Open
WORDS

Access and English Studies

In this issue

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Studies

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OPEN WORDS: Access and English Studies is dedicated to publishing articles focusing on political, professional, and pedagogical issues related to teaching composition, reading, creative writing, ESL, and literature to open-admissions and "non-mainstream" student populations. We seek critical work in areas such as instructional strategies, cultural studies, critical theory, classroom materials, technological innovation, institutional critique, student services, program development, etc., that assist educators, administrators, and student support personnel who work with students in pedagogically difficult settings. Articles should consider the particularities of these settings—issues, for example, surrounding the identifier of "open access," intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, regional and cultural differences, and the range of competencies students bring with them to classrooms—in light of the aims of English studies to empower students' critical and creative endeavors. We value works pertinent to specialists yet accessible to non-specialists, and we encourage submissions that take into account what interactions with students teach us about the broader, democratic goals of open-access educations and English studies.

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Studies*

Table of Contents

Editor's Introduction:
"Why Are We Here?"

WHILE REVIEWING SUBMISSIONS FOR THIS ISSUE, I WAS ALSO THE instructor in a set of writing studios at Miami University's open-access campus in Middletown. These studios, based on the model designed by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, comprise usually 5 to 8 students, often from different composition courses, who meet in the studio once a week to discuss work they've been assigned in their writing classes. In most sessions, we scrutinize assignments they've been given, highlighting teacher expectations and brainstorming ways students might negotiate their instructors' guidelines. The students and I also provide feedback to works in progress, and we help writers interpret their teachers' marginalia and consider possible revisions. Overall, this is a pretty democratic space: students set the agenda, and they earn points for coming to class, for bringing agenda items, and for writing short reflections on each session. I make no value judgment of their work, in other words. I facilitate discussion and offer feedback, share what I know about writing, about our composition program in particular, and I listen to what they tell me about their efforts to balance coursework with their home and family obligations. Because, relatively speaking, this is such an odd school space, I've usually asked students on the first day to tell me why they are there. It's an honest question—What did they think was going to happen in here? What was it in their backgrounds that made them think this was the place they ought to be? We have no mandatory placement, after all; students choose their writing courses from a menu presented to them at orientation.

Articles in this volume of *Open Words*, Hope Parisi and Lara Rodriguez's in particular, convinced me that things needed to change on the first day of my studio. This is not for a second to suggest that the above questions are not important or that they never came up in studio. In fact, variations of them came up quite often, and I think they are of defining significance for any teacher committed to educational access and student empowerment. If anything, articles collected in this volume underscore the significance of these questions, especially as they might serve to connect academic discourses with aspects of students' work and home lives. Tim Barnett's "Love Letters": Narrating Critical Literacy Theory in the First-Year Writing Class," for instance, calls out his open-access students' "many strengths and [argues that these students] need an education that helps them understand the multiplicity, complexity—even the difficulties—of their backgrounds as potential sources of intellectual strength rather than simply as 'problems' to be overcome." Likewise, Frank Alexander, in "A

Perpetual Literacy Crisis?: Bourgeois Fears, Working Class Realities, and Pedagogical Responses," argues for educators to develop environments that help working-class students weather mistakes, to develop school places that view "mistakes as growth opportunities instead of a sign of impending failure, laziness, or sheer stupidity." Alexander and Barnett describe ways to intersect the stories and media of open-access students' everyday lives with school culture as a means to transform that culture and to reverse the marginalization of non-traditional students in it.

Similarly, Michael Michaud's "Literacy in the Lives of Adult Students Pursuing Bachelor's Degrees" uses the stories of non-traditional students, in this case returning adult students, as points of departure to challenge notions of literacy as skills development. His article describes ways that literacy conceived as the linear obtainment of subskills, in particular, eschews the range of competencies that students bring with them. Like Barnett and Alexander, Michaud's attention to the stories of adult (over 24 years of age) students indicates the value of pedagogies that build upon rather than disregard the home, work, and various other literacies these students represent. Seeing the writing center as a site hospitable to just such a range of literacies, William Burns, in "Postmodern Geography and the Open-Admissions Writing Center," calls into relief ways writing centers often urge allegiance to "container" discourses, to practices that represent writing as an "ordered and controlled arrangement and movement though a bound space." His article underscores the degree to which this function of writing centers conflicts with educational access and alienates students from academic culture; he identifies instead ways writing centers might serve as a "public and private space, a third space that encompasses both loud and quiet, intimate and social, professional and personal, general and specialized all at the same time."

Each of these articles speaks to dynamics I commonly find in studio work. Since the quality of student work is not graded/judged, the environment readily invites discussion about "mistakes" and provides time to interpret them (rather than eradicate them, as teachers often try to do; or hide them, as students might feel compelled to do): What literacies does language marked as "mistake" represent? What does this language accomplish? What makes it a "mistake" in the context of school, and what does this judgment say about the role of school in a democratic society, about the thoughts, backgrounds, vernaculars that schools welcome or discourage? Working from the premise that "every aspect of relationship between teacher and student is fit for scrutiny—not only assignments, course themes, and institutional structures, but, [. . .] conversation was well," Parisi and Rodriguez's "'Why Are You Here?': Troubling Legitimacy for Basic Writers and Their Instructors in the Community College," helped me to scrutinize my own discourse in the studio and ways my first address to students there ("Why are you here?") might in itself limit the very type of honest and open

exchange I hope for. Their article helped me trouble the question, hear how it might be heard by some students who come to the studio lacking confidence in their legitimacy as college students. I suddenly began to hear my own question as a form of gatekeeping (What are *you* doing *here*?"). Despite my intent to engage the rich and varied backgrounds that I know my open-access students bring with them, I was inadvertently asserting my own authority over what "here" was meant to be and asking them to justify their presence in it.

Last term, I changed things around, just a little. I opened my studio sections telling students about Parisi and Rodriguez's article and the issues it had raised for me. I told them that, instead of beginning with my standard question, then, I would begin instead with another one: "Why am I here?" I explained that I wasn't looking for any insights into my psychology, but rather I wanted class members to tell me what I would be doing in the studio, what they would be expecting of me. My sections offered various guidelines—they wanted my best instruction, they wanted me to be honest, they wanted me to remember what it was like for me when I was a college student, they wanted me to be available outside of class, they wanted me not to come to class drunk. Not that I ever felt my studios were in much trouble in terms of fulfilling their roles as "third spaces" (see Grego and Thompson) in which students' prevalent interests and concerns could be addressed, but I did feel, nevertheless, that this small adjustment ("What am I doing here?") made a big difference. Among other things, it positioned students more as the architects of the studio agenda, a positioning that in turn situated their own self-revelations ("What are you doing here?") in service of what they wanted the studio to accomplish rather than in terms of legitimacy. Throughout the semester, it was my impression that these students exercised greater degrees of ownership of the studio than had past students; and if my student evaluations are any indication, this past term was my most successful in the 14 years I have been facilitating studios.

Surely other factors could have played a role in the success of these sections—the luck of the draw that gathers students with good chemistry; changes in the composition program that have generated more uniformity in the content of courses, which provides more common ground for studio work; my growing comfort with the new library classroom I'd been relocated to the semester before, etc. Nonetheless, my new opening question, as small a change as it represents, marked yet one more way for me to align my pedagogy with my broader intentions involving student empowerment. Like the other insights readers might draw from this volume of *Open Words*, this was a change within my immediate circle of influence. Over all, this journal concerns itself with multiple spaces, among them the vast social, economic, cultural, and institutional forces that educators shape, confront, and sometimes reform, mostly over the long term. What stands out most for me regarding this volume, however, is how quickly some things can change and the need for educators who are committed

to the development and maintenance of a democratic culture to continue to make such changes in their own classrooms, as quickly and as persistently as they possibly can. I think this issue of *Open Words* can help readers identify some fast changes, provide a menu and rationale for ways everyone might further implicate themselves in the broader and more lasting changes for which we continue to struggle.

John Paul Tassoni

January 2013

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Hope Parisi and Lara Rodriguez

"Why Are You Here?": Troubling Legitimacy for Basic Writers and Their Instructors in the Community College

HISTORICAL TIES OF EDUCATION TO SELF-DETERMINATION GENERALLY present a young person's entrance into a four-year college as a turning-point of self-actualization. The mystique of arrival—and acceptance—surrounding such an event draws from cultural and historic fields that assume, and implicitly celebrate, the student's assent to the values proffered by the academy, including the worth of an education. Cultural scenarios of this sort hardly exist for the community college student, for whom entrance and arrival resonate more actively with the question of his or her legitimacy when compared with the experience of many four-year students for whom legitimation somehow happens prior to entrance and typically as the result of privilege.

We contend that it is a crisis of legitimation that constructs the community college classroom. To the extent that legitimation happens at the site of language (Street), our positions as teachers of English, and more specifically of pre-freshman or "basic" English, doubly embed our roles as our students' *de facto* legitimators. Even as we recognize the ambivalence of leading students toward or into discourse practices that may be alien or in some ways limiting, our influence is undeniable. In the classroom, we wield the assignments, standards, and assessments that see students through crucial, unavoidable junctions. *(It matters little whether they are practices of our own devising.)* Many colleges designate one or more courses, or course sequences, in English as prerequisite for other courses and special programs. In the case of those who have failed the institution's standard of writing prior to entering, proficiency in English is and must be the marker of their future non-provisional status.

When framed historically and politically (see Horner), the connections between English language learning and students' legitimacy flow apart from our personal and professional desire to help students attain written proficiency in standardized form. More than the transmission of writing skills is happening in such classrooms, for here the contact zone encompasses conflicts and tensions far beyond engaging diversities of students' lives and cultures (see Pratt). Competing agendas for educating students in English converge here as well.

The impetus in composition and rhetoric to struggle against conscriptive facets of students' education in English is not new. Much of the composition literature of the past fifteen years implicitly argues for revising, but first by fully recognizing, the leading roles we play in students' assimilation to college life (see Horner and Lu; Horner and Trimbur). The problem of student legitimacy, however, remains like a white elephant in the room, and the ways in which instructors themselves voice assimilativist rhetoric, often unintentionally, calls for greater critical reflection. That proficiency in standard written English ultimately benefits students is a belief that can and has been scrutinized (see Carter), while legitimacy *as a co-conscriptive project of the classroom* has not garnered the same attention. The legitimizing function permeating our roles as English instructors in the community college happens subtly and, it may seem, tangentially to the usual course structures and procedures more accessible to our critical awareness.

Until now, composition as a field has not fully theorized discursive power relations in terms of the questions instructors ask at the sidelines of larger course structures. Undertheorized, the questions we ask students informally, *Why are you here? What are your intentions for college, or for your degree?,* supposedly to validate students, stay under the radar of our intentions and effect. Yet such questions, by which we might have students introduce themselves, for example, in the course of orienting them to the class, are strangely similar to ones that resurface for students in moments of conflict, even stand-offs, between themselves and instructors, when expectations or assessments of students' work do not align and students feel challenged to clarify their purposes for attending college at all. Given the tenuous circumstances by which many community college students enter college, these questions are fraught (and perhaps are anticipated by students more than we realize).

At the same time, another irony pertains: that is, that so much basic writing, as with composition, is taught by contingent faculty, graduate students, and/or instructors newly placed in the classrooms before they have had time to build—through coursework and mentorship—a foundation in basic writing theory and pedagogy. In parallel but inverted relationship to students' conscripted path toward legitimacy, we find the problematic of *instructors'* legitimacy. Instructors who are new to teaching, new to basic writing, often mirror students' susceptibilities to the question, *Why are you here?* with their own set: *Why am I here? What is my role? What service am I rendering to students and the institution in terms of what I do? How I am seen? valued? used? rewarded?* Among millennials, new instructors may likely appreciate, and wish to build upon, students' "non-standard" use of English as a form of intellectual work. The "errors" of basic writers may greatly compel new instructors who, along with their students, take part in the currents of technology influencing our language today, leading them to resist students' blatant labeling. What *is* the instructor's role from this perspective?

Or, from the standpoint of an institutional authority who values "basic writing" for its complexity: *What really defines my teaching?* Marking the contradiction of basic writers writing well, instructors are apt again to experience the question of their own legitimacy.

Our goal for this article is to heighten awareness around the ways in which students and instructors frequently enact mutual dynamics of legitimation in the community college classroom. Instructors do so in how they represent themselves and their pedagogies, as in owning the questions of legitimacy, such as *Why are you here?* To this end, we take on the familiar discourse of teacher introductions and student goal-defining activity as prototype; we explore how, when performed uncritically, some portion of the academic rites of welcome and initiation may compound negative self-beliefs and assumptions by which community college students enter college; replicate and sustain asymmetrical power relations between instructor and student; and ultimately limit possibilities for both teacher and student self- and re-definition. As we'll see, putting such questions out there opens the door to hear similar questions resonating as to *instructors*' "backgrounds"; and purposes; or, in other words, opens the door for basic writing students and instructors to probe more consciously how instructors came to be "here" too.

"Why Are You Here?" A Unique Collaboration

To begin, we add one more layer to the multi-layered, mutually-determinitive narrative of legitimacy for basic writing students and their instructors. Aligning as co-authors,[1] Lara and I developed the insights for this article during a semester in which Lara began her teaching career in a basic writing classroom at Kingsborough Community College, a branch of the City University of New York, where I was a senior faculty member and offering a teaching practicum accredited by Lara's Ph.D. Program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center. That fall semester of 2009, Lara, at 22, enrolled. Not only was it Lara's first venture into teaching basic writing; it was also her first semester as an English graduate student. Only several months earlier, she had graduated with honors from SUNY Purchase, a four-year residential college of the State University of New York. While aware of her positional authority, parallels between herself and her students were never lost on her: within an institutional context, she was, like her students, "new"—new to teaching, new to the campus, new to a diverse, "basic" student population. So she would enact important formalities of "being new": attend course meetings; write a syllabus; keep records; and undergo a classroom observation (though not by me). In addition, and specifically for our practicum, she would ultimately write a reflective essay on her teaching experience as it was shaped by our many discussions and readings

1. Hope assumes the "I" of this narrative as a way to allow the greatest synchronicity/ies between Lara and the students to show through. All insights and writing are wholly collaborative between the co-authors.

in basic writing, composition, and critical pedagogy. In turn, she would lead her students in a similar kind of assignment: a reflective essay, as required for their endterm portfolio, in which they would describe their growth as writers, not only for their classroom teacher, but for another developmental English teacher who would read the entire portfolio anonymously as part of a cross-reading assessment procedure.

In a nutshell, this assignment meant for Lara probing students' understanding of the question, *Why are you here?* As Lara remarks in reflection: "At the time, it was the most benign and creatively existential prompt I could pose to my students, just the simple question, 'Why are you here?'" She also notes the personal correspondence: "Like any insecure graduate student, I evaded the question and my own confusion by projecting it onto my students." Yet as we both look back, it is unclear whether I, as her practicum teacher and mentor, framed the reflective essay in these terms and set out a definite legitimacy agenda; if I did, it is possible that a chain of initially uncritical question-posing started with me.

In my defense, I might say that I hoped to negotiate a perspective recognizing the paradoxes by which students and new teachers like Lara enter basic writing classrooms: *Why are you here?* captures a sub-current of academia's growing standards-oriented stance toward basic writers' right to belong, so determining their political and social location(s); likewise, the question speaks to students' intuitive grasp of their provisional status, while it offers a backdrop for new teachers, fired with idealism, to define their purposes for teaching as well. I saw my teaching of the practicum as a way of outlining such convergences. The question could accentuate the folly of distinctions such as "newness" which essentialize both our students and our field, and which beg to be refuted. At the same time, it could help us problematize notions of authority by which teachers—never "new," only more or less experienced—benevolently lead basic writers into strange, unchartered territory. In our practicum, "teacher" (Hope) and "student" (Lara) worked together to make sure we

> *never failed to account for the ways in which the "basic writer" was a deeply politicized identity—one which was anything but basic. In the midst of the many other adjuncts whom I had encountered who suffered from a kind of "adjunct ennui" (some as basic writing teachers), I gathered that part of my graduate program's intention in pairing me with Hope was to professionalize me under the guidance of someone well-versed and well-worn in the complex histories of basic writing and its subsidiary initiatives within the CUNY system. More often than not, the result was that the practicum raised and aligned my interests and concerns with those of my students rather than (as more typical) with other adjuncts.*

My effort then was one of doubly mediating—on behalf of Lara's students and Lara

too—as to suggest a full and dynamic range of possibility/ies for her own relationship to Basic Writing. Accordingly, the inset italicized quotes of this article hail from Lara's endterm reflective essay. They are our attempt to physically manifest the layers of legitimacy that constitute the community college, basic writing classroom, highlighting legitimacies' interplay within scenarios where instructors who are "new" to basic writing (but "new" only in some ways) engage students who are not always so "basic."

"Why Are You Here?" In a Sociolinguist Frame

For many English instructors in the community college, it might seem like a missed opportunity to not engage students in open, initiatory conversations about their goals and expectations for college. Teachers of English are known for making the most of such conversations, which seem all the more relevant in ELL courses; courses early in the sequence of offerings for basic writers (where sequenced programs exist); or wherever English students "right out of high school" fill the seats. As academia's "gateway," writing courses in English ascribe students, many who have quite varied academic literacy experiences (Blanton; Ferris; Harklau et al.), with "newness" categorically—despite the literacies they have acquired. Perhaps we assume that the discourse of goals and expectations offers anxious students a non-threatening starting-point: *"Hello and welcome! Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves and tell one another:* What are you hoping to get out of college?" "What will be your major?" "What are your aspirations?" "Why are you here?" What better way to welcome students than to positively mark this moment of transition with questions that may resonate the talk of goal-setting familiar to students from counseling sessions or other conversations leading up to college entrance?

More likely, instructors may understand on some level that to claim the discourse of beginnings as an institutional representative confers authority. In which case, an activity other-than, or not simply, questioning is taking place. Further, the co-constructive nature of teaching and learning (see Lave; Lave and Wenger; Hanks; Young and Miller) complicates the rhetorical context for engaging students when querying repeats conventional *initiation-response-and-evaluation (IRE)* patterns of classroom talk (Cazden). A common feature of "low stakes" writing classrooms in high school (Harklau et al.), IRE isolates classroom communication into instances, without flow or mutuality. In the rhythm of question and response, it is easy to read students' "participation" as any one of involvement, agreement, appreciation, or consent. Yet we misread these exchanges as fully active.

> *As I learned in my practicum meetings with Hope, the students were the subjects of institutional and state negotiations, but not exactly the benefactors or legislators of such negotiations—as Sarah Hoagland writes, "those who might be spoken about, but not spoken with."*

In her "postmodern pedagogy of imitation," Mary Minock's sense of the "active" encompasses a psycho-social interplay of language, desire, and assimilation. Minock follows Lacan to include teacher and student in a dynamic that draws together therapist and client, parent and child. Texts, broadly defined, are mediary in these relations as well, as are "any of [a] myriad [of] cultural artifacts," at the same time they assume an othering role. In this framework, the "Subject becomes highly susceptible to nuances of the other's language," desiring to reconcile his [sic] experience of "divided self." While the movement toward reconciliation is neither "simple, nor is it predictable or systematic" (7-8), language's "assimilation" of the Subject, is largely inevitable because it is unconscious. More, it involves both the subject and agent(s) of othering in mutually self- (and other-) defining acts.

The insight of Minock, as well as of other postmodern theorists of composition, is to read the influence of power relations in how students take up their subject positions in the classroom. Among these compositionists, practitioners of critical pedagogy account for power's othering influence in their effort to reconfigure authority for teaching and learning in terms of more equitably configured social relations among students and instructors. Still they remain acutely aware of how prevailing structures can and do impede the life of more participatory and democratic arrangements for learning. As John Paul Tassoni and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson point out, "Though we dream of the utopia and may even steal glimpses of it from time to time, we face the fact that as classroom teachers our ability to move script and counterscript into mutually transforming dialogue is painfully limited" (71). If the social and psychological pull toward assimilation and recognition of/by the Other is pervasive and diffuse (with language as both its driver and its medium), then every aspect of relationship between teacher and student is fit for scrutiny—not only assignments, course themes, and institutional structures, but, as we contend, conversation as well. This includes any sort of assimilationist questioning, especially in contexts that pitch such questions toward an instructor's evaluative response.

It may seem strange, of all things, to pose incidental, well-meaning how-are-you's (essentially and of a sort) as problematic. Still linguists who consider institutional discourse know to study even the narrowest of margins that surround larger structures where discourse performs on both macro and micro levels. Sociolinguistics tell us that the discursive dynamics constructing roles and relationships in structured settings are multiply-determined, encompassing a range of context cues, simultaneous signalings, and behavioral norms and values. As a power-enabling nexus, these and other "features of language, discourse, and social perception coalesce to create the phenomenon of interactional power" (Damico 64). While such dynamics will enter into linguistic interactions anywhere, power differentials and effects are more pronounced in institutional settings where conversational participants are

more likely to consciously speculate outcomes (see Waterman, Blades, and Spencer). Depending on one's status or position, a Subject may both hear and read another/ Other's questions in several registers: *What is being asked of me, and why? To what purpose? To what effect?*

Teun van Dijk, a linguist of institutional discourse, studies conversational turn-taking, noting: "even [in] institutional contexts in which there is no formal prescription governing" the features of language that convey power, conversations are characterized by an "asymmetrical distribution of questions and answers among participants" (102). What linguists identify as the potential of all Subjects to structurally and effectively modify discursive power differentials is framed by how the Subject construes the intentions or projected effect of the conversation. Van Dijk contends:

> This suggests that the question-answer structure of talk is an emergent property of the local management by participants. . . .the task of analysis is to specify how it is locally managed, in ways that display the participants' orientations to what they should properly be doing in a setting. (102)

Again, keeping to their institutional positionality, instructors are apt to "display. . . [their] orientations to what they should properly be doing," that is, confirming a measure of authority (while stressing for students all kinds of links between presence and *purpose*). Similarly, the tenuous status of many community college students is sufficient for them to "construe outcomes" as to questions that probe their legitimacy. Feminist philosopher Sarah Hoagland draws out the dilemma of speakers engaging frames of meaning wherein "the inquiry itself makes sense" but for which the audience "[is] not normally used to hearing or acknowledging the sorts of things they have to say" (1). "Re-valuing testimony" of the marginalized in political or institutional contexts, she cites the respondent's turn as performance (2). "What the audience is familiar with and has skill thinking about will affect whether simply pointing to the information of the testimony will be possible" (2). Indeed, students have much to both lose and gain in these early informal and "active" exchanges with their instructor; they know to speculate outcomes. While "new" to college, "new" to English, students may well intuit that the performative engendering of academic merit begins now as they ponder: against what standards will their answers be measured? How will they, and do they now, "stack up"? What impression are they creating?

Given the pressures of the students' endterm reflection, Lara worried as to

> "How will they, and do they now, 'stack up'? What impression are they creating?"

whether her students would indeed "be themselves" or rather perform a self which, "contrived, boring, or expected 'validates the curriculum producing the subjects that the curriculum envisions'" (Scott 26). In her words:

> *how, and how much, would students reveal themselves and how would they rhetorically anticipate their readers' assessments of their own private experiences? How much would they predetermine of themselves as writers for said reading stranger? Would they tell these teachers what they wanted to hear much as they've told teachers like them in the past? Or imagine the fictitious gatekeeper (not me) differently, reading and judging whether or not they'd made it as real writers and thinkers—as legitimate? How would they position themselves within these conversations, as well as among the authors they read and the content of the course?*

It takes little for one who is positioned at the institutional margins to interpret questions posed centrally as challenges. In such scenarios, students' agency of response is already partially written: perceiving their own tenuous positionality—and seeking to manage it, as van Dijk might hold—students may respond in the affirmative so as to verify love of learning, personal goals, turning-points, and the like. Or resisting, they may fashion some unconventional response—silence, indifference, humor—which effectively risks their legitimacy but perhaps obtains for them another sort of recognition or status.

To our view, these complexities establish the question of basic writing students' legitimacy as an essentializing fact (or fallacy) about them. In our practicum, we reflected on these concerns at length, often referring to the literature and histories of the CUNY system, its open-admissions policies, and the emerging policies' relationship to race, class, education, and affirmative action legislation. In order to appreciate the conflicts our students negotiated at present, we felt compelled to consider how historically students have colored the classroom, and how the larger academic institution has also tried (successfully? unsuccessfully?) to put in place faculty who could speak back to that color, and whether it was enough. We questioned, in Lara's words, "how would the interaction between 'What I want to be' and 'What I am' be stylistically rendered, i.e. 'shap[ed] at the point of utterance'" (Britton, qtd. Mutnick 99)? And how would such utterances reflect the many dimensions of legitimizing activity implicit in students' self-presentations, including but not exclusive to their actual writing? That is, we marked the fraught rhetorical diversity students were encountering, a rhetorical diversity that the institution, maybe in error, anticipated students would be culturally equipped to mediate—as a result of being New Yorkers perhaps, and in spite of their own status in needing (re)mediation.

Why Are You Here? Shared Space Within Territories

By now, it is evident that we are locating teachers and students in a linguistic-political field distinguishing authorized knower and Subject of knowing. Even as we know identity to be a co-constructive activity, teachers and students interact with one another as if across pre-occupied territories. Related, many basic writing and composition scholars have used territorial metaphors to conceptualize the teaching of basic writing as an act of crossing or of bridging (for the purpose of later eliding) borders. To help counter a tradition that constructs new and basic writers as deficient, Mike Rose encourages us: "we need to define our work as transitional or as initiatory, orienting, or socializing" (543). Scholars such as Rose, David Bartholomae, and Patricia Bizzell have helped alter the way we talk about what students need—not fixes for linguistic deficits but instead support for students' success in new academic environments. And still, we are talking about getting students from "there" to "here." By contrast, it is our academic biases against students' actual, already-there, participation in language that define the "here" we mean, such that we can even ask, "Well, what brings you here?"

As much as our field has come to recognize and integrate students' varied, extracurricular literacies (see Carter), its metaphors of initiation and new beginnings can still misrepresent students as new to literacy, new to meaning making—new to "here," which is no longer "there." As their teachers, we know on some level that basic writers own an exceptionally authentic understanding of English as a living, mutable language. As Bruce Horner and John Trimbur discuss, it was the academy's perceived need to fill the great vacated space left by Greek and Latin at the universities that afforded modern languages the opportunity to assume new, disciplinary territories, and from here the study of English as a written language followed suit. Meanwhile in the university, students' many extra-literary "dexterities" of rhetoric are consigned only pre-literate, pre-legitimate status. In addition, such conceptions of English language learning as initiation or socialization underscore certain "myths of literacy." These include literacy's constancy of value, as in "once literate always literate"; and literacy's autonomous and completely transportable nature (Carter 56-59). Not least, when framed as a "new beginning," literacy assumes ultimate desirability, at least by anyone with any sense, and so educators weight this time with even greater import. There is no room for ambivalence about the brand of literacy being offered or what the endeavor will entail, both gains and losses, once that first "decisive" step toward academic literacy has been taken.

And yet for many community college students, the notion of a fresh start applies fairly narrowly to their lives. Community college students typically do not overturn their lives as sons, daughters, caretakers, mates, neighbors, workers, drivers, bus riders, volunteers, and bill payers when they sit for the first time in a college classroom. What we term *real life* does not now exist apart from their traversing the college campus.

At Kingsborough Community College, it is never easy to identify authentically first-time students. Students may enter basic writing and ESL classrooms as transfers from summer and winter immersion programs that have already oriented them to a variety of college reading and writing practices. Students come from across campus, having completed a full-day, five-day-a-week writing Institute, affiliated with Continuing Education. Or they come as returning students whose most recent pre-admission writing test was several years ago. As older students, they may have accumulated credits before our current policy of taking remediation in the first semester went into effect. Or they may be seniors from the My Turn Program who have decided to fully matriculate, or transfer students from one of the non-CUNY, private colleges in the borough. This semester in teaching freshman composition, I learned that some of my students were taking classes as part of AHRC, now with an office on our campus, which provides students of the program with a meaningful college "experience." (Should these students do well and enroll, most likely a portion of them will "start again" in developmental English.) At our community college, "new" is certainly a relative term.

Even when a new basic writing instructor is unaware of such student populations, she may still find herself critically suspicious of the "basic" category. As a scholarship student and recent graduate who had once struggled to decide between a career in literature or musical performance, Lara saw the *Why* question as an occasion to probe the presumption of "basic."

> I had few to no frames of reference for how to pedagogically inject spontaneity into marking students' competence—let alone how to do it productively. At the time, I felt that spontaneity was the most efficient way to assess whether these students were in fact basic—basic as in bad writer—or just rhetorically non-conformative. (Obviously, as a writer and student, I identified with, and secretly wished for, the latter.) In order to assess how basic is basic, I felt I needed a straight-forward prompt to act as a deterrent for any writing that could prove overly fashioned, stylized, contrived. So that day I left a mere fifteen minutes at the end of class to address this prompt, Why are you here? Not nearly enough time, but I wanted to see what would happen with limited time. I didn't want them to "please me," to produce writing that had anything to do with me. I wanted something real, something already in-excess of my solicitations as the instructor.

A desire like Lara's for writing beyond basic may reference other moments in which instructors look to test out the category they are charged to deal with. If so, we might acknowledge that some of the writing we assign students, as well as other efforts, reflects our own wish to trouble that category. And if we are so engaged, one effect would be to reflect upon the matter of our legitimacy too. What if even some of our students aren't basic, and rather are, in Lara's terms, "rhetorically non-conformative"? What does that mean for the self-reflective basic writing teacher?

In sensitivity to this relationship, we can understand the co-constructive activity of the basic writing classroom to involve the instructor as much as the students. That same pressure to sustain the category, to protect borders, may well force its own release, yielding transparency. Lara grappled with the matter of students' legitimacy all semester:

> *And what soon became apparent was that all my students shared a sense of urgency strongly connected to moving out of the derogatory classifications of "basic," writer and otherwise—this they would do by passing as literate, passing the class. But as the semester headed to a close, I felt the impending crush of being a kind of trafficker of industry, my students being potentially unhappy customers, not just seekers of wisdom. When they failed themselves, I felt I had failed them. Particularly as I was now in graduate school, enjoying the privilege of my scholarship, my upstate New York upbringing, I knew I was not doomed to fail. I was not at all like my students.*

Lara realized that the relationship between herself and her students was both political and personal. Indeed she consciously worked to create "a fine line between being a professor and actually being myself, probably more of a peer than a professor: a frustrated 22-year old with hardly more to give my students than 'the real' empathy that despite all that I had accomplished, I often feared to be a failure too." One day especially revealed the correspondences, the day of the course midterm, when Lara had brought the wrong set of papers to class. "I told them and they all sighed; they were already 'in the zone,' ready to write. I had totally messed up, something I'm not used to doing. I felt in need of guidance, but there was no one to hold me accountable," Lara recalls, "no one except my students." That exception spoke volumes of the mutuality of basic writing student and instructor as per legitimacy, as one of the women of the class sought to allay Lara's distress:

> *"So we'll take it tomorrow. Don't be so hard on yourself, Miss."*

Why Are You Here? Relocating the Question

Basic writing instructors might each write their own list of such moments in which students and instructors change roles, one helpfully leading the other. The challenge is to draw from them, and incite more of them, to transform the classroom, to keep them from being mere blips on the social screen. Teaching within the contradictions of legitimacy might rather pull us in to join our students in a shared, creative space, as Lara found in mirroring students' uncertainty. While still interested in the *Why* question, she began asking it somewhat differently, effectively changing the *Why to a How and a What of it:*

> *Alright, you're here.* Discuss.

Now it became more of a cue than a question, enabling a more genuine sort of turn-taking as van Dijk might view it, a turn providing a much broader responsive space. So cued,

it was left for students to decide the next move, be it toward "[w]hat the audience is familiar with and has skill [to think] about" (see Hoagland), that is, toward information, or toward re-locating the question farther beyond reach of the traditional IRE classroom dynamic. Lara discovered it was possible to jolt the institutional framework for evaluating response; like-wise, the big "I" of IRE (initiation) could function performatively: *Alright, you're here, and that's something, isn't it? That you are sitting here now, that you continue to do as you have and need to do; that you are designated as a basic writer, that you failed writing, that you write poorly according to some, that you write well. It IS something this semester that you are here and hopeful-ly intend to be back tomorrow.* Effectively re-voicing the question in these terms drew an open circle around students' lives, including the problem of their legitimacy, whereby once they entered, they could choose to stand at any number of points defining that space—center, edge, or somewhere in between.

With the *Why* question reconfigured, students were freer to make more of the "here" dimension, to consider their social and political locations, *here* and beyond the classroom. For Melanie (student names are pseudonyms), the turn of the question proved just such an invitation. She openly expressed the anxiety that perhaps her white Eastern European her-itage did not qualify her to participate in the frequent discussions of othered and racially-contested experience. In her reflective essay, she responded to Lara's admittedly "Hispanic notions of taste and flamboyance," which Lara had often drawn upon to emphasize greater possibilities for the students' writing:

> Professor always kept telling us we have to add more spice to our writings, that some-times the writing was boring. Every time she would say that I would look at her and wonder, how am I supposed to add spice to writing? Im white I know nothing about spices. It always seemed funny to me, how I would wonder off with my thoughts about writing.

In parallel reflection, Lara notes that this student "is keen to observe that what I was trying to draw out, and which I certainly produced, was in fact a very limited notion of color, ethnicity, and diversity." No less, the student, in Lara's view, finds her way: "She ends not in fact focused on me, the instructor, but in her own discursive, internal, vagrant space." Lara's outreach, her coming forward to bring her own traditions to writing, showed her again join-ing students in the widened circle of question and response, sharing a unique space, periph-ery or center, that also allowed them theirs. Moreover, Melanie finds herself somewhere meaning-filled and productive, not vacant. This is the space of "wonder[ing] off" that leads Melanie to explore her ethnic and social positioning.

Another student, Jeff, pulls at the question like a string which, like Melanie, he uses to find and assess his particular social positioning. A young African-American from Brooklyn,

Jeff met the implicit challenge of the question straight away, the first time that Lara asked it early in the semester. He wrote, "After failing the placement exam, I was put into [this course] in order to fix my skills in reading and writing." And as a thoughtful and confident writer, he is unwilling to have these circumstances define him. He writes that there is more to move him than such an institutional determination: specifically, the death of his older brother from "hanging," or gang violence. Still he does not accredit this death, or the chance to redeem it, as the reason he has come to college. He does not suggest, nor must we assume, the connection.

What is clear, however, is that through the semester, Jeff struggles to find a place of proximity to, with, and for his brother. On each of his papers, he inserts his brother's name, Cl---, into his own, a kind of a.k.a. between his first and last names. His later decision to remove this detail from his name as written on his endterm reflective essay suggests his personal consideration of political and social location—where he is—now mindful of writing for public, evaluative purposes. He finds a proximity to journalist and former gang member, Nathan McCall:

> Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* is a book about the life of a young black man in America during the 1960's and how Nathan dealt with violence, drug use, and racist problems in his life. With this book I was able to relate it to many of my own experiences even though the events in this book took place way before my time and by relating myself to McCall it also helped me to change some of my ways in order to better myself. By using prompts and having open readings in class, Professor helped me to insert myself in Nathan's shoes. The prompts allow me to voice my opinion and to hear the many different opinion's of my classmates. We also wrote a paper about the word "hanging" and it's effect on African-American men. With those methods, it help me to express myself on paper and connect myself to Nathan McCall.

Jeff does not bring up the explicit gang violence connection between himself and McCall perhaps because he doesn't need to. "By inserting himself" into the identity of another, he recognizes that the act of finding proximity is significant. For him, this is true whether it is done in reading for college or in writing his name. In addition, as we've noted, he ties the personal to the political. "Hanging," or street violence, is not McCall's or Jeff's problem, but rather the problem of African-American men. Enlarging the concerns of violence of which he knows something personally locates Jeff in an even wider realm of community and identity from which answers may emerge. Questions that allow students that space to range within and across the borders that define them make finding proximity possible. As if following his own impulse, with Lara's support, he readily shifts the question of *Why are you here?* to *Where is here for me?* Whom do I stand behind? Who accompanies me? Or as Black cultural theorist

Awad El Karim M. Ibrahim might ask, *among whom and where do I see myself mirrored?* These are all full and sufficient questions to answer, *Why are you here?*

We have claimed that the questions imploring students to articulate why they have come to college encompass great complexities of identity and social positioning, urging a "revaluing" of students' "testimony" (Hoagland) in these instances. Cultural presumptions of basic writers' newness to college hide countless ambiguities, including our students' past forays into academic literacy and their many simultaneous competencies and affiliations. Asymmetries of power are the driving mechanism; charged socially and linguistically, they make the asking of such questions seem legitimate at the same time they affect the possibility of authentic, productive answers.

As well, we have marked how easy it is to engage a rhetoric of welcome that circumvents the same need to legitimize the new teacher of basic writing. The linking of welcome and legitimacy opens larger questions of *by what standards and toward what purposes legitimate*, for both students and their instructors. We acknowledge the institutional and political spaces that students and instructors mutually occupy and the importance of opportunities for new basic writing teachers to see their positionality reflected by their students.

In our graduate-level practicum on the teaching of writing, a new basic writing teacher and a veteran one gained a fuller picture of the contingencies of basic writing students' and their instructors' experience, wherein key markers of academic beginnings are questioned. We better understand that institutional entry points to college are troubled ground and need further contestation. We hope to evolve this process to freshly encounter our students, joining them in their reach for legitimacy and in the revelations of its troubling.

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Tim Barnett

"Love Letters": Narrating Critical Literacy Theory in the First-Year Writing Class

ON ARRIVING AT NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, a comprehensive, open-access institution that prides itself on being the "most diverse university in the Midwest," colleagues cautioned me against using critical literacy approaches in the classroom because NEIU students "could not handle" difficult texts. In my years at NEIU, I have fought the advice of my colleagues even as I understand the reasons for it. Many of our students come from overcrowded and underfunded Chicago public schools. A good number are the first in their families to attend college as well as first-generation English speakers; many are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves who entered the U.S. to escape poverty and violence; many are underprepared for college-level work. In other words, they are the new "traditional" college students, and their life experiences are diverse and complex.

NEIU students, however, often have deep insight into the inequities of U.S. life, and I have heard instructors say they appreciate the critical awareness our students bring as compared to the traditional skills of students they have taught at other institutions. If sometimes underprepared for traditional academic work, NEIU students have many strengths and need an education that helps them understand the multiplicity, complexity—even the difficulties—of their backgrounds as potential sources of intellectual strength rather than simply as "problems" to be overcome. Open-access students, that is, deserve the insights that critical pedagogies offer. In return, these students' insights and experiences can enrich theories of critical literacy when we acknowledge their ability, in Nancy DeJoy's terminology, to participate in and contribute to complex understandings of writing (1).

Along with theorists who advocate Writing about Writing (WAW), I teach students how to write, in part, by introducing them directly to composition theory, and my focus on critical literacy means that first-year writers grapple with some of the most theoretical concepts in composition. I use academic texts (from Ira Shor and others) to initiate students into this discourse, but I also rely on what I call critical literacy narratives, such as Megan Foss's "Love Letters," to put flesh on the abstract bones of theory. Critical literacy narratives describe characters who use language to grapple with subject formation and create change. These characters provide models of critical "writers writing" (Yagelski 14), and analysis of their experiences helps students understand some of the dialectical relationships among

reading, writing, subjectivity, and change.

Students in my classes also write critical literacy narratives, and they use academic and professional texts to help them not simply tell their own stories of literacy but also to help analyze literacy in their lives. We write two such narratives during the semester, and we also write two theorized arguments about critical literacy that use the *class's* narratives as primary source materials (that is, the students read each other's literacy narratives as they would published pieces, looking for trends or anomalies, and from analysis of their fellow students' stories construct arguments about literacy and language). By asking students to consider literacy from their own and their classmates' experiences in light of academic essays and published literacy narratives, I encourage them to imagine how they can contribute to significant discussions about writing.

Specifically, one concept I use to help students read narratives such as "Love Letters" and imagine new possibilities for writing is John Trimbur's idea that writing, the self, and culture are "leaky sites" (as quoted in LeCourt 130). Donna LeCourt explains that "a single writing context produces a variety of subject positions that have the potential to both interpellate the subject ideologically and/or provide spaces wherein that inscription can be resisted" and suggests that "the concepts available for writing subjects are probably best imagined as 'leaky sites of struggle…where no outcomes can be guaranteed in advance' (130). Enacting the possibilities for agency…relies on the subject's ability to see culture as 'leaky' by mobilizing the multiplicity [s/]he brings to…acts of writing" (*Identity* 28, citation in original).

I introduce these ideas early in the semester and "translate" them as best I can, but they remain murky for students until we encounter the leakiness LeCourt describes in Foss's and others' stories. Through Foss's description of her experiences as a sex worker/addict/writer/student/teacher, students come to better understand the possibilities of writing as both a critical act *and* as a tool that keeps us in line with dominant ideologies. The first-person narrator in "Love Letters" (who initially identifies as Mickey and later as Megan—presumably our author in this piece of creative non-fiction) vividly reflects this tension through her conflicting purposes for writing, her relationships to multiple audiences, and her understanding of writing as a tool that can intervene in the material world. Together these things mingle in complex ways to help Mickey rewrite herself and the world around her.

In the next section, I briefly look at the theoretical background informing this essay before offering a close reading of "Love Letters," broken up by "From the Classroom" sections that suggest pedagogical questions and strategies for using Foss's text. While I do not read "Love Letters" as closely as this essay might suggest with every class I teach, I have taught all the theoretical issues suggested in this reading to various classes. The depth of my reading of Foss is meant to demonstrate how narrative can offer insight into critical literacy for students

and academics alike and to suggest that students can work with concepts of the postmodern subject—still foreign in a world that depends on the presumption of the autonomous, unified self—much more readily through story. Linking theory and story in this way, I argue, offers all of us a stronger sense of the way language works in our lives and increased opportunities to pursue our own critically literate acts.

Theoretical Background

Those who espouse "writing about writing" argue that students can best learn to write through serious engagement with composition studies, and, along with these theorists, I use scholarly texts in English 101, texts that offer students complex analyses of writing rather than reductive textbook formulas. Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle argue that such work will help students see that writing is not a universal or finite subject to be learned once and for all, and they suggest that students can best learn to "think like a writer" (i.e., be attentive to issues of audience, context, purpose, etc.) when they grapple with the complexities of writing theory rather than overly simplified discussions that suggest a monolithic, decontextualized writing process (553).

In addition, Barbara Bird believes that the difficulties basic writers encounter stem not from a "lack of appropriate strategies or processes," but "from their lack of conceptual knowledge" (2) about writing and little "opportunity to participate in the meaning making process" in composition studies (3). Such lack of opportunity, she argues, can be remedied by exposing students to the debates about writing that professionals engage in, and she recounts her own experience as a writer who flourished when she learned some of the "secrets" of the field by reading David Bartholomae and others (8). Indeed, Bartholomae is another who advocated almost thirty years ago for student participation in professional discourse when he wrote that students too often do "work that places them outside the official discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do" and, instead, should be asked to work "inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise" (632-33). Finally, Jonnika Charlton addresses a major concern about WAW when she asserts that students—instead of being turned off by reading academic texts in English 101—gain confidence in themselves as writers as they become more immersed in the field and see how writing theorists think and write about *them* and their writing processes. Charlton suggests that exposure to some of the complications of writing studies is good for everybody, and my experiences confirm this idea.

However, exposing students to composition theory, critical literacy theory, in particular, is difficult. As Joe L. Kincheloe writes:

a vibrant, relevant, effective critical pedagogy . . . must be simultaneously intellectu-

ally rigorous and accessible to multiple audiences . . . .[O]pen-access writing and speaking about critical pedagogy are also profoundly important. Such a populist form of criticality does not . . . undermine our intellectual rigor and theoretical sophistication; instead, it challenges our pedagogical ability to express complex ideas in a language that is understandable and germane to wide audiences. (10)

With Kincheloe, Eric J. Weiner (60), Luis Huerta-Charles (251), and others, I believe that the theories behind critical literacy must be made more accessible to students, particularly students at open-access institutions, if critical literacy is to become a stronger force. Theorizing about Freire in graduate seminars and in academic journals is not enough; we need to find a way not simply to incorporate practices of critical pedagogy/literacy (grading contracts, problem-posing activities, etc.) into first-year writing but also to offer students access to the critical theory that underlies what we understand about reading/writing and possibilities for change. Only then will students be ready to fully partake in Bird's notion of the "meaning-making processes" that critical literacy has to offer.

In my classes, one issue we focus on is subjectivity because, for decades, theorists have posited the downfall of the autonomous, unified individual and, in its place, suggested a fluid, multiple subject constrained by discursive and material inequities but able to best negotiate such constraints when aware of them. This notion of subjectivity has been central to critical literacy to the extent that LeCourt remarked in 1998:

Although there is no monolithic theory of critical literacy or pedagogy, a fairly coherent thread of thought has been developed under the term 'postmodern' critical literacy . . . .This version of critical literacy . . . attempts to relocate agency within a postmodern version of the subject as multiple, contingent, and always in process. ("Reifying" 5)

In addition, DeJoy has argued that the "second phase" of process theory (which she identifies with Berlin, Bridwell-Bowles, and others) "tend[s] to center some aspect of student subjectivity as the thing being revised through composition studies" as opposed to the "first wave," which focused on "the rewriting of student texts as the locus for revision" (40). If writing instructors are truly concerned with revising student subjectivity (e.g., to help students re-imagine themselves as "writers"), and if we are serious about including students in more significant ways in "our" field, we should find ways to make contemporary theories of the subject accessible to students.

Students at open-access institutions have been left out of theoretical conversations more than most; too often, writing instruction for such students has emphasized a decontextualized writing process and simplistic forms (such as the five-paragraph theme) instead of careful engagement with ideas and the multiple potentials of writing and self. Many students

at these institutions also come from working-class backgrounds, and so are likely to have had early educations that reflect what Jean Anyon found years ago when she argued that working-class students were taught to follow instructions rather than to think critically and lead (74-5). These students need opportunities to revise the knowledge they have received and their roles in the world. They need opportunities to validate the critical acuity they possess from their lived experiences and their complex relationships to language and education. They need to see not, on the one hand, that reading/writing matter, and, on the other hand, that we are in need of a more democratic society—a reasonable message sent by many progressive writing classrooms that is limited because it implies that literacy issues run parallel to but are ultimately separate from social justice issues. Instead, students need to see how language and literacy deeply intertwine with issues of identity, difference, and access to power. Finally, while we can tell students all these things, it is more effective if students directly encounter critical literacy theory in the lives of people whose experiences embody these complex ideas: The narrator of "Love Letters," Mickey/Megan, is one such figure.

Subjectivity and Purpose in "Love Letters"

"Love Letters" moves in a linear fashion through three moments of Mickey's/Megan's life (from her experience in Section I after her boyfriend/pimp has been arrested; to her own experience in jail in Section II; to her time in Section III as an English student/instructor). The story is rich in content and rich in its ability to help students understand theoretical concepts of subjectivity and writing, so much so, that I will address only parts of Sections I and II in this essay and leave the implications of Section III (which suggest the complications of combining personal success with a larger critical vision of society) for a future piece. It is important to note, also, that some of Mickey's struggles with writing and identity continue through all three sections of the story and grow more complex over time (they are not necessarily "overcome" and are recursive processes, much like the writing process itself). The narrator, for example, both confirms her sense of self as a writer and struggles with this definition throughout the story, and it is through these ongoing moments of tension that I ask students to consider notions of subjectivity and writing.

Mickey signals her identity as a writer in the opening lines: "The first time my old man went to prison . . . .I wrote Darryl long rambling letters that went on for 10 or 11 pages . . . and them tablets of paper got to be as critical for survival as black tape and crazy glue and bolt-cutters" (4). In these lines, Mickey uses colloquial language (as she does throughout her text) to define writing as a life-saving act, which immediately raises a question about the materiality of writing: How does writing help Mickey in a way comparable to such tangible tools as tape or bolt-cutters? How can it intervene in the "real world?" Subtly, Mickey address-

es this issue when she notes that, in all the years she was with Darryl, "I probably never said as many words out loud as I poured into a single one of them 10-page letters. And as long as I kept writing them I could pretend he was still there" (5).

When I ask students to examine this statement, they see the conflicts in Mickey's words (suggesting the "leakiness" of this particular rhetorical context). Mickey's clearest purpose for writing is suggested in the second sentence of this quote, as her "letters" (which she writes for Darryl but ultimately decides not to send) are useful because they keep Darryl present; they help maintain her status quo. At the same time, Mickey hints in the first sentence of this quote that this writing offers her a new voice. While writing to maintain her sense of normalcy, Mickey has created text that also allows her to explore an identity separate from Darryl as she pours a part of her (unspoken, maybe unknown) self into 10-page "letters." Writing, then, helps Mickey explore a new sense of self even as it helps her imagine that Darryl is still present, and I use this moment to ask students if Mickey is using writing to reach for something new or to hold on to what she knows and to consider how these two conflicting purposes might enable each other. What does it mean for Mickey, for any of us, to embrace such conflicting purposes through writing, and how do such conflicts enable the leaky elements of writing that LeCourt and Trimbur espouse?

Through facilitating analysis and discussion of these seemingly simple lines, instructors can help students experience both writing and subject formation as recursive and often contradictory. Mickey cannot simply move ahead into a new life, but she discovers that she can toy with possibilities through language and, when she writes these new possibilities down, the materiality of her text—in conjunction with its ability to move her to generate more text —makes her textual role-playing into something more, something in between "real" life and pure imagination. Mickey's instinct, like the instinct of most people, is to hold onto the life she knows and can maintain some control over, but her leaky writing context allows her to discover alternative, materially empowering purposes for her work.

The idea that the processes of writing and of subject formation are recursive and connected becomes clearer as I ask students to consider LeCourt's notion that "identity formation begins with the positions a given discourse makes available" (*Identity* 38). We explore this idea through Mickey's clash with her friend Billy Jay, who is angry when he finds Mickey ripping up letters he assumed she had sent to Darryl. Mickey responds: "I liked Billy Jay, but he was getting into shit that he couldn't possibly understand" (6). More important, though, she does not understand her need to write, as she suggests in the following: "As long as writing had a purpose…it made sense. Writing to communicate was logical. Just wandering around scribbling thoughts…down for no apparent reason pointed to one of two things. A rat or a nut. I knew it wasn't the former and that left only the craziness as an option" (6).

Writing enables Mickey to begin questioning who she is and might be, but the idea that she might be a critical writing subject—and that she might need to be the audience for her own work rather than do the "logical thing" and communicate to Darryl—is not available in the discourses she knows. And because she does not have a purpose for writing that "makes sense," she cannot imagine a writing subject that makes sense. She continues:

> I can't think of anything much more suspicious in that community than a hooker . . . recording things on paper. Sometimes people would watch me... like I mighta been half-crazy and ask me why I was doing it. And I really didn't have an answer . . . .I remember . . . sheriffs stopping to see what I was doing and scratching their heads. . . it shoulda occurred to me that sitting there with that tablet on my lap and a...sheriff chatting me up wasn't the brightest thing I coulda done . . . .I never thought about what I was putting in them tablets as information. Never thought of it as secrets. (5)

In Mickey's mind, her purpose for writing is not a public one (to provide information to the authorities, a depiction that positions her as a "rat"), and she is not writing because she is "crazy," (a position she falls back on, though, because other alternatives do not seem to exist). I ask students to imagine how the leakiness of this particular writing context may be surprising Mickey with the possibility of new purposes and the emergence of new kinds of voices, even as she writes to keep Darryl present. We discuss and write about what it would take for Mickey to make the voices that are beginning to emerge in her letters/journals more "real" and why she seems hesitant or unable to do so.

In these discussions, I have discovered that students, while they often accept the common place that writing can be "life-saving," have no ready answer for how writing plays such a constructive role in Mickey's life. This gap presents an opportunity for personal analysis as well as a close reading of Foss's text. While students' circumstances may be very different from Mickey's, they often face similar difficulties in that they cannot imagine multiple subjectivities (such as writer, speaker, critical citizen) as real possibilities to compete with those subjectivities made most available to them (complacent student, consuming subject, etc.). They work for their A's and see writing as practical but do not imagine that such work is positioning them in negative or fixed ways and—maybe—could position them otherwise. And, so, we consider *their* purposes for writing: who gets to choose these purposes and how these purposes are related to societal needs and interests as well as students' own sense of self, education, and agency. And we explore the multiple relationships between difference and language, critical literacy and subjectivity, more broadly.

From the Classroom

By this point in the semester, we have read the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, and others who foreground race and ethnicity as a marker of difference in their lives (a marker instantiated, in part, through language). As purpose, identity, and the materiality of text come to the foreground for Foss, I ask students to consider Foss's experiences in relation to Jordan's African American students—who write public letters of protest in Black English even though they know their choice of language "dooms" their goal of getting justice for Reggie Jordan, a young, unarmed Black man killed by police. Students often raise the question of why race and ethnicity are important to Anzaldúa and Jordan but, seemingly, not to Foss (who never mentions race in her text) and we consider how race is, in fact, present in "Love Letters." For example, when I ask students what race Mickey is, they almost universally respond "White," and this response pushes us to consider how we recognize "unmarked" racial identities through discourse and how whiteness works to maintain its invisibility. Such a response also suggests more questions: How might Foss's story have progressed if she were Black or Latina? An immigrant? Undocumented? What privilege does Mickey have by virtue of her whiteness even as she struggles greatly with poverty, addiction, and abuse? And what if, after all of our discussion of Foss's whiteness, we come to find out she's not white? What would this tell us about ourselves as readers and about the material/discursive nature of race?

June Jordan's story raises thorny issues of subjectivity and purpose as well, and read alongside Foss's, it helps illuminate the role of whiteness in "Love Letters" and in all of our lives. As I have noted, Jordan's students, after long debate, decide to write letters in Black English to the police and to New York publications protesting the shooting death of an unarmed Black man by police. This decision comes after the class has spent a semester exploring the grammar and social functions of Black English and with students' recognition that their choice of language virtually eliminates any chance that their letters will be published and read by a wide audience. Most of my students initially cannot understand why Jordan's students make such a choice, and our focus on subjectivity as it relates to a writer's purpose helps in this regard. When looked at this way, Jordan's students appear to decide that their purpose in writing is as much to own themselves, and Reggie, as "Black" linguistically as it is to protest Reggie's death.

The students choose AAVE to lay claim to their, and Reggie's, identity in response to a racist society that does not care about Reggie's death precisely because he is poor and Black. Staying racially "invisible" for these students is much more complicated than it is for Mickey, as they feel their Blackness intensely when they recognize that Reggie Jordan's encounter with police could have been their own. At the same time, they are given the message that, when addressing this issue publicly, they must choose "neutral, non-racial" voices; otherwise, the form of their language would disqualify them in the court of public opinion. The larger message received by Jordan's students, and that they eventually respond to, however, is that the White majority has the discursive ability to

make race count or make it invisible—to suit its needs—and that other groups suffer in large part because they do not have the same kind of flexibility. Therefore, Jordan's students imagine new purposes for their writing as this message becomes clear; they move from creating texts that protest a specific act of police violence to creating texts that continue to protest this act but that also materially foreground systemic issues of White linguistic supremacy.

The fact that these kinds of questions are not central to Foss's struggle may help students see that critical literacy, and possibilities for social and personal change, can look very different for different people at different times. Such discussions have opened the way for students in my classes to explore how and when we all choose to foreground our differences (linguistically and otherwise) as well as how these differences get foregrounded, or minimized, for us. For example, one trend in my classes has been for students to write narratives that consider recapturing their pasts, particularly through language. What has resulted has been class-wide verbal and written dialogues about identity, language, and difference—along with our varying ability to control these things. Briefly, these kinds of narratives go something like this: The student writes of being born elsewhere or of having a strong family connection to a linguistically marginalized culture. Those students who moved here from other countries, not surprisingly, often write about the turmoil in their identity when asked to recreate themselves within U.S. culture, while those who were born here often recount narratives of tension as they struggled from the time they were born to reconcile conflicting cultures.

Students who write such narratives, however, express what seems to be a new desire (perhaps in response to the work of the class) to recreate themselves yet again. They share an interest in "rebalancing" their sense of self as they have come to believe that one or both of their cultures has exacted too much from them. All, regardless of ethnic or racial background, mention a need to relearn their native language (or their extended families' native language) as part of this process. While narratives exploring tensions in linguistic identity have become common among writers at all levels, what has worked well about the way my classes have explored these issues is that the students have become better able to situate their own personal struggles within larger narratives of language and identity. Because my students' stories are not simply written for me, but are instead read and analyzed by the whole class as part of a larger analysis of critical literacy, many students' purposes for writing appear to evolve just as Jordan's students did. The purely individual explorations of literacy with which my students start become essays that attempt to integrate the experiences of others into their analysis—and this process of integration has been much more productive as I ask students to integrate not simply the voices of professional writers into their texts but the voices of the students sitting near them as well.

For example, one student, A, in an early essay provocatively postulates that his loss of Spanish has meant the loss of the actual experiences he had had with his Mexican cousins when he was younger, and he develops that argument in a final paper that situates his experience living

between worlds in relation to several other students' experiences. His insights, while not conclusive, begin to suggest a growing awareness of the multiple ways individuals can navigate their relationships to U.S. culture and to the cultures of their immediate and extended families:

> *Some students…were dealing with issues of Spanish language and trying to preserve it…. Other students, like [B], knew every important aspect of the culture but struggled with simply being accepted as part of the group. He had to choose between a [Mexican] group that heavily relied on tradition and a [U.S.] one…immersed with other traditions. [C] learns that it isn't easy being in two groups and even choosing one can be hard [as he writes] "I cannot just be one race [;] I could not be white with a name like [Juan] and I couldn't be Hispanic when I failed…Spanish."*

> *This student writer concludes that, while these issues initially seem "racial," they are ultimately more about the universal human need for acceptance, and, while I challenged this assertion as potentially limiting (ironically because it might make too universal a claim), I could not help but express admiration for the student's further consideration in this essay of the ways race and nationality intersect in different ways for different people. While he does not fully flesh out this analysis, he is beginning to think about race and language, identity, and culture as unsettled notions that can work both on and for us, and he is beginning to see in the multiple stories of bilingual, multi-national identity alternative opportunities for balancing his own world.*

> *D, a student in a different class, proposes the term "linguistic orphans" to explain the dilemma of students who had written (like Richard Rodriguez did) about being distanced from family and often being literally unable to communicate with parents, because of language barriers perpetuated by institutions such as schools. D writes that "the idea of a language barrier manifested itself in my mind as a physical one separating me from my parents" but that "it was comforting to know that I'm not alone…and that…some of us decided to to stop being linguistic orphans by embracing and strengthening our bilingual identities." Unlike Rodriguez, this student argues strongly for other ways of cultivating students' "public" voices than by orphaning them, and, in a sense, making them linguistic wards of the state—wards who find it all but impossible to achieve full membership in the dominant culture. Writers such as these students suggest multiple possibilities for their peers who may be struggling between languages and cultures as they also shed light on Mickey's need for acceptance in her seemingly "unracialized" world. Foss's story, complex as it is, becomes more provocative as her experiences speak in response to other stories, including students'.*

Subjectivity and Audience

In Section II of "Love Letters," Mickey finds herself in jail and begins to attend a prison English class, and the issues of subjectivity, purpose, and difference remain central to her writing. However, another rhetorical element—the element of audience—becomes central as

well. As we read Section II, I ask students to imagine how Foss's story suggests that writers can construct new subjectivities (in part) through their relationship to audiences both invoked and addressed and how her story helps us understand and expand on these notions of audience.

Section II opens with Mickey in jail, needing to affirm the subjectivity she knows. Therefore, she writes to Darryl asking him to validate her sense of self as a subject of his world, and this time she actually mails the letters (8). She goes on to write that, while in jail,

> . . . all I wanted to do was sit in fronta the tv. I hadn't seen tv for months . . . . I mean—I'd seen the news . . . . But them people on the news then had been them and we'd been us and it was very different tuning in when I'd been clean for a few weeks because I was no longer sure where the boundary was . . . . I wrote to [Darryl] . . . to …document that boundary line and my position relative to it. And my world would . . . be a very different place . . . if he'd answered my letters... and confirmed my vision. But he didn't . . . . (9-10)

This passage highlights the importance of Mickey's earlier writing even as it suggests her ongoing uncertainties. Her ability to blur the lines between herself and the mainstream "them" she sees on the news has been set up by her journaling from Section I, which allowed her to begin to imagine herself less as a static entity (Darryl's subject) and more as a subject with other possibilities. Now, however, Mickey is not resisting the discourse of the streets, but is, instead, writing to restore her primary sense of self as a resident of those streets. She writes so that Darryl can affirm her stability as a subject, only he fails to do so.

My classes generally read Lunsford and Ede's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy" at this point, and we consider the idea of audience addressed through Mickey's relationship to Darryl. He is the first outside audience that Mickey addresses in her writing, and she does so with the hope of gaining something concrete from him: a stable sense of self in his world. She finds herself open to other possibilities; however, when Darryl fails to respond and "confirm her vision" of herself, the "leakiness" of this writing situation opens up new possibilities for Mickey as she confronts other audiences for her work: her English teacher in the county jail and her family.

When Mickey first mentions her English class, she notes that her only purpose for attending is to gain her physical freedom: "[W]hen I found out I could get time off my... sentence by attending classes I jumped on it" (10). Such a statement provides a good opportunity for students to again consider how Mickey's purposes for writing are in flux as they consider audience issues more deeply. For as she writes, Mickey's purpose in using writing to "con" her way out of jail (and it is important to note that Foss uses the word "con" frequently to describe the way she and others use language) evolves as her teacher becomes an

addressed audience whose ability to speak to and shape Mickey's sense of self rivals Darryl's. This evolution begins on the first day of class, when Mickey's teacher talks about "reasons for writing," and Foss writes that the teacher's discussion of these reasons is "much like the conversations I'd had with myself when I was carrying around them notebooks fulla words that weren't ever going to get read by anybody but me" (11).

I ask students to consider this sentence in relation to Mickey's earlier consideration that writing offered her only two available positions—rat or nut—because Mickey's teacher seems to be describing other possible subjectivities, possibilities that resonate with Mickey's intution that her earlier writing mattered and was worth pursuing. Students and I speculate on how the teacher might have described the purposes of writing (writing to question, explore, imagine, change) and how a breakthrough can come when a writer sees herself reflected through an audience with the authority to name something the writer only intuitively feels. We talk about the significance of the teacher's validation given Darryl's refusal (or inability) to acknowledge Mickey's pleas to help her unify herself as a subject of the streets. Rather than reinforcing Mickey's sense of self as static and part of an absolute us/them relationship (where she is the perpetual "Other"), Mickey's teacher seems to affirm the idea that writing can negotiate new meanings and selves. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mickey's writing context becomes leaky again and we see her shift away from the utilitarian (getting time served for her sentence) and toward the critical (imagining new possibilities for language and a more fluid sense of self).

For example, as she evolves as a student/writer, Mickey asks her teacher if she can write independently to gain more time off her sentence, but her teacher is skeptical and asks for samples of Mickey's writing before approving. Tellingly, Mickey writes that, as she was composing a story to demonstrate her seriousness to her teacher, "my purpose changed…. I cared about what she thought for what it could gain me but I also started caring what she thought simply for the sake of the story" (12). The significance of the text itself begins to rival what it can gain Mickey in terms of time served. Then, once Mickey's teacher allows her to write independently in exchange for time served, Mickey notes that she "took to staying up half the night with pencil and paper" and that by morning her pencil "points were always all rubbed down to smooth black nubs" (13). For the first time since her almost obsessive writing in Section I, Mickey is writing with fervor as her teacher's validation of her text seems to open her up and help her tentatively identify new possibilities for self, possibilities exemplified when Darryl eventually visits her in prison and Mickey reminds herself that she has begun to use writing "to think about options other than returning to the back seats and the spoon and the grasping hands on my body" (13).

In this instance, Mickey is, for the first time, using writing to consciously explore

new realities and not writing primarily to solidify the reality she already knows (as she did, for example, when she wrote to Darryl so that he could reaffirm her as a subject of the streets). While both ways of writing (writing to solidify an existing reality/subjectivity v. writing to imagine new realities/subjectivities) suggest Mickey's belief that writing is a material force that can intervene in the world, only now is she consciously exploring the productive elements of critical writing: its ability not only to re-inscribe her in a dominant discourse, but also to offer alternative positions from which she might rethink and contest the dominant (in this case, the discourse of the streets that has dominated her for so long). This leakiness in her writing context helps Mickey take more and more control over her sense of self and, in turn, can help my students understand the possibilities of "audience invoked."

That is, if Mickey's English teacher is, on the one hand, an example, with Darryl, of audience addressed (she is a physical audience that Mickey attempts to read and satisfy with a clear goal in mind), she is also an example of audience invoked, as Mickey uses her text to help reconfigure her teacher from a skeptical audience (worried, correctly, that Mickey is trying to con the system) into one who believes in Mickey as a writer and, therefore, a "person of value." At the same time, this process of "invoking" is not one-sided. Mickey, the writer, is perhaps the one most affected, as her teacher—Mickey's audience—helps invoke a new sense of self within *Mickey* as well. The two transact meaning and negotiate senses of self through text. While students often see writing as a one-way street with the writer in charge of transmitting meaning (or, conversely, with audiences of power, such as teachers, in complete control), this example helps demonstrate that meaning making and subject formation are epistemic processes that do not necessarily privilege the writer and that give teacher-audiences other forms of power than the ones students usually consider (grading, etc.). In this case, I argue to students, the writer and her audience are mutually dependent on each other to make meaning (in this case, the meaning of a new subject) as neither alone can materialize Mickey into a "writer"—whereas together they have a chance at doing just that.

We see evidence that Mickey's sense of herself as a writer is far from complete, however—and that she needs further opportunities to "perform" and stabilize this role, in Judith Butler's terms (18-19)—when she writes letters to her family. At this point, she acknowledges that her first letter home is a "peace treaty after living for years as one half of a them-against-us equation" and that she needs her family to help her get out of jail, even though she does not expect her life to really change (Foss 14). In this "us v. them" metaphor (a metaphor that echoes Mickey's early experience encountering the news), the only subject she can imagine is someone who cons her family, and then uses them to con the system. Her sense of herself

as a writer (and, therefore, a person of value able to circulate through multiple layers of society) is fragile. However, this new writing performance once again seduces/entraps/empowers Mickey as she also notes at this time that her words become "girders in the formation of a straight identity" (14). This architectural metaphor stands in sharp contrast to the idea of "us v. them" (since a materialized "straight identity" would enable Mickey to cross boundaries that otherwise might seem uncrossable) as well as to Mickey's claim that she only wants to use her family's help to get out of jail sooner. Mickey's purposes for writing and her relationships to audience evolve as she explores how language can affect her relationship to Darryl, her relationship to figures in authority (like her teacher), her relationship to family—and her sense of herself as a more fluid subject.

It is through this generative lens (generative in terms of words, knowledge, and self) that I ask students to view Mickey's continuing conflicts about writing. As should be clear by now, Mickey consistently uses writing to broach new subjectivities before retreating to a sense of self she is more comfortable with,[1] but she does write one final story in jail that seems to be a textual turning point as she uses words to once again intervene in material reality:

> I wrote one more story. Once I decided to leave [life on the streets], the hardest part became shoving away . . . everything . . . that would stay behind. And . . . [it] all massed in my mind as Darryl . . . .I didn't start out planning to kill him off but that's how it worked out . . . .Of course I knew it wasn't true. But just like never mailing the letters I wrote . . .allowed me to pretend he wasn't gone until such time as my mind could handle the reality—writing that story helped me to bury the past until it was safe to resurrect it. (16)

My focus on critical literacy in English 101 offers students tools to analyze the "problems" of purpose and audience in Mickey's life, and, by this point, they are eager to consider how the subject who wrote to maintain Darryl in her life is now using language to construct a competing subject with the flexibility to imagine multiple futures as well as new relationships to her past. This alternative subject is under construction, and words are never simply enough to conjure her up, but Foss is asking us to believe that written texts played a key role in her abilty to "kill" Darryl's hold on her sense of self, leave the streets, and become a student, teacher, and writer. For Mickey, the multiple writing spaces she has engaged have

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1. At this point, students and I often revisit the idea of audience in Section I as well and the traditional idea that writing for the self is writing "without an audience." Mickey's writing suggests that journal writing can invoke a different kind of audience than we are used to thinking about: a new subject **within** (in Mickey's case, a subject who uses words to consider a self separate from Darryl). That is, Mickey's writing for herself in Section I serves an unexpected purpose as she invokes, from within herself, a new subject who responds to her words and offers new possibilities for her own existence.

proven "leaky" indeed as she has used them to construct new purposes and possibilities for writing and used competing audiences to reshape her sense(s) of self textually and materially, and students can explore these kinds of issues in equally fascinating ways.

From the Classroom

In one of my English 101 classes, a student named X wrote an essay titled "It Lives," which begins this way:

> *Writing is most certainly an entity of its own. It can help us, hurt us, make us happy or sad, etc. Although we may not realize it, perhaps we can argue that we are always writing to an audience. Who that audience is may vary, perhaps it is the reader, the writer or…perhaps even the entity of writing itself.*

This essay jumps from a discussion of the independent existence of text to audience issues in a way that is a little startling. Citing multiple student texts from our class as well as "Love Letters" and other readings, this student is the first I have met to write about a "textual entity." Foss's comparisons of her writing to "black tape and bolt cutters," along with the ways she uses writing to intervene in her mental and physical worlds (by, for example, killing off Darryl) seem to have inspired this student to imagine text in complicated ways and to make an unlikely connection between the materiality of text and the idea of audience. What does it mean for the text to be our audience, X seems to be asking? What happens when another subject, a textual subject, becomes a player in our efforts to make meaning? How does understanding text in this way make the writing process more "leaky," and, therefore, able to open up space for change?

When discussing X's essay in class, we considered how understanding text as its own powerful entity adds to our understanding of critical literacy. On the one hand, it would seem that having another "player" in this process would create more possibilities for our work as we would no longer depend simply on the writer or on the writer/reader transaction (connected through an inanimate text) to control the meaning-making process. This discussion helped students tell their own stories of when text has "acted" on them or had a life of its own and, I think, opened them to a better understanding of revision as an epistemic process, where early drafts play an active, and not always predictable, role in constructing new ideas and new texts, even new selves. At the same time, X's idea that writing is an independent player in the meaning-making process helped students imagine that discourse also has the power to write us and keep us in line.

This line of thought prompted one student (a seemingly confident 19-year-old who is also a strong writer) to comment in class about his dislike for the traditional research paper and his growing understanding that it was the form itself, along with the way teachers and students interact around it, that is the problem. In his view, and other students agreed, the very form of the research paper suggests that student voices do not matter because students are required to "substi-

tute" expert voices for their own to achieve credibility. When I tried to explain that research papers did not have to be this way and that, at the college level at least, they are generally not expected to be that way, we had a productive class session on how such rules and regulations seem built into forms of discourse (and are part of what gives them life) and how these forms can empower and overpower teachers as well as students, "real" writers as well as novices. In particular, this discussion opened up space for me to more fully grasp and then discuss with my students why I struggle with teaching English 102 (and typically choose not to): because the power of the research paper to dominate student voices—as it is too often understood—feels greater than my power as a teacher to help students engage this form of discourse a conversation of ideas. The "entity" of the research paper does not only overpower students; it can also overpower teachers, such as myself, who too often feel helpless in the face of the way it has traditionally acted in the world.

I have long talked to students about James Berlin's notion of social epistemic rhetoric (the idea that writer, reader, text, and material world come together to make meaning in contexts shaped by history and power relations), but it was only when we started reading stories like "Love Letters" that students were able to truly engage this theory in some depth. X is only beginning when he writes that, for Foss "writing itself, without experience, without schooling and without a direct purpose (because she never sent the [initial] letters [to Darryl]), was enough for her to keep doing it. For something to be able to force people to act without even knowing why adds to the argument that writing is an entity of its own." However, because it engaged the materiality of text, X's essay was more useful to me and to the class than the typical essays I received before engaging critical literacy theory in English 101. Its complex consideration of textuality as a real player in the production of meaning contributed greatly to my efforts to bring critical literacy theory into the "real" lives of students.

Another student, Y, seemed to channel Foss in an essay that describes her experience using writing to move beyond a bad relationship. While Y cites Richard Wright's experience with reading as a primary influence for her analysis, her classmates, after reading her essay, told her to revisit Foss because the two stories address similar themes. I might note that I often ask students to reread texts that relate to their writing as well, but they do not usually jump at the chance; however, in this case, Y was provoked by the responses of "real" readers who saw her experiences and ideas reflected in Foss's text, and she ended up writing a final in-class essay that discussed how startled she was to revisit her story through the prism of Foss's when she re-read "Love Letters."

One way that Y's literacy narrative reflects Foss's is that they both describe using literacy as a way to cope with realities that feel impossible before going on to describe how literacy as a means of coping can morph into literacy as a tool for change. For example, Y initially describes using reading (anything she could get her hands on) to block all thought and feeling after ending her relationship, much like Foss initially uses writing to buffer herself from the knowledge that Darryl

was in prison. Both, however, demonstrate how initial experiences with reading/writing can open other possibilities and even new subjectivities. After writing about the way reading helped keep her emotions and her understanding of what had happened to her at bay, Y notes that she came to see that writing could also offer a tool for analysis. However, "this was not an easy process":

> I would begin to type and as soon as I knew the words were leading to descriptions of pain I would…hit the backspace key…. The keyboard seemed to have its own shield that did not allow me through…..

> I was afraid. I was not afraid of others reading the truth but I was worried about ME reading my own truth. … For me, words were dangerous because they could either make me strong and restore the old me, or they could be very hurtful and break me even more.

> One option that Y does not consider in her last sentence is the possibility that the act of writing—and her experience of her text as its sole audience—might have helped her imagine a new subject, an identity somewhere in between her "old self" and the frightened, depressed person she had become. Her allusion to the pain of writing is also very important as it suggests how the power critical literacy can bring often comes with risk and how fear of this risk is what often keeps us stagnant, playing the same role over and over. Seemingly in response to this issue, Y's essay ends "happily," with a discussion of how she deleted her story of her bad relationship and, therefore (like Foss), "closed that chapter in my life" (in yet another testament to the way writing can intervene in our material worlds).

> However, the few sentences I cite here offer a mixed picture of the many roles literacy can play. Y writes first of using reading to tune out before she eventually confronts her need to write about her experience—a need challenged even as she wrote by the text that was created. Writing down her experience took courage, but it still was not enough, as Y goes on to acknowledge a third layer of her process when she writes that, after careful thought, "I realized that reading my story was the answer…. I read my own story for a different perspective, I was now the audience" (my emphasis). Y recognizes that she has played multiple roles in this experience, and, as a class, we discussed that it may have been this multiplicity that helped enable the leakiness of the writing context for her. She remarks that "just like Richard Wright in Black Boy, I came to the realization that reading can indeed be a dangerous process," and it is her ability to confront the "dangers" in this experience that give her writing context its "leakiness." In addition, Y adds a fourth role to her reading/writing repertoire in my class as she becomes a more distant observer of her own situation, an analyst with the capacity to re-imagine a fairly common writing experience ("I was in a bad situation, and writing helped me feel better") and see it as a rhetorical problem with multiple layers and nuances, as well as a rhetorical issue that could be illuminated by, and help illuminate, the stories of others.

> In their narratives, both X and Y consider the power of writing and its relationship to audi-

ence in more complex ways than they had in earlier essays in my class. As they imagine how texts might have an agency of their own, they acknowledge that texts might influence the reader, and the world, in ways they had not previously considered. They recognize that the writer as audience of his/her own work can run a risk—a risk of pain or gain, or, more likely, pain and gain. Such revelations can make the leakiness of all writing situations more visible to students, as they begin to see the multiple roles they play in the writing process, as well as the multiple roles their texts and audiences play in relation to them—and how the interactions between these multiple and shifting entities contribute to the production of meaning and selves.

Conclusion

The discipline of Composition is only beginning to explore the possibilities for Writing about Writing, the potentially radical act of asking students to participate in our professional conversations and activities more fully. I submit, though, that one important way to teach students *how* to write through the study of writing is to use literacy narratives such as Foss's, along with formal theory, to engage them with critical ideas in the field. I am not a professor of rhetoric and composition because I believe everyone needs to know how to use commas correctly and that it is my mission to teach them. Nor am I a professor because I want to help students go quietly into the fast-capitalist night of the global economy and meekly take their roles. Composition Studies as a field and as a practice holds me because writing is such a complex, leaky entity. It offers us possibilities as it constrains us; helps us construct personal and public voices; offers us new subjectivities as it binds us to the subjectivities we have assigned to ourselves or that have been assigned to us. It is a fascinating cultural construction whose powers I want to share with students, including—especially—students like those at NEIU, open-access students too often shortchanged by poverty, discrimination, and educations that have emphasized submission as the key to success. In part, of course, we all have to submit in various ways, and I do not believe that any easy "liberation" will be found through stories such as "Love Letters" or through critical literacy theory. However, I have seen students who struggle with grammar and spelling come to life when faced with real ideas about writing and its many possibilities, students who conclude a semester of English 101 with thoughts like the following:

> Before I started…writing and reading essays and stories that made sense to me and that seem[ed] to be real and share…a common experience, I thought that writers, especially well known writers like Richard Wright…, were born that way. I thought that it was in them to write really well…. I never thought of writers as writers, but as machines that are program[med] to say the "right" things…. After reading the essays of my classmates I… understand why writing is really important and how it can be

used to make sense of …your world. The writers that I see as inspiration are not then machines, but people who look for change when the only thing they know best…is reading and writing.

Because my English 101 classes look at critical literacy theory through the lens of narrative, and because our narratives come from students in our class as well as published authors, students such as this one are able to begin re-imagining their relationships toward literacy as a critical act. They open up to the many things that can happen when we read and write—in and out of school, for teachers, parents, lovers, the world, ourselves. Composition Studies also benefits when we ask students from all walks of life to look at and understand their own multiplicity, their own complex uses of language, as potential goldmines of intellectual import. Asking students to "contribute to and participate in" (DeJoy 1) our efforts to utilize critical literacy in the classroom and beyond is hard work, but we owe it to the possibilities of writing to make critical literacy theory more accessible within the university and beyond.

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Frank Alexander

A Perpetual Literacy Crisis?: Bourgeois Fears, Working-Class Realities, and Pedagogical Responses

WHEN MORE THAN HALF OF "THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST" OF AMERICA'S boys, educated in the country's premiere prep schools, failed Harvard's first entrance exams in the 1870s due to their poor writing skills, anxieties over education began surfacing in print, and our first national literacy crisis was born. The proof was in the writing: mechanical errors "of all sorts" filled the pages, and the Harvard English faculty was in shock (Connors 128 - 129). In terms of national literacy insecurity, little seems to have changed since the 1870s. As Brownyn Williams points out, since that time, the literacy crisis has been "perpetual": from the 1870s outcry over the results of Harvard's entrance exams to the "Why Johnny Can't Read" crisis of the 1970s to the assessments of various national studies, the "wailing" has gone on (178). But the sheer constancy of the outcry can give pause. Why the concern when "clearly most people by adulthood have acquired adequate levels of literacy" (Williams 179)?

Williams may be right in seeing the national alarm as a reflection of middle-class anxieties over a desire to maintain "status and privilege"—bourgeois fears that without the proper literacy and linguistic markers, they will lose the cultural capital to insure their identities (179 - 180). But when the perpetual nature of the literacy crisis is highlighted, what may get lost are the unequal access to literacy experienced by the working-class poor and the material consequences of the lack of higher literacy acquisition. In my inquiry, the current "literacy crisis" does not concern whether the privileged punctuate their sentences according to Harvard's criteria or how well the tenets of standard language ideology are being maintained by the middle class. What I want to explore is the crisis experienced by working-class students (defined here as students of low social economic status) in access to higher literacy acquisition, an inequality that should be recognized and addressed in any attempt to improve what is seen as defects in our educational systems.

Decades ago, two icons within literacy scholarship published ethnographic research and case studies that foregrounded the difficulties of literacy acquisition for the working class. During the 1970s, Shirley Brice Heath completed extensive ethnographic research relying heavily on transcriptions of language use of communities in the Piedmont Carolinas. In

the resulting book, *Ways With Words*, Heath highlights the unique difficulties that working-class students had in school due to differing language use. Deborah Brandt, in *Literacy in American Lives*, explores the changing nature and inequalities of access of literacy acquisition through her case studies of 80 residents of south central Wisconsin. Brandt's research highlights the rising standards of literacy needed to sustain material well-being while exposing the economic factors that have made literacy acquisition problematic for the working class. Her work demonstrates that as literacy demands have increased for middle-class jobs in a variety of areas, working-class students experience increasing difficulties in obtaining that literacy.

From the time of these two studies, nothing has changed much judging from the data that government agencies and scholarly research churn out on a regular basis: low socioeconomic status (SES) students are clearly fighting against the odds. Steven Krashen reviews the literature correlating poverty with academic achievement and finds that poverty means lower scores on all measures of school achievement: the negative impact of low SES can be seen in food insecurity, lack of proper medical care, environmental conditions, and more limited access to books (17). The correlations are strong between SES status and academic factors that contribute to success in school studies. Relative to their wealthier counterparts, lower SES students develop pre-academic skills more slowly (Lopez and Burrueco 34), then attend schools with fewer resources (Aikens and Barbarin 235) with teaching staffs that are less experienced with a higher turnover rate (Muijs et al. 4). They have significantly less parental involvement in their education (Snyder and Dillow 99) and drop out of school at a much higher rate (Snyder and Dillow 182). While in school, students from working-class backgrounds do not test as well as their more affluent counterparts. The tested reading comprehension level of the poor is significantly lower by the third grade, and their lower level of reading comprehension rate indicates their greater probability of dropping out of college (Hernandez 2-3). Those who do attend college tend to enroll in less selective colleges (Karen 202 - 204), and they are more likely to quit before achieving their degree (Tinto 3). In *Completing College*, a comprehensive research of student retention in higher education, Vincent Tinto reports the discovery of a startling fact that reveals the achievement gap faced by the working-class poor, "Among four-year institutions there were too few first-generation college and low-income students of middle-high or high ability to be included in the data. That fact alone is a telling reminder of the association between social status broadly understood and the ability of students to acquire academic skills prior to college" (131).

Those who have lived working class or who teach working-class students do not need ethnographic research, case studies, or statistical data to reveal the frustrations of the lower socioeconomic classes in their attempts to gain higher literacy. In *Defying the Odds*, Donna

Dunbar-Odom, a scholar from a working-class background, uses the Anselm Kiefer sculpture "Book of Wings" as a metaphor for the literacy aspirations of the working class (1). While the metallic sculpture of a book with wings situated on a teacher's pedestal suggests the common belief that literacy offers the heady possibilities of flight, the working class finds itself "weighted inexorably to . . . material lives" (1). In my work inside the classrooms of an urban community college and a regional state university—and in my work outside the classroom in tutoring programs for working-class students attending secondary schools—it seems to me that the metaphor should be extended: Kiefer's winged-sculpture should be detached from the pedestal and turned on its head in semblance of a crash landing. This pose would reflect a more realistic assessment of my working-class students' literacy aspirations. Almost without exception, these students understand the acquisition of higher literacy as key to economic mobility, but the challenges they face are daunting. Children come to tutoring sessions hungry; adults come to midmorning college classes after a full night's work; there is the constant economic pressure to keep bills paid, families provided for, and studies completed. Even when highly motivated to achieve literacy, students struggle to maintain the level of persistency needed to develop the skills and habits of literacy. For these college students, often their academic preparation for acquiring higher literacy is suspect, and they now juggle work, family, and school in attempt to "catch up" and achieve their dreams of economic success and upper mobility. They struggle against the weight of their material lives.

Literacy scholars like Brandt and Heath acknowledge the role educators can play in an attempt to address issues of difference and inequites. Without blaming teachers or our educational system as a whole, both Heath and Brandt call on teachers and school systems to stand in the gap for working-class students, overcoming the obstacles of cultural discontinuities (Heath 368–369), fragmented communities (Heath 375–376), and rectifying inequities in providing equal access to higher literacy resources (Brandt 206). Their studies conclude with their responses to the working-class dimension of the literacy acquisition. Since their groundbreaking studies, there has been no shortage of researchers interested in proposing pedagogical and educational systems solutions to what they see as a general literacy crisis (Faggella-Luby, Ware, and Capozzoli 454). One of the most influential reports on adolescent literacy is *Reading Next.* Faggella-Luby, Ware, and Capozzoli consider the *Reading Next* report a foundational document in current adolescent literacy studies, noting that it provides "example programs and pedagogies throughout," has been "cited more than 280 times," and "has provided a guiding framework for the field of adolescent literacy" (455).

In fact, the Carnegie Council touts its own report as "a cutting-edge report that combines the best research currently available with well-crafted strategies for turning that research into practice" ("Carnegie Council for Advancing Adolescent Literacy"). While this

report for the improvement of literacy acquisition may be cutting-edge, I believe it is incomplete and often does not offer solutions that sufficiently take into account social class issues. Given the extent that social class contributes to failures of literacy acquisition and that research has consistently indicated that "working class children, as a rule, do not desire higher literacy" (Dunbar-Odom 46 – 48), I want to see the currently most influential report on middle and high school literacy to more directly advocate practices that specifically address youth from working-class backgrounds.

In *Reading Next*, Biancarosa and Snow list the fifteen key elements of adolescent literacy programs "aimed at improving middle and high school literacy achievement right now" (4). The tables below give an abbreviated version of that list:

Tables. Key Elements in Programs Designed to Improve Adolescent Literacy Achievement in Middle and High Schools

Instructional Improvements	Infrastructure Improvements
1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction	10. Extended time for literacy
2. Effective Instructional principles embedded in content	11. Professional development
3. Motivation and self-directed learning	12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs
4. Text-based collaborative learning	13. Teacher teams
5. Strategic tutoring	14. Leadership
6. Diverse texts	15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program
7. Intensive writing	
8. A technology component	
9. Ongoing formative assessment of students	

(Biancarosa and Snow 12)

As noted in the tables, the improvements involve both instructional and infrastructural improvements in middle and high schools. Many of the instructional recommendations have strong to moderate evidence of effectiveness in improving literacy, including the use of direct and explicit instruction, text-based collaborative instruction, and motivation for self-directed learning (Kamil et al.). Also, in the attempt to raise the literacy levels of all students, the recommendations on some level responds to Brandt, who asks that we acknowledge "how often the literacy skills that exist in American lives languish for lack of adequate sponsorship" and that we "dedicate the resources of the democratic school more wholly" to the cause of "stigmatized groups" (207). Similarly, *Reading Next*, in the last stated recommendation for the improvement of the educational infrastructure, concurs with Heath when recommending

that provision be made for a comprehensive and coordinated literacy program that will coordinate with out-of-school organizations and the local community (5). This recommendation responds to Heath's call for an expanded role for community organizations in order to fulfill the literacy responsibilities that were once accomplished through the home and community.

Admittedly, any measures that lead to an increase in literacy could be considered helpful to the working class since the working class almost by definition suffers from an unequal distribution of high literacy (Narcisse). Some of the improvements suggested by *Reading Next* are certainly "working-class friendly." Although the report does not articulate the fact that students must "invent school" (see Bartholomae, "Inventing the University"), the recommendation of "direct, explicit instruction" may represent an acknowledgment of the widely recognized difficulties of students who must "move from marginalized home discourses to standard academic discourses" (Chandler 155). When *Reading Next* recommends the practice of "reading apprenticeship" in which "high school students 'apprenticed' into the reasons and ways reading and writing are used within a 'discipline' (subject area) and the strategies and thinking that are particularly useful in that discipline" (Biancarosa and Snow 15), it is recognizing the difficulties associated with learning an academic discourse with its own linguistic style (White 371). There are "ways with words" that must be taught and learned (Heath).

As noted in *Reading Next*, students who are engaged and self-directed will be more successful academically. To motivate and engage students, the report recommends giving students choices for reading and to have reading materials available that are relevant to their lives (16). Both of these suggestions are valid and could help young people from working-class backgrounds. Offering reading material that reflects working-class culture and youthful, working-class interests not only shows cultural awareness on the part of the teacher but also provides motivation for students to read. However, the *Reading Next* report misses the opportunity to advocate significant sources of motivation that are especially significant for working-class youth.

Students need a supportive learning environment that can help them weather the mistakes they make as they learn new ways of speaking, writing, being and doing. Working-class youths will make a lot of mistakes, many of them attributable to the difficulties of learning a new discourse. Research shows, however, that a teacher's stance regarding mistakes makes a tremendous difference to student motivation and learning. In a systematic review of adolescent literacy research to determine "what works," the Institute of Education Sciences reports:

> When teachers put more emphasis on the learning process and provide a supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as growth opportunities instead of failures, students are more likely to develop learning goals. Studies have consistently shown

that students who have learning goals are more motivated and engaged and have better reading test scores than students who have performance goals. (Kamil et al. 27)

When teachers view mistakes as growth opportunities instead of a sign of impending failure, laziness, or sheer stupidity, a supportive environment is maintained. Finding the logic to student errors is an affirming approach modeled by Ken Goodman. Studying children as they read, Goodman discovered that the mistakes that were made by his readers were "wonderful." He saw that their mistakes came as a result of being "experienced users of language":

> Unlike most other researchers, who assumed that mistakes reflected incompetence, inexperience or carelessness or some combination of these, I discovered that *mistakes are part of the process of making sense of print* . . . .They were making sense, and to do so, they were combining language cues from the printed story with what they knew about how language works. (5)

This approach has validity for older learners too. Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue take Goodman's approach to mistakes in *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* when they examine the way that older students experience difficulties with texts. Throughout the book, Salvatori and Donahue show students "that when they experience difficulties, there might be good reason for it" (xxii). Student difficulties, many times can be traced to student attempts to make a piece of writing fit a literary pattern that they already know. Sometimes prior knowledge is "mismatched" with the genre (35); other times, student knowledge is accurately matched to the genre, but the author of the work "transgresses" the rules of genre convention causing difficulty for the reader (55). Like their younger counterparts in Goodman's studies, older students are attempting to *make sense* of their texts, making use of what they do know. It causes them difficulty, but Salvadori and Donahue recognize the difficulty does not come from laziness or inattentiveness: the difficulties are all part of the process.

> "the difficulty does not come from laziness or inattentiveness:
> the difficulties are all part of the process"

The attitudes modeled by Goodman and Salvatori and Donahue create the supportive environment that motivates. Mistakes and difficulties are seen as opportunities for growth not failures of intellect. All students benefit from such a climate. Working-class students who as a group experience more than their fair share of failure stand to benefit the most from this approach to student mistakes.

Reading Next is mute on the possibilities of the new literacies to motivate and engage

learners. One gets the sense that the literacy promoted by *Reading Next* is print-based, excluding digital literacies. This exclusion regulates digital literacies outside of school where access is unequal, works against the literacy aspirations of the working class, and ultimately exacerbates social class divisions (Stone 52).

Reading Next calls for the use of technology as a tool and as a topic, but it remains oblivious to the new literacies that are supported by technology (19). Schools (and reports that inform the literacy practices of school) should engage in a paradigm shift and validate the new literacies in order to better engage working-class youth. New literacies are "literary practices that involve different kinds of values, sensibilities, norms and procedures and so on from those that characterize conventional literacies" (Knobel and Lankshear 7). The use of popular websites, video games, internet resources, online memes, and fan fiction all represent new literacies that have both relevancy and the power to engage working-class youth in a way that printed material does not. In her study of the literacy resource represented by favorite youth websites, "recommended by students of color and lower socioeconomic backgrounds—many of whom were seen in school as struggling readers," Jennifer Stone finds a disconnect between the reading performance of these students in school and online that is "striking," as they spend "hours poring over … websites, figuring out how to deal with complicated vocabulary and syntactical structures along the way" (56 - 57).

Video games have the potential to stimulate the "deeper learning" that higher literacy aspires to. James Gee, analyzing the well-known ability of good video games to engage, maintains that video game "learners" have a visual and embodied experience that leads to "deep learning," the kind of learning that excels beyond written tests and that produces both performance and competence. Good games do that by "forcing the player (learner) to accept (for this time and place) a strong set of values connected to a very specific identity" (108). Gee finds it a "shame" that schools don't offer the "deeper learning" of academic subjects that are available to gamers through their video games, a learning that develops a "competence that goes beyond definitions and test-taking" (111 - 112).

Reading Next's comments on "intensive writing" as a key element of an "effective adolescent literacy program" illustrate my frustration with the report as an effective response to working-class literacy needs. The study argues that since large numbers of students entering college must take remedial writing courses, teachers should teach writing skills and should teach about the writing process while avoiding "traditional explicit grammar instruction" (19). The recommendation concludes by stating that quality writing instruction "has clear objectives and expectations and consistently challenges students, regardless of ability, to engage with academic content at high levels of reasoning" (19). There is nothing here that offers new insight or acknowledges the special needs of working-class students. Nothing here discour-

ages teachers from giving writing instruction that is soaked in the highly particular language of academia, that is particularly remote from working-class youth, and that leads to the kind of school writing that is "to writing as catsup is to tomatoes: as junk food to food" (Brodkey 528). What is missing is an advocacy of the kind of writing that gets students to write.

Analyzing extensively the research regarding literacy and the working class, Dunbar-Odom in *Defying the Odds* points to literacy narratives and use of the personal as ways to get students to write. Teachers who have students writing personal literacy narratives put their working-class students in a rare position: they are motivated to write; they are able to write from a position of authority; and the importance of their stories, rooted in working class discourses, are validated. Dunbar-Odom finds (as Brandt does in *Literacy in American Lives*) that the only time when students might "experience writing as pleasurable is when they are writing to tell a story that they want to tell or writing privately to explore their own feelings" (55). While advocating the use of the personal, Dunbar-Odom is "calling neither for a return to the expressivist methods whereby students write to 'discover' their 'true' selves nor to current-traditional methods that place personal writing at the beginning of a modal approach because it is presumed to be the 'easiest' place to begin" (82). The "personal connection" that is offered by personal literacy narratives and the use of the personal in other school writings lead to a more "personal investment" (82), an investment that is important for working-class students who especially need motivation and encouragement to develop the writing skills associated with higher literacy.

Perhaps for political or ideological reasons, the researchers and authors of *Reading Next* felt compelled to address the literacy crisis in a "classless" way, seemingly oblivious to the unique needs of working-class youth to acquire higher literacy. As noted earlier, the report does provide a framework that includes a number of evidence-based practices that if implemented should enhance learners' odds of acquiring the literacy that they need. While "well-trodden battle lines of social conflict" (Foucalt 227) in the distribution of literacy are overtly ignored, simply by addressing the literacy crisis, *Reading Next* answers Brandt's call for schools to exercise their "democratic mission" as it attempts to galvanize Americans and the educational community in particular to respond to the literacy crisis.

There is an obvious danger, however, in letting literacy be viewed as a school problem. Both Heath and Brandt lead us to see the social and economic dimensions of the literacy crisis that extends beyond the resources of the classroom. Teachers have reason to feel inadequate to address the systemic needs of our nation's literacy challenges. Following the instructional recommendations that are based on the best studies of the best practices in the classroom can help teachers deal with the literacy crisis that sits immediately in front of them. But to meet the challenges of higher literacy acquisition demands a more comprehensive societal response to the social and economic needs of families and communities.

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William Burns

"Where Are You Located?": Postmodern Geography and the Open-Admissions Writing Center

IN 2008, I WAS ASKED BY MY CHAIR TO BE THE COORDINATOR OF THE Suffolk County Community College Writing Center. Being junior faculty and untenured, I figured that accepting this invitation would increase my value to the department and, hopefully, decrease the likelihood I'd be let go, since nobody else really wanted the position. Taking the position also allowed me to indulge in a fantasy of importance, as if I were the speaker of the house: if the chair and assistant chair were unable to fulfill their duties, I would step in a moment of crisis and provide Churchill-like leadership in our darkest hour. Preparing over the summer, I reviewed much writing center scholarship, research, and pedagogy as possible, and given that my area of interest is in postmodern geography, I was particularly drawn to the spatial metaphors used to describe and theorize writing centers: heretopias (Foucault), liminal spaces (Lefebvre), contact zones (Pratt), literary salons (Owens), public spaces (Owens), Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey), borderlands (Anzaldúa), and homespaces (hooks)[1]. I immersed myself in the "conversation of mankind," "noise," "good intentions," and "deprivatization." I strategized, plotted, and dreamed. I imagined my writing center (I already was emotionally attached) would transform the perceived view of the SCCC Writing Center as a remedial dungeon to an open, free, empowering cultural space—"the place to be" as *Seinfeld's* Kramer and Frank Costanza called their billiard room.

SCCC is the biggest community college in New York State with over 26,000 students enrolled. The SCCC Writing Center sees 2,000 to 3,000 of these students every semester. SCCC is spread over three different campuses, and our writing center is the only game in town in terms of serving the students at SCCC. Located right in the middle of suburban Long Island on 156 acres, my campus in population and geography is the largest with 7,537 full-time and 7,434 part-time students. The Western campus is closer to New York City with a more diverse urban population (African-American, Hispanic, Eastern European) of 4,423 full-time and 5,277 part-time students while the Eastern campus is located out towards the afflu-

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1. To this list I can now add diwaniyas, courtesy of Dilara Hafiz: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dilara-hafiz/diwaniya-kuwaiti_b_2269140.html

ent Hamptons and North Fork farms and wineries with a much smaller demographic of 1,600 full-time and 2,337 part-time students. Because we are the only writing center serving the college, we often have to negotiate not only different assignments and writing styles but also the varied geographies and identities that these students bring with them. Although we are considered "one college," the different campuses have their own attitudes, their own policies, their own administrations, their own specific needs, and their own resources or lack thereof.

The pedagogical and discursive methods and forms we use at the SCCC Writing Center are tied to this student demographic as well as to the material conditions of the center itself. The space we tutor in often dictates how, why, where, and to what extent we engage students and their writing. Over the course of any given day, I am often asked "Where are you [the writing center] located?" It seems to be a rather simple geographical question and yet when conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences of space and place become problematized in terms of institutional, pedagogical, personal, and physical positioning, the question becomes much harder to answer.

In this article, I discuss notions of space as they are perceived, conceived, and lived in terms of two of the most crucial aspects of the writing center experience: "Openness" and "Collaboration." How "open" are writing centers? What kinds of spatial positionings are involved in collaboration? How do the material, discursive, and social come together to inform notions of "openness" and "collaboration"? Connecting these two concepts is the idea of location: from where and to where are we moving to, dwelling in, retreating from when we work with students, faculty, administrators, and fellow tutors. Using a postmodern geographical framework and research by spatial compositionists, I will locate the SCCC Writing Center as a crucible for many different spatial, social, and discursive practices and experiences. My hope is that this postmodern geographical lens will help other writing center practitioners and composition instructors better understand and utilize the resources (material, discursive, personal) that writing centers offer, resources that are of particular interest to those of us working at an open-admissions institution. The postmodern writing center has been imagined as a place of multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity (Grimm 3), but how "in-between" can or should a writing center be?

Obligatory Theoretical Positioning

Postmodern geography, or how space is constructed through material, social, and discursive relationships, has informed and problematized the supposedly "objective nature" of spatial metaphors (locations, boundaries, maps, margins), as used by the theorists and practitioners of composition. The belief that space, society, and language are mutually informing and transforming has provided compositionists with useful metaphors through which the connections between power, space,

race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality can be compared, equated, or contested.

The concept of "absolute space" (Smith and Katz 68) suggests that the medium through which we understand space, place, and location is a physical experience divorced from any notions of ideology, identity, language, history, or power. Acting as a value-free blank slate, this conception of space allows its "users" to control, own, and manipulate space as if it were just another static, decontextualized commodity. In this way, space becomes the ultimate container, a thing that people can fix, locate, limit, and restrict, made resistant to outside forces by boundaries and borders. Due to its ability to constrain and confine, "absolute space" allows its users to assimilate, gentrify, or remove "foreign" elements, those external forces that threaten the coherency and stability of the space over which a group has declared ownership. Just as our bodies act as containers, so does "absolute space" with its inside/outside dichotomy of movement.

This notion of space went unchallenged until postmodern geographers questioned the ideological and economic ramifications of believing in "absolute space." For postmodern geographers, space is socially produced through the intersections of language, power, and identity—a fluid, fragmentary relational process that rejects any attempt to objectify or fix space. Probably most influential in theorizing space and place is cultural geographer Edward Soja and his notion of Third Space. For Soja, First Space is the space of literal physical perceptions, of materiality, and of the body. First Space represents a spatial, social, and historical awareness that can be empirically measured and tends to privilege objectivity. First Space epistemologies concentrate on accurate descriptions of surface appearances, material conditions, and mapable geographies (74-8). Second Space is the space of imagination and conceptual thinking, of the mind, metaphor, and belief. Second Space reflects spatial, social, and historical knowledge produced and reproduced through thought, imagination, and discourse. Representations of Second Space are reflective, subjective, introspective, and individualized (78-81). These are the imagined geographies and cognitive maps of thinkers and artists who are concerned with images and ideas.

Third Space is the space of lived experiences that brings together First and Second Space awareness retaining the reciprocal and contradictory relationships between these different spatial knowledge. Third Space is the simultaneous deconstruction, revision, and reconstruction of the binaries of First and Second Space, lived literal and metaphoric spaces and experiences informing each other equally without one awareness or space being subordinate to the other. Third Space is an "in between space," a place not as rigidly structured by institutional, social, and spatial conventions. It takes on a fluid, ambiguous, both/and atmosphere, "outside but alongside" conventional views of space and place, taking advantage of the tensions and gaps between institutional and everyday experiences. Obviously, the idea of the

writing center fits quite well into this model of Third Space: a location that is neither a classroom nor a personal space, people who are not exactly faculty nor exactly peers, existing outside but at the same time within the institutional hierarchy of a college or university. As Derek Owens comments, "No strangers to the paradoxical, writing centers are sites of in-betweeness, gray zones, occupying central and marginal positions within the academic landscape" ("Two Centers" 158).

As an example of how these theoretical notions can be applied to the physicality of a writing center, I will use my own writing center as a model.

First Space: "The Cave"

The physical space of the SCCC Writing Center is one room on the first floor of the Islip Arts Building on the Ammerman Campus in Selden, NY. Because the Islip Arts Building contains the English, Communications, Foreign Language, and Theater Departments, we are certainly not on the margins of the campus but almost in the center. The Writing Center is a large room containing 13 computers, four round tables, 25 chairs, three filing cabinets, and two desks. Book shelves filled with handbooks, anthologies, MLA, and APA resources line one of the walls. The walls are concrete, painted a washed out clinical blue with a hard tile floor and fluorescent lights, giving it the appearance of a "lab,"—one of my most hated monikers used to describe the Writing Center by students, faculty, and administrators (but that's second space). Students sign in at our check-in desk and move to either a computer or to a table to be tutored.

Tutors usually sit next to the student at a table or at a computer. A counter gives tutors a small space to call their own at the Writing Center, and they will often wait behind the counter, reading or talking until they have to tutor. I have encouraged tutors to move beyond this barrier between tutors and students even when they aren't tutoring, but the majority of the tutors seem to prefer to be segregated from students when not working with them, almost as if they are trying to reinforce the social boundaries with a physical one. Behind the counter is a microwave, tutor mailboxes, and a small fridge as well as a computer meant only for tutor use. Interestingly, when I come into the center, whatever tutor is using the computer will immediately stop what he or she is doing on the computer and quickly move away from it as if he or she is conceding the space to me even though I didn't ask for it. The physical layout of the center does not encourage "hanging out" as the majority of the space is filled with tables, computers, and the counter. Designed as a work space, the center's primary use is just that.

Some of the tutors and students have commented that the Writing Center is "cave-like" because of the concrete walls. There have been attempts to beautify the Writing Center with art prints, pictures, and decorations; however, the material conditions of concrete and

the inability to hang anything easily make it a frustrating interior design project. Most of the creativity is directed at the bulletin board behind the counter as tutors will often pin up humorous pictures and writing cribbed from the internet. The bulletin board also displays utilitarian items such as schedules, phone numbers, a calendar, and signs asking people to clean up after their shift. The physical layout of the Writing Center is not inviting; it resembles any number of other rooms across campus. It reflects what the college imagines a writing center to be: a place of work and contemplation, a place where students get help and leave in an orderly fashion, guided by the arrangement of tables in the middle of the room and computers around the perimeter. Come in, check in, have your paper fixed, get out. Much has been written about the importance of décor and design in establishing an atmosphere and "branding" of a writing center for its constituents. Stephen Newton argues quite succinctly and persuasively that "we need to be moving beyond the institutional office style government issue sterility that characterizes so many workplaces because the more we embrace the antiseptic, regimented image, the more we are also endorsing a world of things that we probably don't want to be expressing to our students" (2).

While I heartily agree with Newton's view of the connection between material spaces and the effect they have on the lived experiences of tutors and students, I am also reminded of the physical constraints and obstacles that make creating a totally accommodating open space so formidable and often impossible. Writing centers are not "absolute" spaces, but rather, spaces that are constructed by physical, material realities that cannot be changed and revised as easily as we want them to be. Even the physical layout of a writing center reflects social, economic, political, and institutional ideologies that are hard to overcome. In a perfect world, tutoring could happen "anywhere," from the trunk of a car in the faculty parking lot to the digital "nowheres" of virtual tutoring. Material conditions have real consequences on tutoring, writing, coordinating, and positioning in an institutional hierarchy.

Second Space: Welcome! But Don't Do Anything

The discursive and conceptual space of the SCCC Writing Center expresses a conflicting message to those who dwell in it: you are welcome here but obey our rules. The language and discourses used in sessions with students utilize the usual composition/academic/tutoring jargon: thesis, high order/low order concerns, editing, "flow,"[2] citations (the beloved MLA and the despised APA)—a nice mixture of professionalism and congeniality. The signage around the Writing Center constructs second space around divergent viewpoints. The welcoming side of the Writing Center is reflected in the art prints and photos (Van Gogh, Tarkay,

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2. What is flow? It is one of the most used metaphors for writing, indicating movement through space but does anything really "move" in textual space? Is it really more about presence (the thesis/purpose/argument) in paragraphs and our ability as writers and readers to locate and connect ideas than about movement?

Klimt[3]) that hang on the walls, the humorous pictures and poems pinned to the bulletin board, the *Danger: Zombie Crossing* sign, and the quotes from famous writers about writing. These visual and discursive elements suggest a space that is intellectual but self-deprecating, mixing high art with pop culture, literary pretension with nerdish fan boy obsessions—a place where we take things seriously, but not too seriously. This is also reflected in the conversations that take place between tutors and students when tutoring isn't going on: discussions of movies, graphic novels, cartoons, novels, TV shows, music, and video games. Though students will talk about their classes or professors, they seem much more excited, invested, and relieved to talk about these cultural phenomena. The tutors often obsess about these aspects of life as much as the students and conversations can get quite enthusiastic (loud).

Students are drawn into our conversations, and we encourage our clients to engage the tutors in these types of conversations (though tutors still stay behind the counter when they are talking to students). Thus, on the one hand, we promote these types of dialogues; conversely, the other message we impart to our constituents in the second space of the SCCC Writing Center is do what we tell you. Outnumbering the art prints and funny pictures, other signs articulate policies and procedures in bold block letters:

- **ATTENTION ALL STUDENTS: YOU MUST BE CURRENTLY ENROLLED AT SCCC TO USE THE WRITING CENTER.**
- **YOU MUST HAVE A STUDENT ID TO USE THE WRITING CENTER.**
- **YOU CAN NOT TAKE TESTS IN THE WRITING CENTER.**
- **10 PAGE PRINTING LIMIT**
- **NO FOOD OR DRINK AROUND THE COMPUTERS**
- **IF YOU DON'T HAVE AN ID YOU MUST WAIT IN THE HALLWAY.**

These signs represent the official discourse of the Writing Center, a discourse that runs counter to the openness and whimsicality of the artistic and pop culture décor that invites students in, that makes them feel relaxed and comfortable with opening themselves up to discuss their writing and personal experiences. And yet, as all writing center coordinators know, rules and policies are not always a choice but can be imposed from "above." These official discourses create a second space that seeks to include and exclude through membership in the institution.[4] Second spaces, though perceived as a space of imagination and cre-

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3. What is it about writing centers and Klimt?

4. In terms of lore, legend, and official histories for the SCCC Writing Center, there really is none. A few anecdotes from the old guard of tutors, but nothing written down or immortalized in second space. The full name of the SCCC Writing Center is the Rose Tehan Memorial Writing Center but Rose Tehan remains a mystery to me. All I could find out about Rose was that she was an English professor who started the Writing Center at Suffolk in the early 1990's and that she died of cancer. In terms of establishing roots and heritage in the second space of the SCCC Writing Center all we have is a small black and white picture of Rose, smiling but also a bit sad, hung on the wall next to the check in desk. Though this lack of historical background might seem limiting it can also be seen as freeing as well. While we have no sustained collective traditions or inspirational foundations, we don't have the burden of the past or any oppressive models to live up to either. It's always the same; it's always different every day at the Writing Center.

ativity, are also spaces through which people can be acclimated or even indoctrinated into certain ideologies and behaviors. These discourses have influence over the physical as well; I have witnessed students who reflexively reach for their wallet to show me their IDs even though we aren't in the Writing Center.

Third Space: People and Place not just Paper

The lived experiences of the SCCC Writing Center create several different third spaces depending on the tutor, the student, and how, where, and why they interact. Eight full-time tutors, called Professional Assistants, work 12 hours a week, supplemented by three student tutors. Each of these tutors have individual interests, approaches, experiences, and styles that then intertwine with students who have individual interests, approaches, experiences, and styles. Through these negotiations, the SCCC Writing Center creates third space. Three male and eight female tutors work here, ranging in age from 60 something to 18. Some of the tutors have been at the Writing Center for over 20 years and some for under a year. Each of the tutors locates himself or herself in different, often overlapping ways: socially, politically, institutionally, pedagogically, and physically (where they sit, tutor, and interact with students). Sometimes this positioning is in agreement with other tutors, students, institutional roles, and my own practices as coordinator; sometimes it isn't. Though these conflicts are mostly interpersonal drama or difference in methodologies, I have noticed that the physical and geographical can also create tensions, such as when I see tutors sitting with their back to the door rather than facing the incoming students as they check in. Due to their lack of experience and their ambiguous location in the institutional hierarchy, it is the student tutors who have the most trouble finding both a physical and pedagogical position in the Writing Center, as they struggle to locate themselves in a new environment and different roles that blur the lines between peer and authority figure.

This negotiation of spaces, discourses, and identities manifests itself in ways students "use" and "dwell" in the Writing Center. SCCC is a commuter school, and so the Writing Center has become not just a work space but a lay-over as well, a stable place for students who live decentralized, fragmented lives with many different kinds of work, family, and educational obligations. Because the majority of SCCC students transfer to four-year institutions, the college itself is often treated by students as a way station, a temporary place for students to raise their grades or save up money before going to a "real" school. The college actually embraces and markets this perception of SCCC, composing our own "public myth" of mobility, to borrow terminology from Ann Larson (28). SCCC's recruitment and promotional materials emphasize that the college is a conduit to where you want to go rather than a destination itself. A commercial airing on local TV stations uses the visual rhetoric of former students holding up sweatshirts from schools they transferred to (Cornell, UNC, NYU) and student tes-

timonials about how SCCC prepared them for success at these universities. Here, the myth of absolute mobility, of free, unrestricted travel and access unencumbered by material, political, or economic boundaries or barriers, is "evidence of a liberal mythology that serves as the basis of the development of recruitment strategies as well as for construction of institutional identity" (Larson 30). SCCC is the educational, social, and economic highway that fast tracks students upward and outward beyond community college and the cultural and geographical strictures of Long Island.

While most students come to the Writing Center to use the computers or to be tutored, according to our student evaluations and observations, a significant group of students come to the Writing Center to get a break from their busy schedules, to alleviate stress, to express their anxieties about college and life in general. This is a particular strategy used almost exclusively by first- year and returning students, a population that seems to worry most about acclimation and positioning in the instructional hierarchy. The student population of SCCC is drawn largely from white lower middle-class and working-class families on Long Island, a suburb about an hour away from New York City. There is a significantly growing ESL and non-traditional demographic, with an increasing amount of veterans coming back to school and older, unemployed career people trying to gain skills that will allow them to return to the workforce.

For these types of students, teachers seem remote (regardless of the efforts that instructors use to seem approachable and accessible) and their friends and family don't understand, so the Writing Center, as the in-between teacher and friend place, is the de facto decompression spot on campus. I look at the Writing Center as being a public and private space, a third space that encompasses both loud and quiet, intimate and social, professional and personal, general and specialized all at the same time. As a third space it deconstructs, revises, and reconstructs these binaries in a way that informs and is informed by the material, the discursive, and the social as mutually constructive:

> We embrace chaos. We depend upon random improvisation. I resist aligning myself in any kind of rigid way with the dogma of any one group or point of view, but we clearly are expressing something, or something is expressing itself through us . . . Many times this happens through the collaboration of aligned sensibilities, with a kind of collective writing center consciousness emerging, the lineaments of its contours taking shape in front of our eyes. (Newton 3)

I have tried to mold our collective philosophy in this direction: when we tutor, it is not just the paper we are dealing with but also people and place as well. From this perspective, crucial writing center notions of "openness" and "collaboration" move beyond just what hours the center is accessible and how much time and work tutors should invest in their sessions. How

open are we? How balanced is our collaboration? Are we actually occupying the same space as our constituents when we tutor? Can we be open physically but closed discursively?

These mutually competing and informing notions of space, pedagogy, and identity have tremendous repercussions on writing center methodologies and the way writing is understood, taught, and practiced. Because texts are also physical spaces, they, their writers, and those who read and facilitate that writing are implicated in a variety of spatial relationships. The intersections of textual and "actual" space that occur at writing centers are particularly useful in analyzing the effects of openness and collaboration on the process of tutoring writing.

Open Access: "The Container"

As a writing center coordinator, I sometimes get these kinds of calls from an instructor: "I sent my students to your writing lab and they still can't write. Their ideas were all over the place. They jumped from point to point with no connections. Didn't you tell them what to do? What are you doing over there?" This kind of call is infuriating but also provides a key insight that informs concepts of writing and writing instruction: writing is a spatial practice that is imagined as ordered and controlled arrangement and movement through a bound space. It is our job as writing instructors and tutors to reign in any rogue elements or trespassers, to eliminate moments of chaos and uncertainty, to provide straight, direct pathways and bridges, to gentrify language and discourse, and to create a renewal project that reflects an ordered, antiseptic academic environment. Textual spaces and writing are equated with geography, building, and travel and so the principles of sound construction of one medium should be transferable to another. Interestingly, though writing instructors often praise the concept of openness which indicates a certain freedom or willingness to experiment, the actual practice of leaving a space or a text "open" is fraught with anxiety and apprehension because of the perceived loss of control and certainty. Thusly, writing, often imagined as an open and freeing experience, is bound by spatial, discursive, and social practices and ideologies, none more so than the container metaphor.

Because a text has a bounded space where elements can be located, added, taken out, and moved around, some writers and instructors imagine texts to be containers, a vessel capable of holding, carrying, and transporting based on a view of space that is absolute and empty (Bowden 365). Texts, as contained objects, become accessible or inaccessible through the conscious manipulation of space by the writer.[5] Writers "put" meaning in a text, capturing readers, forcing them to follow through this absolute space, and not letting them out until

5. In order to not present containerization as the most evil thing in the world since the Kardashians, please see Philip Eubanks' "Understanding Metaphors for Writing: In Defense of the Conduit Metaphor" *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001): 92-118.

the paper acknowledges its own boundaries through its conclusion.

Often, readers are not encouraged by writers to wander through their writing, but are "guided" by topic sentences and transitions to arrive at their destination through the writer's control of language and structure. Since control of this absolute space is related to writing prowess, any change or revision causes resistance from the writer, an anxiety that revolves around her ability to manage and control space. The boundaries and borders of absolute textual free space are solid and stable, not allowing any unrestricted traffic in or out of the paper.

Obviously, this view of the containerization of absolute space raises many problems for tutors interested in the multiple and contested aspects of discourse and socially-constructed knowledge. The emphasis on control, domination, and restriction over space and, at the same time, on the value and ownership of structuring space according to one's own desires has tremendous ideological ramifications. This belief in absolute space suggests that space is there to be taken, structured hierarchically, and used for institutional, political, and economic benefit, normalizing and naturalizing textual and spatial practices through inhabitation and accumulation.

The idea of free, unrestricted, and unencumbered travel through this absolute textual and physical space also reflects larger notions of access and movement among the members of a society, particularly students at open-admissions colleges. Because these spaces are decontextualized and removed from class, culture, and social forces, the "democratic" belief in equal opportunities for using and moving through space (both textual and institutional) is reinforced here. The postmodern geographical idea of locality offers an important critique of these accounts of open textual and physical space: that social and spatial location is less an individual than a multi-dimensional experience, a collective engagement of mutually implicated identities and practices (Smith and Katz 75). By turning to writing centers as a loci of textual, institutional, and physical spaces and using the lens of "locality," we can move away from seeing space (and by extension writing, texts, and identities) as an empty receptacle of experience and objects and focus on how the social, political, cultural, and personal produce spaces, writing, and texts as sites that construct and are constructed by material conditions, human activities, and power relations.

Due to the different writers who use the writing center (and the varied texts produced by those writers), writing centers are sites where the interaction with difference (race, class, culture, gender, education) seems inevitable. Yet, too often, writing centers are expected by their host institutions/administrations to manage and contain those differences, to bring them under control, to make students sound as mainstream as possible (Grimm 108). Overall, there seems to be an institutional belief that the job of a writing center is to resolve

or fix misunderstandings, mistakes, and "foreign" elements, keeping textual space as uncluttered and absolute as possible despite the diverse positions, locations, and spaces these writers are drawing from. Some writing center tutors are expected by both student and instructor to take on the role of grammar police, patrolling the text for rogue elements that might destabilize the coherence of form and structure. Openness is fine as long as it reflects the institutional or disciplinary conception and practice of what is acceptable and expected in a text, a writer, and a tutor. And so though the doors are open for students at the Writing Center (well, only those with a student I.D. at SCCC), their texts and the discourses they use are often forcibly closed, physically and pedagogically, with tutors acting as border patrol.

The practice of openness is one fraught with doubt at the SCCC Writing Center. Is openness a good thing or a bad thing? Should we be open more hours or fewer hours? Should we enforce the policy of only allowing students with their IDs in or does this fly in the face of an open-admissions school? Should we encourage students to write what they want, to challenge the assignment and instructor demands, and to open up the genre and its boundaries? Or should we smooth out the rough edges, stay within the conventions, and help the student compose a product that fits into the container, a container that is valued and expected by its primary audience?

As a writing center coordinator, I feel that we have to be honest and upfront with students and instructors about our role and the material, discursive, and institutional constraints that we labor under, no matter how this "openness" undermines our power, authority, and place in the college. This social, spatial, and discursive openness fits into Diana Calhoun Bell's notion of "a deprivatized pedagogy," one that "demands that educators make explicit and public their educational and professional practices wherever possible. This requires we rearticulate our theoretical positions, [reexamine] our performances of those positions, and investigate the ways that the two continually interact" (11). To the theoretical and pedagogical positioning, I would only add our spatial positioning on both the micro (individual) and macro (institutional) levels.

Texts, spaces, and identities are negotiations between freedom and restriction. Sometimes we are on the student's side, sometimes the instructor's, and sometimes the administrator's. Just as the Writing Center isn't open at all times and has to have some sort of constraints, so do texts and institutional roles. When tutors struggle with how open and transparent they should be when dealing with students and their struggles with assignments and discourses that seem limiting and confining, I tell them to admit to the students that we don't have all the answers. We don't know. Asking the students what they think about this assignment and how it positions writer, tutor, and instructor moves students and tutors toward a larger conversation about the spatial, discursive, and social aspects of open and closed, of

freedom and control. Often my tutors don't feel comfortable or say "it's not my job" to ask students to critique these notions. However, admitting there are always boundaries and barriers in writing, some that we can overcome and some that we can't, could help demystify practices and purposes of writing and how and why institutions value or don't value certain kinds of writing and composing.

Instructors construct some assignments around the claim that students can write about anything they want in any form they want, but is this as illusionary as absolute space? Does the writer ever have total control over his or her text or his or her writing? Students have a latent awareness of this as they will often claim that they are "not allowed to do that" or ask "Am I allowed to do that?" at all stages of the writing process, even those we consider most open, free, and unrestricted. But, as with some instructors and tutors, students don't always want this type of critical positioning of their writing, their locality, and themselves. Just proofread it. The container can be self-imposed.

Although it is often a writing center's goal to help marginalized students with their writing, this attempt to turn their texts into absolute, decontextualized spaces actually further alienates writers who already feel that academic culture is silencing them. This containerization of texts affects the tutoring session and practices themselves, resulting in what Derek Owens sees as a "sameness... despite the extensive diversity of our students' ethnic, religious, class, and linguistic backgrounds" ("Two Centers" 153). This view of textual and tutoring stability and control could be constructively problematized by seeing textual and tutoring positionings as not objective spaces but ones in which multiple voices, discourses, and experiences are interweaving through an arbitrary and socially influenced form. By moving away from the idea of a text and tutoring session as a container and seeing them as examples of third space—a combination of material experience, internal reality, and metaphor producing an in-between space that is both real and imagined—perhaps tutors might view textual spaces and their own tutoring sessions as fragmented, imaginative, multi-voiced, constraining, and liberating at the same time. But what happens when students, tutors, instructors, and institutions want containerization, value it, and request it in their collaborations? It is not only through openness that writing centers can naturalize "absolute space," but even the concept and practice of collaboration can reproduce unforeseen spatial consequences.

Collaboration: Peer and Not a Peer

Currently at SCCC, the practice of online, virtual tutoring and an online writing center are being bandied about by the institution. The notion that we are a commuter school makes administration think students want a disembodied, digital collaboration that can be accessed from anywhere at any time. This would seem to make the utopian ideal of an open, equal col-

laboration unhindered by time and space a reality. While online writing instruction and tutoring are certainly worthwhile ventures, my own apprehension comes from not so much the pedagogical aspects but from the spatial consequences of collaboration divorced from material conditions. And yet, do we ever really critique the physical, social, and discursive positioning involved in collaborating, whether in virtual or "real" spaces? Positioning entails where tutors sit or have students sit, where we place the paper (in front of tutor, student, or in between the two) when we work with a student, or what kinds of tables we use (square, round, hyperbolic paraboloid), though the physical aspects of collaboration are quite important. Collaboration has material, discursive, and social dimensions, which all come together and clash to create a third space of tutoring. But, like the concept of "openness," when understandings and practices of collaboration occur in an imagined "absolute" space, are we containing and mapping experiences that should be liberating?

Because of the socially constructed aspect of spatial metaphors, collaborative learning theorists and pedagogues as well as writing center practitioners seem to find spatial metaphors especially valuable in expressing notions of participation, community, consensus, and positioning within the collaborative process itself. Though many of these authors take considerable time and effort to critically analyze how power and ideology influence conceptions of textual production, negotiation, and resistance, the unexamined use of space and spatial metaphors as merely a helpful trope ignores significant questions of how the collaborative learning experience is informed by and constructed through the negotiation of space, identity, and knowledge within these group dynamics. By not seeing the multiple spatial practices, roles, and positions within the collaborative conversation as represented by this unquestioned use of spatial metaphors, collaborative authors and practitioners run the risk of undermining the very goals they mean to achieve.

Collaborative learning assumes that conversation, agreement, and consensus among groups of knowledgeable peers are the foundation on which knowledge rests (Bruffee 636). The goal of collaborative learning is to replace an alienating teacher-dominated method of traditional instruction with one in which students teach each other by finding some consensus, whether it is through their status as students, their shared assignment, or their participation in a discourse community. Collaborative learning is conceived as a space where the social construction of knowledge is recognized and examined outside of context, a way to assimilate differences that students bring to the classroom and how that negotiation between difference and consensus produces a text.

Critiques of collaborative learning say it enforces conformity, lowers standards, and denies the importance of the individual, making all choices equivocal. It fails to acknowledge the role of ideology in knowledge construction, masking unequal power relationships, which

affect the social construction of knowledge. Bruffee's unproblematic use of community and consensus suppresses the conflicts that exist within a social group. This unified and closed conception of collaboration discourages a view of writing and space where the influences of the contradictory and multiple discourses that one encounters in everyday life inform spatial practices and subject positioning. This notion of conversation and consensus seems to be outside of time and space.

According to its critics, the collaborative learning experience should move away from consensus and ask students to not only compose texts but also locate themselves in the spaces opened by that text, to map their subject positions, identities that are often appropriated, conflicted, and contextual. Yet within these liberating uses of spatial metaphors, some problems arise. Postmodern geographers would agree that seeing consensus as a fixed, central, neutral position would be faulty, ignoring the fragmented, multiple aspects of space; however, the notion that collaborative learners could map and position themselves as autonomous free floating subjects within the collaborative process also shows a belief in the transparency of space. "Mapping" progress in the collaborative experience in an effort to objectively "track" the positions, methods, and discursive "movements" made by the participants can be an act of self-colonizing, an imposition of power that fixes a subject within a static space. The power of mapping is closely related to the power of conquest and social dominance (Smith and Katz 77), a metaphor that may appeal to those who feel the dynamics of collaboration are within our secure control. Metaphors of colonization and possession are predicated on the physical and symbolic appropriation of space (Smith and Katz 78), an appropriation that would be just as counterproductive to the collaborative experience as a belief in a total consensus.

The collaborative practices of the SCCC Writing Center include peer tutors, who, ideally, share separate but equal knowledge about discourse with the student writer, representing the same marginal power as the student does (Lunsford). Though this relationship is often imagined by tutors and students as consensual, critics of this notion have been quick to point out that the idea of shared consensual knowledge and institutional status is problematic in that institutional hierarchies make peer and tutor contradiction in terms (Trimbur 21). A postmodern geographer might also question the idea that the tutor and peer occupy the same space and subject position as institutionally "marginalized" writers. It is naïve to assume that student status alone will enable students to establish a trusting reciprocal collaboration: perhaps a contested idea of the spatial repercussions of marginal roles could help the collaborative process in the writing center be more constructive. In collaboration, roles and identities are always shifting and the tutor should acknowledge his or her privileged positioning and that that position can blind him or her to other marginalized perspectives. Not

critiquing the ever-changing notion of a "peer" can cause tutors to be oblivious to the differences that exist between them and students. Each participant in collaboration has a particular history and occupies a particular space.

Tutors have authority but often pretend that they don't, and this authority, though marginalized in the bigger institutional hierarchy, does change the place from which the tutor is coming. At the SCCC Writing Center, we have two kinds of tutors: peer tutors and Professional Assistants. When I first took over as coordinator, it bothered me that there was this differentiation between the tutors.   They both do basically the same work, so why this hierarchy? Why the demand that PAs be recognized as part-time faculty rather than just a collective "we're all in this together" identity? Though I'm not sure this was their motive, the PAs' insistence in positioning themselves in this way and in having students aware of their elevated location in the institution is much more transparent and honest than my utopian view of a writing center where everyone is equal and is able to identify with all subject positions. The PAs were (inadvertently) deprivatizing the collaborative process and the space of the writing center:

> It is disingenuous to assert that the writing center is capable of …. a chameleon-like transformation [and] is no longer associated with the dominant discourse. For while we can de-emphasize the writing center's institutional authority, it nevertheless is sanctioned and housed by the institution, just as the classroom teacher is. (Griffin qtd. in Calhoun Bell 12)

Writing center collaborations should encourage students to recognize and critique these hierarchical power relationships that exist in an academic institution (especially those that marginalize) and how that power is expressed, "normalized" and contested through discursive and spatial literacy. But do I as coordinator challenge my tutors and tutees to critique the institutional roles and mapping that creates compliant bodies and writers? Unfortunately, not enough, as student, tutor, and institutional resistance and my own precarious positioning in the institution (as untenured junior faculty) often wears me down.

My ideal writing center would be a location of ever changing collaborative perspectives, encouraging dispersal and fragmentation rather than consensus. My ideal tutor would be what Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet identify as the Trickster, "an icon of spontaneity, shape-shifting, and the creative potential of chaos" (55). Trickster tutors would encourage constructive disruptions in the text and in the tutoring space. Trickster tutors would inspire and challenge trickster writers to embrace dissent and interrogate spaces, discourses, and positions that have become naturalized and normalized. Trickster writers would, in turn, question and critique trickster tutors. Yet, how would this work in terms of the institutional role we play at the college? How would

instructors react? How would students? Would my tutors mutiny? It's hard enough to get students to come to the writing center when we offer comfort, security, and candy but how about ambiguity, contestation, and critique? Again, returning to the third space model, writing centers must acknowledge they are sites of both repression and resistance, negotiating the differences between marginality that is imposed by oppressive structures and the marginality that one chooses as a site of resistance. Tutor and writer could construct that space through contestation and struggle, creating another discursive and social location from which to articulate a sense of writing. But again, writing centers are material and institutional spaces, spaces that often are tasked by departments, instructors, and administrators with acclimation, reproduction, and homogenization as consequences of collaboration, consequences that are not necessarily viewed as negatives by the student, tutor, or instructor.

Collaborative learners need to be more fully engaged with the paradoxes of spatial literacy, the way both space and discourse practices can both dominate and liberate, offering the threat of submission but also the promise of agency at the same time. In a truly empowering scenario for an open-admissions institution, textual production would not be the focus of the tutoring session but the collaborative dynamic itself: not so much on how differences are negotiated into consensual texts but on the spaces constructed and utilized by tutor and tutee and how that positioning affects writing, spatial, and social practices in the institution. Tutors need to be able to distinguish between collaborations that reproduce the status quo and those that challenge prevailing conditions of knowledge and spatial production but, at the same time, recognize that writing centers are always negotiating both of these types of collaborations because of the in-between, third-space positioning of a writing center for student, tutor, and institution. In collaboration, space and subjectivity intertwine: both subjectivity and space can be denied and/or expanded when collaboration critiques, revises, and reinscribes dominant discourses, ideologies, and beliefs in absolute space.

The Studio Approach

In the end, I am still left with the question: can a writing center be a comfortable, open, collaborative place but, at the same time, be a location from which we can resist, critique, and contest institutional placement and hierarchies as evidenced in the types of writing that are privileged in assignments? A constructive example of the linking of these seemingly conflicting objectives could be the studio approach. Grego and Thompson's *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces: The Studio Approach* articulates an "institutionally aware" methodology called the writing studio, an approach which seeks to achieve a "third space" location outside the usual educational and disciplinary binaries. Using the concept of an art studio as their model, Grego and Thompson's writing studio is an "alongside" environment where student writers

and tutors compose, discuss, and critique their work in a non-classroom setting in order to examine how their own positioning inside and outside the academy influences what, how, and why they write.

The studio approach emerged as a way to address student needs. Small groups of students along with a staff group facilitator met frequently to discuss, analyze, and work on writing/communication assignments. By not dictating a set curriculum, but, rather, encouraging "reflective communication" to generate ideas and refine approaches to content, processes, and attitudes toward their work, the writing studio became a dedicated space conducive to the kind of production and interactions that make self-education possible. Grego and Thompson's studio approach also brings a heightened awareness of institutional positioning and power relations to its participants that helps to define student writing and basic writing students by addressing writing as an interface between local and global interests. The authors pay close attention to the material/physical description and layout for the studio: tools, resources, furniture, technological, and equipment. In this manner, the studio is explained by Grego and Thompson as a "spatialized and spatializing methodology" (20) that offers the potential for institutional change through making power relations and disciplinary expectations explicit, specifically by identifying how and where students and instructors locate themselves and their work within specific spaces and places.

As a conceptual model for the studio, Grego and Thompson utilize Soja's notion of third space, a liminal space in between existing boundaries, a place not as rigidly structured by institutional, social, and spatial conventions. The studio recontextualizes traditional student/teacher power relationships because the studio is not a typical classroom controlled by curriculum, program of study, or subject matter. The studio as third space represents a flexible process rather than a strict pedagogy and is adaptable to particular institutional or programmatic conditions attached to a specific course or as an extracurricular space. The authors imagine the studio as being able to move across and between different disciplinary and institutional areas and boundaries in order to open up and decentralize student writing in a variety of different disciplinary cultures. And yet as we have seen, movement through space is not as easy as we often think as material, discursive, and social barriers and obstacles often hinder our best intentions.

Although the studio would have to be revised and adapted for the more structured aspects of a tutoring session and a writing center, perhaps the studio approach is a place from which to start, a spatial and social metaphor to describe the type of place and work we do at the SCCC Writing Center. Can the studio approach offer both a safe, intimate centralized personal place and a resistant tactical public site of resistance? Insiders but outsiders as well? Where the studio could fit in both the academic and material geographies of SCCC would be

difficult to map, as Mark Sutton perceptively notes: "Because Third Space can be influenced by the spaces around it, studio programs at other schools may need different decisions about how to connect, or not connect, their space to traditional academic structures" (43). I have already started to integrate this kind of thinking and practice into student tutor training, that the Writing Center is not only a room in the Islip Arts building but also exists as a third space of conceptions, perceptions, and lived experiences—freeing and limiting; a myriad of locations, ways of communicating, and roles: people-paper-place.

Conclusions

As we well know, writing centers inhabit real material sites within larger academic institutions but because of the often "invisible" hierarchy within such socially important institutions, an awareness of how location implicates even the most well-meaning part of the institution may be ignored. Although writing centers are often positioned as sites of academic discursive acculturation, many writing center practitioners are using their marginalized institutional roles to construct themselves as outsiders, divorced from the politics and hegemony of the university. Their doors are always open and ready to welcome all students who are disillusioned, victimized, oppressed, and silenced by academia, providing them with a free space in which to fight the power.

When students, instructors, and tutors imagine that a writing center can inhabit a space beyond institutional practices and that all students will find a haven away from the oppression of the institution, again reveals a belief in an absolute space. Writing centers cannot escape the fact that they are institutional creations, funded by the institution in order to play the role that the institution envisions it to be playing. This is not an autonomous, "student-owned" space but rather should be seen as a liminal intersection of different discourses, ideologies, and material conditions that can offer both freedom and limitation. The students and tutors who inhabit the writing center are not moving through an absolute space but instead must negotiate the interplay between identity, place, discourse, and institutional positioning that occurs at the writing center. Are writing centers equipped to deal with all marginalized students in the same way? For some students, the writing center could be an intimidating place, or physically problematic for those with disabilities. Postmodern geographers and spatial compositionists have complicated any notion of a "safe" place, a "transparent" space that denies differences of the politics of space and positioning (Reynolds 12). The materiality of the space of the writing center as a site of institutional academic culture has everything to do with how both students and tutors conceive, perceive, and use the writing center not as an absolute space but one in which multiple and contested subject positions are being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed every day.

The conceptions of textual and collaborative space in Writing Center research and practice cannot be absolute or deny their material conditions but rather should be challenging this notion of space by analyzing the way space produces and is produced by social, political, cultural, economic, and academic relationships. Writing Center practitioners should view the institutional spaces they inhabit as well as the textual and collaborative spaces they occupy in their roles as tutors as indicators of larger contextual processes that have produced rather than fixed the positions, locations, and reactions to space that inform both their roles and practices.

The SCCC Writing Center is informed by multiple competing forces: disciplinary, institutional, pedagogical, material, personal, and the needs of the students the center is serving. Issues of location and positioning, of access and collaboration, not only affect the work done in the Writing Center or those who utilize and work in the center but the mission of a Writing Center itself. For the SCCC Writing Center, the spatial aspects of writing, tutoring, collaboration, and institutional and individual positioning are now part and parcel of our mission to create "a refuge, an intermediary space less formal than the classroom but more intellectually driven than the cafeteria—a locale shaped by our own imaginations and not corporatized models that are increasingly informing our institutional environments" (Owens "Hideaways and Hangouts" 82). This task would prove difficult at any institution, even more so in spaces that promise "open" access and admissions. Where are we located? I'm still working on that one.

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Literacy in the Lives of Adult Students Pursuing Bachelor's Degrees

In addition to the increase in the number of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who will attend college in the coming years, the average age of students attending college will continue to rise, a tendency already clear in many schools. Consequently, no longer can we expect our first-year writing courses to be made up of eighteen- and nineteen-year-old students fresh out of high school.
—Beverly J. Moss and Keith Walters, "Rethinking Diversity: Axes of Difference in the Writing Classroom" (451)

People have their own needs and purposes [for literacy] based on their own lives.
—David Barton, Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language (212)

IN ANY GIVEN WEEKNIGHT THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, ADULT STUDENTS taking courses at Northeast State College (NSC)[1] travel down Alan Drive, past the new air-traffic control tower, the long-term parking lots, and runway six to NSC's Barrington Learning Center, which is housed in the former terminal building of a regional airport. Beneath the boom of jets and amid the rumble of a small army of shuttle busses and maintenance vehicles, they gather their things and climb the marble stairs to the second floor, where NSC leases classroom space, quite literally, on the tarmac of the airport. As the time approaches 6:30, weary from the workday but energized by the possibilities of learning, they make their way to their respective classrooms, settle into their seats, and wait for their courses to begin. They carry bags of fast food and bottles of soda, water, or coffee. They carry backpacks, briefcases, and smart phones. They carry tales from the week past and plans for the week ahead. And they carry myriad and diverse stories of literacy development and use, in and outside of school.

In the field of composition studies, few investigations have been made into the role that literacy plays in the lives of adult students participating in formal programs of post-secondary study at the bachelor's level. Whereas much research exists that examines the liter-

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1. To protect the identities of those who participated in the NSC study, I have assigned pseudonyms to all individuals and institutions described in this article.

ate lives and practices of adults enrolled in literacy programs outside colleges and universities such as workplaces (Gowen; Hull) and community literacy settings (McKee and Blair; Rosenberg; Belzer; Branch; Daniell; Merrifield et al.) and a good deal of research engages the experiences of adults enrolled in community colleges (see, for example, Tinberg and Nadeau; Bay; Frederickson), adults pursuing bachelor's degrees in four-year colleges and universities have received little attention. Of those who have investigated the experiences of such students, Sohn seeks to understand the ways in which academic literacy shapes her former students' lives after college and Ivanic explores the intersection of academic literacy and identity among "mature students" participating in higher education in Britain. While the number of adults pursuing bachelor's degrees in formal programs of post-secondary study has risen over the last several decades (Kleiner) and while scholars within composition and literacy studies have sought to better understand the literate development and experiences of traditional-aged undergraduate students (Carroll; Beaufort, *College*; Lunsford, Fishman, and Rogers), there is still more to learn about the role of literacy in the lives of adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees in higher education.

In this article, I seek to add to the conversation about adult students in composition and literacy studies by sharing findings from a series of case studies I conducted with a small group of adults pursuing bachelor's degrees at Northeast State College during the early years of the 21st century. Having worked with adults in a range of settings for several years, I wanted to investigate the "extensive histories with literacy" that Kirk Branch reminds us all adults carry with them when they return to school and the role that literacy practices play in such students' lives beyond the classroom (22).

Theoretical Framework

> It is never too late to pursue the career of your dreams
> and "go back to school" to get the skills you need to succeed…
> —Urban League of Greater Alabama, "Empowerment Through
> Education and Job Skills Training" [web])

In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphors are important because they shape our perceptions and actions. David Barton acknowledges the importance of metaphors for the study of literacy by examining several of the more prevalent ways we think about literacy, including the metaphor of literacy-as-skills, "a view of literacy which is at the root of much educational practice" (11). According to this view, "Skills are treated as things which people own or possess" (or do not) and literacy is treated as "a psychological variable that can be measured and assessed" (11). The literacy-as-skills metaphor breaks reading and writing down into sets of "skills and sub-skills" which are

then "taught in a particular order, each skill building on the previous [one]" (11). This metaphor of literacy-as-skills, Barton suggests, "is very powerful [and often] spills over into the rest of society" (11), as we see in the statement above from the Urban League of Greater Alabama website. In scholarly and popular accounts of adult students returning to post-secondary study, we frequently hear of the need for skills "updates" or "retooling." "Skills update" has become a powerful means by which we have come to understand why adult students enroll in postsecondary study and what we who teach such students are to do with them.

And yet, adults like those who attend NSC don't make sense within a "skills" framework. This view, premised as it is on a linear progression of literacy development, is hard to square with the range of literacies adult students carry with them when they come to college. Despite the fact that such students are positioned by the metaphor as those who *do not* "own or possess" requisite literacy "skills," most adults pursuing bachelor's degrees read and write sufficiently to function successfully in civic society, fulfill their responsibilities as parents and spouses, and earn a living. What, then, are the literacy skills that such students do *not* possess? And what are we who teach literacy to such students in higher education supposed to impart to them?

As Barton points out, "everyone has a view of literacy" but for many, metaphors of literacy are held unconsciously—structured as they are by the Discourses in which we all participate (see Gee). Importantly, "different metaphors have different implications for how we view illiteracy, what action might be taken to change it and how we characterize the people involved" (12). Barton has argued for an *ecological* view of literacy, a view which evolves out of and expands upon social theories of literacy (Scribner and Cole; Heath; Street; Barton and Ivanic). This view, like earlier theories, takes as its starting point people's *everyday* uses of literacy (Barton 34). It is built on the belief that literacy is not a discreet cognitive skill or ability that one either has or does not have (literacy-as-skills) but is, instead, always situated within broader social and cultural contexts and relations. To study literacy within this framework is to investigate the role that literacy plays in the lives of individuals within these broader contexts and relations.

For Barton, an ecological approach is "neither innatist or environmentalist," but is "about the dynamic interaction of the two, how people fit into the environment, how they form it and are formed by it" (49). Such a view serves as an alternative to the literacy-as-skills view that is implicit in so many discussions of adult students and literacy. As Barton argues,

> . . . in order to develop a full understanding of what literacy means in people's lives it is necessary to look at how they use literacy as part of the process of making sense of their lives, representing the world to themselves, and working towards achieving what they want, using the resources available to them. (52-53)

In what follows, guided by Barton's ecological approach, I share what I have learned about what literacy means to and how it is used by seven adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees at NSC. In doing so, I hope to persuade those who work with such students to reconsider often implicitly held views which emphasize the literacy "skills" that adult students do not already "own or possess," to more expansive views that acknowledge the complex role that literacy practices already play in the lives of adult students pursuing post-secondary study when they arrive at the classroom door.

Method

Research Site

According to its website, Northeast State College, founded in 1972, is one of four public institutions that comprise the higher education system in the state in which it is located. NSC is an open-access institution that grants both associate's and bachelor's degrees and offers courses and degree programs online and face-to-face at four regional centers and five additional part-time sites. Of the roughly 2,500 undergraduate students actively enrolled in coursework at NSC during fiscal year 2010, roughly three-quarters were female, two-thirds were first-generation college students, eighty percent were transferring credit from other institutions, and eighty percent were over the age of 24 (the average age of NSC students was 36). NSC students tend to pursue professional programs such as business management, criminal justice, information technology, and early childhood education. According to NSC's website, its mission is to "expand access to public higher education to adults of all ages throughout the state."

Research Participants

I used only two criteria when recruiting participants for the NSC study: participants must be over the age of 24,[2] and enrolled in coursework at NSC on a part- or full-time basis.[3] The adult students who volunteered to participate were generally of two kinds—those between the ages of 24-35, who worked part-time and took classes at NSC on a more full-time basis, and those between the ages of 35-60, who worked full-time and took classes at NSC part-time

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2. Because most federal studies of student populations classify those age 24 and older as "adult" students, I have done so as well.

3. Despite my attempt to recruit participants of diverse ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, all participants who agreed to join this study were caucasian and only one was a non-native English speaker. This likely reflects a) student demographics at NSC where, at the time of this study, according to the Director of Institutional Research, whites made up 87% of the student body, b) the general demographic picture of the city in which the Barrington center is located, where, at the time of this study, 80.2% of citizens were categorized as "white persons," and/or c) the general demographic picture of state in which NSC is located, where, at the time of this study, 96.1% of citizens were categorized as "white persons."

(usually one per term). These two populations, I found, often brought different experiences of literacy development and use to their coursework and educational pursuits. Table 1, below, contains composite data on all seven NSC study participants.

Table 1: NSC Study Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Race/Native Language	Program of Study/ Years at NCS	Post-Secondary Education & Training	Marital Status	Current Job/Status
Sarah Knox	31	Caucasian/ English	Individualized Studies (undeclared)/3	None prior to NSC	Single	Work Study/part-time
Goran Prka	32	Caucasian/ Croatian	Business Management (B.A. Info Tech.)/4	A.S. (2004)	Single	IT consultant/part-time
Tony Vaccaro	39	Caucasian/ English	Applied Studies (B.A. Education and) Training)	A.S. (1999); NREMT Paramedic certification; extensive workplace training	Married/ 3 children at home	Paramedic; Education Manager/unemployed at time of study
John Beech	43	Caucasian/ English	Business Management Management/<1	Post-secondary course-work at regional private university; local extension school; workplace training	Married/ 4 children at home	Information Technology Manager/unemployed at time of study
Patsy McGee	44	Caucasian/ English	Individualized Studies (B.A. English Language Arts)/1.5	None prior to NSC	Single/ 2 children at home, 1 in college	School paraprofessional/ full-time
Lois Smith	45	Caucasian/ English	Indiviualized Studies (B.A. Elementary Ed.)/3	U.S. Air Force Community College; A.A. (2006)	Single/ 2 children at home	School paraprofessional/ full-time
Jennifer Jarvis	58	Caucasian/ English	Applied Studies (B.A. Allied Health Care Services)	A.S. (1967); extensive workplace training	Married/ 3 grown children	Personal and administrative assistant office manager/part-time

Researcher Stance

At the time when I conducted the NSC study, I was not a member of the faculty at NSC, but I did retain professional contacts with colleagues there, several of whom helped make recruitment opportunities available to me and aided me in gaining access to space for conducting interviews. None of the adults who participated in the NSC study were my students. Having taught at NSC for several years prior to the time when I initiated the study, I did bring a good deal of experience working with adult students to the project and those experiences, combined with the many conversations I had about learning in adulthood with my own mother while she pursued a bachelor's degree later in life, informed my thinking and the study itself.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to learn more about the role of literacy in the lives of NSC study participants, I drew on life research question strategies that have been used by literacy researchers (Barton; Barton and Hamilton; Brandt) to assemble a portrait of the role of literacy—past and present—in NSC study participants' lives. I met with each participant for roughly one hour per meeting as few as five and as many as eight times. During early interviews, I tried to assemble a basic narrative of participants' experiences with school and literacy from childhood through adulthood. As the interviews progressed, we turned from past to present as I asked participants to discuss current literacy activities and share artifacts from three domains: home/community, work, and school. By the time interviews ended, I had amassed roughly 300 pages of transcripts and collected over 100 literacy artifacts, which I then began to code and categorize, looking for patterns among participants' experiences.

During the coding period, drawing on Barton's integrated ecological framework of literacy, I developed four focus areas:

- School and Literacy Histories
- Everyday/Vernacular Literacy Practices
- Workplace Literacies
- Literacy Attitudes/Values

My discussion of participants' experiences with literacy, below, is organized around these areas of inquiry (with findings on attitudes/values woven into the discussion of the other areas). Beth Daniell reminds us that "little narratives of literacy" like this one "seldom make statements that claim to be valid for literate persons in general or literate cultures in general" but can "offer valuable insights into literate behaviors" (4). So it is with the NSC study. It is my hope that these stories of literacy development and practice will provide important insights to composition teachers and scholars who work with diverse populations of adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees in postsecondary settings.

Findings

Literacy Histories In and Outside of School

Reflecting on the role that literacy plays over the course of individuals' lifetimes, Barton writes:

> Every person has a history [and] every person has a literacy history. This goes back to early childhood and the first encounters with literacy practices in home literacy events; it continues with involvement in community and school practices, and on into adulthood with its varying and changing demands. At any point in time a person's choices are based on the possibilities provided by their past experiences. (48)

"What are the past experiences with literacy that adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees carry with them when they enroll in college? What do these past experiences make possible—or impossible?"

What are the past experiences with literacy that adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees carry with them when they enroll in college? What do these past experiences make possible—or impossible? As Barton points out, "Our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon" (47). As literacy instructors, all too often we see only the present role of literacy in students' lives. Similarly, our view is sometimes restricted to a vision of just one kind of literacy—the kind that is practiced in schools. Methodologically, it is challenging to learn about adult students' literacy histories because, for many such individuals, the past is not so near at hand. Additionally, the fact of the researchers' own investment in the study of literacy may influence the kinds of stories participants are likely to tell. Despite these challenges, I found that NSC study participants had interesting stories to tell about significant literacy events and practices during their formative years. Below, I report on the role of literacy in NSC study participants' early, and in some cases, later lives—at home, in the community, and in school.

Among NSC study participants, Patsy McGee and Tony Vaccaro conveyed some of

the more frustrated stories with regard to early literacy development. Patsy recalled that when she was growing up, literacy activities were just not a part of family life. "Neither of my parents went to college or even finished high school," she explained. "I would say that they didn't even know that literacy existed." Patsy could not recall being read to as a child, nor could she could recall writing letters to friends, family, or pen pals. She summed up her earliest experiences with literacy with the following poignant observation: "We just never put anything up on the refrigerator." Despite this absence of informal parental literacy instruction, Patsy recalled that she did manage to develop a passion for creative writing as a child and pursued her own self-sponsored literacy practices—both reading and writing. "I was a closet writer," she explained. "I liked to write stories, downstairs in the cellar or just any old weird place I could find." This passion for creative expression ended abruptly at age 11 when an older brother was killed in an automobile accident. "When my brother died, my writings were pretty sad," Patsy recalled. "My mother found my poems and they were pretty dark and they scared her. I realized how afraid she was and that's when I stopped writing." Around this same time, Patsy really discovered reading for the first time and began to spend hours tucked away in quiet corners of the house, reading novels—"nothing that would be considered great literature, mostly VC Andrews." She continued to pursue this self-sponsored reading throughout her adolescence and right up to the present day, where she talked of the hours she spent reading magazines, journals, and newspapers during her lunch period at the school at which she currently worked as a paraprofessional.

Like Patsy McGee, Tony Vaccaro grew up in a home setting where literacy was, if not neglected, not much emphasized. Tony's parents divorced when he was still young. He lived with his mother and spent a lot of time with his grandparents, who, he says, helped raise him while his mother worked and, later, attended college in the evenings. Tony recalled with fondness weekday afternoons when he served as his grandfather's newspaper boy, running into town to fetch the paper and a pack of cigarettes. Still, Tony did not recall feeling as though reading and writing were much emphasized during his early years:

> My grandfather only had an 8th grade education. It was the accepted thing, you know, if you can't work with your mind, you gotta work with your muscles. That was the mentality. Everybody wanted you to do well in school, but if you didn't, you were still going to be able to get by. We grew up in a blue collar family and that was the accepted way of life and you shouldn't feel down on yourself for this.

It wasn't just that literacy activities weren't much emphasized at home, though. As a result of early frustrations with literacy instruction in school, Tony began to avoid activities which required reading and especially writing. "I always associated reading with school and I didn't really care for school," Tony recalled, "so I didn't care much for reading." As for writ-

ing: "I'd get the phone. Writing was just not my thing." Summing up his childhood self, Tony explained, "I didn't spend a whole lot of time indoors. I was an outside kid."

Other participants in the NSC study remembered early home and family literacy practices with fond feelings and nostalgia. Lois Smith, the middle of nine children, recalled her love of expressive writing and arts and crafts as a child—a love that was self-sponsored but also nurtured by parents and siblings. "[O]f all the kids, mom told me I was the writer," Lois recalled during our interviews.

> I would write letters to friends, family—to grandma, my aunts. I made homemade cards on birthdays and I used to do this little scrolly thing in the four corners of the letters so they knew it was from me. I put these little poems I had written in the cards and I signed them, "Lois, fourth daughter, fifth child."

Growing up in a large family, Lois was surrounded by literacy practices at home. Early on, she began to keep a journal and experienced, first-hand, how writing can serve as a tool or "outlet," as she put it, to better understand one's life. Over the years, as her talent at writing became known within her family and local community, Lois was sometimes "hired" by friends and family to draft reflections and speeches at family events. "I've known since I was five years old that I had a gift for story-telling," Lois Smith explained during one of our interviews. "Not to toot my own horn, but writing is one of the things I do well."

Like Lois Smith, Sarah Knox, Jennifer Jarvis, and Goran Prka all grew up in contexts of rich literate activitiy. Sarah Knox traced the self-sponsored literacy activities that she was currently practicing, writing short stories and poems and submitting them to literary magazines, to early home literacy instruction. Knox drew a sharp distinction between home and school literacy, though: "I remember myself as being someone who couldn't stand doing schoolwork, even in English class," she explained. "When I wanted to read or write for myself, it was acceptable. But when I was told to do it, I resisted." Knox started writing for herself when she received her first journal from her mother, at age five. "[Mom] always encouraged us that writing was soothing," she explained, "through writing, you could get things out that were bothering you." Along with journal writing, mother and daughters read and discussed classic literature together as well, "*Little Women, The Secret Garden,* books that my mom knew girls would be interested in." Later, in high school, through the influence of her older sister, Sarah discovered the poet Pablo Neruda and the writing of the Beat Poets and began drafting stories and poems and, with a close friend and fellow literati, making trips to the bookstore to purchase books and CDs. With the help of a network of women—her mother, sister, and friends—Sarah developed a rich relationship with literacy and creative expression during her formative years that carried forward to the present day.

Jennifer Jarvis, the daughter of a nurse and optometrist and the eldest of the NSC

study participants, recalled that when she was growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, her home was filled with literacy materials. "My mother always had a book in her hands. She was a very busy reader," Jennifer recalled. "We always had things at home like *Reader's Digest, Newsweek, Ladies Home Journal*. My father read the paper. I would say that reading was very important to them." Jennifer also developed a rich literacy connection with her cousins, with whom she and her sister traded books whenever they got together on family vacations. Jennifer recalled with fondness the hours the cousins spent engaged in games that often featured literacy—putting on plays based on Nancy Drew mysteries and creating arts and crafts projects with old issues of *Reader's Digest*. When they were apart, the girls wrote letters to keep one another apprised of their lives and anticipate the next family gathering. Literacy events and practices, Jennifer emphasized throughout our interviews, were a significant part of her childhood.

Like Lois Smith, family, and in particular, siblings, played an important role in Goran Prka's early literacy development in his native Croatia. "My sisters played a huge role in my learning," Goran recalled. "They taught me and when I started school, I already knew how to read and write." From this early exposure, Goran developed a passion for self-sponsored reading, mostly about American popular culture. Sometime around middle-school, he began reading and watching American westerns. "You could get these books at the local kiosk or the library—they were translated into my language and they were everywhere," Goran explained. "I read about Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday, Butch Cassidy, and Jessie James [sic]. I had a huge collection in my room and I would trade these books with my friends." By high school, with the increased reading load in his classes, Goran moved from western novels to sports magazines, particularly Sports Illustrated. Despite this passion for reading, Goran confessed that he never cared much for writing and mostly avoided it when he wasn't in school. In his love of popular reading and disinterest in the productive aspects of literacy, Goran Prka shared much in common with John Beech who, despite the fact that he could recall no real negative experiences with literacy growing up, recalled outside-of-school reading experiences that revolved around sports and comic books ("*MAD* magazine! I had drawers-full of them!") and recalled feeling that writing held little interest, especially given its association with school.

An ecological approach to the study of literacy acknowledges the importance of school literacies, but does confuse schooling and literacy development, the latter of which, Barton points out, takes place in a range of settings in and outside of school and serves many distinct purposes beyond formal learning or earning a grade (15). Participants in the NSC study, I learned, carried a range of different experiences with school and school literacy from the early years of their lives, some of which built upon and expanded on home literacy practices and others of which did not.

Lois Smith, who described herself as an "A/B student who often made the Honor Roll" during her adolescent years, recalled experiences from both elementary and secondary school that encouraged her passion for reading and writing. In the seventh grade, Lois wrote a poem for English class that her teacher liked so much she suggested Lois submit it to the yearbook for publication (which she did, leading to publication). Again in high school, an English teacher noticed Lois' facility with language and encouraged her to submit a poem to the yearbook. During our interviews, Lois recalled fond memories of writing comic strips in her seventh grade English class and reading and studying plays in a high school drama course. Given her competence and confidence with writing, Lois soon found herself playing the role of tutor among her friends: "Sometimes, if someone was having a hard time with a paper, I'd say, 'Well, I'll help you with English if you'll help me with math.' I wasn't great in math. But I could help them with papers—proofreading, tweaking and stuff like that."

Like Lois Smith, Jennifer Jarvis was able to recall positive memories of school literacy instruction that were sometimes tempered by memories of not-so-positive experiences. Jennifer recalled liking English and science classes best. Having discovered an enthusiasm for and a potential future vocation in dental medicine via an afterschool job, Jennifer was especially motivated in her health and science courses and carries, to this day, an ongoing passion for health and well-being. In English classes, she enjoyed reading stories and poems and did well in spelling bees, but recalled feeling as though writing was, perhaps, not her strong suit. This feeling was put in motion, Jennifer believes, by an English teacher who "told me that I had the worst writing in the world." Despite feelings of frustration, Jennifer was successful in her schoolwork and upon graduation, immediately enrolled at a local university to pursue an associate's degree in dental hygiene. Today, in her current work at the family construction firm, Jennifer has become a prolific communicator and, she confessed with pride during our interviews, she is the person at the office to whom everyone brings their writing for editing.

"'It was always about them, about doing what they told me to do, and I just couldn't do it,' she explained."

Unlike Lois and Jennifer, and despite her early passion for self-sponsored reading and writing, there was no simple or easy transition between home and school literacy for Sarah Knox, the youngest participant in the NSC study. The spheres may as well have been "two different worlds": "I was lazy as could be in school," Sarah explained. "I was uninspired on a regular basis. I hated it. I was a bad kid." Older now

and far enough from her younger rebellious self to see those early years a bit more clearly, Sarah explained that the problem was that she was rarely able to connect her own literacy practices with those of the school. "It was always about them, about doing what they told me to do, and I just couldn't do it," she explained. To make matters worse, Sarah attended three different high schools during her teenage years and struggled to fit in at each of them. As her senior year wound down, she learned that she did not have enough credits to graduate on time. "I dropped out on a Monday and took the GED on a Wednesday," she recalled. "I didn't study for it or anything. I just went and took it and I scored in the 98th percentile and that was that. I was finally done with high school." To celebrate her newfound freedom, Sarah moved to the city, got a job at her father's design company, and spent the next decade mastering every workplace she entered, but knowing, all along, that what she really wanted and needed was to finish her education.

Whereas Sarah Knox's story highlights the deep connections that some students make with literacy in the home or family sphere and the corresponding feelings of alienation that can result when they enter school, Tony Vaccaro's story highlights the challenges of acquiring school literacy in the first place. Tony could not recall a time in his life when he did not harbor a suspicion of and negative attitude towards school and school literacies. He described his long run of frustration with the following imagined exchange between his younger self and a teacher:

Teacher: Here, here's the work.

Tony: I don't understand this.

Teacher: Well, what don't you understand?

Tony: I'm not sure.

Teacher: Well, go back and re-read it.

(later)

Teacher: Okay, do you have any questions now?

Tony: No.

Teacher: So you understand it?

Tony: No.

As Tony, who at the time of our interviews had achieved the advanced rank of Paramedic and had become a respected Emergency Medical Services (EMS) educator and Education and Training coordinator at his ambulance company, reflected on this all-too-familiar exchange, he pointed out that "In order to formulate a question, you have to have some knowledge. If you have no knowledge, you can't even ask a question." When I asked Tony when the problems began, he explained:

I think it started in grammar school because they started talking about nouns and

pronouns and adverbs and I didn't understand. And if you don't understand at the beginning, the more they progress, you just kind of sit right there and start floundering. You think, "I can't catch up now, I'm too far behind."

In high school, Tony was finally able to make a connection to school via his growing interest in technology. He enrolled in every computer course he could find, even though computers in school were still relatively new at this point. Soon, through a connection with a computer teacher, he was volunteering to work in the school computer room, "and believe me," Tony explained with a grin, "I didn't volunteer to do much if it had to do with school." The accumulated experience of years spent floundering over-rode Tony's late school success with technical or technological literacies, though; just before graduation, he enlisted in the Marines. "I knew I was going into the military," he explained. "I absolutely hated school."

Patsy McGee and John Beech recalled their years of schooling with feelings of indifference and/or ambivalence. "From fourth grade on, it was just work," Patsy, who spent her last two years of high school attending a regional vocational school, recalled. "I didn't find much pleasure in it. I just did it so that I got the grades. I never saw school reading and writing and the reading and writing I did at home as similar." According to Patsy, college was not something that was much discussed in her home growing up: "I didn't even realize you could go on. I thought education ended as soon as you graduated high school." John Beech always knew he was going on to college, even though school and school literacy practices held little attraction for him. Like Tony Vaccaro, John tended to avoid the activities that he associated with school—mainly writing. But he did develop an affinity for reading and, during his high school years, he plowed through every Stephen King novel he could get his hands on. There were some school books that captured John's attention (Heller's *Catch 22*, Orwell's *1984*), but for the most part, traditional school literacy practices failed to capture his imagination, as he explains: "I didn't particularly hate or dread anything that I can remember. For things I liked, I would go the extra mile. English never did that for me and so I never went the extra mile. In my mind, they never made a good argument for what they were asking us to do."

Like John Beech, Goran Prka always assumed he would attend college after high school—he just never anticipated that he would attend an American college in the United States. The son of an architect and homemaker, Goran enrolled at the University of Belgrade in Serbia to study history directly out of high school. His plans were interrupted, however, by the Bosnian war in the mid-1990s. Fearing for his life, Goran sought refugee status and later fled the country. When he arrived in the U.S., he knew that he wanted to continue to pursue higher education, but now he faced the daunting task of needing to learn a new language first. For two years, he worked during the day, first at a dry-cleaning business and later at a printing company, and took ESL courses in the evenings. When he felt confident enough, he

enrolled in a local community-technical college where he earned an associate's degree in computer programming. Fearing he would not be able to speak English well enough to become a history teacher, Goran decided to pursue a degree in computer programming at NSC, but he faced a number of obstacles, most of which had to do with his evolving orientation towards English and writing in English. When I interviewed him for the NSC study, he had one more course to take to complete his program of study and he had already lined up work for after graduation. He was also running a small business, working as a self-described computer "geek," helping friends and neighbors with their technology problems.

As Barton has argued, for each of us, "Literacy has a history" upon which "the present is built" (35). The seven adult students who participated in the NSC study brought a diverse range of literacy and school literacy histories to bear on their various "presents." Educated at different historical moments, under different regimes of literacy, in different regions of the U.S. and even in different countries, it is difficult to find commonality in their experiences of early home and school literacy development. Their stories underscore the challenges and opportunities of working with adult students in postsecondary classrooms. For while their stories are complex and varied, they are also rich and full of possibility for those wishing to make the study of student literacy an explicit part of the composition.

Everyday Literacies in Home/Community Contexts

As Barton argues, an ecological view of literacy starts from people's "uses of literacy"—from "everyday life and from the everyday activities people are involved in" (34). The adult students who participated in the NSC study engaged in a wide range of everyday literacy practices outside of school. Their days, like those of their professors, were punctuated by literacy events and practices, some of which were thrust upon them simply by the nature of living and participating in a post-industrial or "knowledge" society and some of which they pursued of their own initiative and interest. In what follows, I document some of the everyday literacy practices which NSC study participants engaged in at the time of the study. By no means exhaustive or conclusive, these anecdotes give a sense of the larger picture that everyday literacy may play in the lives of adult students pursuing post-secondary study.

At the time of the NSC study, Lois Smith was ensconced in the project of chronicling her husband's death. In an introductory writing course at NSC, she had begun composing a memoir called "The Grief Storm" and over time the project took on a life of its own as Lois decided to turn the essay into a family history, one to be passed down to her children. Lois's everyday literacy practices also extended to her work as CCD teacher, where she was responsible for reading instructional materials and devising and implementing lesson plans. Via an outreach program for grieving families, Lois communicated regularly through email with

other widows and offered and received guidance and wisdom. Recently, when a local civic group nominated her son for a certificate of excellence, Lois delivered a speech on the challenges of raising a child with learning disabilities. As in her childhood, home and community-based literacy activities took up a good deal of Lois's time. She was still very much "the writer" she was when she was younger.

Sarah Knox's early exposure to expressive and creative writing inspired her to continue to pursue such practices as an adult. During our interviews, Sarah opened her laptop and shared her "digital journal," where she experiments with drafting essays, poems, and short fiction. Via connections she made in a creative writing course at NSC, Sarah formed a writing group to meet and share writing outside of school. Literacy practices played a role in her civic life as well. During the tumultuous years of the Bush administration, Sarah frequently wrote letters to local newspapers and Congressional representatives protesting the war in Iraq and advocating for progressive causes. Like many Americans, Sarah used a range of communications technologies and social media to maintain friendships and professional connections and to learn about and participate in the world.

Technological awareness, interest, competence, and confidence were, I found, important determinants in the kinds of everyday literacy practices NSC study participants pursued in the home and community contexts. The younger participants, like Sarah Knox and Goran Prka, and those whose professional lives engaged technology to a considerable degree, like John Beech, Tony Vaccaro, and Goran Prka, seemed to move in a somewhat different literate universe than the three participants who, for various reasons (i.e., age, socio-economic status, gender, interest), were less engaged with communications technologies. All three of the males who participated in the NSC study were highly involved with digital literacies in the home/community spheres, where their literacy practices often overlapped with workplace practices. In the cases of John Beech, Tony Vaccaro, and Goran Prka, it was sometimes hard to tell where professional or workplace practices left off and self-sponsored non-work, non-school literacy practices began. All read in their fields of professional interest after-hours; all participated in discussion groups, listservs, and social and professional networking sites that saw no time or space boundaries; and all engaged in self-sponsored technological literacy practices frequently. In sum, the younger NSC study participants and those whose professional work directly engaged with technology moved through a sea of digitally-based literacy practices that saw virtually no boundaries of space or time.

In highlighting the role of technology in some NSC study participants' everyday literacy practices, I don't mean to suggest that other participants (Lois Smith, Jennifer Jarvis, and Patsy McGee) did not engage in such practices. At the time of our interviews, Lois Smith and Jennifer Jarvis were both reading blogs that friends in distant places were publishing,

and Lois was participating in an online discussion group for cross-stitchers. Jennifer Jarvis was pursuing her lifelong interest in health and well-being by reading online journals and magazines. Patsy McGee, had, at the time when I interviewed her, taken eight online courses at NSC and was using email to keep in contact with her daughter, who was away at college. Clearly, digital literacies played an important role in these women's lives. They just did not seem to seek out such activities in the same way or with the same enthusiasm as other study participants did. Jennifer Jarvis still preferred to "hold the newspaper in her hands" while reading it and despite her extensive experience with online learning, Patsy McGee confessed that she actually found the computer an annoyance and tried to avoid it when she could. Conversely, Goran Prka, Sarah Smith, and John Beech, despite the enormous amount of time they devoted to digital literacies in the home/community contexts, each indicated that they still found time to sit down with books and spoke passionately about their everyday non-digital reading practices.

An ecological view of literacy encourages us to examine and take seriously the ordinary and everyday literacy practices in which individuals engage outside of school. Beyond the everyday practices of writing grocery lists and reading mail in which we all take part, everyday literacy played an important role in NSC study participants' daily lives. Their stories underscore the extent to which adult students pursue such practices in purposeful ways and derive meaning from them in their day-to-day lives.

Workplace Literacies

Studies of trends in adult education (Kleiner, et al.; Kim et al.; Berker, Horn, and Carroll) have consistently found that most adult students work while pursuing post-secondary education, with one recent study finding that 82% of all adults surveyed worked at least part-time while taking classes (Berker, Horn, and Carroll iii). Six of the seven NSC study participants worked at the time when I interviewed them for this study (and the seventh, John Beech, was actively seeking work) and all of those who worked participated in a wide range of workplace literacy practices. Barton argues that "The workplace is a particularly important site for the study of literacy practices" as it is the place "where many people spend the majority of their waking hours" (66). Additionally, "work constitutes an important part of [individuals'] identities" (66). In what follows, I report on the role that workplace literacy practices played in NSC study participants' lives.

Sarah Knox and Goran Prka, the two youngest NSC study participants, pursued their studies on as close to a full-time basis as possible and tended to think of work as something that would follow graduation (despite the fact that both were working part-time while in school). Whereas Sarah had worked full-time in a range of different capacities since she was

eighteen years old (graphic design, retail, hospitality), at the time when I interviewed her, she was working part-time at NSC as an administrative assistant and just about to move into a new position to assist with outreach and recruitment. In her capacity as an administrative assistant, she described her workplace literacy practices as typical of administrative work (emails, in-office communication, correspondence, documentation etc.). While Sarah's tone suggested her confidence with workplace literacy practices, it was also clear that for her, such writing was secondary to the kinds of creative practices that she pursued with passion outside of work.

Like Sarah Knox, Goran Prka also spent most of his twenties engaged in one kind of work or another and had scaled back his hours to pursue his coursework on a more full-time basis. At the time of our interviews, Goran was working about 10-20 hours a week, writing programming code for a local technology company, and another 8-10 hours a week as a local computer "geek." Aside from the code that he had to write for the technology company, Goran reported that he wrote as little as possible, preferring the telephone for most communication.

Similar to Sarah Knox and Goran Prka, Jennifer Jarvis was also working part-time when I interviewed her for this study. Unlike Sarah and Goran, Jennifer was taking just one course per term at NSC, slowly re-acclimating to college. At 58, Jennifer had found herself at a professional crossroads, trying to figure out what her "third career" was going to look like. For the first half of her professional life, she had pursued her passion for medicine and health by working as a dental hygienist. After twenty years in dentistry, Jennifer hung up her mask, changed industries entirely, and took a position at a commercial sign and stamp shop, working as a sales and marketing associate. After a dozen years, she found herself once again itching for change and for a return to work that engaged her core interests of health and well-being, so she enrolled in her first class at NSC with the hope that she might find a way to re-connect her work with her passions. She also began to work part-time at the family construction business, where workplace literacy played a significant role as she juggled three professional roles: administrative assistant, office manager, and sales associate. When I first asked Jennifer about her current work, she modestly explained that her job was to "enhance [the family] business and add those little touches that make us look more professional." By the time we finished discussing the range of workplace literacy practices in which she engaged—ghostwriting for her husband (the president of the firm), documentation of internal and external processes, document production for project bids—it was clear that in an office full of engineers and construction managers, Jennifer had become a one-woman communication team whose literacy practices literally kept the business running.

At the time of the NSC study, Patsy McGee and Lois Smith, both single-mothers with children at home, were working as paraprofessionals and job coaches in their local school

districts—positions which, they explained, allowed them to balance childcare and work with their coursework at NSC. The writing these women enacted in the workplace, in accordance with state and federal laws, was largely documentary in nature—both kept weekly journals for the students with whom they worked and wrote regular summative reports on their charges' progress. The journals and reports were shared with other case-workers, supervisors, and parents and served both as a form of evidence that the school was complying with state and federal laws and as an important means of communication between various school team members. These practices were the raw data upon which case managers drew in making strategic decisions about student services.

At the time when I interviewed him for this study, Tony Vaccaro was undergoing an interesting and not insignificant shift in demand in literacy practices on the job. For most of his career, Tony had worked as a paramedic, where the only real writing he produced was the patient-care report—a kind of boilerplate that combines standard fill-in-the-blank and check-the-box responses with longer narrative writing. Recently, though, Tony had moved into a new professional role, Education and Training Coordinator, his first administrative job, and with this move, Tony was finding new demands for his literate practice. For example, in order to ensure that all employees shared common knowledge about company policies and EMS procedures, he and a group of Field Training Officers had assembled a twenty-five page Competency Manual. Because ACME Ambulance, where Tony works, is a large ambulance company and sees a high degree of turnover among its staff, Tony also found himself frequently conducting three-day orientation sessions, which required the creation of considerable presentation materials and a 200-page Orientation Manual. Because a big part of his job involved tracking the certification status of ACME's 140+ staff, Tony also spent a good deal of time utilizing a learning management system to communicate and provide access to training and recertification information and materials. In addition to these new practices, Tony was also finding that in a large organization like ACME, there was a continual need for communication with administrators and supervisors and for ongoing documentation of various processes and procedures. "These days, I'm responsible to a lot more people," he explained during our interviews. "When the Director of Operations goes 'Hey, I want to know about this or that person—why isn't he working out?' I say, 'Well, it's this, this, and that.' And he says, 'Do you have any documentation on him? We can't do anything if we don't have documentation.' I don't say it, but I'm thinking 'Oh my gosh, I've got to type up another report!?!'" Midway through his career, Tony Vaccaro, a self-described "outside kid" who had spent a good deal of his life avoiding work that required extensive writing, was finding himself saturated in literacy practices in his new position as Education and Training Coordinator at ACME Ambulance.

For twenty years, John's Beech's career trajectory in the IT field had been upward. When his previous employer, a multi-million dollar technology company, closed their doors, he was serving as the director of information systems and overseeing a staff of a dozen IT professionals. In this capacity, John's workplace literacy practices were extensive and ongoing. He was responsible for the design and maintenance of all corporate networks, connectivity between offices, and maintenance of all servers, desktops, and software. He wrote for those above him (emails, memos, reports) and those across or below (emails, memos, policy statements, deployment guides). He wrote for audiences internal to the company (executives and managers as well as colleagues in IT and other departments) and those external (vendors, job applicants, colleagues in the field). John's most significant literate production was evaluative and analytical as he devised IT strategy to help the firm reach its strategic goals. Of all the NSC study participants, workplace literacy practices played the most prominent and high-status role in the professional work life of John Beech.

Barton reminds us that "In all jobs, people encounter new literacies at work, whether as a firefighter, a social worker, or a factory worker" (208). Such is the case with the adults who participated in the NSC study. The practices in which these individuals engaged "may be valued in different ways" (Barton 66) and for those who work with adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees, it may be important to get a sense of the relative value and investment such students feel towards workplace literacy practices. The value will likely, with some adult students being highly invested in workplace practices and the professional identities these practices have engendered (Tony Vaccaro, John Beech) and others feeling no great loyalty to workplace literacies or identities (Sarah Knox, Goran Prka). Additionally, given the number of hours most adults spend at work, we should not be surprised to find that many have internalized the conventions of the genres they produce on the job and the professional identities these genres sustain. In sum, adult students' participation in workplace communities and engagement with workplace literacy practices may have considerable implications for those who teach such students in composition classrooms (for further elaboration of this point, see Michaud).

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In outlining the implications of an ecological view of literacy, Barton argues that we must rethink the metaphors we employ in discussions of literacy. Discussions of adult students in scholarly circles and the popular media often attribute adults' decisions to enroll in programs of postsecondary study to the need for updating "skills"—including literacy skills. However, a focus on the "skills" that adult students do not possess obscures from view the role that literacy plays in such students' lives beyond the classroom. As we have seen in the case of the

seven adults who participated in the NSC study, adult students carry with them a broad range of literacy histories and a wealth of experience in everyday and workplace literacy practices. These histories and practices are in a state of continual flux as adults encounter and participate in new social contexts that involve and reshape their literate practice and orientations towards literacy. As paraprofessionals, Patsy McGee and Lois Smith must find ways to effectively document their students' development and adapt to changes in local and federal education policy. As Education and Training coordinator, Tony Vaccaro must keep abreast of EMS certification guidelines and work to devise means of assessing providers' performances on the job. As she enters into a new life-stage, Jennifer Jarvis constantly expands her knowledge of health and well-being and adapts her family's routines around food and nutrition to what she learns. Sarah Knox shares articles on politics with friends and organizes political action groups on Facebook to advocate for causes that matter to her and her community. Far from being deficient in literacy "skills," NSC study participants' stories suggest the rich role that literacy practices play in the lives of many adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees at the turn of the twenty-first century.

As students, these individuals would be well-served by literacy instruction that takes as its starting point not those things teachers and institutions perceive such students to be lacking but, instead, the complex and evolving role that literacy already plays in such students' lives. Barton articulates this point succinctly:

> Rather than looking at whether people do or do not possess literacy skills, in order to develop a full understanding of what literacy means in people's lives it is necessary to look at how they use literacy as part of the process of making sense of their lives, representing the world to themselves, and working towards achieving what they want, using the resources available to them. (52)

Literacy instruction aimed at adult students pursuing post-secondary study might effectively take as its starting point the questions implied by Barton's words: What literacy practices do adult students already engage in? Why do they matter in their lives? What practices do they hope to acquire? Why? Literacy instruction at the post-secondary level can and should play a role in helping adult students to reflect on these questions and to better understand themselves as literate individuals.

In addition to encouraging those who work with adults to take seriously the role that literacy already plays in the lives of adult students pursuing bachelor's degrees, I would emphasize another point that emerges out of Barton's ecological framework and that is especially germane for the many faculty who teach writing to adult student populations, but whose training came within traditional departments of literature or English. Barton argues that there is no hierarchy of literacy practices—some practices are not "better" or "more

advanced" than others. Within an ecological framework, Barton explains,

> Literacies do not exist on some scale starting with basic or simple forms and going on to complex or higher forms. So-called simple and complex forms of literacy are in fact different literacies serving different purposes. They do not lead on from one to the other in any obvious way (38).

There are two points to make here. First, despite the fact that college still comes before work for many individuals, academic literacy practices do not precede workplace literacy practices and do not necessarily prepare one for workplace literacy. Many adults who never completed postsecondary study, including NSC study participants, function successfully and productively in workplaces where literacy practices play a considerable role. As we know from much scholarship, academic and workplace literacies are probably more different than they are alike (Beaufort, *Writing in the Real*; Dias et al.). This is not to say that academic literacy is not important or cannot help prepare individuals for the world beyond college, but it is to underscore the point that one need not have mastered academic literacy before one can go on to learn the various forms of workplace literacy.

Second, while difficult to prove empirically, there is sometimes a bias among those who work in English Departments and who teach writing against literacies that are practiced on the job or in the home or community contexts. As Barton points out, a view of literacy that is almost as pervasive as the "skills" view is that of the "literary" view—which is privileged and promulgated by schools and which emphasizes the creative or imaginative elements of literate production. Of course, most individuals do not produce the kind of creative writing that is the focus of the literary view. But as we have seen with participants from the NSC study, many adults do engage in a variety of literacy practices every day, at home and in the community and in the workplace, and they often feel a good deal of investment in these practices. Barton argues that children often feel excluded from academic literacy activities when their "own literacy practices are not valued by the school" (208). The same can be said of adults. When the practices that are most familiar and meaningful to adult students are excluded from the study of literacy in the classroom, school literacy instruction can feel alienating. Honoring everyday and workplace literacies as legitimate forms of practice in and of themselves and as worthy of investigation as Barton and others (Carter; Downs and Wardle; Gleason; Ivanic) have done should go a long way towards giving adult students—some of whom have been away from and others of whom have felt alienated by the kinds of literacy practices emphasized in schools—a language to think about and make sense of the transitions they are experiencing as they move between the various contexts (school, work, home/community) in which they practice literacy.

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