

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**SPRING 1991**

Volume 10, Number 1

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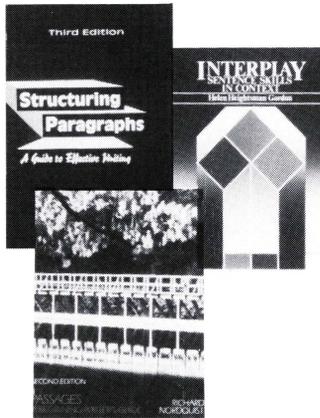
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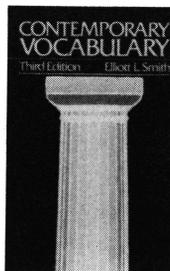
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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10–20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted.

Manuscripts will be refereed anonymously. We require four copies of a manuscript and an abstract of about 100 words. To assure impartial review, give author information and a short biographical note for publication on the cover page *only*. Papers which are accepted will eventually have to supply camera-ready copy for all ancillary material (tables, charts, etc.). One copy of each manuscript not accepted for publication will be returned to the author, if we receive sufficient stamps (no meter strips) clipped to a self-addressed envelope. We require the MLA style (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 3rd ed., 1988*). For further guidance, send a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope for our style sheet and for camera-ready specifications.

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

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

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

A “Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award” is given to the author of the best *JBW* article every four issues (two years). The prize is \$500, courtesy of an anonymous donor. The winner, to be selected by a jury of three scholars/teachers not on our editorial board, is announced in our pages and elsewhere.

## *Editors' Column*

A member of the *JBW* Editorial Board wrote us recently to say how much she enjoys reading manuscripts and providing feedback for authors. We, on our part, would like to take this opportunity to say how much we appreciate the dedication and professionalism of our Board members. In particular, we applaud the detailed feedback with which most reviewers respond to manuscripts, *all* manuscripts submitted, including those recommended for immediate publication, those they feel might with revision be suitable for publication, and those they reject.

The extensive suggestions which members of the Board send to authors are, no doubt, an important factor in the increasing number of "resubmissions" of manuscripts originally returned for revision. Naturally, not all of these can be published in *JBW*. Still, a significant number of the articles we eventually publish reach their final form as a result of this collaborative editorial process between authors and reviewers. We think, moreover, that this process spreads a measure of good will throughout the profession, especially with regard to younger members seeking initial publication.

This is also the time for us to welcome a new member to our Editorial Board, Professor Evelyn Webb of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. Professor Webb is also Southeast Regional Chair of the NCTE. Professor Webb served, with Professors Charles Cooper and Deborah Holdstein (Chair), on the 1990 Selection Committee for the Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award, which will have been presented to Kathleen G. Dixon of Ohio State University at Lima, by the time this issue of *JBW* reaches our readers. The Conference on Basic Writing, a special interest group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), was kind enough to give us time at its 1991 meeting in Boston to make the presentation.

Before turning to a brief mention of the articles in the current

issue, we would also like to say that part of *JBW*'s function, as we see it, is to act as the "journal of record" for conference presentations of particular importance to our readership. In the present issue, we include the texts of two recent keynote speeches by Pat Belanoff and Rexford G. Brown, which fall into this category.

In the first article, Rexford Brown discusses the need for educational restructuring around the notion of a "literacy of thoughtfulness," which emphasizes thinking creatively and critically, assimilating and applying information, and communicating effectively with others.

Sandra M. Schor's article describes her experiences and impact as an unseen correspondent, called Ms. Mystery, on the writing of twenty-eight developmental students in an intensive Summer Immersion Writing Program at Queens College, CUNY.

Min-zhan Lu argues from a poststructuralist perspective for the need to redefine the legacy of Mina Shaughnessy and the "essentialist" view of language dominant today in the teaching of basic writing, because of its "political innocence," which overlooks the dissonances between competing discourses.

Peter Rondinone draws significantly on his personal experiences with Open Admissions in the '70s to help basic writing students explore the differences in attitude and language use between themselves and their communities, on the one hand, and those prevalent in the university.

Pat Belanoff challenges a number of myths about large-scale writing assessment, while offering an alternative view which favors a diversity of local, agreed-upon assessment methods and means.

Rose Marie Kinder explores the use of informal reading materials, such as newspaper articles which students feel freer and less apprehensive to analyze, as a bridge to interpret more complex college texts.

In the final article, Adele MacGowan-Gilhooly presents the results of a three-year study introducing a whole language approach to the teaching of ESL reading and writing at The City College, CUNY. The new program abandons the traditional, grammar-based instructional sequence and promotes overall fluency in reading and writing before complete grammatical correctness.

***Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller***

Rexford G. Brown

## SCHOOLING AND THOUGHTFULNESS

*ABSTRACT: In "Schooling and Thoughtfulness," Rexford Brown discusses his concept of a "literacy of thoughtfulness" for all students, characterized by the ability to think critically and creatively, to solve problems, exercise judgment, access, assimilate, and apply information, and communicate effectively with others. He contends that as an institution, the American school generally does not foster such capabilities, despite our society's increasing demands for graduates and workers who can think. Brown suggests that thoughtfulness is inescapably bound up with culture. Educational restructuring, in his view, can only succeed in the context of an environment in which public policy and the community support bold, collaborative inquiry, imagination, and trust in the democratic process.*

When Karen Greenberg asked me to again address a National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW) conference, she said, "Just take up where you left off last year." Let me, therefore, very quickly synopsise what I said last year and what has happened since. Then I will go on to talk about thoughtfulness and evaluation and the evaluation of thoughtfulness.

What I said last year was that there was considerable momentum around the country among business people (and this is true in

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*Rexford G. Brown is director of communications for the Education Commission of the States, a nonprofit interstate compact which conducts educational research, analyzes policy, and advises state governors, legislators, and school boards about issues related to school restructuring and reform. He also directs a five-year study called "Policy and the Higher Literacies," funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Brown's new book, Schools of Thought, How the Politics of Literacy Shape Thinking in the Classroom, just published by Jossey-Bass, examines the degree to which policy and politics in America either encourage or undermine efforts to facilitate critical and creative thinking among teachers, administrators, and students. The above paper was the keynote address at the National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW) 1989 conference in Montreal.*

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Canada as it is in the United States) and policymakers to require schools to produce students who are far better at critical and creative thinking and problem solving, and active learning. I use the word “thoughtfulness” to embrace a wide variety of things that people mention when they talk about the kinds of students they want to see graduating. They’re really the kinds of things you’d like to see in a good mind. A good, well-trained, disciplined, engaging mind of a graduate should be good at detecting fallacies, it is argued, good at building arguments, and very good at critiquing arguments. A good, well-trained, educated mind is a mind that knows the various modes of discourse in the sciences, in the humanities, in the arts, and how in each of these modes of discourse people define and debate and solve problems. A good mind is creative when necessary and can discover and invent. And certainly a good mind has what they call the “Hots,” the higher order thinking skills: the capacity to analyze information, to synthesize it, to interpret it, to evaluate and judge it. And increasingly you hear people saying that a good mind is capable of metacognition—thinking about thinking, thinking about the strategies and tactics of solving problems whether they’re well-defined or ill-defined problems.

A good mind is capable of making distinctions and clarifying, capable of the various modes of discourse that we talk about so often in writing: description, illustration, persuasion, explanation. A good mind is capable of making decisions, inquiring, and learning how to learn.

We want people to be able to practice these various aspects of thoughtfulness alone, and with others, verbally and orally, in written form with various subjects and with a core kind of knowledge and in appropriate kinds of activities, given their ages. Moreover, today you hear from various quarters that the kinds of graduates we want, should have, in addition to these qualities, dispositions that are favorable to employing them. They should display the various virtues that go along with intellectual pursuit, for instance, the courage to pursue a matter to its end. Not only are these the kinds of things people talk about with respect to an elite class destined to go on to the university, they are saying we need these for a far broader range of our people than ever before.

I also said in my earlier talk that this kind of thoughtfulness requires certain conditions that are very difficult to achieve in schools. For instance, in order for people to be thoughtful you need a certain amount of mystery. Paradox is helpful. Uncertainty often stimulates us to think. Ambiguity can be a good condition for stimulating thoughtfulness, as is unpredictability, an atmosphere in which there are multiple demands, a dynamic social environment.

Also needed are a good deal of diversity in culture and language and background; theoretical disagreements; tension; incongruity; incompleteness; an urgent need to know; wonder; marvel; astonishment; surprise; enchantment.

Well, when you go through this list as I did last year, you begin to realize a very interesting fact: that all of these things are potential in any classroom, but all of them are often recognized by teachers as the enemy, not the friend, of instruction. Few are the teachers (who have a hundred and sixty students) who want to see ambiguity, who see unpredictability as a friend, who can deal with great diversity and uncertainty. There is something about the very conditions of schooling that makes us prefer that these kinds of conditions be minimized, not maximized.

So there's the dilemma that was sketched last year. A great many people would like to see thoughtfulness broadly defined and yet there are a number of conditions, all known to be favorable to thoughtfulness, which are perceived within the institution of schooling not to be useful, not to be desirable.

At that point, I left the NTNW conference and went off on a quest for thoughtfulness. I picked up my lantern and I did a series of studies. I went to the Deep South and studied some schools attended entirely by Black students and staffed entirely by Black teachers and, in fact, visited for a while in a community that was founded by ex-slaves and has always been an all-Black community in America. I also visited an Indian reservation and did some interviewing and case studies there. I also visited a major city in Canada and a number of major urban areas in America. In each case, I was looking for thoughtfulness. My colleagues and I spent about 650 hours viewing and talking with people and chatting with children. We were interested in a couple of things. One, what are the opportunities for thoughtfulness that young people from minority and language-minority backgrounds have in the schools? And two, what are the various kinds of policies at the local, state, or national level that can either foster a great deal more thoughtfulness in the schools or seem to squelch it? So we were constantly asking questions about the role of assessment, the role of curriculum mandates, the role of various kinds of teacher training opportunities, and so on, either in constraining people who would like to be more thoughtful in their classrooms or empowering them to go on and do so.

I just wanted to tell you a little bit about the results of our wanderings last year and focus in on the area that I think you are probably most interested in and that's the evaluation of thoughtfulness. I want to give you a broad overview that I hope will be helpful

of what I see going on around North America with respect to evaluating a wide range of behaviors associated with thoughtfulness.

First some overall findings. Most of what you see with respect to thinking and problem-solving at schools is expressed, both in terms of politics and in the classroom, as skills. People talk about the “skills” of thinking and break thinking into millions of tiny bits and pieces and then drill students on aspects of thinking. And so, as a result, much of what we saw was disappointing.

Overall, we found two main approaches to thoughtfulness. One is to define, very precisely, something like critical thinking or tactics or metacognitive skills and teach them and test them one at a time. The other is the “whole-language” approach to getting kids to immerse themselves in reading, writing, and discussion in ways that will naturally lead them to use their minds and go through many of the kinds of things I mentioned as characteristics of a good mind. Little of what we found was guided or supported by a coherent literacy policy at state or local levels. A great deal of what you see in schools results from a tension between the fact that schools are institutions and therefore must follow bureaucratic and logistical demands of institutions, while at the same time they are institutions that harbor practices—the practice of teaching and the practice of learning. One of the things that we were very interested in was the difference between the language of people primarily concerned with their institutional role, and people who were interested in learning. The language, the words, the type of rationality—the instrumental rationality that dominates administrative thinking—seems to clash powerfully with the language and the type of rationality that learners and teachers most use when learning is productive.

We talked to a lot of people about what the barriers might be to allowing students to be more active in their learning. And they told us things that I think you’ll find quite familiar. Number one, people said there is not enough time to be thoughtful. There’s not time to think, either because there’s not enough time to plan for thoughtful activities or because time in our institutions is so fragmented that you can never get any extended writing, any extended discussion, or any extended reading going. And you know from the observational research of the last fifteen years that in American schools, certainly, very little reading goes on, very little writing goes on, and almost no discussion goes on. When you say that, people say, “Well what *is* going on?” and the answer to that is something that I’ll talk about in a moment.

The second reason people gave as to why there’s not a lot of active learning and why minds are not being challenged is that the

curriculum must be covered at all costs. Coverage is a very important thing. Teachers will tell you, "I can't do this thinking thing today because we have to do Asia today. And then tomorrow we're doing Australia." Because there are so many mandates requiring an incredibly broad and atomized curriculum, no one can cover it in depth or comprehend it in whole, and enormous amounts of time are spent trying to pass it along as quickly as possible to as many children as possible. Also with respect to coverage, people say that too much of what passes for curriculum is devoted to enabling skills and not enough is devoted to doing something with those skills. Reading, instead of being an enabling skill, has become a subject in and of itself which has its own vocabulary and its own arcane kind of system. I saw many children all over the country studying, not reading but what adults have made reading into, trying to memorize the various terms and so on and so forth. We began to describe the language of the classroom as the language of "talkin' 'bout" because so many people were talkin' 'bout writing, but not really writing, and talkin' 'bout mathematics, but not really calculating.

A third reason people gave us for there not being many active learning opportunities in school was that they felt most kids cannot think at a sophisticated level. Intelligence is what is required for using one's mind, they believed, and in America intelligence is distributed across a bell-shaped curve. This means that only 5 to 15 percent of the people in any school are capable of any heavy thinking. The rest are not. Ultimately what it means is that thinking is against nature. This is not the case in other countries where people don't believe in the bell curve the way we believe in it.

A fourth thing that we heard is that young people do not want to do more thinking and problem-solving or are developmentally unable to think because they're too young. We heard that thinking is fine for college students but until students have gone through these various Piagetian stages of development there's really no point in trying to get them to think. They're either too young or they're developmentally behind from a learning theory point of view; they're disadvantaged. We heard dozens of reasons why disadvantaged students cannot use their minds fully. Ironically, many were from people who love these disadvantaged students dearly and wanted to help them, but believed that poverty and lack of opportunity were reasons why they couldn't think.

A fifth reason given is that a great many teachers who would like to get their students involved in activities that use the mind more fully don't know how to do it. And this is a serious problem because, if you look at staff development opportunities and training

opportunities, they are few and far between, particularly in large urban centres. And very often they themselves are conducted in the same lecture and recitation mode that classrooms are conducted in, in which teachers outtalk whole classes by ratios of three to one.

Another reason why people said they were not engaging in thinking activities is that the kinds of things I listed under thoughtfulness cannot be evaluated. They're too subjective; they can't be evaluated because we don't know how. Or they said, "Well yes they can be evaluated, but not in ways that are compatible with the accountability system we have in this district or this state. We have a basic skills test and this is what occupies our time. We must do well on it, and there's no way to make what you're talking about compatible with this test."

A major reason we saw for there not being much thoughtful activity going on in large school districts was a lack of coherence. There's no vision. Most major urban school districts have long since given up on trying to focus on curricular goals or outcomes except in the most superficial sense. They are absolutely overwhelmed by discussions about asbestos removal, gasoline for the buses, and leaky roofs and tar, and how can a large urban district afford insurance anymore and things like this. But they have no real vision about where they want to go. At the same time, large urban districts have been under attack for so long that they have found a porcupine-like way of defending themselves. So if you come into a district and ask, "Well are you trying this?" they will say, "Oh, yeah, we're trying that. We've got a pilot on that." "What about this?" "Oh yes, we've been doing that for five years." No matter what you say, they will tell you that they are doing it, or that they did it and it didn't work.

Another very important reason there's not a lot of thoughtfulness among students is that there's not a lot demonstrated by the adults in the system. As a matter of fact, one of our hypotheses as we went out to look for this literacy of thoughtfulness was that we did not expect students to be much more literate than their teachers. By and large, we found this to be true. Where teachers were critical and creative thinkers and problem solvers and were using their minds fully, there we happened to find students who were much more liable to be working in the same ways. Where we found teachers who were not using their minds very well, we found that was true of the students as well.

In poor schools, there's no vibrant conversation, there's no sense of a tradition of inquiry or argument. You find in them a preponderance of the kind of bureaucratic instrumental rationality which focuses on skills and processes and control. And you do not

see the kinds of conversations that lead to thoughtfulness, except rarely. Where we did see thoughtful schools and thoughtful districts, there was a huge and vibrant and exciting conversation with a capital “C” going on in the community and in the school, among the adults. They were engaged in community-making and community-building by focusing on the most important matters of the community and tackling them as a group.

Well, those were some of the things we found. We did indeed find some wonderful schools and some wonderful things going on and we saw some progress within some large urban school districts. We were very impressed with some schools and some school districts that we observed in Canada, where the whole-language philosophy had permeated and had been very thoroughly imbued in the educational system for a number of years.

But I want to turn back to the question of evaluation, because that is the subject of this conference, and tell you a little about how I see things shaping up with respect to a question that came up again and again, at school after school, and in district after district: Can thoughtfulness, variously defined, be assessed? And if so, how? I see some real changes at work in the environment around testing and assessment and I want to tell you a little bit about them.

First of all, two things are happening simultaneously. One is that we have an increasing use of standardized tests in the States, and the other is that we have an increasing interest in reform. The two go hand in hand because the reform movement has moved ahead over the last six, seven, eight years only because there have been promises made that the reform will be watched carefully. So, legislators have been freeing up money for school reform only on the grounds that schools be accountable. Accountability seems to be tied into standardized test scores with the result that there is more standardized testing than we used to have. This is unfortunate because we’ve already got a great deal too much, and have had for a number of years.

But at the same time there’s increasing criticism of standardized tests because they don’t measure this new kind of literacy or any of these things that, increasingly, people are asking for. It makes a difference that the people asking for these things are in the business community—because it’s the people in the business community who asked for basic skills fifty years ago, who very much fixed the curriculum the way it is today, and who very much put a premium on standardized tests. So if you find that you can get to a point at which important people around the schools are asking questions, the answers to which they cannot get from standardized tests, you

have some likelihood that you're going to move away into alternatives.

You also hear a lot of criticism about teaching to the test. Indeed, I saw an enormous amount of teaching to the test in two kinds of situations. In the first, school districts are under court ordered mandates and are being scrutinized carefully by the community because people are so concerned about them. There, a rise or fall of two or three points on a standardized reading test can mean the difference in a superintendent's job. Secondly, you also see teaching to the test among the insecure and young teachers who are looking for ways to fit into the culture and do what they think must be done. I found plenty of teachers who don't teach to tests at all and who don't care about them at all and whose students do just fine. I also found plenty of school districts that are not in these high stakes situations, where no one pays any attention to the tests and things seem to go fine too. But there is this pernicious and ironic, even paradoxical, fact that the more people teach to the test, the worse their students do. You get this increase in students' scores at the price of a diminution of comprehension and breadth and a few other things that show up in other indicators that people then complain about. Because what is stressed in these places is a certain type of learning. It's "learning-in-order-to-be-tested" rather than natural learning. And this kind of learning incites the wrong strategies of problem-solving, the wrong kinds of thinking. As a consequence of these criticisms, we're having a very broad scale, interesting search for alternative outcome measures, alternative ways of looking at the context of learning, alternative ways of looking at students' and schools' backgrounds, alternative indicators of various processes and practices.

I see four basic areas of innovation right now in testing and assessment around North America, and I think these areas are going to continue to dominate the landscape increasingly over the next few years. A number of people are working to improve existing, widely used testing and assessment instruments including instruments that look at discreet competencies or holistic competencies or organizational characteristics of schooling. What they're doing is taking examinations like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and they're trying to make sure that they include more higher-order thinking skills questions. There's a whole debate about whether, in fact, a question to which there is already a known answer is really going to challenge thinking, but in any case you do see this. You see experiments like the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania district's Higher-Order Thinking Skills Assessment, which was developed in order to lead teachers toward developing their teaching in more thoughtful

ways. You see more interest in the National Assessment of Educational Progress among the States—particularly those aspects of the National Assessment of Education Progress that cover writing and reading comprehension and higher-order kinds of activities. You see people more and more using several tests instead of one test in order to gauge the quality of education. You certainly see more and more people using writing samples, whether they score them holistically or analytically or through primary trait or error analysis.

I would say that in California they've gone about as far as they can go in writing assessment in terms of defining primary traits that one isn't sure exist. They've defined so many different, small aspects of writing to look at, that they've started fragmenting it in a new way. In any case, it's a good sign, because it involves real writing and making students write and there is some evidence that when you change your assessment to a writing-based assessment, more writing is taught in the schools, rather than just grammar and drill.

In the second area of innovation, I see more effort to aggregate information that already exists and is widely gathered but to analyze it and package it in new ways. In Peter Ewell's book *The Self-Regarding Institution* (Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1984), Peter mentions a number of the kinds of information that higher education institutions gather, most of which is never looked at or analyzed at all, let alone in some thoughtful or new way. I've seen a movement toward gathering people together to take a look at this data base and try to look at new kinds of perspectives on it: school profiles, organizational indices, changes of various kinds.

In the third area of innovation, I see a number of people trying to adapt and legitimize evaluation schemes and instruments that already exist in various fields but are not widely used at present. This is where I think there's a lot of excitement. There are tests of creativity and divergent thinking and problem-solving that have been around for twenty, twenty-five years. They have not been widely validated and they have not been widely used. There is an effort now to get them into play and there are networks of people using them and doing some validation among themselves. The same is true of critical thinking tests like the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Test or the Cornell Critical Thinking Test, instruments that have been around for a number of years but have not been widely used and have not been validated but are increasingly being networked as ways of increasing the documentation necessary for validation.

Under this category, writing is being analyzed for what it reveals

about thinking and problem-solving, and comprehension, and so on. I remember years ago, when we were working on the second writing assessment for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Lee Odell concocted a very interesting protocol for analyzing essays for cognitive development of children and laying it out on some kind of scale. People are now playing with ways of evaluating argument within writing samples so that one could perhaps conclude that a child was more or less thoughtful as a consequence of reading his writing.

I've seen in Canada that it's often the case that a research study by a major university of a sample of schools is sometimes sufficient to give people a good idea of what is going on in those schools, rather than imposing upon them a restrictive kind of assessment.

I see a bit more of "the teacher as researcher." This has been a slow developing phenomenon. Unless there are some major changes in the condition of work, you're not going to see a lot more of it, but it's growing slightly.

I see lots of interest in exhibitions as a form of assessment. We are in a collaborative program with Ted Sizer at Brown University developing fifty schools in five states, called "Re:Learning Schools." One of the principles these schools must ascribe to in order to join is that they must move away from standardized tests to exhibitions as a way of displaying knowledge.

I've seen "walkabouts" based on the Australian aborigine initiation ceremony in a number of the alternative schools I visited.

I've seen "Passages." There is an examination called the Rite of Passage examination at Walden Three High School in Racine, Wisconsin, which is a broad scale effort to have young people present all kinds of information and projects in order to graduate.

I've seen more performances. I worked for a while in an art institute for young people. The whole idea of assessment was that you performed as an actor, as a musician, and that was our whole way of evaluating students.

I'm seeing more interest in clinical evaluation in ways that are being pioneered by Lee Shulman, for instance, at Stanford University. Modes of evaluation derived from jurisprudence are coming into social studies in some places as well as from ethnographic studies. Portfolio evaluations have gotten to the point where the state of Vermont is going to have a state-sponsored portfolio assessment in order to find out how things are going.

All of the approaches that I've listed are efforts to adapt and legitimize and broaden and deepen evaluation schemes and instruments that have already existed in a number of different fields but have not been widely used to date.

One place in particular where I see some of this is my own home state of Colorado, where the governor has declared that he wants what he calls Educational Creativity Zones, which are places that are free of state rules and regulations. The State Board of Education has just passed a waiver law that says if any school can show that it is having difficulty restructuring and moving ahead toward a much more thoughtful kind of school environment because of some rule, regulation, or even state law, the Board will provide a waiver of that law so that it can move ahead.

Now the fourth area is what I would call breaking new ground in assessment. There are half a dozen approaches that I think merit our attention in the coming years. The first is adaptive computer testing and intelligent tutors—some work that Alan Collins at Bolt, Beranek and Newman (educational consultants, Cambridge, MA) is doing. Computer programs have been developed that assess what you know and follow you as you answer questions. They provide the next question that illuminates what you didn't know and leads you ahead, and so on. They're very interesting kinds of programs.

A second new direction is video. The Key School in Indianapolis is experimenting with video evaluation of children. The children are filmed both in candid and setup situations, and then the teachers and parents sit around and talk about them and say, "It looks to me that this child knows this, or has this problem or that problem."

A third innovation that I think is very interesting is structuring an entire school around fundamental questions. Debbie Meier's school in Harlem seems to me to be a model of this. The entire school runs around five fundamental questions. First, "How do I know what I know?" Every student, every teacher has to be asking this question all the time, and they do. The second is "What's the viewpoint behind that statement?" Somebody asked Debbie at a conference I was at, "Well, how do you know that this is working?" and she said, "The other day I was walking down the hall and I heard one student say to the other, 'Mary likes you,' and the kid turned around and said, 'What's the evidence for that?'" The third question is "How does this connect with anything else?" The fourth is, "What if?" and, "Suppose that . . ." and the fifth is, "Who cares?" The teachers who meet for a full day every Friday to talk about the students and to talk about what they're doing, and the students, whether in the lunch room or on the playground or wherever, are constantly held responsible for dealing with these five questions. Once you get into a school organized around questions and not answers, the question of assessment almost becomes moot.

Who needs it? The thing is, you know everyone is being thoughtful as a matter of course.

A fourth thing that I'm quite interested in is student-created tests and assessments. I've been working with some teachers who are able to have the students themselves do their own evaluation at the end of any unit of study. When you finish the unit of study, you ask what the most important thing in the chapter is, and one kid says it's Abe Lincoln and another kid says it's the slaves, and so on, and you have an argument over what was the most important thing. After a while you get it down to maybe six things and the class has to agree that these are the most important things in the unit. Then they discuss how would anybody know if a person knew these six important things? Well, you just ask him. Well, how would you ask him? Sometimes this discussion takes a few days. In the end they invent a test. It's almost irrelevant by that time. Nobody really needs to take the test, because the most important thing was they had to invent it.

Number five under cutting-edge innovation would be school and system climate assessments. Some of us have been working with the Centre for Early Adolescence in North Carolina on a literacy assessment of entire schools that really tries to get a sense of the atmosphere and the environment.

You can see how in many of these, writing and writing assessment has been a pioneer, not only in terms of the substance of an assessment, but as a way of developing teachers and in developing coalitions. It's through programs like the National Writing Project, or NTNW that you develop networks over a good many years that become the source of training and information about some of the things many school districts themselves can't provide.

What are the remaining challenges for evaluation? Let me just suggest a couple of them. As people are going about restructuring classrooms and schools, one of the difficulties they face is a lack of evaluation materials. Yet, if we invented an absolutely stupendous thoughtfulness assessment tonight we wouldn't have enough of a market to offset our production costs; the commercial incentives simply aren't there. In many ways we're at the point where David Sarnoff was with television in the late 1940s. He had a product. It was a great product. He wanted to mass produce it, but the market wasn't big enough. The only way he got it off the ground was with huge subsidies by the government. The government bought millions of television sets and therefore made it possible for the unit cost to come down, and for the thing to spread and for more people to afford it. It could be that one of the things we have to do is to

interest people in creating a market and subsidizing the development of tests like this. Certainly, we're going to have to prove, in a way that's organized and persuasive and coherent, that exciting education is easily assessed and can provide the constituents of education with the information they need in order to be able to do their job. Along those lines we've got to look at the aggregation of soft, messy, data. Suppose for instance, everyone were doing the things that I mentioned in my last two categories: the cutting-edge innovation and the adaptation of very interesting kinds of assessment from other areas. Well, pretty soon it would look like chaos to a policymaker with public obligation to get answers to their questions. One of their criticisms of these apparently soft ways of going about assessing is that they don't answer a question such as "Are some children getting a better shake than others?"

I think that in the long range we need to look at ways of developing a market for interesting assessments of thoughtfulness. I think that we have to prove that it can be assessed and provide lists of all the various things that I've just given you in much more detail so that no one could then say that there's no known way of assessing it, and deal head on with this question of, "Its subjectivity and its softness." I think that in the end much of what is holding standardized testing in place is the need of policymakers to make various important decisions. We sometimes thought they do this because they are empiricists or behaviorists or positivists or bourgeois anti-intellectuals or something, but what it comes down to is they've held on to test scores because they're very practical people and the low-level basic skills test scores tell them things that they think they need to know. The best argument in the long run for us is to show them that they are not getting answers from this data to the very questions that mean the most to them, and to help them see that there are alternatives. I think that as we do this, as they see that the traditional modes of testing are not really meeting their needs and that there are alternatives, we'll find ourselves in the position of developing the kind of market we need and to spreading the kinds of gospel that the NTNW conference spreads each year, further and further around North America.

Sandra Schor

## THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF MS. MYSTERY

*ABSTRACT: This article describes an experimental summer intensive course in basic writing conducted at Queens College, CUNY by the author, two colleagues, and twenty-eight students. For six weeks, she assumed the identity of "Ms. Mystery," exchanging weekly letters with each of the students, excerpts of which are provided and analyzed. In reflecting on this experience of twenty-eight separate correspondences, the author considers the nature of letter writing (and reading) as an effective pedagogic tool.*

The intensive summer encampment of motivated students is an ideal occasion to depart from conventional time schemes and methods, and at the same time to focus collaborative faculty spirit on literacy through interdisciplinary and innovative syllabi. I recall the summer of 1975 in the Total Immersion Program at Queens College as one of the two or three highlights of my teaching career.

Along with my colleague, the poet Marie Ponsot, who met the class nightly, and the late Betsy Kaufman, then director of the Academic Skills Center, who administered to the organizational needs of the class in her own wise and loving way, I became the class's unseen correspondent, Ms. Mystery.

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Students in the class numbered twenty-eight; they were self-selected among a larger number who, because they scored lowest on the College's June placement exams in reading and writing, were invited to stake a segment of their summer on intensive daily practice and instruction in reading and writing before enrolling in September classes as freshmen. These twenty-eight accepted, and I ought to add at the outset that attendance for the five-a-week meetings from 4:00–9:00 p.m., for six weeks of July and August, was almost perfect. The Ms. Mystery correspondence could have taken place only in such a class whose members were immersed in hard and rigorously planned work, hope, and a steadily mounting self-esteem. For the first time in their lives they were engaged in a kind of regular literacy as habit forming as eating dinner, nightly writing and reading informed by a clear curriculum based on the idea that sound writing adheres to whole structures, and inspired by the literary practicality of Marie Ponsot's radiant and structuring intelligence.

The syllabus, invented by Marie Ponsot, emphasized writing in familiar forms (fables, parables, family stories, essays), which enabled the writer to identify those elements in our thinking—and in our narratives—that are abstract and concrete. The syllabus also prepared students to have something cogent to say about what they read—both student writing and published writing were viewed as literature. The syllabus taught students the critical difference between making observations of what a piece of writing says and drawing inferences from those observations. Students read two books a week, one assigned in class, and one selected freely from a ready library of 200 available volumes. Aesop's *Fables*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *World Harvest of Folk Tales*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Hamlet* were the assigned works. Grammar instruction came regularly in the form of positive teacher comments on writing, often by red-penciling *completed* sentences and *successful* verb forms rather than errors; in programmed workbook exercises that students did at home nightly; and in highlighted discussions in class. Tutors from the Writing Skills Workshop assisted in the classroom, as they had been doing in our basic writing classes since the start of Open Admissions. (For a complete survey of the content of the Total Immersion class, see Marie Ponsot's essay in the *Journal of Basic Writing*.)

I suppose my involvement began for two reasons: one, while I try to make it a habit not to teach summer school I could not resist getting in on this project; and two, I have often used the letter as a form for beginning writers because it reduces the abstractness of writing. Without a clear audience, the first few essays tend to be

quite bloodless. If you address your thoughts to a specific person, by name, you reach to fill the shape your own name calls into being, you exchange confessions, pose and answer questions, thus reducing the risk of a destructively bland institutionalization of writing that severs writing from its connection to the life outside. After all, a real correspondent wants to know everything. He or she has the same needs you do: plain facts, true feelings about nights and events, exact times, ambitions, street corners, historical events, doubts, fears—in short, no abstract escapes.

In a recent review of Erich Heller and Jurgen Born's new collection, *Letters to Felice*, Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* writes about Kafka the serious correspondent as fanatically complicit in the life of his alter ego, as uncompromising as any of my twenty-eight correspondents, for example, and as relentless but unhurried as any of my precocious and inexperienced zealots in Total Immersion.

Kakutani writes, "He complains incessantly about his ill health—his headaches, his insomnia, his nerves, then turns reporter, bombarding her with questions about her work, her habits, her personality: 'What exactly happened at your house on Sunday?' 'What do you wear at the office? And what does the main part of your work consist of?' 'What is the meaning of you having had a backache during the day and of you not feeling very well when you wrote on Sunday evening?'"

"The answers to these questions were important to Kafka," Kakutani writes, "not so much because he was in love with Felice Bauer, but because he needed to reinvent her within his own imagination. . . ."

Too often, classroom work bypasses the imagination. In English classes, as in other disciplines, assignments are tailored to classic disciplinary needs, in this case formulating an idea, writing it as a thesis, constructing solid paragraphs, composing readable, grammatical sentences that defend previous and successive sentences, opening attractively, and concluding memorably. Imagination takes up residence only within the fortune and genetics of the rare, sometimes heretical, student. In Total Immersion imagination moved in on everybody. Since I was engaged in twenty-eight separate weekly correspondences, the principals of which had never met, we each had to "invent" the other; as a byproduct we reinvented ourselves. This reinvention of self at the same time reinvented the institution, gradually draining away the resentment for school that had built up over the years in students who were, typically, dystopian and nonachievers. At its worst, resentment was temporarily put aside to make way for nightly negotiations in

literacy with a small kickback in hope. At its best, resentment was displaced by “college” with its own kind of legitimate pension plan in the future. Skepticism lingered, but hope was no longer corrupt.

One hot July night Marie said, “Okay. You are each to write a letter to a mystery correspondent, someone you may never get to meet.” She divulged, finally, that it was a woman, and Ms. Mystery materialized. Letters were tucked and sealed into envelopes and run back and forth across Long Island to my house for six weeks, for twenty-eight students each time. Students began on faith. My job was easier than theirs: I was writing to real people, with legal names—Curtis, Lenore, Peter, J.J., and more. But *they* had to take a deep breath and write squarely into the mystery, and they wrote, honestly, and with a kind of genius, for that was the climate in that class. You never knew whose letter would be packed with feeling, suspicion, withdrawal; reeling with curiosity; or full of the unprecedented obsessiveness of self-revelation to a captive reader.

They wrote suspiciously:

I hope this is not a joke. It is hard writing to someone you don't know and never seen.

optimistically:

I hope that we could meet and become friends. We would be able to go to the beach in the mornings.

apocalyptically:

School is a drag. Life is a drag, but what can I do but live my dragged out life. Jesus I don't know what to write. Well, I'm glad that I graduated high school on time. I didn't get a regents diploma because I failed the English regents. That pissed me off. I took 7 regents and passed 6 and I don't get a regents diploma. Well that's life. I guess I'll live. The blinds in the room are shaking from the wind.

and pragmatically:

In your letter tell me how you look, good or bad, what ever, because I want a woman I can talk to. It would help me get in school work because I would not have to give so much time to women. I am looking but I think I've got bad luck. Either she had a boyfriend or tells me she had given up on boys. I know my spelling is bad but I am working on it. Your friend,  
U.S.

P.S. Maybe next week I will tell you my name.

And I replied, accepting in unblinking pedagogy their matter-of-fact dazzlers. I wrote to each one every week, exploring the specific letter I had received. No two letters I received were the same, and no two they received were the same. I assumed my trust with responsibility; the purpose was to use our letters, reading them and writing them, as a daring basis for revealing ourselves, even constructing ourselves, responsibly, to each other. I did not “correct” student writing; I responded to it. But I was no pen pal. That is not what our basic writers, our lowest scorers, our pissed-off failers needed. Although I had several secret personae in play, I was above all a writer—a writer-teacher.

A writer is nothing if she is not individual; while students began by comparing the letters they had received as a token of camaraderie, I was told they soon wandered off into corners to read, recognizing that the received letter individualized them, overcoming their habitual public bravado, and rediscovering the self-esteem located in what was private. I was no pen pal because my purpose was to teach, encouraging a durable confidence in the larger person each was, the whole and teachable person, providing pleasure along the way in the personal attention the written word guaranteed. I was not merely gossiping, offering my wistful persona as a kind of writerly summer romance. Summer romances rarely come off. I demanded follow-up letters that clarified a vague statement. I insisted that students replace inexact gush about the course with precise feelings, vague observations about their vans with colors, lengths, angles; I encouraged development. I craved speculation. I highlighted their own ideas and then begged them to realize their ideas, not by supplying one-word replies to my questions, but by describing, reminiscing, considering, reentering, comparing, and by confronting the question *why*.

These twenty-eight low scorers, nonreaders, and hapless writers were nonetheless the twenty-eight who voluntarily appeared, tentative as most college students on a summer day who wish they were elsewhere—“upstate” or “at the beach”—to see for themselves what this project was all about. It was always necessary that we looked forward to the weekly event of the letters—as an army looks forward to its mail. I tried hard to retain my correspondents’ friendship, along with their interest, because without these I could not expect my own letters to serve in the pedagogical way I planned—as indirect models of directness, concern, confession, precision, syntax, figurative expression, and high interest in people as human beings with human, often graceful, things to say.

Our optimistic forays paid off. Interest in the letters mounted. We managed to sustain and educate the imagination. Conventions of

discourse gradually became models for imitation. I didn't have to be Cicero. These writers quietly settled their rhetorical needs into the available ways of expression. Their subtle acts of imitation gave them a hold on the ropes of writing. Their own acrobatics sprang off of acquired courtesies and pressures. Students wrote me long letters and perhaps didn't quite know what to make of the personal responses they received from an unknown, unseen woman, who somehow functioned—and this is important—within the institution, this new uncertain but tempting environment called Queens College. But assisted by the escalating experiences in their groups and classwork, their letters expanded, escaped the institution, and took on an identity they were all the while constructing. Northrop Frye says about the myth of the Bible, “Its imaginative survey of the human situation . . . is so broad and comprehensive that everything else finds its place inside it” (111). Although our letters did not survey “the human situation” they did survey a limited universe of the student situation, within which twenty-eight self-determined writers sharpened their minds and mythologies and found expression for them in words.

In retrospect, the key strategy for this experiment was to render the imagination a necessary classroom hazard. The key ingredient in our exchange was that one of the two has a reliable literary perception and extends as a donee the gift of good prose. The crossing of these two destinies—the almost wornout learner's and that of the experienced and esteemed correspondent who writes not only personally but privately—released a certain energy. Ms. Mystery was no gimmick. She was secretly and at all times teacher *and* writer.

The letters themselves were good; the students wrote at length, their stance shifting from hesitant to charming, from furtive to philosophical. They wrote about their parents, their jobs, their disappointments, each other, their tutors, Marie, their desires, and chiefly their discoveries of a new and rising power.

From Philip Gonzalez:

Dear I don't know who you are

I'm writing to you because I feel I'm doing something different. Everything I've been doing in this course has been different. I love this course because we're doing things that I never been involved with before. The people are great and Marie Ponsot is really something else. I'm so involved for the first time in my life that it seems like a dream. . . .

From Ms. Mystery:

Dear Philip,

I loved reading your letter. . . . For one thing I like your directness. You are willing to say what you think, in plain language, and you have the energy to go down a little distance into yourself to think about your feelings and your expectations. In your next letter perhaps you can exercise these same skills a little more fully on some piece of your life that takes most of your time. What, outside of school, takes most of your time? Job? Friends? Car? Sports? Tell me about one of these things as if no one had ever described it before. Pretend I am slow to understand. Explain very carefully and in detail, but be sure to include the essentials, the things you think about in bed at night after the car is in the garage, or the job is over for the day. I'm not prying, Philip. You needn't reveal anything you'd rather not. But the matter that rests with you long afterwards is usually the most interesting to others as well as to you. . . .

From Philip:

Dear Mysterious Friend

The first thing I have to tell you is that the letter I received from you made me feel great. I'm really feeling optimistic about writing you a second letter. In your return letter you advised me to write about my outside life in detail. You wanted me to pick a topic in which I spend my time. Well, most of my time is spent at the racetrack where I work. I work from 6 AM to 9:30 AM everyday. What I do is very easy and very interesting to me. I work as a part time hot walker and part time trainers aid. As a hot walker all I do is walk the horses that come from training at the main track. The reason you walk them is to cool them off. As a trainers aid I do most of the work the trainer is supposed to do such as putting the sore horses in ice and in bandages. To me my job is not only a job but a great past time. I love horses and I love to take care of them. The other day one of the greatest horses if not the greatest had to be destroyed because of a broken leg. To me that was a great loss to the whole racing world. Someday I would love to become a trainer not only for money but for the love of horses. Horses to me is like a part of my life which gives me a great feeling inside.

In your reply to my letter you said that you were prying. My dear friend you will never be prying as far as I'm concerned. You said what was on your mind which I try to do as much as possible. You said something about my directness

in your letter which made me feel good about myself and about you.

From Bobby:

Dear Ms. Mystery,

Hello! What's going on. What am I supposed to write to a person I never met before. First I'll ask how are you feeling. Hows your family and all that stuff. My name is Bobby. It's a beautiful day out. I wish I could have gone to the beach, but I had to get paid at work. So I didn't have time to get there & to get back home. College is O'k. I did all my homework last night. It wasn't that hard. I'm in a different group today. Dominick is head of the group. Valerie was head of the group I was in yesterday. I'll probably go broke this summer, I found the pin ball machines. I lost 50 cents today. I got one free game. Big deal. I still don't know what I'm doing here, but I'll come here for 22 more days. My mother went away yesterday and is coming home Monday. A whole week with just me & my brother Marc in the apartment. What new with you?

From Ms. Mystery:

Dear Bobby,

. . . Your last letter was indeed long. In a few weeks you'll be mailing me pounds of writing each time. I'm still hopeful you will stick to a subject for a few sentences so that you can develop your ideas and find out how complex some of them are. Try, perhaps, to confine yourself to an idea for five or six sentences before you turn out a new paragraph on another idea. For example, you suggested that you and your brother Marc in the whole apartment alone represented a novelty to you. WHY? What would you do about chores? Cooking? Cleaning up? Having friends in? Go into some of the details of this "odd couple" arrangement and put them down in order so that I can have an orderly sense of what that week alone might be like. Think of yourself as a movie writer, describing a scene for a new film about two brothers managing temporarily on their own. What would you include? What would you omit? You appear to be an observant fellow and might find, to your surprise, that you can make a scene come to life. Good luck. Stick to your subject. Try to tell the whole wicked truth, as if no one had ever told it before. . . .

From Joe:

Dear Ms. Mystery,

. . . Suppose I feel like writing to you after this course is over, what will I do then. Maybe, if it's all right with you, I can meet you at Alley Pond Park. Wow what a good Idea. I tell you what. I'll set a date and time and if you can't make it or don't want to, let me know in your next letter. How about the 24 of this month at 9:30? Look for the van in the back left corner of the lot. . . .

Joe, who had written profusely on his van, including draftsman-like diagrams of his proposed airbrush paintings for it, met me on the last night of class. But more about that later.

Programs such as our Total Immersion experiment with its Ms. Mystery component are especially suitable to prefreshman summer programs designed to promote competent preparation in writing and reading at a time when students are willing to concentrate on skills. Twenty-eight students in separate, conventional writing and reading classes normally justify three to four instructors. Our Total Immersion class had two instructors, one appearing nightly, one not appearing until the final meeting of the class. Assistance for the single instructor came from less-costly student tutors placed in the classroom. Administrative power might be replicated through a college's writing center. For the writing center and its satellite programs often ease the cold shock of the institution, a stupefying chill on many students, and certainly on those defenseless students who have performed marginally in high school.

The depersonalization of a 200-student lecture, the injury of a "conference" with a professor who doesn't remember your name, the one-sided instruction that fatefully passes for education—these are the barriers to come which a summer of Total Immersion anticipates. Intensive work day after day or night after night among tutors and faculty promises a trusted environment in which to learn. The privacy of letters between an experienced writer and an inexperienced correspondent continually returns writing to the real world and connects what is learned in the classroom to the individual life lived between subway stops and part-time jobs.

Our program is surely replicable for other disciplines—history, anthropology, biology, or, for that matter, any course in which writing and reading occur. A collaborative effort in literacy promises increased competence in all courses. An informed sequence of assignments reinforces what it means to learn how to write and read; and the immediate application of those skills to a chosen field, a career, may in the lives of many of our students be the first inch of progress toward graduation from college.

At the end of that summer I did appear, finally, in class; my eagerness to meet my letter writers led me to risk it.

The night before my appearance, I was up and down to the bathroom twenty times. I couldn't sleep. Wasn't I pushing a good thing too far? Surely by now they had all sorts of illusions about me, that "you are really one of the tutors in this class," and "I can tell you are a serious lady, an older woman of twenty-five." And what about my illusions of them? As a teacher, I was unencumbered, and here is another requisite for quality teaching, especially of the inexperienced. I had none of those ritual, and often sinister, little prejudgments to go on, based on a student's shyness, arrogance, T shirt, slouch, race, face, eye contact, or fifteen-week complete failure to make eye contact. In most cases I had only a first name and a lot of handwriting, which we all learn to ignore as one more prejudice.

On the final night I arrived, and everybody clapped. I shook hands all around and had no trouble with their names because their faces just fell into the slot you unconsciously leave for a face when you know so much more. I asked them what they had imagined me to be like, and they asked me what I had imagined them to be. Playing the scholar, I quoted from their letters, but they caught on and quoted from mine. A couple of exchanges had proved quite salty, and shaking the hands of these writers I told them, smiling, that I was glad that round had ended. I ran into my correspondents on the campus for a couple of years afterwards, who greeted me with "Hey, Ms. Mystery!" And I remember now that my identity as Ms. Mystery is probably one of the most professional and glamorous images a teacher has ever been privileged to carry.

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Min-zhan Lu

# REDEFINING THE LEGACY OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY: A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICS OF LINGUISTIC INNOCENCE

**ABSTRACT:** *This article examines Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations in light of current discourse theories which posit language as a site of struggle among competing discourses. It finds Shaughnessy's analyses and recommended pedagogies dominated by a view of language as a politically innocent vehicle of meaning. The author argues that this view of language leads Shaughnessy to overlook basic writers' need to confront the dissonance they experience between academic and other discourses, which might undercut her goal of helping students achieve the "freedom of deciding how and when and where to use which language." The author further argues that to pursue Shaughnessy's goal of countering unequal social conditions through education, we need to abandon the limitations of the essentialist view of language informing our pedagogy.*

The aim of this paper is to critique an essentialist assumption about language that is dominant in the teaching of basic writing. This assumption holds that the essence of meaning precedes and is independent of language, which serves merely as a vehicle to communicate that essence. According to this assumption, differences in discourse conventions have no effect on the essential meaning communicated. Using Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as an example, I examine the ways in which such an

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assumption leads to pedagogies which promote what I call a politics of linguistic innocence: that is, a politics which preempts teachers' attention from the political dimensions of the linguistic choices students make in their writing.

My critique is motivated by my alignment with various Marxist and poststructuralist theories of language.<sup>1</sup> In one way or another, these theories have argued that language is best understood not as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a site of struggle among competing discourses. Each discourse puts specific constraints on the construction of one's stance—how one makes sense of oneself and gives meaning to the world. Through one's gender; family; work; religious, educational, or recreational life; each individual gains access to a range of competing discourses which offer competing views of oneself, the world, and one's relation with the world. Each time one writes, even and especially when one is attempting to use one of these discourses, one experiences the need to respond to the dissonance among the various discourses of one's daily life. Because different discourses do not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such dissonance are never politically innocent.

From the perspective of such a view of language, Shaughnessy's stated goal for her basic writers—the mastery of written English and the “ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where” to use which language (11)—should involve at least three challenges for student writers. First, the students need to become familiar with the conventions or “the stock of words, routines, and rituals that make up” academic discourse (198). Second, they need to gain confidence as learners and writers. Third, they need to decide how to respond to the potential dissonance between academic discourse and their home discourses. These decisions involve changes in how they think and how they use language. Yet, most pedagogies informed by the kind of essentialist assumption I defined earlier, including the one Shaughnessy presents in *Errors and Expectations*, tend to focus attention on only the first two of these challenges.

I choose *Errors and Expectations* as an example of such pedagogies because, following Robert Lyons, I interpret the operative word in that book to be “tasks” rather than “achievements.” As Lyons cogently points out, Shaughnessy's work “resists closure; instead, it looks to the future, emphasizing what needs to be learned and done” (186). The legacy of Shaughnessy, I believe, is the set of tasks she maps out for composition teachers. To honor this legacy, we need to examine the pedagogical advice she gives in *Errors and Expectations* as tasks which point to the future—to what needs to be learned and done—rather than as providing closure to

our pedagogical inquiry. One of the first tasks Shaughnessy establishes for composition teachers is that of “remediating” ourselves (“Diving In” 238). She urges us to become “students” of our students and of new disciplines. Reading *Errors and Expectations* in light of current theories of language is one way of continuing that “remediation.” Shaughnessy also argues that a good composition teacher should inculcate interest in and respect for linguistic variety and help students attain discursive option, freedom, and choice. She thus maps out one more task for us: to carry out some democratic aspirations in the teaching of basic writing.<sup>2</sup> Another task she maps out for composition teachers is the need to “sound the depths” of the students’ difficulties as well as their intelligence (“Diving In” 236). If, as I will argue, some of her own pedagogical advice indicates that an essentialist view of language could impede rather than enhance one’s effort to fulfill these tasks, then the only way we can fully benefit from the legacy of Shaughnessy is to take the essentialist view of language itself to task.

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy argues that language “is variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to the others but none of which, also, can substitute for the others” (121). Using such a view of language, she makes several arguments key to her pedagogy. For example, she uses such a view to argue for the “systematic nature” of her students’ home discourses, the students’ “quasi-foreign relationship” with academic discourse and, thus, the logic of some of their errors. She also uses this view of language to call attention to basic writers’ existing mastery of at least one variety of English and thus, their “intelligence and linguistic aptitudes” (292). She is then able to increase the confidence of both teachers and students in the students’ ability to master a new variety of English—academic English.

Shaughnessy’s view of language indicates her willingness to “remediate” herself by studying and exploring the implications which contemporary linguistic theories have for the teaching of basic writing.<sup>3</sup> However, in looking to these fields for “fresh insights and new data,” Shaughnessy seems to have also adopted an essentialist assumption which dominates these theories of language: that linguistic codes can be taught in isolation from the production of meaning and from the dynamic power struggle within and among diverse discourses.<sup>4</sup>

We see this assumption operating in Shaughnessy’s description of a writer’s “consciousness (or conviction) of what [he] means”:

It seems to exist at some subterranean level of language—but yet to need words to coax it to the surface, where it is communicable, not only to others but, in a different sense, to the writer himself. (80)

The image of someone using words to coax meaning “to the surface” suggests that meaning exists separately from and “at some subterranean level of language.” Meaning is thus seen as a kind of essence which the writer carries *in* his or her mind prior to writing, although the writer might not always be fully conscious of it. Writing merely serves to make this essence communicable to oneself and others. As David Bartholomae puts it, Shaughnessy implies that “writing is in service of ‘personal thoughts and styles’” (83). Shaughnessy does recognize that writing is “a deliberate process whereby meaning is crafted, stage by stage” (81), even that “the act of articulation refines and changes [thought]” (82). But the pedagogy she advocates seldom attends to the changes which occur in that act. Instead, it presents writing primarily as getting “as close a fit as possible between what [the writer] means and what he says on paper,” or as “testing the words that come to mind against the thought one has in mind” (79, 204). That is, “meaning is crafted” only to match what is already in the writer’s mind (81–82).

Such a view of the relationship between words and meaning overlooks the possibility that different ways of using words—different discourses—might exercise different constraints on how one “crafts” the meaning “one has in mind.” This is probably why the pedagogical advice Shaughnessy offers in *Errors and Expectations* seldom considers the possibility that the meaning one “has in mind” might undergo substantial change as one tries to “coax” it and “communicate” it in different discourses. In the following section, I use Shaughnessy’s responses to three student writings to examine this tendency in her pedagogy. I argue that such a tendency might keep her pedagogy from achieving all the goals it envisions. That is, it might teach students to “write something in formal English” and “have something to say” but can help students obtain only a very limited “freedom of deciding *how* and when and where” to “use which language” (11, emphasis mine).

The following is a sentence written by one of Shaughnessy’s students:

In my opinion I believe that you there is no field that cannot be effected some sort of advancement that one maybe need a college degree to make it. (62)

Shaughnessy approaches the sentence “grammatically,” as an

example of her students' tendency to use "fillers" such as "I think that . . ." and "It is my opinion that . . ." (62). She argues that these "fillers" keep the writers from "making a strong start with a *real subject*" and make them lose their "*bearings*" (62, my emphasis). The distinction between a "real subject" and "fillers" suggests that in getting rid of the "fillers," the teacher is merely helping the writer to retrieve the real subject or bearings he has in mind. I believe Shaughnessy assumes this to be the case because she sees meaning as existing "at some subterranean level of language." Yet, in assuming that, her attention seems to have been occluded from the possibility that as the writer gets rid of the "fillers," he might also be qualifying the subject or bearing he originally has in mind.

For instance, Shaughnessy follows the student's original sentence with a consolidated sentence: "A person with a college degree has a better chance for advancement in any field" (63). Shaughnessy does not indicate whether this is the student's revised sentence or the model the teacher might pose for the student. In either case, the revised sentence articulates a much stronger confidence than the original in the belief that education entails advancement. For we might read some of the phrases in the original sentence, such as "in my opinion," "I believe that you," "some sort of," and "one maybe need," as indications not only of the writer's inability to produce a grammatically correct sentence but also of the writer's attempt to articulate his uncertainty or skepticism towards the belief that education entails advancement. In learning "consolidation," this student is also consolidating his attitude towards that belief. Furthermore, this consolidation could involve important changes in the writer's political alignment. For one can well imagine that people of different economic, racial, ethnic, or gender groups would have different feelings about the degree to which education entails one's advancement.

In a footnote to this passage, Shaughnessy acknowledges that "some would argue" that what she calls "fillers" are "indices of involvement" which convey a stance or point of view (62 n. 4). But her analysis in the main text suggests that the sentence is to be tackled "grammatically," without consideration to stance or point of view. I think the teacher should do both. The teacher should deliberately call the student's attention to the relationship between "grammar" and "stance" when teaching "consolidation." For example, the teacher might ask the student to consider if a change in meaning has occurred between the original sentence and the grammatically correct one. The advantage of such an approach is that the student would realize that decisions on what are "fillers" and what is one's "real subject" are not merely "grammatical" but

also political: they could involve a change in one's social alignment. The writer would also perceive deliberation over one's stance or point of view as a normal aspect of learning to master grammatical conventions. Moreover, the writer would be given the opportunity to reach a self-conscious decision. Without practice in this type of decision making, the kind of discursive options, freedom, or choice the student could obtain through education is likely to be very limited.

Attention to this type of deliberation seems just as necessary if the teacher is to help the student who wrote the following paper achieve the style of "weav[ing] personal experience into analytical discourse" which Shaughnessy admires in "mature and gifted writers" (198):

It can be said that my parents have led useful live but that usefulness seems to deteriorate when they fond themselves constantly being manipulated for the benefit of one and not for the benefit of the community. If they were able to realize that were being manipulate successful advancements could of been gained but being that they had no strong political awareness their energies were consumed by the politicians who saw personal advancements at the expenses of dedicated community workers. And now that my parents have taken a leave of absence from community involvement, comes my term to participate on worthwhile community activities which well bring about positive results and to maintain a level of consciousness in the community so that they will know what policies affect them, and if they don't quite like the results of the policies I'll make sure, if its possible, to abolish the ones which hinder progress to ones which well present the correct shift in establishing correct legislation or enactments. In order to establish myself and my life to revolve around the community I must maintain a level of awareness to make sure that I can bring about positive actions and to keep an open mind to the problems of the community and to the possible manipulation machinery which is always on the watch when progressive leaders or members of the community try to build effective activities for the people to participate. (197)

Shaughnessy suggests that the reason this writer has not yet "mastered the style" is because he has just "begun to advance into the complexity of the new language" and "is almost certain to sound and feel alien with the stock of words, routines, and rituals that make up that language" (198). The "delicate task" of the teacher

in such a situation, Shaughnessy points out, is to “encourag[e] the enterprise and confidence of the student” while “improving his judgment about both the forms and meanings of the words he chooses” (198).

I believe that there is another dimension to the teacher’s task. As Shaughnessy points out, this writer might be “struggling to develop a language that will enable him to talk analytically, with strangers, about the oppression of his parents and his own resolve to work against that oppression” (197). If what Shaughnessy says of most of her basic writers is true of this writer—that he too has “grown up in one of New York’s ethnic or racial enclaves” (3)—then the “strangers” for whom he writes and whose analytical discourse he is struggling to use are “strangers” both in the political and linguistic sense. To this writer, these “strangers” are people who already belong to what Shaughnessy calls the world of “public transactions—educational, civic, and professional” (125), a world which has traditionally excluded people like the writer and his parents. These “strangers” enjoy power relationships with the very “politicians” and “manipulation machinery” against whom this writer is resolved to fight. In trying to “talk analytically,” this writer is also learning the “strangers’” way of perceiving people like his parents, such as viewing the oppression of his parents and his resolution to work against that oppression with the “curiosity and sentimentality of strangers” (197–98). Thus, their “style” might put different constraints than the student’s home discourse on how this writer re-views “the experiences he has in mind” (197). If all of this is so, the teacher ought to acknowledge that possibility to the students.

Let me use the writings of another of Shaughnessy’s students to illustrate why attention to a potential change in point of view might benefit students. The following are two passages written by one of Shaughnessy’s students at the beginning and the end of a semester:

*Essay written at beginning of semester*

Harlem taught me that light skin Black people was better look, the best to succeed, the best off fanicially etc this whole that I trying to say, that I was brainwashed and people aliked. I couldn’t understand why people (Black and white) couldn’t get alone. So as time went along I began learned more about myself and the establishment.

*Essay written at end of semester*

In the midst of this decay there are children between the ages of five and ten playing with plenty of vitality. As they toss the football around, their bodies full of energy, their clothes look

like rainbows. The colors mix together and one is given the impression of being in a psychedelic dream, beautiful, active, and alive with unity. They yell to each other increasing their morale. They have the sound of an organized alto section. At the sidelines are the girls who are shy, with the shyness that belongs to the very young. They are embarrassed when their dresses are raised by the wind. As their feet rise above pavement, they cheer for their boy friends. In the midst of the decay, children will continue to play. (278)

In the first passage, the writer approaches the “people” through their racial and economic differences and the subject of childhood through racial rift and contention. In the second paper, he approaches the “children” through the differences in their age, sex, and the color of their clothes. And he approaches the subject of childhood through the “unity” among children. The second passage indicates a change in how this writer makes sense of the world around him: the writer has appeased his anger and rebellion against a world which “brainwashed” children with discriminatory perceptions of Blacks and Whites. Compared to the earlier and more labored struggle to puzzle out “why people (Black and white) couldn’t get along [sic],” the almost lyrical celebration of the children’s ability to “continue to play” “in the midst of the decay” seems a much more “literary” and evasive form of confronting the world of “decay.”

Shaughnessy characterizes this writer as a student who “discovered early in the semester that writing gave him *access* to thoughts and feelings he had not *reached* any other way” (278, my emphasis). She uses these essays to illustrate “the measure of his improvement in one semester.” By that, I take Shaughnessy to have in mind the changes in length and style. By the end of the semester, the student is clearly not only finding more to say on the subject but also demonstrating better control over the formal English taught in the classroom. This change in length and style certainly illustrates the effectiveness of the kind of pedagogical advice Shaughnessy gives.

Yet, these two passages also indicate that the change in the length and style of the student’s writing can be accompanied by a change in thinking—in the way one perceives the world around one and relates to it. This latter change is often political as well as stylistic. I think that Shaughnessy’s responses to these student writings overlook this potential change in thinking because she believes that language will only help the writers “reach” but not change how they think and feel about a certain subject or

experience. Thus, attention to a potential change in one's point of view or political stance seems superfluous.

If mastery of academic discourse is often accompanied by a change in one's point of view, as my reading of these three student writings suggests, then it ought to be the teacher's task to acknowledge to the students this aspect of their learning. However, teachers may hesitate to do so because they are worried that doing so might confirm the students' fear that education will distance them from their home discourses or communities and, as a result, slow down their learning. As Shaughnessy cogently points out, her students are already feeling overwhelmed by their sense of the competition between home and college:

Neglected by the dominant society, [basic writers] have nonetheless had their own worlds to grow up in and they arrive on our campuses as young adults, with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds. College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about the world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience as outsiders. (292)

Again and again, Shaughnessy reminds us of her students' fear that college may distance them from "their own worlds" and take away from them the point of view they have developed through "their experience as outsiders." She argues that this fear causes her students to mistrust and psychologically resist learning to write (125). Accordingly, she suggests several methods which she believes will help students assuage that fear.

For example, when discussing her students' difficulty in developing an "academic vocabulary," Shaughnessy points out that they might resist a new meaning for a familiar word because accepting it would be like consenting to a "linguistic betrayal that threatens to wipe out not just a word but the reality that the word refers to" (212). She then goes on to suggest that "if we consider the formal (rather than the contextual) ways in which words can be made to shift meaning we are closer to the kind of practical information about words BW students need" (212). This seems to be her rationale: if a "formal" approach (in this case, teaching students to pay attention to prefixes and suffixes) can help students learn that words can be made to shift meaning, then why not avoid the "contextual" approach, especially since the "contextual" approach

will only activate their sense of being pressured to “wipe out not just a word but the reality that the word refers to”?

But taking this “formal” approach only circumvents the students’ attention to the potential change in their thinking and their relationship with home and school. It delays but cannot eliminate their need to deal with that possibility. As a result, students are likely to realize the change only after it has already become a fact. At the same time, because the classroom has suggested that learning academic discourse will not affect how they think, feel, or relate to home, students are also likely to perceive their “betrayal” of home in purely personal terms, the result of purely personal choices. The sense of guilt and confusion resulting from such a perception is best illustrated in Richard Rodriguez’s narrative of his own educational experience, *Hunger of Memory*. Rodriguez’s narrative also suggests that the best way for students to cope constructively with their sense of having consented to a “betrayal” is to perceive it in relation to the politics of education and language. The long, lonely, and painful deliberation it takes for Rodriguez to contextualize that “betrayal” suggests that teachers might better help students anticipate and cope with their sense of “betrayal” if they take the “contextual” as well as the “formal” approach when teaching the conventions of academic discourse. In fact, doing both might even help students to minimize that “betrayal.” When students are encouraged to pay attention to the ways in which diverse discourses constrain one’s alignments with different points of view and social groups, they have a better chance to deliberate over how they might resist various pressures academic discourse exercises on their existing points of view. As Shaughnessy points out, “English has been robustly inventing itself for centuries—stretching and reshaping and enriching itself with every language and dialect it has encountered” (13). If the teacher acknowledges that all practitioners of academic discourse, including those who are learning to master it as well as those who have already mastered it, can participate in this process of reshaping, then students might be less passive in coping with the constraints that academic discourse puts on their alignments with their home discourses.

In preempting Shaughnessy’s attention from the political decisions involved in her students’ formal or linguistic decisions, the essentialist view of language also seems to have kept her from noticing her own privileging of academic discourse. Shaughnessy calls formal written English “the language of public transactions—educational, civic, and professional”—and the students’ home discourse the language one uses with one’s family and friends (125).

Shaughnessy insists that no variety of English can “substitute for the others” (121). She reassures her students that their home discourses cannot be substituted by academic discourse, but neither can their home discourses substitute for academic discourse. Thus, she suggests that academic discourse is a “necessary” and “advantageous” language for *all* language users because it *is* the language of public transaction (125, 293). This insistence on the nonsubstitutive nature of language implies that academic discourse has been, is, and will inevitably be the language of public transaction. And it may very well lead students to see the function of formal English as a timeless linguistic law which they must respect, adapt to, and perpetuate rather than as a specific existing circumstance resulting from the historically unequal distribution of social power, and as a condition which they must recognize but can also call into question and change.

Further, she differentiates the function of academic discourse from that of the students’ home discourses through the way she characterizes the degree to which each discourse mobilizes one’s language learning faculty. She presents the students’ efforts to seek patterns and to discriminate or apply rules “*self-sustaining activities*” (127, emphasis mine). She argues that the search for causes, like the ability to compare, is “a constant and deep *urge* among people of *all* cultures and ages” and “part of an *unfolding intellectual power* that begins with infancy and continues, at least in the lives of some, until death” (263, emphasis mine). Academic discourse and the students’ home discourses, Shaughnessy suggests, unfold their “intellectual power” differently. The home discourses of basic writers are seen as allowing such power to remain “largely intuitive,” “simplistic,” and “unreasoned” (263), while the conventions of written English are seen as demanding that such power be “more thoroughly developed,” “more consciously organized” (261). Thus, academic discourse is endowed with the power to bring the “native intelligence” or the “constant and deep urge” in *all* language learners to a higher and more self-conscious level.

This type of depiction suggests that learning academic discourse is not a violation but a cultivation of what basic writers or “people of all cultures and ages” have in and of themselves. Shaughnessy thus suggests basic writers are being asked to learn academic discourse because of its distinctive ability to utilize a “human” resource. Hence, her pedagogy provides the need to learn academic discourse with a “human,” and hence with yet another seemingly politically innocent, justification. It teaches students to see discursive decisions made from the point of view of academic culture as “human” and therefore “innocent” decisions made

absolutely free from the pressures of specific social and historical circumstances. If it is the student's concern to align himself or herself with minority economic and ethnic groups in the very act of learning academic discourse, the politics of "linguistic" innocence can only pacify rather than activate such a concern.

Shaughnessy's desire to propose a pedagogy which inculcates respect for discursive diversity and freedom of discursive choice articulates her dissatisfaction with and reaction to the unequal social power and prestige of diverse discourses in current day America. It also demonstrates her belief that education can and should attempt to change these prevailing unequal conditions. However, the essentialist view of language which underlies her pedagogy seems also to have led her to believe that a vision of language which insists on the equality and nonsubstitutive nature of linguistic variety, and an ideal writing classroom which promotes such a view, can stand in pure opposition to society, adjusting existing social inequality and the human costs of such inequality from somewhere "outside" the socio-historical space which it is trying to transform. As a result, her pedagogy enacts a systematic denial of the political context of students' linguistic decisions.

The need to critique the essentialist view of language and the politics of linguistic innocence is urgent when viewed in the context of the popular success of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s proposals for educational "reforms." Hirsch argues for the "validity" of his "vocabulary" by claiming its political neutrality. Hirsch argues that "it is used to support *all* conflicting values that arise in public discourse" and "to communicate *any* point of view effectively" or "in *whatever* direction one wishes to be effective" (*Cultural Literacy* 23, 102, 103; my emphasis). Hirsch thus implies that the "vocabulary" one uses is separate from one's "values," "point of view," or "direction." Like Shaughnessy, he assumes an essence in the individual—a body of values, points of view, a sense of direction—which exists prior to the act of "communication" and outside of the "means of communication" (*Cultural Literacy* 23).

Like Shaughnessy, Hirsch also argues for the need for *everyone* to learn the "literate" language by presenting it as existing "beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region" (*Cultural Literacy* 21). Furthermore, he assumes that there can be only one cause of one's failure to gain "literacy": one's unfamiliarity with "the background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, speak effectively" in America (*Cultural Literacy* 22, "Primal Scene" 31). Thus, Hirsch also denies the students' need to deal with cultural differences and to negotiate the competing claims of multiple ways of using language when writing.

He thereby both simplifies and depoliticizes the challenges facing the student writer.

Hirsch self-consciously invokes a continuity between Shaughnessy's pedagogy and his "educational reforms" ("Culture and Literacy" 27; *Cultural Literacy* 10). He legitimizes his New Right rhetoric by reminding us that Shaughnessy had approved of his work. For those of us concerned with examining writing in relation to the politics of gender, race, nationality, and class, the best way to forestall Hirsch's use of Shaughnessy is to point out that the continuity resides only in the essentialist view of language underlying both pedagogies and the politics of linguistic innocence it promotes. Critiquing the essentialist view of language and the politics of linguistic innocence in Shaughnessy's work contributes to existing criticism of Hirsch's New Right rhetoric (see Armstrong, Bizzell, Moglen, Scholes, and Sledd). It makes clear that if, as Hirsch self-consciously maintains, there is a continuity between Shaughnessy's work and Hirsch's ("Culture and Literacy" 27; *Cultural Literacy* 10); the continuity resides only in the most limiting aspect of Shaughnessy's pedagogy. Recognition of some of the limitations of Shaughnessy's pedagogy can also be politically constructive for the field of composition by helping us appreciate Shaughnessy's legacy. Most of the lessons she taught us in *Errors and Expectations*, such as students' "quasi-foreign relationship" with academic discourse, their lack of confidence as learners and writers, their desire to participate in academic work, and their intelligence and language-learning aptitudes, continue to be central to the teaching of basic writing. The tasks she delineates for us remain urgent for those of us concerned with the politics of the teaching of writing. Recognizing the negative effects that an essentialist view of language have on Shaughnessy's own efforts to execute these tasks can only help us identify issues that need to be addressed if we are to carry on her legacy: a fuller recognition of the social dimensions of students' linguistic decisions.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My view of language has been informed by Louis Althusser's notion of ideology, Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, Jacques Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power, and the distinction Raymond Williams makes between practical and official consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of Shaughnessy's pedagogy in relation to her democratic

aspirations, see Robert Lyons and rebuttals to Rouse's "The Politics of Shaughnessy" by Michael Allen, Gerald Graff, and William Lawlor.

<sup>3</sup> In arguing for the need to show "interest in and respect for language variety," Shaughnessy cites William Labov's analysis of the inner logic, grammar, and ritual forms in Black English Vernacular (17, 237, 304). Shaughnessy also cites theories in contrastive analysis (156), first-language interference (93), and transformational grammar (77-78) to support her speculations on the logic of basic writers' error.

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of the way modern linguistics of language, code, and competence (such as Labov's study of Black English Vernacular) tend to treat discourses as discrete and autonomous entities, see Mary Louise Pratt's "Linguistic Utopias."

<sup>5</sup> Material from this essay is drawn from my dissertation, directed by David Bartholomae at the University of Pittsburgh. I would like to thank my teachers and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and Drake University, especially David Bartholomae and Joseph Harris, for their criticism and support. I want to acknowledge particularly Bruce Horner's contributions to the conception and revisions of this essay.

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Peter Rondinone

## TEACHER BACKGROUND AND STUDENT NEEDS

**ABSTRACT:** *Basic skills teachers are in the business of helping students to achieve proficiency in standard English. Yet, when students leave the classroom they are sometimes faced with a dilemma that is not addressed by the instructor. A parent tells a student that reading The New York Times is forbidden in the household because that newspaper is for snobs. And another student is told that if she speaks grammatically she will be punished . . . by her friends. Thus this article attempts to help teachers help students navigate the breaches that occur when what is learned at school is diametrically opposed to the values the student learns at home or in the community—particularly when those values inhibit language acquisition.*

Teaching was not something I was supposed to do with my life. I grew up in the South Bronx, so odds were greater that I'd end up on drugs or killed in a gang fight. In fact, in an article written when I was a college senior I once described my drug abuse, my life, this way:

One night, I swallowed a dozen Tuminols and downed two quarts of beer at a bar in Manhattan. I puked and rolled under a parked car. Two girlfriends found me and carried me home. My overprotective brother answered the door. When he saw me—eyes rolling toward the back of my skull like rubber—he pushed me down a flight of stairs. My skull hit the edge of a

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marble step with a thud. The girls screamed. My parents came to the door and there I was: a high school graduate, a failure, curled in a ball in a pool of blood. (43)

So there are days when I marvel that I now have a box of chalk in my book bag instead of a knife—which I carried throughout high school. A thought that horrifies me; but at the time, it seemed like a good idea.

After all, I didn't go to school with apple-cheeked teenagers in bow ties and monogrammed sports jackets. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx during the 1960s—the era of Black Power and Kill Whitey; acid dreams and dreams of Martin Luther King; Vietnam and body bags. And all of it ripped my school apart. Shorthairs beat on longhairs; and Blacks fought for the right to sit on the school's front steps, which were historically controlled by the "White Angels" and "The Golden Guineas," gangs that fought back with well-thumbed baseball bats. And often there were more undercover policemen in my classroom than students.

So it's strange to be in front of a class, clutching a piece of chalk instead of a knife. Strange—and yet, there are times when I find my experiences can be rewarding. As a teacher, I've found there are certain aspects of my background which I can use to help my students improve their language and writing skills. That is, I can make my students aware that in deciding to become educated there will be times when they will be forced to choose between their home culture and that of the school, which means that, at some point, they will have to reject or *betray* their family and friends in order to succeed—as I did.

But I don't mean to suggest that one has to be a former gutter rat, like me, to benefit from the teaching strategies that have grown out of my background. There are many teachers who came from homes where English was a second language and they could certainly share their own conflicts with balancing their home culture with that of the school. Nor do I mean to suggest that these techniques can work only with students who have backgrounds similar to my own—those who are educationally disadvantaged. What's unique about where I teach is that many students in my classes (at least one-third) do come from homes where someone is college educated. And they, as much as the others, can benefit from the lessons I've gathered from my own struggle to acquire language skills.

I'm not ashamed to admit it and I tell my students: while a freshman at the City College of New York (CCNY) I was in Basic Writing 1. And what I recall is how that label "basic writer" did have an impact on my self-image. I felt that the lack of writing skills

was also a sign of a lack of intelligence. And no doubt there were teachers who reminded me that grammar was something *real* college students mastered in the 5th grade. And so, every paper I failed didn't make me want to do better on the next one, as the teachers hoped. Rather, every "F" only confirmed what I already suspected: "Gee, I must be stupid."

So I now believe that an introduction to a remedial class should begin with a discussion of how "we" feel being in basic writing; and I use "we" deliberately, for even if the teacher has never been a basic writing student, he/she can still talk about how it feels to be a basic writing teacher.

In some academic circles, no doubt, there is still a stigma attached to being a "remedial" writing teacher—as opposed to one of the blessed few chosen to defend the canon. And there are certainly many who'd rather be lecturing to Ph.D. candidates. These teachers usually complain about the mind-numbing ritual of having to repeat, ad nauseam, the same lessons on how to write a five-paragraph essay with a topic sentence.

And, no doubt there are also negative stereotypes of basic writing teachers which don't even originate in the academic community. I've, unfortunately, had too many relatives approach me at parties only to comment: "Now honestly, wouldn't you rather be teaching in a *real* college where students know the difference between a subject and a verb?"

Of course, if teachers and students are positive about being in basic writing these feelings should be shared. But I've met few students who are happy about taking a class they know they must pass in order to continue their college education. Also, I've heard far too many teachers grumble about the dismal quality of their students' writing to be convinced that many teachers feel great about being in basic writing. One professor I know begins each quarter by asking me about the intellectual level of my classes: "Hey!" he cries out. "What are you teaching this quarter—mollusks or crustaceans?"

So by acknowledging negative labels, for both the basic writing student and the basic writing teacher, I've found that the potential negative impact of these labels can be diminished. The classroom can become a kind of support group—teachers reminding students, and students reminding teachers, that: *No*, just because *we're* in basic writing doesn't mean there is something wrong with us.

In fact, an added advantage of this dialogue is that it allows that teacher to initiate a further, equally open and supportive, discussion of the all-important question: Well, then, if there isn't anything wrong with us, why are we in basic writing? Why?

To answer, I begin by putting a list of sentences on the blackboard (taken from the students' essays). Sentences like:

- 1) He be a friend of mines.
- 2) We going buy car today.
- 3) I'm going to reach over and have me a house.

Then I ask the students: "You tell me why? Tell me why you write sentences like these?"

Often, students are surprised by the question. Someone once said: "If we knew why, we wouldn't be in here, would we?" So before I elicit their responses, I often add: "I know why I used to write sentences like these when I was in basic writing." As in the discussion of labels, I begin by drawing on my own experiences.

In my case, I used to write sentences like "Mom and me was *tinking* about home." And why? One day, a speech teacher at CCNY pulled me into his office and asked me if I'd mind reading aloud into a tape recorder. Okay. I was curious. But when he played back the tape, I was shocked. For some reason I was leaving out the "th" sound on every word that required one. I said "ting" for thing and "tought" for thought. Obviously, I was transferring the way I heard language to the way I was writing it down. And where did I hear this language?

I didn't have to look far. My Russian mother, a high school dropout, who came to the United States after World War II, didn't pronounce the "th" sounds either. Apparently, there are no "th" sounds in Russian.

I should add that even though some teachers may come from homes where parents are college educated and language use is important, this shouldn't prevent them from sharing their background with the students. Their experiences can be instructive. The teacher who comes from a home, like my wife's, where parents are quick to note the nuances of "phenomena" and "phenomenon," can certainly talk about the impact a family sensitive to standard English use has had on their language skills. In my wife's case, upper middle class, east side Manhattan, she became a poet—what else?

As for teachers who have grown up in homes where a foreign language was spoken, they too can speak openly about their struggles with acquiring standard English. For example, one Puerto Rican colleague once told me how she tells her class that her greatest struggle with English was breaking free of Span-glish—the habit in her community of combining English words like "pen" with "el," the Spanish word for the article "the." So sometimes she

used to say things like: “Give me el pen” instead of “the pen” or: “Are you going to el movie?”

Anyway, after sharing my experiences with the class, I always find students eager to offer their explanations for sentences we’ve put on the board. For example, one student complains that her girlfriend uses the “F” word in nearly every sentence. Another, a Chinese student, says her mother forbids her to speak English at home. Still another student recalls how his friends called him a “sissy boy” because he told someone to use “is” instead of “be” as in “He be.”

Naturally there are always some students from families where a college educated person did serve as a role model for the acquisition of standard language skills. And their anecdotes are also instructive to the others. One student, for instance, says that his parents’ insistence on “proper” language drove him to rebel—to use language improperly just to get on his parents’ nerves. Another says she was driven to use slang because of high school peer pressure to be cool—hip.

And so, in answer to the question, Why do we students write the way we do? I use the students’ anecdotes to create yet another list.

We write like this because:

- 1) English is a second language for our parents
- 2) English is our second language
- 3) Our parents know English but they are not educated
- 4) English is the second language of our friends
- 5) Our friends are uneducated
- 6) Our friends speak more slang than English

So what’s the point? I want students to see that the people they depend on the most are apparently the same people who most influence their language in a negative way. And that raises still another question: Where do I fit in? What role does the teacher play in the student’s life?

Usually, few hands want to field this question. And those that do end up telling me that I’m an okay teacher. But what I’m after is deeper: “How many of you seriously wonder, outside of my classroom, if you’ll disappoint me because you misuse the English language? Do you care?” “After all,” I go on, “isn’t it true that outside of this room you are really more concerned about doing those things which make your friends and family happy than doing those things which would make your teacher happy—such as speaking like an academic?”

The point is, I tell my students, I’m the one person they are most distant from—I only see them 3 hours a week for 11 weeks. So I am

the one person they are least dependent on—and I say “least” because they know they are not entirely independent of me either. They do need me for their grades. However, as they are quick to point out, this has traditionally made me their nemesis.

Consequently, what we discover is that in the final analysis the one person who is given the job to most influence their language skills in a positive way is the one person they are most remote from—the least important person in their lives, if not someone who is seen as their enemy.

This dynamic is no doubt what Stanley Fish meant when he discussed the problems we all have getting outside of our own communities:

That is why it is so hard for someone whose very being is defined by his position within an institution (and if not this one, then some other) to explain to someone outside it a practice or a meaning that seems to him to require no explanation, because he regards it as natural. Such a person when pressed is likely to say, “but that’s just the way it is done” or “but isn’t it obvious” and so testify that the practice or meaning in question is community property, as, in a sense, he is too. (320–21)

Therefore, I initiate further analysis to make students sensitive to the crucial role language plays in binding them to their communities. I ask the class: “In spite of what we’ve seen in the sentences on the board, does the way you use language in your neighborhood or your home serve any positive purpose? Is there anything good about using slang, say, with your friends?”

Here again, I begin with my own experiences. I recall how when I hung out on the corner of 183rd and Davidson Avenue nearly twenty years ago, my friends and I had our own slang. And when we went to a high school dance, we’d use this language to start trouble. As we passed a rival gang, for example, my friend Louis might say, “Yo, Pete, what about a little daddy lo lo tonight?” What he meant was: how about waiting outside for these suckers with baseball bats so we can give them a good beating? So, in that case, our language was a secret code which gave us a kind of perverse power like those in government who like to name missiles “Peace keeper.”

And again, through the use of such anecdotes, the students are able to generate yet another list on the board. This one focuses on the positive role that nonstandard language plays in the students’ community. For example, an Arab student says she feels more in touch with her soul when she writes poems in her native language,

while another student says that the lyrics of rap songs seem more exciting than the language he's forced to use in school. So, we see, our community language plays a positive role because it's:

- 1) A way for the community to identify itself
- 2) A way for the community to keep secrets and thus protect itself from potential enemies
- 3) A way for the community to pass on its values from one generation to the next
- 4) And often it's a language that is more expressive and creative than the one used in school

I expect that teachers, regardless of their background, can address this issue of acquiring a community language which is foreign to the one they normally use. That is, at one time in our college careers, we have all been called upon to master a particular jargon which can only be used within a narrow context, like the language of sociology—not to mention the language of the academic community. And as we know, it did take government intervention to force one community (lawyers) to break down their language into one which everyone could understand—a testimony to the grip a specialized language has on its community, especially when that community depends on its language for survival.

Which raises yet another point: Though students have seen that there are good reasons for using the language that binds them to their communities, even if that language can be negative, I also seek to make it clear that these influences on how they use language are not benign or passive. I don't want students to think that the way they are influenced to use language is simply a matter of being surrounded by it, like a stone surrounded by water in a pond.

To make my point, I return to some of the anecdotes we'd already heard in class. For example, I go back to the anecdote of the student who said his friends called him a sissy boy because he told them to use "He is" instead of "He be."

I also recall how when I started college I used to sit on the stoop of my tenement in the South Bronx on hot evenings and read books. But now and then, a carload of my old buddies would drive by and they'd yell: "Hey, hey, look at Petey Weety. He's weeding a book. He must be a chump!"

Again, through sharing my experiences, a dialogue begins. Anecdotes are shared. One student says that her father told her not to bring a copy of *The New York Times* into his house because "that newspaper is for snobs."

"So, what is happening here," I ask my students? I attempt to

demonstrate that these influences on the way they use language are not passive. They are coupled with what I call “messages.” And if we look at these messages closely, I tell my students, we can see a community’s attitude toward language use.

This view is shared by Kenneth Bruffee. In his essay, “Liberal Education and the Social Justification of Belief,” he recommends that students “identify in non-evaluative ways, their own beliefs and the beliefs of the local, religious, ethnic . . . and special interest communities they are already members of” (108).

For example, through classroom discussion, students discover that messages like “*you’re sissy boy*” if you use “*He is*” instead of “*He be*” are threats from the community, reminding us that any effort on our part to improve our language skills will result in our being kicked out of that community.

Why is this? I believe, like Bruffee, this happens because, “Learning involves shifting social allegiances.” For example, Bruffee describes what happens when a group of watchmakers want to become carpenters. “To do that,” he says, “you have to do more than teach them how to use a hammer and saw. They have to swear like carpenters, drink like carpenters, to walk, eat and make love like carpenters and to see the world from a carpenter’s point of view” (105).

And the impact on students as they attempt to shift their social allegiances should not be underestimated. There is, I would agree with Bruffee, “emotional stress involved in leaving one’s community to join another” (106). After all, the messages which tell students not to leave their communities come from just those people that the students are most attached to—their family and friends.

Therefore, to sensitize my students to these messages and their potential impact, I have them write an essay that explores the use of language and the attitudes toward language in their communities. The essay has five parts:

Part I.

a) Students must not only listen carefully to the way language is used in their home, they must also transcribe a word-for-word sample of that language taken from a short interview with a family member.

b) After the transcript has been made, the student must then provide a grammatical analysis of the language contained in the sample. What have they found? Does the family member use a lot of slang? Span-glish? Sentences with verb errors?

Note: Given that some students may not be able to identify lapses in their family’s language, students can have their transcripts reviewed in student groups so their more knowledgeable peers can

help with the analysis before the essay is written. Also, to prepare students to provide a word-for-word language sample, I have students practice note taking and listening by interviewing their classmates. These notes can then be used for this essay, as you will see.

#### Part II.

a) After obtaining the language sample, students must also ask the *same* family member if he/she thinks using standard English is important? And why or why not?

b) Based on the response to the above question, students must assess their family's attitude toward standard language? In other words, what is the family message—negative or positive?

#### Part III.

a) Students must transcribe some language from a friend and

b) provide a grammatical analysis, as in Part I.

#### Part IV.

a) Students must also ask that friend if he/she thinks using standard English is important. In other words, what is the message from friends—negative or positive?

#### Part V.

a) Students must describe how language use and the *attitudes* toward language of other friends and family have affected the students' language use. Students must also give examples from their own language use to illustrate these influences—negative and/or positive. And this is where the earlier language samples from the interviews with classmates can be valuable. Students who may not be able to see their own patterns can now have peers review their language samples in order to point out the language errors—which are often the same kind of errors found at the writer's home or among his/her friends.

Once students have written their essays and shared them with the class, the class is usually surprised to find so many negative influences from friends and family. So I pose yet another question: Given that so many students identify negative influences, I ask: "What can you do to avoid these influences?"

Again, I begin by drawing on my own experiences. For me, improving my language skills meant giving up the guys on the street corner, as well as avoiding my family. It meant developing strategies to stay on my college campus for as long as I could, like studying in the library until it closed. After all, like most students at commuter schools, I lived at home. So I also joined clubs and my school newspaper, which allowed me to enter a new community—one which obviously paid a great deal of attention to language, unlike my friends and family.

However, I offer my solution to improving language skills more as a challenge to my students than a prescription. I don't want anyone to think that my way is the only way to improve one's language skills. After all, I know that my message to students is a radical one: *knowing that without having certain language skills, particularly writing skills, you won't be able to reach your goal in life, like graduating from college or having a better life than your parents. What are you willing to do to get these skills? How far are you willing to go? What are you willing to sacrifice? Are you willing to give up those friends on the street corner who'd rather read Batman than Kant?*

That's the challenge. Whether or not students accept this challenge, I believe, like Bruffee, that the job of the teacher does entail "helping students examine how knowledge communities express and justify beliefs." It does entail "helping students discover communities of beliefs relevant to their interests." And it does entail "helping students learn to join, to maintain, and where appropriate to move from one knowledge community to another, or to disband a knowledge community altogether" (110).

And I do believe that some students *do need* a community other than the one they often describe. Some do need to disband their communities altogether. Unlike those students who come from communities that nurture their citizens, some of my students come from communities that hinder them as mine did; and after they graduate, they don't want to stay in those communities anyway. Like poor kids for generations, they want a house in the suburbs on a tree-lined street. They want a place away from the gunplay of crack dealers.

Besides, as one student put it: "If I do get a good job, and I have money and stay on my block, who do you think the crackheads are gonna jump on payday?"

In other words, for some students, staying in these neighborhoods wouldn't make them objects of admiration or role models; rather they'd become targets—objects of prey. Our inner city neighborhoods are no longer havens for the returning prodigal son. As one woman in my class put it: "Oh yeah, after graduation, I'm going back to my neighborhood all right. I'm going to get my mother out of there. 'Cause over there, they'll blow you away."

In fact, it was this kind of threat of violence which ultimately drove me to overcome my circumstances. Which is not to suggest that I grew up with the expectation of going to college. Like my brother, who is a janitor, like my sisters, who are clerical workers, I was expected to get a job right after high school. And what jobs were

these? The usual ones for a high school city kid: policeman, fireman, or sanitation worker. And so college was not on the list of things to do. It was luck which got me on that path.

At the time I graduated from high school with a 67% average there was a budget crisis. City jobs were not available, so what was I supposed to do? A high school counselor told me about a unique educational opportunity—a social experiment. The City University of New York had started an open admissions policy which allowed anyone regardless of their high school average to attend a four-year university. And thus in 1972, I entered the City College of New York—one of thousands of unprepared students who were considered by some to be the end of education. But as it turned out, after a year of remedial writing, math, and reading, I was performing as well as my more advantaged peers—many of whom I used for tutors, as well as mentors to introduce me to the culture of college.

I really wanted to join this community. At that time, I witnessed too many friends join gangs only to get blown away with shot guns. A few got stabbed. Some overdosed on heroin. Others just hung out on the street corners all day, smoking cigarettes and drinking Mad Dog—a cheap wine. I wanted to escape this violent, dead-end world. And school was the obvious way out. I often heard about graduates earning more money in one day than my father made working two jobs, when he wasn't too sick to work, seven days a week, peddling hot dogs on Times Square or selling Christmas bulbs door-to-door. As far as I was concerned, my neighborhood was not a fertile place to sink roots.

In fact, I quickly learned that even if I wanted to go back to a community like this, whether I liked it or not, the very process of becoming educated alienated me from the community. What I found is: now that I had these new and sophisticated ideas in my head, there was no one to share them with. How, for example, could I discuss phenomenology with my Dad or my friends when the last book they read was usually wrapped in brown paper.

That is, I believe, if students don't make use of what they've learned, like language acquisition, what results is what linguists call *fossilization*—where “the learner no longer revises his intralanguage system in the direction of the target language” (McLaughlin). For example, linguist J. Schumann cites a study of a 33-year-old Costa Rican immigrant, Alberto:

As a member of a group of Latin-American working class immigrants, Alberto was seen as socially and psychologically quite distant from the target-language group. He interacted almost exclusively with a small group of Spanish-speaking

friends, and showed no interest in owning a television, which would have exposed him to the English language, because he said he could not understand English. He chose to work at night as well as during the day, rather than attend English classes. Alberto showed very little linguistic development during a 9 month study. (McLaughlin 112)

So, basically, I encourage serious discussion of ways someone can mature academically and linguistically in an intellectually deficient community. And students do offer their own strategies. Some students say that though they may have to leave their communities behind while they are becoming educated, once they get their skills together, they plan to return to their communities to share their knowledge.

Still, I believe that most students will have to close the distance between their communities and the academic one which is their target. After all, we don't just give students skills. We provide alternate world views. Educating students often means passing on values which may be different from those of the home and/or the peer group.

For example, I remember when I took an art history course. After a day at the museum, I got home and told my Dad about it. But he just laughed: "Whata you wasting your time for? Is staring at a piece of dried paint gonna put money in your pocket? Is it gonna put food on the table? You coulda been working, you jerk!"

And that (in microcosm) is what many of my students are up against. Which is why I feel basic writing teachers should not underestimate the enormous benefit of making students aware that the acquisition of language and writing skills may mean resisting or *abandoning* the very people they love the most—their friends and family.

I hope I have emphasized that a teacher's background should not inhibit that teacher from knowing a student's needs. To know these needs, I believe, means knowing a student's background, and this is best achieved when the teacher is willing to explore how his/her background is linked to the student's background.

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Pat Belanoff

## THE MYTHS OF ASSESSMENT

*ABSTRACT: This article challenges several myths about writing assessment: that we know what we're grading, that we know what the results mean, that we can agree in practice on the relative weight of various criteria, and that it is possible to establish absolute standards and apply them uniformly. Despite these seeming difficulties, this article argues for the validity of assessments developed within particular environments for particular purposes agreed to by those teaching within those environments. And, finally, the article celebrates the lack of conformity in grading as a sign of a rich and nurturing environment for the development of writing skills.*

Back when I started to teach writing, my first students were mostly middle and upper middle class White kids. What I was learning at the time about the teaching of writing, the theories behind various approaches, and the supporting philosophies, I was applying to a fairly privileged group of students and was gratified by the results. When I moved from teaching that group and began to teach at the Borough of Manhattan Community College and became familiar with the work of Mina Shaughnessy, Marie Ponsot, Rosemary Dean, and others, I discovered that what I had learned about teaching writing continued to apply in classrooms of so-called basic writers and somewhat advanced ESL students. I didn't realize that immediately. I thought I needed to teach basic writers and ESL students lots of grammar and how to write sentences so someday

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they could write paragraphs, and then compositions, and maybe some day even discourses. I discovered how wrong I was. I often believe that the students of BMCC taught me more than I taught them.

When I moved to Stony Brook and began to teach less advanced ESL students and lower middle class and working class students, I discovered again that their needs were not so different from the needs of my previous students. Learning to write is learning to write—what works for advanced students also works for ESL students. Even in beginning language courses, students use language to think within restricted contexts and need to think in order to learn. To quote Janet K. Swaffar in *Profession 89*, “The notion that thinking and intentionality were integral to language use at any level made viable a claim heretofore rejected out of hand: that language learning need not be remedial learning. If taught in terms of creativity rather than replication, even beginners could find language learning an intellectually challenging activity, a bona fide academic enterprise.”

All of us have been accused of doing remedial work, even those of us teaching advanced composition; a recent survey of faculty at Stony Brook makes that conception of our work painfully obvious. We need to argue that point constantly to our colleagues in other fields. Nor can we exclude our writing center colleagues and say they are in charge of grammar and mechanics, and classroom teachers deal with “ideas”—as though they were separate. This is a common dichotomy, but we’re all teachers and we’re all tutors—certainly the best classroom teachers I’ve known are tutors.

What we need to argue within our field and to each other is equally important: that all of us engaged in the teaching of writing—regardless of the names given to the courses we teach—are working within the same paradigm and have much to learn from each other once we recognize the commonality of our pursuits. We all need to talk to each other more often.

I’ve entitled my talk today the myths of assessment and plan to speak generally about four myths:

- 1) We know what we’re testing for
- 2) We know what we’re testing
- 3) Once we’ve agreed on criteria, we can agree on whether individual papers meet those criteria
- 4) And the strongest myth of all, that it’s possible to have an absolute standard and apply it uniformly

First myth: we know what we’re testing for. Let’s think about the writing tests we’re connected to in some way—tests we give in our

own classrooms and standardized tests administered apart from our classrooms.

What are those standardized tests testing for? Are they finding out, as the CUNY test supposedly does, that students have achieved a certain level and are ready to go on to another level—where they may or may not get more help with their writing? Does that mean that students in supposedly below-level classes cannot apply what skills they have to writing about economics or literature or whatever their other classes will ask them to write about? Our portfolio proficiency test at Stony Brook certifies that students have satisfied the first level of our writing requirement; what it really means is that students do not have to retake our basic composition course—in truth, what it does for far too many students is assure that they won't be asked to write again for a couple of years—or until they have to satisfy their upper-level writing requirement.

What does the National Association for Educational Progress' writing sample measure? How well students can write to demonstrate they can write? And what about New York State's minimum competency tests in writing? They demonstrate that students can or cannot reorganize a list of things and write up a report. I'm not saying those things aren't measurable or shouldn't be measured—but once they've been measured, what can we say about a student's skill as a writer? We overgeneralize about all these results.

Some standardized tests purport to say that students write well enough to be allowed to graduate from college. How well is that? How well *should* a college graduate write? And why do we need separate writing requirements? If a college degree doesn't certify literacy, what does it certify?

Well, perhaps we are testing to see if students are improving (I think now of pretests and posttests used to evaluate either programs or students or both), how much can students genuinely improve in one semester and can we measure the ways in which they improve? A lot of what we want to teach them is subsumed under attitudes and approaches and how do we test for that? We want them to take risks, to try harder things which may make their writing look as though it's deteriorating depending on when we decide to look at it. We don't want them to write what they already know how to write; we want them to write something that pulls and stretches their skills—and that pulling and stretching can result in some pretty messy stuff.

And what about the testing—formal and informal—in our classrooms? What are our purposes? To see if students have mastered a particular skill? To see if students write better than they did three weeks ago or three months ago? Do we need tests to know

that? What if students haven't mastered the skill or don't write better, have we failed? Have they failed? Is growth steady or does it come in spurts?

The assumption here is that we have some precise notion of what skills students need to master in order to be good or better writers and that we know in what order these should be learned: word forms before paragraphs, narrative before argument, etc., or vice versa. Unfortunately, the skills which are easiest to measure are the ones least important to the development of good writing. We can determine with some degree of accuracy and agreement from others whether or not a word form is correct or whether an essay has a topic sentence or whether all sentences end with the proper punctuation marks. But we can't agree so easily that the word or the topic sentence selected is effective stylistically and rhetorically and whether the groups of words ending with periods communicate some idea clearly and effectively and integrate that idea into what comes before and after. We won't agree about the latter to the degree we agree about the former. We can't agree on something as seemingly concrete as where commas go. Rules, after all, are abstractions, humanmade—they're not real. As abstractions, they do not reflect any reality exactly. Consequently, rules are only clear until we apply them—then they fuzzy up. But, more importantly, we cannot separate rhetorical issues and issues of correctness even though textbooks and handbooks purport to do it all the time.

So we just don't know whether what we test in class makes for good writing or not, and if students improve whether they become better writers. In fact, we really can't isolate skills and judge them separately from the entire act of communication because it is that act that sets the perimeters for us and for them, and it is that act against which we have to measure whatever students do.

Well, that's my first myth: that we know what we are testing for. My second myth is that we know what we are testing. What we're testing is the student's writing ability, correct? And how do we do that? By looking at some piece of writing the student has done in 20 minutes or an hour? To what degree does a particular piece of writing represent a student's total ability? Are we assessing the student's ability or the quality of the piece of writing? In fact the only thing it's really possible to find out is if the particular piece of writing before us does or does not accomplish some particular purpose. Could the student duplicate the piece, do something else like it just as well again? And even if so, can writing tasks be so much alike that we can be sure that if a student does one he can do the other? Or that someone will even ask him to do this thing again some day? But given the nature of most of our tests, I suspect no one

will ask the student to do quite this same thing again. In fact, are we grading a piece of writing in any meaningful sense at all? Under what circumstances would a student ever be asked to do this thing we've asked him to do on the test?

Other issues are relevant too. Did the student struggle to write this? Was it easy for her? Was she feeling well, poorly, hostile? What, in fact, does this piece of writing in front of us represent?

Listening to Muriel Harris<sup>1</sup> this morning as she spoke of the role of writing centers in relation to the increasing cultural diversity of colleges made me realize with even greater intensity how ludicrous it is to use a single instrument to measure writing competency. I would add another diversity to her provocative list of cultural diversities. What does it mean to write as a woman in a profession so long dominated by western male standards of performance derived from classical rhetoric?

And what is writing ability anyway? What does it mean to write well? Is a good writer someone who can write anything? Is a good writer someone who can fulfill a school assignment? Is being able to record one's thoughts in a diary, write a letter to a friend, write a poem—are these things a good writer can and should do; is one a good writer if one can do them? As Ed White points out in *Teaching and Assessing Writing* (and he's a proponent of assessment), our profession has no agreed upon definition of proficiency and certainly as a consequence, no agreed upon definitions for proficiencies at various levels of schooling.

So that's my second myth: that we know what we're testing. My third one is that even if we know what we're testing for and what the artifact is in front of us, we still don't agree on how well the student has achieved the goals. In truth we don't always agree on which characteristics of a good piece of writing are most significant in making us judge the piece positively.

I've often sat with groups of teachers and worked out what we could agree on as the traits of a good piece of writing—they'll come out something like clarity, effective organization, contextual awareness, coherence, correctness of language, and so on; probably the same set of traits any group of good teachers would come up with. In the abstract, they sound fine. The problem comes when we get around to applying them to actual papers. What I think is clear, someone else doesn't. What I see as well-organized, another doesn't. Or I value the work because it's well-organized and another reader agrees, but thinks the good organization is overshadowed by superficiality of content. Modern critical theory points to something we've always known—that people don't read in the same way—that, as a result, texts do not *embed* meaning, they *enable* meaning.

Subjects affect us; our acquaintance with a variety of forms affects us; the authority we're willing to grant to authors and to our own right to judge affects us—we can't really codify what goes into the interpretation of a particular text, we can't even be sure that we would assess the same text the same way a second time.

We can, of course, be trained by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), or through similar methods, to agree on texts—agree on numbers we would assign to particular texts. ETS is wise not to insist on expressions of why a grader awards a particular score to a particular paper. In the process of “training” (a form of brainwashing for sure), a grader learns the community standards and learns to apply them quite well, but never questions their validity for the task they set themselves up to do. They're not asked to.

But most of us simply don't want our students to be subjected to such an inhumane process. We rightly insist that writing is not genuinely writing if it degenerates into a performance whose content is irrelevant. We need to beware of valuing some scheme simply because it produces interreader reliability. Reliability is high, but what does a 3 or 4 really mean in any context outside the room where the scoring is occurring? No question that it means quite a lot to the students who have taken the test—it places them in a level of college composition or it increases or decreases their scores on tests such as the National Teacher's Examination.

But how well should a beginning teacher be able to write? And what does the NTE test itself suggest to new teachers about the role of writing in their own classrooms? What kinds of things will they ask their students to do as a result? As we are tested, so we will test others. Frankly, I'd rather test a teacher's ability to get students enthused about writing—that, of course, includes getting the teacher enthused about her own writing. I'd also like that new teacher to know something of current theories about the teaching of writing if only as an indication that all methods of teaching writing assume certain things about language and about learning in general; all methods of teaching writing, that is, are philosophically based, whether we recognize the basis or not. But, of course, the writing test she has just taken invalidates those theories I want her to know.

In addition, this sort of brainwashing, holistic testing, and grading separates the graders from the testmakers and often separates the latter from those who devise the standards for admittance into a particular profession. Graders are protected from the consequences of their grading, and teachers are isolated from judgments of students they have taught. Furthermore, new teachers are pragmatically taught something quite undesirable about writing.

So, this is my third myth: that we know what good writing is and

that, in meaningful contexts, we can agree when we apply those standards to pieces of writing. Students have always known we don't agree. They tell us over and over again that a former teacher or their roommate's teacher would have given them a different grade (usually higher of course), although in their more honest exchanges, they'd also admit that some prior teacher would have given them a lower grade. Though they may be exaggerating the size of the differences, they're not wrong in principle. Such disagreements exist all over. I've had the same article (revised each time of course) rejected by *College Composition and Communication* three times. One reader has been fairly consistent in his or her comments; I'd love to sit with that reader and discuss the issues I want to raise. But the other readers tell me disparate things. One thinks my subject is strongly significant within the profession; another considers it only somewhat significant. One thinks the personal references enrich my piece; another thinks they make the style rough and uneven. The truth is that for all sorts of reasons, readers don't agree on texts. We may be judging at different levels (unskilled, skilled, professional) but there's no more agreement at one level than at the others. It's no easier to determine a student's readiness for regular composition than it is to certify graduate level competency or a paper's suitability for publication.

This brings me to the last and most harmful of my myths: the myth that there is some Platonic image out there of "good writing" and that there is as a result a Platonic standard of writing which we can all learn to apply uniformly. Within this myth, the problem is only that we haven't yet discovered this absolute standard, but if we keep working at it, we will find it some day.

But there is no such Platonic ideal—there are only lots and lots of real texts around us in our world, some of which we have to judge because they're written by our students within an educational system which says we have to judge them. But, in real-world reading, we always judge for a reason, within a context, according to the purposes a writer sets up. Thus, the only decisions we *can* make are contextual. Over and over at ETS grading sessions, I've heard graders say that they know that some paper they've scored gets a 3 by the standards we've been asked to adopt, but that they'd never "in the real world" give it that high a rating. By "real world" I assume they mean the usual context in which they grade.

We all judge holistically, despite the fact that we can then find reasons for our judgments. We judge first and then articulate our reasons. The rhetoricians Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca believe this to be true of all our decisions. Thus we react to discourses as a whole and not to parts of discourses in isolation. And because we

judge on the basis of whole discourses, we inevitably take into consideration at the conscious and unconscious level an integration of all the traits of a piece of writing. We don't judge on the basis of one or two of these—we judge on the basis of the whole which is always greater than its parts. This is not to deny that within my holistic judgments I don't value one trait more than someone else might.

So, what am I saying—that we can't judge at all and should just give it up altogether? Well, in one very real sense, I'd love to say that. Many of you here have been talking about writing centers and what goes on and can go on in them. One of the wonderful things about being a writing center tutor is that one doesn't have to give grades: one's function is simply to help students become better writers—usually through talk and revision and feedback and such, not through grades. “This is what you've done well, do more of it.” “This is what doesn't work well for me because I don't see its relation to your main point; can you do something to help me with this?” These are the sorts of things we can say and do when we're writing center tutors. And, most importantly, we can through our talk and feedback begin to direct students toward becoming evaluators of their own texts—at least to the point of understanding where they may need to think about doing some more work. Evaluation and feedback merge. Almost everyone I know who has moved from the classroom into a writing center loves the emancipation from grading and finds it stimulates whole new ways of looking at and commenting on students' texts. We don't like grading.

Think about it. Have you ever noticed that you can find lots of articles on assessment and evaluation, but how many articles have you read or seen published on grading—on the actual giving of grades? Not very many. Most of us would just rather not talk about it at all; it's the dirty thing we have to do in the dark of our own offices. We can spend lots of time talking about teaching writing and encouraging students to like writing—to find subjects they can relate to, to find ways of dealing with subjects they have trouble relating to, to give and receive feedback, to work on revision, and so forth. We love to talk about those things to each other; we don't love to talk about grading and we do very little of such talking, though we're likely to moan and groan about it.

But, modern society and the structure of modern educational institutions are simply not going to let us not deal with the issue. We are stuck giving grades and administering standardized tests. But are we?

There is a movement afoot in elementary and secondary schools

to give teachers more say in the running of schools and in the make-up of curricula. Finally, there seems to be developing some institutional awareness of the value of a classroom teacher's knowledge. That movement needs to move into college writing classrooms so that what we know will be given as much credit as almost all other college faculty's knowledge. Who's checking up on their standards? I know there are lots of bad teachers out there—I've had them; you've had them; my kids have had them; I have some in my department. But I see little reason to build systems as ways to subvert bad teachers; we need to build systems that release the strengths of good teachers. We need to take more of a hand in our own fates. What are some ideas we can build on?

First, we need to realize that our inability to agree on standards and their applications is not something we need to be ashamed of—something to hang our heads and wring our hands about in the presence of our colleagues in the sciences or other disciplines (even including our literature colleagues at times) who have “content” to test. Our inability is no sign of weakness—far from it, it is a sign of strength, of the life and vitality of words and the exchange of words. For, if we agreed, we could set up hierarchies and fit ourselves and others into them and then all could dictate to those below them and follow the orders of those above them. And in fact, in such a set up there would have to be an autocrat at the top who knows what's best for us and who knows what texts are best. Then someone would know what sort of texts to write and to teach and the variety would leave our profession and along with the variety, the richness.

Texts reflect life and the multitude of tastes and standards in real life; it is for that reason that we're motivated to create them, as expressions of our place in a multifaceted world. We've learned that texts have a peculiar strength, a peculiar ability to make us feel ourselves and the uniqueness of those selves.

Colleagues in other disciplines can tsk-tsk-tsk at our subjectivity because theirs is so well hidden. Do introductory biology teachers agree on what should be taught, what should be tested, and how tests should be balanced and averaged into the final grade? I doubt it. Have all introductory biology teachers in CUNY gotten together recently to discuss these issues? I doubt that too. When I'm not teaching composition, I'm teaching introductory Old English. It will come as no surprise to you to know that no one else is teaching it at the same time I am. I determine what to teach and when, what to test and when, and what elements to figure into my final grade. If there were 39 other sections of introductory Old English, I'd bet we'd be called to a meeting one day to talk about how to measure

competency in Old English and how to determine when students should move on to the next semester. And someone would come up with a standardized test just to make certain I was indeed teaching my students what they needed to know about Old English language and literature.

Let's not apologize for our lack of agreement—let's make it work for us. How can we do that?

Well, I've certainly cast much doubt on our ability to agree on standards, but I've never cast doubt on our ability to *have* them. Each of us does have his or her standards: we read a text and we judge it almost as a reflex action, the judgment usually growing out of whether or not we like the text. Each of us also has the ability, enhanced when we talk with others, of figuring out the basis of the judgments we make. We can learn to articulate that basis for ourselves, for our students, and for other teachers. Frankly if we can't, we shouldn't be teachers of writing. Our judgments are the result of a number of factors—what we've read, what our values are, what our philosophy is, who our colleagues are, what our own education has been, and for many of us, years and years of reading and responding to student papers. Whatever those factors are, they feed into our judgments. Thus, there is a kind of individual validity of judgment which arises from our well-trained and experienced response to all sorts of texts, including student texts. In a very real sense, no one else can “disprove” my response and judgment of a text.

But there is another kind of validity of judgment which can come from the pooling of individual judgments in the process of discussion of specific papers about which decisions need to be made for reasons we all know within a context we all share, a validity quite different from ETS readings. The more we participate in such collaborative decision making, the more we become a community—a community which exists in a very specific time and place and for a very specific purpose within that time and place.

This is in fact what we do in our portfolio system at Stony Brook. A passing portfolio is what students need in order to satisfy the first level of the writing requirement at Stony Brook. A portfolio passes if at least two teachers agree that it is passing. The judgment is holistic in terms of the whole portfolio.

So, what I am saying is that there are two sorts of valid judgments—the totally personal and the communal—but it has to be a community which is engaged in conversation about teaching and standards all the time, not just during grading sessions and not in the abstract. These discussions always have to be tied to actual student papers, and they need to include the student's teacher and be based on a range of work.

Additionally, and perhaps paradoxically, I want to argue for the importance and benefit of evaluation. The more we talk about evaluation with our colleagues, the better we'll become at giving feedback to our students on their writing and the better we'll be able to guide our students into making their own evaluations of all sorts of texts, including their own. James Moffett wisely reminds us that the more talk we hear, the more our own voices are likely to be individualized, and yet remain solidly embedded in the language which provides the basis for communication. The same is true of evaluation. The more we engage in talk with students and colleagues about our reactions to texts, the more we're able to construct individual evaluations firmly embedded in our communities. Ultimately our students also need to learn that, to understand the variety of ways a particular community will respond to their texts. This understanding will open the doors to the revision and improvement of texts based on context and purpose and personal intentions. Without some internalization of our voices and through our voices an internalization of the voices of our community, students will not be able to become good editors and revisers of their own writing.

And so, outsider as I am, I'd like to propose something fairly radical to you, all the while recognizing that any evaluation system needs to grow from the strengths and initiation of individual teachers; it cannot be imposed from above—the standards must come from within the group and be constantly open to alteration and transmutation. My suggestions are meant to start a conversation.

Here's my suggestion: Conduct your classes as you always do, getting students to collect all their work, formal and informal writings, graded and ungraded, journals, whatever you ask them to write, but including I hope some writing about their own writing. Many of you undoubtedly already do this. Two weeks before the end of the term ask your students to look through their own folders and write a letter summarizing the contents, the sorts of processes involved in producing those contents, including also some analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the writing, concluding with their estimates of whether they should pass on to another level. You will then meet with each student (or perhaps only with those selected because their status is problematic) and discuss their evaluations of themselves and your evaluations of them. In the final week (or during the time normally spent scoring standardized tests) meet with a group of your colleagues and discuss the following specific folders:

- 1) A folder you are certain passes
- 2) A folder you are certain fails
- 3) All folders on the borderline

Whatever decisions the group makes would be final. Even if teachers, particularly adjuncts, were paid extra for these group sessions, the overall cost would have to be less than all it costs to prepare, administer, and store thousands of standardized tests every year.

The two questions I'm most often asked about portfolio grading are 1) doesn't it take loads of time and 2) how reliable is it? No, it really doesn't take loads of time because it usually demonstrates that something else we're spending lots of time on doesn't warrant that time. As for the second question, how valid (not reliable) is what's currently being done? Because you and I agree on a score doesn't mean that the student whose paper we are reading is necessarily the writer we say she or he is. What's more, Roberta Camp of ETS has a delightful little table that I love to show skeptics; it's a statistical study which demonstrates that the more people who read a particular set of papers, the more genres or modes there are in the set, and the more examples of each genre or mode there are, the higher the reliability—that is, the more likely it will be that evaluators will agree on their evaluations. This is the closest we can come to making judgments about a writer; everyone's running about trying to make a difficult job easy. Was the Nobel Prize for Literature ever given to a writer who produced just one book?

You cannot, of course, adopt my plan because it's *my* plan, not yours. But you can come together with like-minded colleagues and begin to try some things—things that don't bastardize what you teach in your classrooms. Through trial and error, you'll find a way if you continually remind yourselves that evaluation of writing cannot and should not be removed from those contexts which alone provide the possibility for meaningful and useful evaluation. We cannot continue to allow others to tell us how to do the job we know best how to do. But if we don't step in, speak up, develop strategies, others, including state legislators, will gain greater and greater influence over our classrooms. They will be making those decisions which it is our responsibility to make in ways consonant with what we have learned and are continuing to learn about language and the teaching of writing. If you work together, I'm confident you can find ways to evaluate your students' writing fairly for whatever purposes you need, and thus do your job better. If you do work together and pool your knowledge, experience, and commitment to your students and your work, you will come up with something better. Then I can

hope with a great deal of confidence that by the year 2000 the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, as we know it (and its clones throughout the country) will no longer exist.

Good luck.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Muriel Harris spoke at The City University of New York's ESL conference in March, 1990.

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Rose Marie Kinder

## A PIECE OF THE STREETS

**ABSTRACT:** *The frequent use of journalistic texts for classroom discussions encourages students to interpret and analyze written texts more freely and with less apprehension. Two groups of students who had failed an upper-division writing exam and who were reluctant to discuss assigned readings, became engaged and careful readers when similar material was presented spontaneously. Their responses suggest that the use of unplanned material creates a supportive environment in which teacher and student meet on common ground.*

I want to make a case for the frequent use of newspaper, journal, and magazine articles as texts in composition classrooms. I imagine many teachers already use them, but I suspect many do not, preferring to follow the order of reading and questions and exercises prescribed by a bound text, one chosen by the department and supported by at least a publishing house. Using "found" articles, the printed communications we encounter and read every day may be a little risky for the teacher but it can also bring composition into the area where the students live, which is what we're all attempting to do.

Two years ago, at the University of Arizona, I was teaching three summer classes, two of which were writing workshops for students who had failed the university's Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam. These students weren't likely to have a favorable attitude toward writing: they were juniors and seniors, held back by their

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departments from graduating or from taking advanced classes, until they could present evidence of acceptable writing proficiency. They felt, each of them, caught in the English Department's web of "basic skills." Actually, the proficiency exam is the joint effort of the university's numerous colleges and is only administered by the Composition Board. At any rate, the students had little faith in the Department of English, and none in themselves. After all, a written exam had just shown them (and the world, they seemed to believe) that they were unable to respond in writing to a piece they had read. They weren't exactly Troyka's "non-traditional" (16) students. They were accustomed to academic life, procedures, and expectations. But like Bartholomae's students, they were not familiar with academic discourse, and like Rose's they were apprehensive, and expected failure rather than learning and success. They wanted simply to pass the course.

As I had designed the workshop originally myself, the packet of materials was one that, for the most part, I approved of (some readings had been added by others), and would have selected again. The writings, by such writers as Lewis Thomas, George Will, Joan Didion, and others, were short, accessible, lively, and were meant to generate interest and response, not to test students' analytical abilities, but to foster them. The main readings in the course would be the students' own writings, as Murray and Bartholomae and Petrosky convincingly suggest should be the content of a writing class. As I wanted the students to see and hear many voices and techniques, and to help them acquire their own, the chosen texts seemed reasonable, accessible, and nonthreatening.

The classes stymied me. If the students found the material accessible, they didn't find it engaging, and no amount of willingness on my part to query, model, mirror, entertain, or coerce, could bring flickers of interest to their eyes. Certainly they joined in discussions, even prompted some, and took notes. We approached writing as process, following current theories and, gradually, trying to keep the information relevant to their own writing, I introduced them to audience awareness, to writing choices in arrangement, modes, and language. They were attentive, somewhat participative; but even in peer-response work, they were mostly courteous and patient. It's odd how patience resembles defeat.

Then one morning I read a Royko essay, "The Risks Women Take in Miniskirts," containing passages such as the following:

The fact is, someone who wears a miniskirt is, in effect, making a statement. She is saying: "Gaze upon my flesh. Don't I have a neat set of gams? Don't they turn you on?"

They can deny it, but why else would a female person wear so revealing a garment in public? It is, pure and simple, exhibitionism. A modified form of flashing.

Now if a man flashes, women say “eek,” call a cop and the poor soul is hauled to the jailhouse and labeled for life as a creep. But when a woman does essentially the same thing, she takes refuge behind the concept of “fashion.” (15)

I reacted personally, as I usually do to Royko—sometimes favorably, sometimes not so. I cut and pocketed the essay intending to ask colleagues—not students—their opinions. Had Royko stepped over the bounds, even considering his limited audience? Shouldn't someone respond? I had at that time no intention of using the piece in the workshop classes. However, the first professor who responded to Royko said something about the article being “tongue-in-cheek,” and that no one “takes Royko seriously.” Yet I was taking Royko seriously.

To test the professor's claim, I read the essay aloud to one class—the American Short Story. They took Royko seriously, too; but they also agreed with him. That was disconcerting. Here were students a little attuned to the power of language. They were fairly good writers themselves, and interested in literature. I turned the Royko article into an impromptu lesson, asking the students simply to examine the article closely, weighing Royko's evidence for his position. The next surprise was more pleasant: most of them decided they did not agree with Royko's evidence and thus did not actually agree with him at all. What they had accepted initially was an implied maxim underlying his essay: that we must be aware of the risks of our actions. With this he had disguised a traditional sexist stance.

Their interest in Royko caused me to try the exercise with the writing-workshop students, the patient but lethargic class. From the beginning, they were involved. They chuckled, laughed, and (which didn't surprise me this time) agreed with Royko. He was serious, they said, and he was right. I asked them to analyze the essay as they had one another's work, and as we had analyzed the readings in the packet. Here is a summary of their findings: Royko is writing to the general public, primarily to fans who already agree with him. His essay would not appeal to an academic audience. Royko's purpose is to express his opinion, but he wants too, to persuade, and is really writing an argument, taking a controversial issue and presenting only one side. He arranges his material in a standard (classical) pattern: introduction, statement of fact, thesis, supporting paragraphs in which he gives concrete examples through compari-

son and cause-effect, and conclusion. He stereotypes women throughout, in examples and in word choices such as “eek” and “refuge.” His comparisons are false: “flashing” and wearing miniskirts are not the same type of action. He seems to consider the opposition, since he includes “fashion,” but he really evades that point. The students noted other strategies as well, but these were the major ones. The majority of the students decided that they did not agree with Royko after all—they enjoyed him immensely, but they didn’t agree with him.

I imagine that any teacher would see the value in this exercise, at least in the students’ use of analytical skills and abstract reasoning. Too, they experienced firsthand, and eventually consciously, the power of language, Royko’s manipulation of their own opinions and beliefs. If they had read the piece only once, as articles are usually read, they might have walked away with someone else’s opinion ringing in their ears and coming from their lips.

Equally as important here, though, is the question of why they became involved with this article and not those in the packet? The class material had included dramatic essays for the general reader, some very emotional, but none had elicited even half the response of the Royko article. What I had observed during their exercise with the “found” piece, was speculation about Royko the man, as well as Royko the writer, and an unabashed willingness to risk interpreting what he might have meant, how he might have approached the topic, what larger issues lay behind his words. This kind of interplay between minds, this reaching through language for ideas and beliefs, had been my goal throughout the classes. Why the success with Royko?

Part of the answer may be that because the professor’s response to Royko had surprised me, I walked into the classes totally unsure of what the students would say, could say, or should say. I was only a citizen, a reader of newspapers. But I try to be that open with every class. I believe the real answer lies in the total spontaneity of our joint response to the text, the equality created in reading a piece of everyday communication.

Any text given to students as part of a course implies an authority behind the text, an authority that includes the instructor and department, and thus has behind it years of academic learning and expectations—that authority who offers classroom texts, whether they be anthologies or packets, writings by professionals or by students. At the University of Arizona, for example, a main text was *A Student’s Guide to Freshman Composition* (Shropshire). Revised and reprinted each year, it was filled with students’ essays of various qualities, reflecting personal writing processes, personal

styles, and levels of success in an academic setting. Yet students resisted reading that text as much as they did Axelrod and Cooper's *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* or Crews' *Random House Handbook*, or any other material preplanned and presented. Even when the text is a peer's, the students still seem to see the assigned written word as something to be analyzed with an ultimate departmental goal in mind, to help their peers produce steps, ideas and techniques that will lead to success in the particular course.

We're urged more and more to make our classroom content more accessible to our students—in various works, Patricia Bizzell urges us to negotiate; James Sledd to accept as much variation as we can comfortably accommodate. A bit of common rhetoric from the newsstand is one step not only in being accessible but in meeting the students on a common ground. That kind of writing isn't so confined within the walls of learning, doesn't have a judging, hierarchical entity surrounding it. It is a piece of the streets, of homes and coffeehouses. It is everyday, thirty-five cents or free, communication in the real world. This is the students' material, their world, with its spontaneous, quick, fragmented bits of communication. They can love it or rip it apart—no heritage of education lies behind it to say, even in a subtle whisper, "You're wrong." The students are ensured success in interpreting: if they disagree with the text, no one will produce a critical anthology to prove them wrong; if they agree, they have the popularity of their stance, as evidenced by the very existence of the article, to support their decision. For this brief time they are in a totally supportive environment—what we would wish them to feel the support of all the time.

I am not recommending that a writing course be based solely on such found material, although I believe it could be done. In our times, when we know that all our choices reflect our biases and all our choices affect our students' lives, to recommend one type of content or one approach, is to assume a greater knowledge than any of us can have. But whether we believe in a canon, traditional or modern, or in totally student-generated material, we can still plan our courses to include material with which we are no more familiar than our students are. Let's read with them as citizens, be interested, angered or delighted, be manipulated by slanted information, or be vulnerable because of ignorance. If we teachers can't risk facing a strange piece of writing, then how can we expect our students to do so without trepidation and a little resistance?

Conjecture is, of course, dangerous. I haven't interviewed students and haven't documented any clinical observations. I have, however, seen a consistent pattern in the responses of my students

to “found” articles, and have listened to colleagues discussing surprising and pleasing responses to such spontaneous texts as news items, ads, fliers, brochures, and even university memos and letters. Sometimes students borrow these items from one another; sometimes they write essays about the topic raised or about the item itself; sometimes spontaneous material in one class becomes planned material in another. But even if these texts didn’t lead to writing, even if the students missed the revelation that we, too, are audiences for the same communications as they, often swayed by the same rhetoric, the texts seem vitally important—for at least a short time the doors of academe are open to the streets.

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Adele MacGowan-Gilhooly

# FLUENCY FIRST: REVERSING THE TRADITIONAL ESL SEQUENCE

*ABSTRACT: The author describes an ESL department's whole language approach to writing and reading, replacing its traditional grammar-based ESL instructional sequence. The new approach is enabling students to become fluent in writing and reading before having to produce grammatically correct pieces or to comprehend academic material. The research and theory on language acquisition, literacy development, and learning support a whole-language approach to ESL. And the quantitative and qualitative results of the first three years of using the approach affirm its superiority over traditional approaches to ESL reading and writing instruction.*

## INTRODUCTION

Too many English as a second language (ESL) students do not achieve their educational goals because they do not meet their colleges' writing standards. Those who evaluate ESL students' writing commonly cite the following problems: (1) lack of fluency or adequate control over the language, including inadequate vocabularies; (2) general lack of knowledge and the consequent inability to write effective pieces; and (3) errors in grammar and the mechanics of writing, despite the fact that most ESL students have had years of instruction in both. One way to address these problems is by reversing the traditional grammar-focused approach to ESL and

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instead using a whole-language approach, we help ESL students acquire greater fluency and knowledge and thus write more effective, and even more correct pieces.

Freeman and Freeman suggest that the following whole-language principles are important for second language (L2) learning in classrooms: language should be learner-centered; language is best learned when kept whole; language instruction should employ listening, speaking, reading, and writing; language in the classroom should be meaningful and functional; language is learned through social interaction; and language is learned when teachers have faith in learners. This article describes an experimental whole-language approach to ESL writing and reading in an open admissions urban institution serving primarily minority students.

## **BACKGROUND**

The ESL students in question typically have great trouble passing the university's required skills assessment tests (SKAT) in writing and reading, tests which students must pass before taking the bulk of their required courses, even the English Composition requirement. Prior to 1988, ESL students' average passing rate on the writing test had been only about thirty-five percent, and on the reading test, twenty percent.

The ESL faculty had historically taken a traditional instructional approach, stressing grammar and intensive reading and writing (a lot of work on relatively short readings and on writing paragraphs and essays). Yet pass rates had remained low. Then in the Fall of 1987, a group of faculty at The City College, CUNY began to use a whole-language approach to literacy. Since then students' writing and reading test scores have improved. We started implementing our approach in ESL 10, our first level ESL reading/writing course for students with a basic knowledge of English but weak reading and writing abilities. The ESL 10 students read several books, responded to them in writing in journals, and wrote 10,000-word, semester-long projects. We ran the classes workshop style, with students helping each other revise their own pieces, and understand the books they were reading. We used no ESL textbooks and did not teach grammar in those classes, but students made greater gains than we had ever seen in ESL 10. The approach was so successful that we extended it the following semester into our two upper-level ESL reading/writing courses, ESL 20 and 30. Since then, our SKAT reading test passing rate has doubled and the writing test passing rate has increased by sixty percent, even with only two-thirds of the faculty using the approach.

## IMPLICATIONS FROM THEORY AND RESEARCH

### *First language (L1) acquisition*

Implications for whole language approach are plentiful in the research literature. Educators can learn much about how lasting learning occurs from the research on L1 acquisition, not only because it is a language, but because L1 is something which everyone learns by the age of four or five, though it is extraordinarily complex. Macaulay summarizes how children learn L1: by being in the midst of abundant talk, by listening and experimenting with speaking, learning names of things, then phrases, and then the syntax they need to express themselves. They progress in L1 acquisition primarily through massive amounts of interaction with parents or more knowledgeable peers and they control their own L1 learning. Their knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation expands until they are fluent. The key to L1 acquisition is plentiful interaction with more knowledgeable others. The implication for L2 acquisition in classrooms is to provide similar language input and interaction, but due to time limits, in a far more condensed fashion.

### *L2 acquisition*

Providing optimal input in the classroom in order to foster the development of L2 fluency does not mean teaching grammar. Krashen (1985) and McLaughlin argue from the research on L2 acquisition that L2 best develops in ways similar to L1: in contexts where the negotiation of meaning, and not the correctness of form, is the central motivating force, and where language exposure is real, extensive, and anxiety free. But in most language classrooms, language exposure is artificial (contrived, practiced, grammatically sequenced), limited, and anxiety arousing.

Krashen (1987) hypothesizes that the best classroom L2 acquisition will occur when the input provided to learners is comprehensible, interesting and/or relevant, not grammatically sequenced, provided in abundant quantity, and in such a way as to promote self-confidence and self-direction while arousing little or no anxiety. After examining popular L2 teaching methods and finding most of them wanting in such input, he concludes that pleasure reading and conversation have the greatest potential for meeting all the requirements for optimal L2 acquisition because they are made up of real input, and not the contrived type of input found in ESL textbooks and tapes. A whole-language approach includes much pleasure reading and real conversation.

Krashen also makes an important distinction between L2

learning and L2 acquisition. L2 learning takes effort, like extensive memorization of rules and practice of forms learned. Then when people try to use these learned forms in real language situations, they often make mistakes and find it difficult to express themselves adequately and even to understand others. L1 is acquired naturalistically through interaction with others, with far less mental effort and with a greater payoff. L2 may be acquired in a similar manner in schools with a whole-language approach. This is true for both children and adults.

McLaughlin explains that early stages of language development involve the same cognitive strategies for adults and children. The difference is that adults have superior memory heuristics that enable longer retention and more facile discovery of meaning. Adults also have more extensive L1 experience, vocabulary, and conceptual knowledge that help them to process information more quickly. And if literate in L1, they have far less work to do in acquiring literacy in L2. They can also learn and apply rules of language more easily, although an overemphasis on correctness can also impede progress in L2 acquisition.

McLaughlin and others who have studied L2 acquisition describe learners' errors in terms of strategies. Thus what seems to be L1 interference or perhaps an inability to master L2 grammar is actually the result of the learner's strategies to discover irregularities and rules in L2. L2 adults make similar mistakes, regardless of what L1 they speak, and these represent unsuccessful attempts to discover L2 rules. They make simplification errors, transfer errors, or overgeneralization errors as they strive to make themselves understood, and they make them for as long a time as it takes for them to develop their competence in L2. This period of development is referred to as the interlanguage stage and needs to be supported by efforts to help the learner communicate intelligibly in L2 before requiring that s/he be correct. To learn to communicate intelligibly requires a great deal of exposure to L2 with the types of input and interaction L1 learners receive.

### *L1 literacy development*

The research on the most successful learning of reading and writing in L1 also shows that when learners do abundant reading and writing, talk about both, enjoy both, exercise a good deal of control over both, and are not overly concerned about correctness, literacy development, like L1 acquisition, is enjoyable, successful, and almost effortless. And through an approach such as whole language, learners acquire a good deal of functional language knowledge that otherwise they would have to take great pains to

learn: spelling, grammar, vocabulary, appreciation of literature, good composing skills, and good reading skills.

On the elementary level, Holdaway, Graves, Harste, and Smith, among others, have shown how children acquire the skills of literacy when they read and write extensively, talk about language and about what they read and write, have abundant time for independent reading and writing, receive constructive feedback on their writing, ask their own questions, formulate and test their own hypotheses, are not afraid of making mistakes, are encouraged to become serious authors, and are immersed in literate activities across the curriculum. They can control and direct many of these activities themselves.

Branscombe, Atwel, Bartholomae and Petrosky, and many others on the secondary and postsecondary levels report similar findings. It appears that students who read extensively and talk about their reading, who become fluent writers before having to focus on correctness (Mayher et al.), and who are writing to learn (Gere; Goswami) become more successful academic readers, writers, and learners.

### *L2 literacy development*

As already indicated, research on L2 literacy development also points to the desirability of a whole-language approach, with an emphasis on integrative skills rather than grammar study, memorization, and repetitious exercises. According to Hudelson, language development researchers have concluded that people learn languages by actively participating in an ongoing process of figuring out how language works, and that learners must be in control of this process. Research evidence further suggests that the processes of L1 and L2 acquisition are more similar than different, which in the school setting means that L2 learners are in the process of creative construction of the new language. Errors are a natural part of this process as learners formulate and test hypotheses about the language. There are also significant individual differences in the rate of acquisition, thus a uniformly paced curriculum is of little effectiveness. L2 learners want to use the L2 and work hard to be included in the ongoing activities of the classroom. More knowledgeable others and peers offer important teacher functions in providing comprehensible input and motivation to help L2 learners continue learning English. This is true for both oral and written English (1-3).

Like native speakers, L2 writers creatively construct the written language, develop at their own pace, and control the process. Some will experiment and take risks in creating meaning in writing;

others will use familiar patterns for a long time. Investigations have shown that given sufficient encouragement and opportunity, ESL writers will work hard to create meaning, even those without native-like control of English (20–21). ESL learners also construct meaning from print as they read, just as L1 readers do (Carrell et al.).

There have been several studies conducted and hypotheses made about the processes of L2 writing which are very similar to those regarding L1 writing. For example, Edelsky found that the quality of writing is much higher for unassigned topics than for assigned ones in ESL writing. Others have found that personal involvement with a piece also has a positive effect on its quality. Pieces on unassigned topics tend to be better developed and have a personal voice. This is particularly true when there is a real audience, when writers have a stake in the piece, and when it is purposeful. And Urzua found that in writing/reading workshops, as opposed to traditional instruction, L2 writers revise more, develop a personal voice, and become more aware of the power of language. She also found that conferencing influences revising positively.

Hudelson concludes from a review of the research on children's ESL writing that ESL learners, while still learning English, can write. Their texts have many features in common with L1 writers' texts, features indicating that they are making predictions about how the L2 works, and testing and revising their ideas. She recommends a variety of strategies for classrooms, including using diaries and journals to promote fluency in writing and utilizing personal narratives and writing workshop techniques to help learners become comfortable with writing on self-selected topics, and with drafting, sharing, and revising. She also suggests incorporating expressive, literary, and expository writing into meaningful content-area learning.

Likewise, Krashen (1985) recommends using subject matter in L2 as a vehicle of presentation and explanation, but without demands for premature production or full grammatical accuracy. He cites the evidence from the successful language immersion programs in Canada and elsewhere, where teachers incorporate language development into content-area instruction. And in their studies of adult L2 writing, Raimes, Zamel, and others have found that the L2 writing process must begin with abundant opportunities to generate ideas before students focus on editing. They and other researchers in ESL (Krashen 1987; Spolsky) also argue that direct grammar instruction does not generally improve L2 writing or even L2 acquisition. In fact, it probably impedes both processes.

As for L2 reading, Carrell's review of the research shows that L2 reading and L1 reading are currently understood in much the same

way: as an active process in which the L2 reader is an active information processor who predicts meaning while sampling only parts of the text. In addition, everything in the reader's prior experience and knowledge plays a significant role in the process of L2 reading (Carrell and Eisterhold). Carrell further explains that L2 reading must involve both the predicting/sampling activities as well as bottom-up processing, or some decoding, to be efficient; thus reading experts now propose an interactive L2 reading model involving both types of processing. And Devine explains that research and experience have shown that reading is a vehicle not only for the development of L2 reading abilities, but for learning L2 as well. Krashen (1989) found that ESL students' vocabulary, writing, and spelling improve through extensive reading, another indication that using the language extensively and for real purposes helps one to acquire more of the language.

Learning theorists like Vygotsky, Britton, and Wells have stressed the interdependence of language and learning, and the fact that lasting learning, intellectual growth, and language are inextricably connected. This too suggests classroom learning contexts where learners learn the language and content through an abundance of language-mediated activities and projects over which they can exert considerable control.

## THE NEW ESL APPROACH AT CCNY

Borrowing the terms of Mayher et al., that the ideal sequence in the development of writing would stress fluency first, then clarity, and finally correctness, we made these the respective goals for our three ESL writing/reading courses: ESL 10, 20, and 30.

### *ESL 10*

We defined fluency as the ability to generate one's ideas in writing intelligibly and with relative ease, and to comprehend popular fiction with similar ease. To do this, students were given massive exposure to English. They read 1,000 pages of popular fiction, in books like Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, B. B. Hiller's *The Karate Kid*, Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They also read autobiographical and biographical works like *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Louis Fischer's *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World*, and William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*. They had to read about 70 pages a week for homework, copy passages that struck them, and write responses to

those passages in their double-entry journals. They then discussed their responses and questions in small groups in class.

The ESL 10 students also worked on a writing project that had to total 10,000 words by semester's end. Most wrote autobiographical pieces consisting of significant chapters or memories in their lives; some wrote family histories. Others wrote of political strife they had lived through and escaped from, or mysteries, love stories, science fiction, or magazines. Each week they drafted a new piece for their "books," as we called them, read them to their partners, and got help from them on making the pieces comprehensible, logical, and interesting. Teachers then gave more of the same kind of feedback for students to consider for final revisions.

Although, at the beginning, many students complained about the amount of work required and the lack of grammar lessons, after a few weeks both students and teachers expressed amazement at how much the students had progressed in such a short time. As students became more involved in their reading and in their writing projects, they also became more engaged in them, often reading beyond assigned pages and writing up to twice as much as required. By semester's end, most were reading and writing fluently and even more correctly than in the beginning, without having received any corrections or grammar instruction. The overall enthusiasm and trust generated by the approach led us to continue with it in ESL 10 and extend it into the second level, ESL 20.

### *ESL 20*

The goal for ESL 20 became clarity, which we defined as the ability to write expository pieces with a clear focus, sufficient support for that focus, logical development of ideas, and effective introductions and conclusions. In ESL 20, students went from narrative and descriptive writing and reading to expository writing and reading, but not in one leap. We wanted to ease them into expository writing, and from reading for pleasure into academic reading, or reading to learn. They began by reading two bestsellers, historical fiction or nonfiction, having to do with the U.S.A., such as Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and Studs Terkel's *Working*. As in ESL 10, they responded in writing in double-entry journals and discussed their readings in small groups.

They also wrote a 10,000-word, semester-long project on some aspect of America having to do with its people, history, culture, or problems. The project included letter writing, point-of-view writing, reading and writing about a best seller on the topic, interviewing an expert and reporting on that, library research, and a term paper.

Students revised their pieces in a workshop setting, as in ESL 10. And again, by semester's end, most students were writing clearly enough to pass ESL 20.

### *ESL 30*

Those teaching ESL 30, the course at the end of which students have to pass the university's writing exam, reported and continue to report, that the students coming out of ESL 20 are now much better writers and readers than those formerly entering ESL 30. Teachers say they now do not have to focus as much on helping their ESL 30 students to compose well, and can concentrate on students' remaining problems with grammar and the mechanics of the language (which are no greater or less than when we used a grammar curriculum) and on getting students ready for the test, which requires them to write a 350-word persuasive piece that is almost error-free in 50 minutes. Thus the two major goals of ESL 30 are correctness and preparation for the test.

In ESL 30, teachers who are committed to the whole-language approach require that students revise their pieces first to be sure they are completely clear, intelligible, and well-written before they focus on correcting them. Once they are sure students can write clear and effective persuasive pieces, they have them begin work on eliminating the largest percentage of their errors by choosing just a few of their most serious and most frequently occurring errors, and looking just for them when they edit. This eliminates the bulk of students' errors without the cognitive overburden of trying to correct every error.

To become strong in argumentative writing, students read newspaper and magazine articles and editorials, write in their journals in response to them, discuss their ideas in small groups, debate the issues both aloud and in silent written debates with partners, and build up a knowledge of current issues and principles involved in them, like civil rights, government policies, domestic and foreign problems, personal values and beliefs, and ethics. Students also freewrite frequently, and write a few essays each week which go through the same process as in ESL 10 and 20: peer review, revising, teacher response, more revising, until the essay is clear and correct enough to satisfy the criteria posed by the writing exam. In the process, students ask many questions in the context of their writing, and then write what they've learned on individualized study lists of spelling words, new vocabulary, useful facts, grammar points they need to focus on, mechanics issues, and style issues.

Some ESL 30 teachers also have students write real letters to newspapers, public agencies, government officials, businesses, and

others to complain about an issue and to suggest solutions. We have found that this type of real writing is often the most effective. (For more specifics on classroom activities, materials, and techniques, see MacGowan-Gilhooly "Fluency Before Correctness: A Whole Language Experiment in College ESL." *College ESL* 1.1 (Spring 1991).

### *Evaluation*

Students in ESL 10 and 20 are evaluated at the end of the semester through a timed essay exam with topics relevant to the semester-long projects they have done and the books they have read. But this exam is only one factor in their evaluation. They keep a portfolio with their beginning piece from the first day of the semester, their midterm exam, their final, and three pieces from their projects that they think are their best. The ESL 10 and 20 teachers read each others' students' exams and if necessary, pieces from students' portfolios, and recommend if the student should pass or repeat the course. Then the teacher bases the grade on the quality of the portfolio pieces, including consideration of the quantity of work completed. ESL 30 students are given the writing exam at the end of the course, and two readers other than the teacher, usually one from the ESL staff and one from the English department, evaluate the essays. Students who do not pass the exam must repeat ESL 30.

ESL 10, 20, and 30 classes utilizing the new approach have these commonalities: a workshop format, peer and teacher help with revisions, massive exposure to real language through extensive reading, writing, and speaking, absence of ESL textbooks, absence of sequenced grammar syllabi or uniform curricula, student control over much of their work, a portfolio system, and teachers helping individuals and small groups rather than leading the whole class.

We follow a uniform approach, or philosophy, but not a static method. Indeed, we are enabled to offer a curriculum that is anything but static. Materials and activities change with new insights; teachers regularly exchange ideas to help students increase their learning; students learn from their interests and work from their strengths; there is a great deal of life in the classroom, as students share their knowledge and expertise with others; and the approach helps students utilize better learning strategies and become more responsible for their own learning.

## **QUANTITATIVE RESULTS**

The quantitative results we have so far have reassured us and the

students that we are headed in the right direction. The number of students taking courses using the fluency-first approach is approximately 3,000 so far; with 250 in the Fall of 1987 and roughly 600 each semester from Spring 1988 through Spring 1990. Even though a few teachers of ESL 10 and 20 have stuck to a traditional curriculum, most have used the new approach, and overall, ESL students' reading scores since 1987 have almost doubled. We believe that this rate could be even higher if all were using the approach, and if the test were given after ESL 30 or even later; currently it is given after ESL 21, a reading course students take concurrently with ESL 20.

The writing test pass rate has gone from thirty-five percent to fifty-six percent, which is about the average for native speakers, and there is a much lower course repetition rate for ESL 10 and 20. In addition, more students who start on the ESL 10 level are passing the test. Prior to Fall 1987, only twenty percent of those students eventually passed the SKAT. And if the SKAT test were given after some content courses instead of after ESL 30, probably even more students would pass it. But we all know that numbers do not tell the whole story.

## **QUALITATIVE RESULTS**

The most compelling evidence of the success of the approach has been qualitative, with uniformly enthusiastic feedback from teachers, almost universally positive feedback from students, and concrete evidence of improvement in students' written work and reading abilities. On a survey conducted at the end of the second semester in which the new approach was being piloted, teachers reported unprecedented improvement in students' control of English, with growth in fluency occurring very fast. Students typically doubled their production by the fourth week of class. Teachers also reported greater clarity in the way students presented ideas, more daring in their use of new vocabulary, greater ability to write interesting pieces, better reading comprehension and speed, greater enjoyment of reading than in previous ESL courses, and better discussions of readings with students providing insights from their own lives and world views.

Many reported that students' essays had more depth and richness, more fluency, and better grammar, and that all the students progressed more in these courses than in previous ones. Students also showed more growth in the affective domain, specifically more confidence, better ability to work with groups, and more tolerance for divergent views. And cognitively, they were

better at analytical thinking, and showed much greater intellectual curiosity. Further, the students who did the most work progressed the most, and students generally were more serious, concentrated, self-reliant, and open to others than in previous semesters when the approach was traditional.

Teachers reported a higher degree of engagement, attention, and time on task. Students were more willing to write and less afraid of it. They also did so much reading and discussion that it gave them a shared experience in which everyone seemed to have an equal footing; this was empowering to students who were less skilled in English. And teachers felt that students gained confidence in themselves as writers and saw themselves as serious writers in this approach; traditional approaches seemed to inhibit experimentation and exaggerate the importance of errors. Before the course, students could not apply rules they had learned to their writing; but after it, it seemed they could. Yet the only grammar instruction they had had was in the context of questions about their own writing as they revised it.

When asked what they would change about the approach, teachers said they needed more time for in-class individual conferences, more lab support in the way of tutors, better techniques for getting the groups to be more independent, and greater evidence that students are learning grammar and mechanics in ESL 10 and 20, even though they can see fewer mistakes as students progress through the courses. Teachers also wanted to do less talking and interfering with students' discussions and their written pieces, because such intervention appeared to lessen students' involvement and creativity. Many ended up not even looking at students' first or second drafts, but responding to the third draft after the student had worked with a peer. However, at that point, teachers said they wanted to give even more helpful responses than they were giving. And they wanted to work more on a one-to-one basis than they had been able to do.

The majority of students believed that they had improved considerably because they could write such long pieces and read so much in such a short time, compared with work done in former courses. They felt the organization of their writing had improved, and said they had greater confidence and control when writing and that they were surprised by how much they could write. They also felt they were better able to develop ideas and liked working on the semester-long writing projects the best. They expressed pride in having read several real novels in English, rather than ones abridged for ESL students, but they felt less sure about their correctness in writing. Many students also said that the course, although focusing

on reading and writing, had improved their speaking as well. And a few also commented that their ways of thinking have changed, that they felt Americanized because of the course work and that they liked that feeling.

Students said they wanted more grammar, even though they acknowledged greater growth in this ESL approach than in previous courses in which grammar had received major stress. They also wanted more practice for the final exam. And many students said that the writing demands of the double-entry journals were too great. They also said they were teaching each other too much and maybe the teacher should be teaching them more. In other words, despite their recognition of and satisfaction with their own growth, years of traditional instruction limited their confidence in the approach.

## ONGOING RESEARCH

The City College has received a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to conduct further research on the approach, to train teachers in the theory and techniques used, and to disseminate project findings. The first item on our research agenda is to demonstrate how students' writing improves over time using a whole-language, fluency-first approach, compared with how it develops using a grammar-based approach. And we have many questions to answer, such as whether the pressure to pass the test adversely affects students' development in writing in ESL 30, and how well our students do in later required courses. We also want to experiment with students taking greater control and responsibility in the courses, and with other course themes, activities, projects, and readings.

But what we have already learned is that our students now are acquiring fluency in English along with what Mayher et al. call fluency in the written language, and that this latter fluency is the basis for their becoming competent readers and writers, enough to become successful members of the academy. Thus there are decided implications for such an approach in teaching native speakers of English as well.

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## News and Announcements

**The 20th Wyoming Conference on English**, University of Wyoming in Laramie, will be held **June 24–28, 1991**. The theme is Writing and Teaching in the Material World. Invited speakers are David Bartholomae, U of Pittsburgh; Stephen Greenblatt, U of California-Berkeley; Susan Howe, poet and critic; Patricia Nelson Limrick, U of Colorado-Boulder; Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Syracuse U. **Contact:** Bruce Richardson, Conference Director, Dept. of English, P.O. Box 3353, Laramie, WY 82071-3353, (307) 766-6486.

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**Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators** will hold its 1991 training program **June 29 through July 26** at Appalachian State U in Boone, NC. The intensive four-week residency portion includes: A living/learning community environment of informal networking and information sharing; four-week workshops on current topics and state-of-the-art strategies for efficient operation of developmental and learning assistance programs; a faculty of recognized experts; optional credit leading toward the M.S. or Ed. S. in Higher Education; and recreation amidst the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains. The residency is followed by a supervised practicum completed at the participants' home campuses.

The Kellogg Institute further announces the availability of four Leadership Scholar Program awards for the 1991 Institute granted on a competitive basis to individuals who've held leadership positions in local, regional, or national organizations concerned with developmental and learning assistance activities on college campuses. Awardees receive a \$500 fee waiver for their attendance. **Contact:** Elaini Bingham, Director, Kellogg Institute, Appalachian State U, Boone, NC 28608, (704)262-3057.

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**Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition** will be held in State College, PA **July 10–13, 1991**. Among the featured speakers will be: Linda Brodkey, Marilyn Cooper, Jim Corder, Peter Elbow, Jeanne Fahnestock, Michael Halloran, Anne Herrington, Susan Jarrett, Debra Journet, Richard Larson, Carolyn Miller, James J. Murphy, and John Schilb. Deadline for proposals was April 2, 1991. **Contact:** John Harwood, Dept. of English, the Pennsylvania State U, University Park, PA 16802. (BITNET: JTH at PSUVM).

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**The Teaching of Grammar**, a national conference sponsored jointly by Pennsylvania College of Technology and the Association of Teachers of English Grammar, will be held **July 15 and 16, 1991**, in Williamsport, PA. Keynote speaker: Bill McCleary, Editor of *Composition Chronicle*. Presentations are invited in the following areas: textbook evaluations, classroom techniques, applied linguistics, teacher training, rhetoric and composition, reading skills, language development, and critical thinking. Ideally, presentations should be 20 minutes, with 10 minutes for discussion, but longer ones will be considered. Please include information on A/V or computer needs, your address, phone number, and a short summary. Deadline: April 30, 1991. **Contact:** Ed Vavra, Pennsylvania College of Technology, DIF 112, One College Ave., Williamsport, PA 17701. (717) 326-3761, Ext. 7736. FAX (717) 327-4503.

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**The Iowa English Bulletin** solicits manuscripts for its Spring 1992 issue on the topic "Politics and the Teaching of English." Papers might address such issues as working conditions of English teachers, including the status and treatment of part-time faculty and relations between teachers of writing and literature; canonicity; authority for determining curriculum; bilingual education; English as a national language; boundaries between English and other disciplines; social vs. cognitive definitions of literacy. This list is meant only to suggest, not exhaust, possibilities. **Deadline: September 30, 1991.** Essays should be between fifteen and twenty double-spaced typed pages, accompanied by an SASE. Manuscripts should use *MLA Handbook, 2nd Ed.* guidelines. **Send to:** Joanne Brown and Bruce Horner, Eds., Iowa English Bulletin, Dept. of English, Drake U, Des Moines, IA 50311.

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**The ESL Council of The City University of New York** will hold its annual conference on Saturday, **May 4, 1991**. The conference theme is "Teachers and Students as Researchers." Keynote speaker: Prof. Susan Lytle, director of the Teacher/Researcher program at the U of Pennsylvania. **Contact:** Dr. Adele MacGowan-Gilhooly, Conference Chair, ESL Dept., R5-218, The City College, CUNY, 138th Street at Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031, (212) 650-6289.



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