these cultures but to explain problems that Vietnamese people have in the U.S. and to interpret them for her American audience. Exemplifying the dual role she adopts in the essay, she explains that the problem with her parents' generation is that they belong to the "the first generation that has left [their] country for political reasons." They used to hold "high positions in the army" while now they are "only ordinary people of a minority group in this country." Hien then goes on to adopt the role of interpreter and explains that it is this feeling of

"inferiority" that "leads to losing self-confidence."

The problems that Vietnamese people have with the American lifestyle are particularly difficult "between parents who are 'very' Vietnamese and [their] children who grow up in America." It is in the different expectations of male and female roles where "the gap between 'very' Vietnamese parents and their daughter-in-law or son-in-law" is most significant. She explains that it is for this reason that traditional Vietnamese parents cannot "accept the situation that their son has to stay at home to take care of the children and do housework while their daughter-in-law goes to school or works outside the house." Hien arrived in the U.S. as a young adult and understood the tensions that Vietnamese people experience. She adopts the role of interpreter for her native-speaking peers and instructor, and in this way her audience defines the focus she adopts for her essay.

In similar ways, the audience of the basic writing class influenced the ways Raisa and Elena organized their essays. The goal of the second essay that Raisa and Elena wrote in the course was to describe a current problem in our communities and discuss the implications of this. In class discussion, the students brainstormed lists of problems and attitudes that people in different communities have towards these problems. Raisa is an American high school graduate, and Elena had completed a tertiary degree in Russia. However, adopting ideas that were discussed in class, both students chose topics that have particular relevance for students at this open-access college: Elena wrote about teenage pregnancy, and Elena focused on financial pressures.

Raisa's first draft contains five short paragraphs. Her title poses a general question for all her readers: "How We Treat Teen with Children?" She begins to answer this question in her first paragraph. She writes that on the one hand, "People fail to realize that that having a baby is supposed to be a sort of privilege." However, as a teenager herself, she acknowledges the pressures at this time of life and goes on to write: "We, as teens, do many mistakes by learning life." She assumes that her readers feel as she does in her statement: "Most of us aren't sorry for them and why should we be?" Many people when they see a young pregnant girl "walk by us we usually look at her like she done something bad in her life." However, she writes that these mothers have a "huge responsibility to raise a good healthy child." She "smiles" and "talks to" pregnant students "nicely" like most students in college.

She goes on to question how these teenagers are perceived outside the college environment and uses an example of taking her niece to a park to answer her question. While the niece played, she talked to an "old" woman about her "her grandchildren and her life right now." She recalled, "Everything was going really nice until her niece came and sat on her lap." The woman's attitude changed and "she started talking some rude things to us," and accused Raisa of being "dumb to have a child at a young age." The woman left without giv-

ing Raisa a chance to explain. She concludes her paragraph by writing that this experience taught her "that being a young mother is very hard."

One of the goals of the preparatory sequence is to introduce students to using sources to support their ideas. After a discussion of how sources could be introduced, using an example from a peer's essay, Raisa's later drafts were supported with sources of information from the internet. For example, she adds to her introduction: "Recent statistic have shown a continuing increase in teen pregnancy. About one million teenagers become pregnant each year and more than 530,000 give birth." However, although the later drafts develop the ideas in her original five-paragraph essay, she continues to focus on different perceptions of teenage pregnancy in order to establish her own sympathetic understanding of teenage mothers. On the one hand, she writes that teenagers "have a tendency to rush into commitments before fully understanding what they are getting into." However, she goes on to write: "life is often difficult for a teenage mother" and "society has to have some respect to teenage mothers."

The students submit a portfolio of their writing for review by a committee that assesses whether they are ready to move into the composition sequence. One of the criteria for a "ready" evaluation is an assessment of the students' revision processes. For the most part, Raisa resisted the idea of revisiting her work. She did, though, respond to my request for more clarity in regard to the sentence: "We, as teens, do many mistakes by learning life." She revised the sentence in this way: "Young girls today have a tendency to rush into commitments before fully understanding what they are getting into." She used a generalized example to explain her point; an example that relates more closely to the thesis of her essay replaces the immediacy of her early draft.

Elena writes about financial pressures, and like Raisa, introduces several perspectives on this topic. She refers to a Russian proverb to support her thesis: "You better have one hundred friends than one hundred rubles." She explains in parenthesis for her L1 audience that rubles are "(Russian money)." Throughout her essay, she states different ways of considering this topic and introduces counter arguments for the points she raises. For example, she stated, "Thousands of people have the opposite point of view." She agrees in part with these opinions and writes, "I have to say that money is an important factor of our emotional state," because "if we cannot pay our bills and support our family, we feel stress and cannot feel happy." Nonetheless, there are many people who think that, "power is in money." In her perception of some people in the U.S., "Americans say, 'money talks. '" She agrees with these Americans that money is certainly important, but then goes on to argue her thesis and concludes her essay like this: "Our money will take care about everything but our happiness. We cannot buy feelings because they are priceless."

In this first presentation draft, Elena draws on different sources to support her point

of view. For example, she referred to a comment by Oprah Winfrey suggesting that people have to make their own decisions about how they organize their lives. She develops this idea by writing, "The way to choose happiness is to follow what is right and real and the truth for you. You can never be happy living someone else's dream." She also refers to an article used in class discussion that focuses on the importance of optimism as a way of coping with difficulties (Goleman). She responds to the ideas in this article and uses them to develop her own thesis. She writes, "People who are optimistic see their money problem like something that can be changed."

Both Raisa and Elena selected topics closely connected to the issues with which students wrestle in the basic writing class. They introduced different perspectives on the topics that reflect the discussion in the basic writing class. Both students supported their main ideas in the essays by assuming the role of commentators on these topics.

Implications and Conclusions

This study is limited to the experiences of two graduate ESL students and two members of Generation 1.5, from two first-language backgrounds. However, in any section of the basic writing courses at this open-access college, the ESL population of students includes both groups of students; therefore, these students' experiences are representative of the second language students who attend the college. These experiences indicate ways that both groups establish themselves as members of their classes and use their educational and social backgrounds to fulfill the requirements.

"indicate ways that both groups establish themselves as members of their classes and use their educational and social backgrounds to fulfill the requirements"

Both Tham and Raisa were shaped academically by the American education system and, in this respect, are members of Generation 1.5 (see Matsuda et al.). However, they were not marginalized in the class like Generation 1.5 students in different locations in the U.S. (see Lay et al.). Raisa contributed to class discussion about her experiences in American high schools, and Tham's essay contrasting educational values she held as a child and a college student is an example of student writing that was used in a class discussion of ways to develop drafts. The students' comments in

class and in their writing shaped the way they established themselves in the class and entered into an academic relationship with their peers and instructor. In contrast to the ESL graduate students, Raisa contributed to the class like her orally confident native-speaking peers. However, Tham was as silent in class discussion as both Elena and Hien.

Tham writes about ways she rebelled in school, but in contrast to students in earlier studies, she was not conforming to habits of native speaking peers but to those of her brother. She suggests in her essay that her reasons for doing this were a reaction to the frustration of not being able to understand the rules of English grammar. From her own perspective, she was not conforming to the habits of high school peers, as researchers have suggested other examples of Generation 1.5 students do (see Reid), and by the time Tham had registered for college, she was completely focused on her studies. She worked very hard with the tutors in the writing center both to complete this presentation draft and to revise her essay further.

Raisa had difficulty focusing on the demands of the course, and this is one characteristic that identifies Generation 1.5 students in contrast to immigrant students in an intensive English program (see Muchinsky and Tangren). Her first drafts did not meet the program's requirement for moving into the next course. Students are required to revise their essays to pass the class, and although Raisa resisted this requirement, her final revisions indicate that she is beginning to find her identity as a college writer through this activity. In the context of these basic writing classes, generalized characterizations of what it means to be a Generation 1.5 student, both in high school and in college, are difficult to apply.

Hien's and Elena's motivation and work habits corresponded closely to the description of those international students in intensive English programs. They worked very hard to complete the assignments and spent many hours with the tutors in the writing center to revise their essays. Despite being graduate students, they were reading the same texts and writing the same assignments as their L1 and Generation 1.5 peers. Yet, during our frequent conversations over the quarter, they never gave any indication that they felt the placement in a basic writing class and the required assignments were inappropriate for them.

Hien's and Elena's general comfort level may be attributed to the professional preparation of their instructors, who are trained to meet the needs of a diverse population of ESL students (Matsuda 83). Further, Hien and Elena came from mathematic and scientific backgrounds in their mother tongue and had little experience of reading and writing in English. Intellectually, they may have had deeper resources upon which to draw than their Generation 1.5 peers, but they needed the time in the preparatory courses to develop competency in writing English essays, and the supportive environment of the basic writing class gave them this space.

Even if this time was necessary, if the assignments had been too easy for them they

could have felt frustrated by the fact that they were placed in the preparatory classes only to develop their language skills. However, this was not the case; they indeed felt challenged by these assignments. They were required to use critical thinking strategies to relate the topics of the assignment to their experience and to find their own focus for their essays, and they were free to develop their topics in any way they wanted (see Blanton; Sternglass). Both Hien and Elena were encouraged to use their graduate-level critical thinking skills to develop complex arguments in their essays. Elena draws on materials from sources to develop the first presentation draft of her essay, which may reflect her experiences of academic writing in Russia. Hien's argument is arguably more complex and sophisticated than Tham's, who describes personal experiences to support her thesis in ways that are more typical of native-speaking basic writers. However, within the flexibility of the basic writing curriculum, which is designed to accommodate the diverse population of native speakers, the graduate ESL students were able to draw on academic experiences to develop as writers of English.

Tham had lived in the U.S. since second grade, and Vietnam was a distant memory for her, so it is not surprising that she was comfortable establishing her essay topic by describing and supporting American community values. Raisa, who had lived for less time in the States, also established her identity as a commentator on her topic that focused on different perceptions about teenage mothers in the U.S. However, after just two years in the U.S., Elena and Hien were also not static "cultural novices" (Harklau, "From" 52). In contrast, they were learning from American talk shows and interacting in the native-speaking communities with which they had contact on a daily basis. In addition, Hien used her Vietnamese background to establish her identity both as a source of information and a commentator on the problems of Vietnamese immigrants in the local community. She wrote about both L1 and L2 communities, but members of both are local residents. Elena writes about attitudes to money, primarily, from her understanding of the perspectives of people in the U.S. Both students established themselves in their essays as writers who live in the U.S. and as commentators on American communities. Assignments that would have required them to focus exclusively on Vietnam or Russia would have asked them to ignore all the work they had done over the previous two years to understand these communities.

Orientation to the native-speaking audience of the basic writing class shaped the way these students developed their essays in different ways. They used quoted colloquial expressions such as: " 'money talks' " and " 'very' Vietnamese" and brought the voices of L1 speakers into their essays. However, at a deeper level, the ideas in their essays reflect the basic writing class discussions and the contributions that native and non-native speakers made. Peers in the class read Raisa's essay on teenage pregnancy and the range of opinions she suggests on this sensitive topic of teenage pregnancy indicates her level of confidence in the

class. The difficulty of coping with babies as teenagers is a problem some of her peers have experienced. The problems of drinking and smoking in school is one that the mothers and fathers in the basic writing class raised in brainstorming sessions. Tham establishes her focus in the essay by commentating on this problem and uses her own experiences to do this.

Pedagogical Implications

All these "L2 students" were placed in the preparatory sequence. From an administrative perspective, they are defined as "basic writers," and their "ESL" identity is lost in this label. However, Tham's first language is English, and Raisa found it easier to write about the States than about Russia. Like Raisa and Tham, Elena and Hien also shared communities with the native speakers in the class. Their identity as "ESL" students is complicated, and the accuracy of the labels "ESL" and "L2" needs to be questioned.

The students in this study blended into the communities of their basic writing classes. They used their experiences of their first language culture to enrich and deepen their writing and as a source of comparative analysis of their American experiences. Elena and Hien had more recent experiences of their first language culture, and they had lived in their native countries at a time of their lives when they were able to use their tertiary education to develop as critical thinkers. They were more mature students in this respect and contributed to the class through writings that that drew from their wider experience. The common ground that they shared with their Generation 1.5 peers was their determination to write in ways that would give them access to a college education, which is the dominating goal of all the students in these classes. These common goals are links they shared with all their peers.

Students like Raisa, Tham, Elena, and Hien influence the way the class community develops over the quarter through basic writing pedagogical practices such as class discussions and reviews of each other's writing. These students represent a diversity of cultural perspectives, and their contributions bring a richer dimension to class discussion. Their ideas are valuable tools for introducing cultural differences and can lead to ways to discuss diversity in our communities. At the same time, they are part of the local community where their native speaking peers went to high school, raise their children, and work.

Non-native speaking basic writers can play a central role in a class where the goals of the course include open discussion of cultures that are shaping our communities. As our communities are becoming steadily more diverse, such topics are an essential component of the curriculum design in the basic writing course.

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What's In a Name?: *Basic Writing in America* and *Beyond Shaughnessy*

Greene, Nicole Pepinster and Patricia J. McAlexander Eds. *Basic Writing in America: The History of Nine College Programs.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008.

Ritter, Kelly. *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard*, 1920-1960. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2009.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE FIELD OF COMPOSITION HAS BEGUN TO explore the term "Basic Writing" as a discursive construct that creates specified subjectivities and reinforces social structures. For example, in "Discourses of Disability and Basic Writing," Amy Vidali shows the similarities between discourses about disability and the language of "deficit" that often surrounds Basic Writing, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly. Also, in his essay "Our Apartheid," Ira Shor points out composition's "menial status of curricular cop and sorting machine," making Basic Writing an "extra sorting-out gate" (92). Shor even questions whether BW truly provides a "sanctuary" for these writers that improves their academic success (96). As I read deeper into composition history, how academia defines different terms, such as BW, has come to the forefront of my mind, particularly as an ESL instructor at Miami University of Ohio—what many call a "public ivy." Even though the term "Basic Writing" may not be prominent within these communities, this discursive construct exists in relationship to other terms and narratives that are not always explicitly noted, particularly in local contexts such as my own. For example, how BW is defined in a particular context may influence how ESL (and even composition) is defined, showing the need for scholars to explore the entire range of discourse surrounding composition.

Composition history can play an important role in mapping out these discursive networks, providing critical insights to the institutions and subjectivities that not only surround the term BW, but other terms in relationship to BW. For example, exploring how BW and ESL may be mutually constitutive and how they might support dominant narratives requires deeper research into the discursive history of both composition and BW. The two books *Beyond Shaughnessy* by Kelly Ritter and *Basic Writing in America* edited by Nicole Pepinster Greene and Patricia J. McAlexander provide a foundation for these types of explorations by giving readers two different historical perspectives on the disciplinary mechanisms that have allowed BW to emerge within composition history and how such kinds of analysis might

inform further explorations in the field of relations inherent in this term.

In her introduction to *Beyond Shaughnessy*, Ritter grounds her exploration of Basic Writing in her own local experience, noting four different types of "basic writers" that she has encountered in three different universities and showing how the definition of BW relies on a number of discursive relationships. These variances lead her to ask the question: What does "Basic" really mean? She also connects this question to the curricular structure in each of the three universities, grounding the application of such a study in her own local experience. As both a scholar of composition history and a teacher, I have often asked myself these same questions:

> First, who *are* basic writers? Second, what role does the social history and mission of a college or university play in determining the answer to this question? Another way of asking these questions is to posit that, if there *is* a universal need, an agreed-upon societal and institutional demarcation for "basic" writers that diagnoses a lack of something specific and transferable from educational site to educational site, then why does the course vary so dramatically? (7)

All these variances have one element in common—the term functions as a sorting gate, rather than signifying any specific content. Though the compilation of essays, *Basic Writing in America*, examines multiple histories, Ritter's decision to go beyond open-access universities in her book and study BW in "elite" institutions like Harvard provides a new way of exploring this question, where sorting mechanisms can take on a variety of discursive forms. This form of composition history shifts the subject matter from specific categories of content or theory to the institutional and disciplinary mechanisms that carry with them social and ideological implications.

The editors of *Basic Writing in America* set up Ritter's book by exploring the emerging multiplicity of histories arising within the field of Basic Writing, where "each conversation will be historically informed by different regions of the country; different classes, ethnicities, or races of students; different education missions . . ." (qtd. in Greene and McAlexander 1). By comparing nine colleges, the editors hope each of the nine chapters, which use ethnographic methods like archival work and interviews, will "serve as pieces of the BW puzzle, together shedding light upon the overall history of the movement," while also showing directions that BW may be taking and identifying lessons already learned (3). By taking such a wide cross-section of histories, the editors of *Basic Writing in America* create an opening for expanding historical studies of BW to other "sorting gates" that may exist under other discursive terms both within ESL and within elite institutions like Miami University, enabling the asking of broader questions in how these terms function within a discursive field. If the nature of BW does not wholly revolve around the nature of errors, for example whether they

are made by native speakers or international speakers, then our ability to identify narratives and discursive forms that adhere to institutional norms and procedures can become more specifically articulated. As shown by both these books, the first step in this kind of analysis must be this exploration of multiple meanings inherent in terms like BW.

The nine historical studies in *Basic Writing in America* effectively show the "multiplicity of meanings" of BW in a way that allows Ritter to extend these explorations in her own book within a new context. Most of the nine histories refer to the work of Shaughnessy as a pivotal defining point in the field of BW. In fact, the first study is mostly a tribute to Shaughnessy, perhaps rightly so, as it is a history of BW at CUNY. Even so, as an ESL instructor at Miami University, I am looking for other historical frameworks that lie outside dominant national narratives that have historically shaped ESL, BW, and composition as a whole. As a reader, then, I was attracted to Nicole Pepinster Greene's study of open admissions in Southwest Louisiana, where there is a pivotal point that lies beyond Shaughnessy. Beginning her history earlier, Greene identifies what could qualify as BW classes geared toward Cajun French speakers in the early 20th century (72). Greene seems to be describing one of the earliest focuses on "World Englishes" later in the 20th century, where students were still encouraged to use their own dialect in journals (74). Moments like these in composition history can be a starting point for reimagining the linguistic ecology of the composition classroom, perhaps calling for more studies along these lines. Composition history should take into account more unique moments such as these that may provide a counter-narrative to the monolinguistic assumptions of the university. What kind of multiple histories have the dominant narratives of ESL, along with BW, tended to hide? For example, we could extend these explorations further by examining ESL composition in liminal spaces, such as the Philippines or Puerto Rico – not just within mainland borders.

"looking for other historical frameworks that lie outside dominant national narratives that have historically shaped ESL, BW, and composition as a whole"

Greene's study most effectively shows what the editors describe as a "multiplicity" of BW definitions, focusing on the types of BW writers, rather than the subject matter or course descriptions. Other studies in this book also consider African American colleges, athletes,

ESL students, and graduate students, casting a wide net across the diverse population of these courses, potentially appealing to a diverse readership. Even so, this net is only cast over open-access universities that are generally considered a part of the "lower-class" university system. Though *Basic Writing in America* shows the discursive nature of the term "Basic Writing" by performing a "multiplicity of meanings" and examining types of basic writers within different geographies, this plurality is set within a specific political and historical context that connects most of the nine studies (4). In their introduction, Greene and McAlexander describe the historical backdrop that informs each of these histories, connecting them to the Civil Rights movement and the resulting struggle against a meritocratic university (4-6). The editors set up BW against the "elitist" university, creating four common themes within the individual essays of their book: the diversity within BW populations, the class conflict within university politics, the low priority for Basic Writing, and the current decline of these programs. This assumption that these basic writers exist in "lower," open-access institutions tends to be a common lens of interpretation throughout composition history, still relying on national narratives that could be implicitly supporting these inequalities by maintaining the binary between open-access and more "elite" institutions.

One important question comes to mind: Is BW limited to only open-access universities, particularly if this term is a discursive construct? Are there other ways that this discursive construct may be working at Miami University or even within ESL programs? In order to answer these questions, a change in reference is required, shifting from national narratives of equality that rely on the "liberalism vs. elite" binary. In *Beyond Shaughnessy*, Ritter effectively shifts this frame of reference by examining BW as a disciplinary mechanism in the universities that we usually consider elite. As Ritter's title suggests, she hopes to go "beyond Shaughnessy"—not beyond in the future, but beyond in the past. Basic writers did not suddenly appear after 1960. For Ritter, the "frontier" that Shaughnessy discovered was not so wild or untread upon as we are often led to believe in current composition history. Ritter believes the best way to show the discursive nature of BW and how it functions as an "institutional mechanism" is to look backward to a time before the term even existed, providing a basis for further research in areas where this term is not prominent, perhaps even extending it to ESL composition, "public ivies," and other unique localities.

In contrast to *Basic Writing in America*, Ritter builds on previous scholarship to show that Shaughnessy does not have to necessarily be considered the point of origin for Basic Writing. According to Ritter, there is a "deeper chronological history" of BW (31). What Shaughnessy represents is merely a shift from viewing basic writers as deficient to underprepared; the sorting mechanisms are still the same (29). Instead of focusing on specific identities of BW writers, Ritter wants to focus on the "institutional mechanism" of stratifica-

tion (what Shor calls a “sorting machine”), "the highly subjective classification and division of students' abilities as they align," which does not require a specific term like BW (41). What creates the category of Basic Writing is not so much specific content matter, types of errors, or specific identities, but the normalization of the student, which can be different depending on the locality. The "basic writers" at Ivy Leagues may have been elite, but they were not the norm (42). For Ritter, BW is more influenced by locality than universal standards, showing how the analysis of BW must be set within a field of relations that includes the local, not just historical or ideological narratives.

“showing how the analysis of BW must be set within a field of relations that includes the local, not just historical or ideological narratives”

This is not necessarily in contradiction to the work done in *Basic Writing in America*, though Ritter attempts to broaden the localities of BW. For example, in *Basic Writing in America*, Linda Stine makes similar claims in her study of Lincoln College in the early 20th century, in order to include what could be considered BW classes within a graduate program. Stine provides a similar theoretical basis to Ritter’s by claiming that “all Basic Writing is, like politics, local in the sense that a course is ‘remedial’ only in relation to the next step it prepares students to take” (224). Stine’s Lincoln College is still considered a “lower” open-access college, where even graduate students are likely to be from the lower social strata, but in a way, she opens the door to further work like Ritter’s.

In order to reconstruct the discursive field around BW in individual Ivy League schools, Ritter uses “archival documents to reconstruct the curricular history of a program” and the “institution’s overall view or attitude toward that program” (72). Ritter shows how histories are based on texts and that texts can have a multiplicity of meanings, depending on what history one is constructing, requiring her to contextualize her observations within the scholarship of composition history and discourse about Basic Writing, much of which is implied in *Basic Writing in America*. Ritter excels in this respect, using several chapters to contextualize her archival work. For example, in her second chapter on locality, she examines her attempt to fill a gap in this scholarship by discussing the three primary texts on “locating” composition: *The Politics of Remediation* by Mary Soliday, *Situating Composition* by Lisa Ede, and *Basic Writing as a Political Act* by Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington. Throughout the book, Ritter also relies on prominent composition histories by James

Berlin, Susan Miller, Robert Connors, John Bereton, and many others. She clearly shows how the field has created the illusion of exhaustive research about Harvard and Yale and perhaps an illusionary split between "regular" composition and BW.

Within this framework, Ritter shows how the same mechanisms that are at work in "lower," open-access universities, as shown in *Basic Writing in America*, are the same mechanisms at work in more "elite" universities like Harvard and Yale. The most compelling and detailed look into these mechanisms occurs in her fifth chapter on Harvard, "Beyond English A." In her description of archival materials, Ritter points out the "mechanisms of power" or "stratification." For example, she describes a simple disciplinary mechanism developed by Harvard's Committee on the Use of English by Students, where the committee sent out cards to all professors, asking them to identify and categorize students in need of remedial help. The executive officer, then, would periodically inspect the writing of these students and recommend different kinds of remedial work (105). The resemblance to Foucault's Panopticon and carceral system is quite striking. Ritter goes on to explain how these mechanisms functioned within the local context of Harvard and the values held by the administration:

> In other words, while remedial writers at Harvard during the first half of the twentieth century were down, they were clearly not *out*. Rather, the Committee, as a historical public entity, served as a source of refinement, for some a site of individual "finishing," fulfilling a higher social and communal purpose that most faculty and students agreed was vital, if sometimes inconvenient, for Harvard men to endure." (117; emphasis in original)

Ritter ends this chapter with examples of student resistance, perhaps a kind of counter-discourse, opening doors to similar kinds of explorations across composition history, including BW. A similar "bottom up" approach could also provide insights into these disciplinary mechanisms in universities like Miami University or even in ESL composition. For example, what would such archival work reveal about ESL at Miami University and how it functions differently in open-access institutions or even Miami's own regional campuses? What kind of student writing has not yet made its way into composition history? Could student published texts like Miami's *College Composition at Miami* provide similar kinds of counter-history?

Ritter brings up many other intriguing questions by doing an in-depth rhetorical analysis of memos and reports that show basic writers coming from Harvard's own pool of targeted population, not necessarily from those new pools of recruits required to maintain the proper quota and budget for the school, thus showing that basic writers exist in all strata of society within the university system. Ritter's in-depth analysis of both Yale and Harvard calls into question the driving assumption noted throughout *Basic Writing in American*—that

BW represents a specific kind of class conflict between liberalism and elitism that originates within the Civil Rights movement and continues within BW programs of open-access universities. Several of the nine studies in *Basic Writing in America* imply that if we were to lose the BW course, we would lose the space on campus where liberalism can effectively negotiate or work against what seems to be new forms of elitism arising within the university. Though these types of sorting mechanisms certainly can be used to promote or deny different kinds of elitism, such categories are not necessarily tied to specific types of universities, social classes, or even terms like Basic Writing. Exploring how these sorting mechanisms work in specific institutional settings throughout the history of composition will help map out the discursive relationships inherent in national narratives and ideologies—not just the liberalism vs. elite binary. For example, in the past, ESL has revolved around narratives of immigration and empire, creating liminal spaces within and without the nation that can be more thoroughly studied by composition scholars. A more "multicultural" approach to ESL can also be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement, showing a close relationship to many of the same narratives surrounding BW.

In her final chapter, Ritter finally proposes that the term BW be merged with our ideas of "standard composition," which will imply a degree of "unpreparedness" to all incoming freshmen:

> Viewing *all* first-year writing as preparatory in the local context of the *individual college or* university—rather than based on generalized perceptions or standards of preparedness across institutions—does away with the temptation to eliminate access to some and all students who are not ready for the standard course. (140)

By having a specific space separate from "standard composition" that we call BW, we may be reinforcing the sorting mechanisms that will allow a complete elimination of access by universities, or at least "higher" selective admissions universities, a potential that has already been noted throughout *Basic Writing in America*.

Using Harvard and Yale as prime examples, Ritter has effectively argued that "basic writers have been variously defined but uniformly stigmatized over the past eighty years" (143). Though *Basic Writing in America* sets up a nice ground work for research like Ritter's, the contributors tend to restrict their histories to open-access colleges as sites where liberalism and elitism come into conflict. However, if such terms are relative to local contexts, then this gives researchers an opportunity to explore BW in other contexts. Ritter proposes that we focus on locality by making composition classes "contentless," based on a Utopian model called Writing 1-2-3, where each course makes no claims on student labels or preparedness, and students can take these courses for credit without any kind of stigma (144). The 1-2-3 refers simply to a sequence that all students follow. Though this proposed solution may seem

a bit vague or abstract, the content of such courses can only be defined on a local basis, according to Ritter. This is not far off from Shor's own proposal that teachers and administrators should "examine their local conditions and decide what strategies work best at the places where we work" (100). Composition history, then, becomes a way for us to explore our localities more specifically, creating dialogue between our specific situations and broader movements in the field.

As a graduate student who is now teaching ESL at a "public ivy," I see similar discursive mechanisms at work on a day-to-day basis. Questions about how to evaluate and "place" international students are intertwined with similar questions about BW and the discursive frames that build, support, and maintain national narratives and ideologies. To more critically examine our institutional, historical, and cultural localities, scholars in composition history will need to continue mapping these discursive networks, not just of BW, but of other terms that may be implicitly defined by BW, including ESL, and perhaps even composition itself. In the end, can we really eliminate stratification and stigmatization simply by eliminating the term? Perhaps not. But in order to be more critically aware of how such processes take place, histories of terms like BW must go beyond the term itself and into the discursive networks it implies. As the field of composition continues to write its own history, and that of Basic Writing, both these books are critical in examining practical implications of the discursive construct we call BW.

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