



A Community College Professor Reflects on First-Year Composition

JOHN PEKINS

Tallahassee Community College

Appropriately enough, I am freewriting this opening with one of my first-year composition classes, as that is the best—and often only—way I get any writing done, once the semester lifts off. Four first-year composition sections (three of which are English Composition [ENC] 1101), thirty writing students per section, but I'm not complaining. After all, I have a job teaching a subject I love. Anyway, as I write I am remembering the just-returned sets of diagnostic grammar test results for my three ENC 1101 sections. An English department requirement, the test is a forty-question, minimum-competency instrument written at the ninth-grade level, and class averages for the three sections are 56 percent, 60 percent, and 61 percent, respectively. Five-paragraph, minimum-competency diagnostic essay results are often equally disappointing, with many essays demonstrating what I call *flat-line* reasoning, as well as equally *flat* control of sentences and paragraphs. These essays often read as if even this minimum exercise is a disturbingly unfamiliar experience for these students now embarking on a long journey through college-level, scholarly discourse.

At the start of each semester, my reaction to these results is always the same: heartfelt concern for these people sitting before me—men and women, some younger, some older—all of whom have arrived at my classroom with admirable goals related to acquiring satisfying careers for themselves and secure futures for their families. They have registered at this community college to

help bring their dreams to reality. This course, ENC 1101 College Composition, is the anchor course for their dreams, as its purpose is to expose them to the practices of what many call *academic discourse*. Whatever the major, all students participating in the college enterprise traditionally engage in this mode of discourse, involving thesis, organization, development of support, etc. In spite of this long-standing tradition, though, I believe that those who participate in first-year composition these days—teachers and students alike—face severe problems accomplishing the course's purposes. Perhaps I should rephrase that point: teachers and students, in my view, face severe problems even agreeing on what the course's purposes should be, as the definition of college-level writing and even the perceived need for such writing in the first place are, in my observation, unmoored in the present not-very-literate climate we find ourselves inhabiting in this first decade of the twenty-first century.

In a field as subjective as writing, perhaps we have always faced the problem of reaching concrete agreement concerning what college-level writing is and what it contributes to the postsecondary educational experience, but I believe the problem has intensified in the last ten or fifteen years as a result of several factors. Perhaps most notable among these are a general decline in reading and the mind-numbing effects of minimum-competency exams at all educational levels. Indeed, in the present environment, one often encounters difficulty defining college-level anything, according to many colleagues I speak to, both at my own institution and others. Not one to give up on my students or my vocation, I have drawn from eighteen years experience in the first-year composition trenches a few conclusions I would like to toss into our profession's conversation about this course's students, function, and future.

The starting point for me when considering first-year composition is student reading practice. For years, I have polled my classes to learn how much and how regularly students read prior to entering college. With regard to books, most report reading just one or two during their high school years, with the rest falling somewhere on the spectrum from many to none. Although they occasionally read Web sites, magazines, advertising flyers, etc., many students report that they do not read regularly at all,

and when they do, they often find reading to be boring. Though hardly empirical, these responses, combined with further evidence from student essays and one-to-one conferences, suggest that reading is not an integral part of many entering students' communications experience. I find this point reinforced in conversations with colleagues around the country, who conclude similarly from their own observations of student comments and performance. Ironically, though, the electronic age is creating an environment overflowing with the written word. Indeed, most in the composition field recognize that our students must prepare to function in a vigorously text-based, electronic communications environment involving e-mails, memos, reports, online journals, etc.—some informal and some formal, but all operating best/providing the most effective results for those who are practiced, precise readers and writers. In such an accelerating climate of written communication, lack of practiced familiarity with reading is a significant problem for many first-year composition students. This lack of preparation and resulting short- and long-term vulnerability represent a great challenge for both first-year composition students and their teachers.

We can speculate why many of our students arrive at the first-year composition classroom with little to no reading experience. Television is one obvious choice. We've all read the commentaries and studies on this point, particularly regarding the passive and addictive qualities of the television/video medium, all of which often appear to contribute to a decline in the more active medium of reading. From the television phenomena emerges another factor: the absence of reading in households, as television, video games, etc., often replace the book and the magazine as media companions for families at day's end. Throwing their hands up in the air, many kindergarten through grade 12 teachers have accepted the decline of reading and so do not ask for as much reading from their students as was typically asked of the teachers themselves when they were in school. This is particularly true in so-called *basic* and *general* high school English classes, in my observation, which often operate under the assumption that these students are not college bound and so do not need rigorous exposure to reading and writing. Instead, students learn to succeed on state-mandated, minimum-competency grammar

and five-paragraph writing tests. Ironically, these are additional contributors to the decline in purposeful, intelligent reading and writing in our schools. In the end, of course, many of these students actually do go to college, as in Florida, where a statewide open-enrollment policy grants community college admission to all high school graduates. (Speaking of “throwing their hands up in the air,” I have spoken to many in the first-year composition field who themselves have noticed a subtle shift in the length of readings now offered in composition texts. Extended fifteen- to twenty-five-page articles—or longer—appear with decreasing frequency, while two- to five-page articles increasingly become the norm. As the sample textbooks arrive from publishers every semester, I hear many of my colleagues concluding that the wave of decline and acceptance of decline may well be rolling through higher education as well.)

An overall decline in reading, then, at home and in school, is certainly contributing to whatever difficulties we face in attempting to clarify what college-level writing means as a goal for first-year composition courses. A related concern involves a point one hears discussed from time to time: many of the students going to college in the twenty-first century are those who would not have attended college at all a few decades ago. Many of these students’ approach to college work focuses primarily on the acquisition of credits leading to a degree that allows them to compete in a more technical, professional, and skilled job market than existed in earlier generations. Another aspect of this point is that many such students indicate—even in their papers—that they have no interest in the traditional values of college education, going back to the Middle Ages, involving a breadth of knowledge in a variety of fields, including the arts, philosophy, history, rhetoric, etc., and also involving a manner of thinking that cultivates practiced combinations of creative and critical thinking processes. In other words, these students take the college route because they see the acquisition of a college degree as the only possible pathway to their financial goals. From this pragmatic perspective, they often question the value of higher-level competence with the written word and seek primarily to accumulate credit hours toward the degree they believe will help them realize their financial goals.

We could call this the vocational versus traditional approach to higher education, and it is the result of the democratizing of postsecondary education. More people are attending college than ever before, in one of the great democratically inspired educational movements in the history of education. As a community college professor, I celebrate my participation in this movement and remain committed to bringing the best possible education to every student I teach, many of whom are first-generation college students. Some of these students rise to wonderful heights their parents or grandparents could not even have imagined for themselves. I believe, therefore, in this democratic endeavor, but I must acknowledge that this larger, democratic student body also takes its place alongside the decline in reading—perhaps emerges from that decline—as another source of difficulty in reaching a clear definition of college-level writing at the first-year composition level. With the pool of college students so much larger now than in the past, many in our field report a decline among entering students' overall experience and competence with the written word—indeed, even in their belief in the necessity of the written word in the first place. The landscape has changed for us all.

Despite the challenges apparent in the points I have made above, I believe that much can be done to improve the learning experience for both students and teachers in first-year composition courses. In particular, I suggest two major areas for practitioners to consider when reflecting on the definition of college-level writing for first-year composition. The first of these is assessment. The second involves the more vigorous inclusion of reading and reading process instruction in the composition classroom.

Looking first at assessment, professional associations have, over the years, proposed various approaches to assessment criteria in the field. The literature is replete with examples, and I won't spend time here reviewing the various approaches. Instead, I would like to make a simple proposal: that the profession not only take upon itself the identification of criteria and methods of evaluation, but also begin the process of establishing national range finders of passing and nonpassing college-level writing in a variety of typical first-year composition formats. As we know, whatever assessment we undertake in this field, a certain amount of rank ordering is necessarily involved. We can identify consis-

tent criteria and even reliable assessment methods—but, given the growing numbers of college students and also their changing relationships to print, I do not believe we have clarity or agreement now concerning what it is we are rank ordering; that is, what a valid college composition is. In this shifting landscape of growing enrollments and morphing relationships to print, I hear colleagues around the country observe that whatever it is we are rank ordering now is not at the level of what we rank ordered in past years. Having taught first-year composition for eighteen years, I would have to say that my own impressions are much in accord with those comments. Of course, one could require empirical evidence, rather than the growing conviction of practitioners, but such a project would involve a great deal of time, and since it would also involve unearthing decades of student work, may well be unfeasible.

Even if one were not to accept the argument that the quality of student writing has declined over the last ten to fifteen years, many practitioners I speak to agree that we find ourselves adrift when it comes to what we call college-level writing and how we should be assessing it. Throughout my years teaching college composition, I have asked colleagues at my own institution and other schools to provide examples of writing that is A, B, C, and D quality, and the resulting spread of range finders is remarkable. Even when agreement on criteria may move toward a common set of standards, interpretation of those criteria in the assessment of actual student essays often offers little to no consistency. While I have seen interpretations among full-time composition teachers vary significantly, the gap between full-time and adjunct faculty interpretations is often even more profound—and understandable, given each group's respective involvement in and responsibility for defining and maintaining departmental standards. Whatever the sources of disparity may be, however, the results clearly cannot work to the advantage of our students, who experience great confusion attempting to navigate among teachers' varying assessment practices—nor can these results benefit composition program coherence, effective functioning of writing-across-the-curriculum programs, or workplace certainty concerning the skills of college graduates hired to participate professionally in this information age.

Rather than continue our present uncertainty, the assessment project I suggest would challenge practitioners to explore together and possibly even agree to a set of first-year composition assessment criteria. They then would begin the process of discussing and, again, possibly even agreeing to what examples of college writing best demonstrate the agreed-upon criteria, from levels of excellence through levels of unacceptability. Such a project would entail a long and at times possibly contentious process that might, in the end, produce no national consensus at all. I think, though, that engaging in such a national assessment project still would be worth the effort for the potential clarity it could bring to our field—even if not final clarity—and most importantly for the service it would provide our students. The entire debate concerning what college-level writing is in the twenty-first century could be aired openly, and all the affected constituencies—including students, faculty, administrators, professionals, etc.—could seek renewed understanding and perhaps also agreement that would enable all to move forward more reliably. The present variability, uncertainty, and general unease among writing teachers and students across the country could be replaced with a set of range finders that all could understand and reference in their classes/curricula. Adjustment of the range finders could be ongoing—on something like an annual or biannual basis—in order to make best use of new information affecting the field. Participation in the use of these range finders would, of course, be voluntary, but if a solid process informed the discussions and resulting decisions, then the range finders could make a valuable contribution, not just to first-year composition courses, but to all college courses in which writing is required—that is, the great majority of courses currently offered.

When the profession considers criteria for the assessment project described above, I would argue for more vigorous inclusion of reading in students' essays from the start. Four years ago, I conducted an exploration of approximately three hundred composition department Web sites in order to review curriculum and assessment practices in first-semester composition courses. At the conclusion of that review, I found that no more than twelve or fifteen of the three hundred departments demonstrated a commitment to teach the integration of reading with writing in first-

semester first-year composition classes. Some departments provided for a research project toward the end of the term, but most of the programs reviewed opted to require essays relying primarily on personal experience for support of the students' main points.

Some traditional premises bear exploring at this point in the discussion. The first of these is whether the primary reliance on students' personal experience and observation in first-year composition essays is appropriate. I will say simply that I do not believe it is. If the purpose of first-year composition is to prepare students for later college work, then they should be reading and writing about what they read, as that is the sort of work they are asked to provide in the bulk of their college courses, as well as in later professional work. We have a responsibility, in my view, to help students practice as soon as possible the skills most in demand throughout their academic and professional careers. An equally important reason for integrating reading with writing in the first-year composition classroom is to help students become familiar with the sound, the flavor of the formal writing they themselves will be asked to produce as college students and, later, professionals in their chosen fields. The active integration of reading with writing throughout the composition course addresses this problem as well, in my view.¹

As one example of reading/writing integration in first-year composition classes, the Tallahassee Community College English Department chose to adopt this approach to all ENC 1101 assignments as part of its recent Pew-funded course redesign. We are pleased with the results. With the integration of reading in each essay, faculty report stronger, more substantive student writing. We are still growing in our understanding of this change and are presently engaging in faculty workshops to accelerate our ability to work even more effectively with our students. The scope of this article does not provide for extensive discussion of this course redesign, but those interested in exploring it further may read Dr. Sally Search et al.'s documents at the following Web site: http://www.center.rpi.edu/PCR/R3/TCC/TCC_Overview.htm.

When discussing the implications of reading/writing integration in first-year composition, another area to explore involves the traditional preparation of composition instructors. The great

strength of Western education lies in its ability to break down large processes into their component parts. The study of biology, for example, demonstrates this strength through its in-depth analysis of plant and animal life, from the most plainly visible down to the microscopic. Our traditional study of written language follows a similar track, as we have identified and often study separately both a reading process and writing process. Integration of the two processes, however, is not a common practice in the academy. Degrees are typically awarded in one area or the other, but not usually in the integration of the two. I begin to think such a divided approach to written language study is similar to the study of respiratory therapy in which one therapist might seek credentials in the area of inhalation, while another receives certification in exhalation. True respiration, however, requires both inhalation and exhalation, but in this exaggerated example, these specialists are not expert in the entire process, just one aspect of it. In the study of written language, we have reading (inhalation) and writing (exhalation), and yet these processes are often studied separately, rather than as integrated aspects of a larger process we could call written language.

In past generations, when first-year composition students arrived at college with more extensive reading experience than today, perhaps it was not altogether necessary for a composition teacher to conduct a serious study of the reading process, as well as a study of how the two processes work together as a larger written language process. Some I speak to, though, share my belief that the time has arrived for first-year composition instructors to become more knowledgeable about the reading process and its applications to the process of writing college compositions. As discussed earlier, we can no longer assume that the students we meet in our classrooms are experienced readers, and so if we are to help them learn to write at the college level—however that may be defined—we must also help them become experienced college-level readers, a skill for which many are either poorly prepared or not prepared at all. We cannot realistically ask our students to write college compositions if they have little or no experience reading such writing themselves. We cannot ask them to exhale if they do not also understand how to inhale. If as a discipline we continue to emphasize in our teacher training,

class preparations, and teaching practices only one side of the written language process, we do so at the risk of not providing our students the skills we claim our first-year composition courses teach.

While I believe strongly in the importance of the assessment and reading/writing integration proposals described above, I realize that such a comprehensive refocusing of first-year composition courses might well produce more vigorous, more challenging assignments and grading criteria, which, in turn, might contribute to increased student failure rates and even diminished enrollment numbers—at least in the short run. As a result, the composition field might find itself on a collision course with those in administration and elsewhere who identify with the student retention movement, particularly since first-year composition represents, as I mentioned earlier, the anchor course at many postsecondary institutions. I am enough of an optimist, though, to believe that in the end all affected parties, including students, faculty, administrators, and members of the community, would benefit from such an intensive examination of first-year composition courses. If standards were raised, they would have to be raised in the context of increased support mechanisms for all students, starting ideally at the kindergarten through twelfth-grade level and moving up through college years. I am also realistic enough to understand that any examination of first-year composition courses would most likely result in other pedagogical, budgetary, etc. conflicts among faculty, students, administrators, and community members, both within the composition field and outside of it. Even so, I believe the effort is still worthwhile and could actually encourage a larger examination of college standards generally, to the benefit of all parties. Perhaps, though, now is not the time to walk much farther down this speculative path. Instead, I suggest again that first-year composition faculty and administrators embark on a process of examining the applicability of renewed assessment methods and reading/writing integration in first-year composition classes. If this effort is conducted thoroughly and in good faith, then whatever else might follow in its wake will hopefully travel a similarly positive path.

And so I conclude my reflections from the first-year composition trenches. I believe that in examining where we stand as

composition teachers and where we should go next, we find ourselves at a moment of great opportunity. I am excited at the possibilities that an emphasis on reading/writing integration in first-year composition classes could bring to our assessment practices, our growth as a teaching discipline, and, most importantly, our students' academic and professional success. Alone in my office as I write this conclusion, the sky dark beyond the window and filling with stars, I look toward my desk and notice that my sleeves are already rolled up, and a stack of compositions awaits reading and evaluation. This first-year composition teaching is good work. I like it down here in the trenches, where I find in my students' successes my own success. I close by wishing great success to all those who teach and learn in first-year composition classes—now and in the years to come.

Note

1. Through phone calls, e-mails, and published work, several colleagues across the country shared valuable expertise to support my explorations of reading/writing integration and its applications to Tallahassee Community College's Pew-funded redesign of ENC 1101. By extension, their efforts also helped inform the reading/writing integration portion of this article. I here acknowledge these folks' generosity, insight, patience, and humor, and I also thank them: Eli Goldblatt, director of the Temple University Writing Program; Bridget Irish, director of the Fort Lewis (Colorado) College Writing Program; Clyde Moneyhun, director of the Stanford University Writing Center; Tom Ott, director of Developmental Studies at Community College of Philadelphia; Mike Rose, professor of Social Research Methodology at UCLA and author of *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared* (1989); Michael Smith, professor of English Education at Rutgers University; Karen Spear, former chair and dean at Fort Lewis College in Colorado, presently executive director of the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning, and author of "Controversy and Consensus in Freshman Writing: An Overview of the Field" (1997); Patrick Sullivan, professor of English at Manchester Community College (Connecticut) and author of "What Is 'College Level' Writing?" (2003); and Susan Wood, professor of English Education at Florida State University. Although I did not speak or correspond with David Bartholomae, his "Inventing the University" (1988) continues to be a great inspiration. I acknowledge and thank him as well.

Works Cited

- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *Perspectives on Literacy*. Ed. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 273–85.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. New York: Free Press, 1989.
- Search, Sally, Missy James, Patrick McMahon, Alan Merickel, and John Pekins. "Program in Course Redesign." The Center for Academic Transformation. 2005. 8 June 2006 <http://www.center.rpi.edu/PCR/R3/TCC/TCC_Overview.htm>.
- Spear, Karen. "Controversy and Consensus in Freshman Writing: An Overview of the Field." *Review of Higher Education* 20 (1997): 319–44.
- Sullivan, Patrick. "What Is 'College-Level' Writing?" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 30 (2003): 374–90.