

# How Antonio Graduated On Out of Here: Improving the Success of Adult Students with an Individualized Writing Course

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*ABSTRACT: Adult students are more anxious about writing for school, less familiar with academic conventions, and more likely to drop out than younger students. For students learning to move between personal, work, and academic discourse communities, the ongoing and explicit writing instruction argued for in the research of Sternglass, Herrington and Curtis, Carroll, and Beaufort is particularly vital. Writing Workshop at DePaul University's School for New Learning is one model for providing this instruction. The course works for students with a broad range of learning styles, prior knowledge, needs, and goals because it is individualized and because it is focused on developing writers rather than on teaching specific kinds of writing. It is open to any student struggling with writing, from incoming basic writers to seniors stuck on final projects. Writing Workshop has improved access for and the retention and success of our adult students. This article shows the need for a class like Writing Workshop, explains how it works, discusses challenges, and describes the experience of the at-risk, nontraditional, adult students in one Writing Workshop class.*

*KEYWORDS: access, adult students, basic writing models, individualized instruction, meta-cognitive skills, nontraditional students, retention, student success, transfer*

I thought that I would not ever finish my degree. – Antonio<sup>1</sup>

Over seven years after he started college, Antonio became the first college graduate in his family. Antonio's success is all too rare for the 40% of college students who are older than 24 ("Table 191") and the 73% of undergraduates identified as "nontraditional" by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Choy 1-3), where NCES defines nontraditional students as having one or more of the following seven characteristics: "financial independence, part-time attendance, delayed enrollment, full-time work,

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dependents, single parenthood, and lack of a high school diploma” (Choy 11). Antonio was a financially independent, part-time student, and full-time employee who helped support his younger siblings. Like Antonio, most adult students have more than one of the NCES characteristics of nontraditional students. Like many adult students, Antonio almost did not graduate. By the fall of 2009, he had spent two quarters, and much of his two faculty advisors’ patience, trying to write a final project that he did not understand how to approach. That fall, he was one of five students in my Writing Workshop class – a class designed to meet the needs of incoming basic writers as well as students like Antonio who were struggling with advanced writing tasks.

Writing Workshop provides students who need the structure and credit hours of a course with individualized writing instruction at any point in their studies. Developed in response to specific local conditions, Writing Workshop offers a flexible way to support basic writers across the curriculum. It is grounded in research that demonstrates both the importance of writing support for retaining incoming adult students and the necessity of ongoing, direct writing instruction for all students. By providing this direct instruction and coaching students on how to use self-assessment and feedback on their writing, the course has improved the success of our adult students as they move between personal, work, and academic discourse communities.

## **ADULT AND NONTRADITIONAL LEARNERS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM**

Study after study shows that students complete college at lower rates than their peers if they are 25 or older (Murtaugh, Burns, Schuster 368; Swail 18-19; McGivney 35), they are financially independent (Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn 60; Choy 18), they attend school part-time (United States; Adelman xxi; Pusser et al. 5; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn 60; Choy 18; Swail 21), they did not enroll in college immediately after high school (United States; Adelman xx; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn 60; Choy 18), or they work full-time (Pusser et al. 5; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn 60). Half of nontraditional students with four or more of the seven NCES characteristics will drop out within three years of enrolling in school for a bachelor’s degree (Choy 12-13). Half with just two NCES characteristics will drop out within six years of enrolling (Swail 19). Like Antonio, many adult and nontraditional students are also first-generation students. Stuningly, first-generation students are

71% more likely to drop out in their first year of college than students with two college-educated parents (Ishitani 433). The first year is pivotal for both nontraditional and adult students. Nontraditional students are most at-risk of dropping out in their first year (Choy 17), while early academic success is a crucial factor in adult students' decision to remain in school (Smith 76-77).

Given that returning students are more anxious about writing than younger students (Krause 208; Wiant 11-21, 41-45; Sailor ix), providing them with early support for their writing is vital. For example, Gretchen Starks identified "writing and writing assignments" as a recurring theme in the decisions of adult women to stay in or leave school (3). Starks conducted in-depth interviews with seventeen "outlier" students who had either persisted despite being identified as at-risk or dropped out despite being identified as likely to graduate. Her goal was to nuance findings from large-scale quantitative studies that ignore these outlier cases. What she found was the important role writing played in persistence. Students who persisted, although they had low prior academic achievement and often difficult personal and financial situations, valued writing assignments in which they were asked "to explore their feelings, thoughts and goals" and that "helped them develop more self-confidence and awareness of their strengths and weaknesses" (Starks 5, 3). Students who did not persist, even though they had been identified as being at low risk of dropping out, "felt writing was a barrier to their ability to continue in college" (Starks 3).

Students learn to negotiate this barrier when they receive coaching on how to recognize and respond to the "contrasting and sometimes conflicting demands" of college writing assignments (Herrington and Curtis 16). Coaching includes explicit instruction that helps students analyze and address these demands. Longitudinal studies by Marilyn Sternglass, Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis, Lee Ann Carroll, and Anne Beaufort argue that explicit instruction is needed by all students, traditional and nontraditional, throughout their time in college. Sternglass's six-year longitudinal study of nine CUNY students demonstrates that students develop as writers slowly and "neither neatly nor linearly" (xiv). She argues that "the expectation that students have become 'finished writers' by the time they complete a freshman sequence or even an advanced composition course must be abandoned" (296). Sternglass's findings are echoed by Herrington and Curtis, Carroll, and Beaufort. All of these studies show students challenged by the "truly dizzying array of writing assignments and teacher expectations about them" that students encounter "from their first semester to their last" (Herrington and Curtis 387). All conclude that students develop as writers and as

thinkers when they receive coaching throughout their time in college that includes explicit instruction on how to respond to the variety and increasing complexity of the writing tasks they encounter.

Explicit instruction is all the more important for adult and nontraditional students. Adults are often anxious and confused about academic writing because of prior writing experiences in and out of school. From earlier schooling, many adults bring the scars of negative writing experiences (Fredericksen 116; Wiant 15; Wittman; Cox and Ebbers 354). From work and other activities, they can bring writing habits and assumptions that do not serve them well in school (Gillam; Popken; Castaldi). These students need not only encouragement but also coaching on how to recognize and move between their different discourse communities. As Teresa Lillis has shown, teachers frequently assume knowledge of academic writing conventions that nontraditional students do not have, effectively excluding them from academic literacy. She argues “that confusion is so all-pervasive a dimension of their [the students’] experiences as a group of ‘non-traditional’ students in higher education that it signals the need to look beyond a notion of individual confusion, towards an ideologically inscribed institutional practice of mystery” (Lillis 14). To address this confusion, Lillis calls for explicit instruction on the conventions of academic writing.

In addition to providing explicit writing instruction, coaching also prepares students to manage their own ongoing development as writers. The goal, as Beaufort states, is to teach “with an eye toward transfer of learning” in order to “set students on a course of life-long learning so that they know *how to learn* to become better and better writers in a variety of social contexts” (7). In each of the longitudinal studies, students are shown to find little connection between what they may figure out about academic writing in one class and what they are asked to do in the next. Carroll bluntly dismisses what she calls the “faculty fantasy” that academic writing is a discrete, unified, and easily transferable skill. She shows that, “Lessons learned in first-year writing courses do not directly transfer to students’ work in their major areas of study” (9). Therefore, “Instead of mastering one particular style of writing, students needed to develop flexibility as writers, especially the ability to analyze different rhetorical situations and adapt writing strategies accordingly” (131). Carroll demonstrates that developing these meta-cognitive skills is as important for advanced writers as it is for beginners (121). Based upon her review of research on transfer and the findings of her study, Elizabeth Wardle has also concluded that, “*meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies* in FYC may

be the most important abilities our courses can cultivate” (82). Beaufort adds that students need to analyze discourse communities and genres to transfer their knowledge and develop writing expertise. She argues that, “novice writers usually get little instruction in how to study and acquire the writing practices of different discourse communities” (11). This instruction is particularly useful for adults, who sometimes literally write in multiple discourse communities simultaneously as they use their lunch hour to squeeze in work on a school paper while responding to personal and work emails. Moreover, that school paper might be the first academic paper the student has written in over a decade, and it may well be for a course in the student’s major.

Coaching to provide both direct writing instruction and teach learners to manage their own ongoing writing development informs the pedagogy of Writing Workshop. Both Beaufort and Carroll use “coaching” to describe the explicit instruction they are advocating. In their seminal study of expert performance, K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe and Clemons Tesch-Römer argue that expertise is achieved through deliberate practice and that coaching is required for practice to be deliberate. As Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer explain it, coaches create the conditions for deliberate practice by structuring learning that takes into account and builds incrementally from prior knowledge, by providing “individualized diagnosis” and “immediate informative feedback,” by presenting learners with “alternative strategies” when they are stuck, and by teaching learners to self-assess and “proactively seek out alternative strategies” so that they can learn to coach themselves (367, 372). In Writing Workshop, instructors provide direct instruction in response to the writing challenges students encounter across the curriculum. Instructors also scaffold new learning that builds upon each student’s prior knowledge, provide feedback that identifies individual strengths and challenges, teach multiple writing process strategies so students have a variety of ways to get themselves unstuck, and provide students with opportunities for and feedback on self-assessment.

## **THE SCHOOL FOR NEW LEARNING: A SCHOOL FOR ADULT LEARNERS**

Writing Workshop is grounded not only in the research of Composition and Rhetoric, but also in the approach to adult learning at The School for New Learning (SNL). SNL is a liberal arts college for students 24 years old

or older that is part of DePaul University (DPU), a private, tuition-dependent, non-profit urban university. The average age of our 3,200 active students is 40, two thirds are women, and 90% attend school part-time (Benedetto et al.). A nationally-recognized model for adult education (Mancuso 169, “CAEL’s”), SNL is one of a handful of adult undergraduates programs, including Empire State College and Alverno College, that began in the early 1970s with the goal of increasing access to higher education. Grounded in the educational philosophy of John Dewey and research on adult learning and development (particularly that by Knowles, Kolb, Brookfield, and Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler), SNL stresses the importance of learning from experience, individualized learning, and lifelong learning: “The School believes that adults learn deeply by reflecting, particularly on experience, drawing meaning and transferable knowledge from all they have done” (*Foundations* 10). Those who have studied adult composition students confirm that “older students often use experiential writing to create for themselves a point of entry into a complex process of negotiating between lived cultures and academic knowledge” (Cassity 293, see also Belzer 42; Fredericksen 119-120; Morrison 33; Hurlow 66; Gillam 12-14).

Writing Workshop, therefore, aims to scaffold students’ lifelong development as writers by building on what they know, expanding their understanding of writing processes, and enhancing their self-assessment and metacognitive skills. The course allows basic and more advanced writers who find themselves struggling with new writing challenges to develop the “academic literacies needed for college coursework while actually taking . . . college level . . . courses” (Otte and Mlynarczyk 20).<sup>2</sup> In Writing Workshop, instructors coach students who develop individualized learning plans and work on writing projects from other classes or that arise from their interests. Although designed for undergraduates and primarily serving our incoming basic writers, undergraduate and graduate students from across the university are taking advantage of this opportunity to receive individualized writing instruction. While most SNL classes enroll only SNL students, any DePaul student can take an SNL class. Because of the emphasis on developing self-assessment and metacognitive skills while working on writing projects that students bring to the course, Writing Workshop serves students of all ages who are lost in the “dizzying array of writing assignments” they encounter across the curriculum (Herrington and Curtis 387).

## **WRITING WORKSHOP**

### **The Problem**

Like many stories of program development, this one begins with failure. In this case, the failure was of our stretch class (the only basic writing option at the time) to provide basic writers with the writing instruction they needed. The problem was not with the stretch model itself, but with our implementation of it. The immediate problem was logistic and specific to SNL. To accommodate working students, SNL offers classes online and at four campuses, some quite small. As a result, we frequently did not have enough students enrolled on any one campus for the stretch class to run, and many of our basic writing students were reluctant to take the class online. This was a particular issue because, when students come to SNL, they find themselves immediately immersed in a writing-intensive program. In their first class, students write learning autobiographies. In another introductory course, students write an eight to fifteen-page research paper. Writing assignments are by far the most common form of assessment in SNL courses. The writing-intensive nature of our program and lack of other direct writing assistance for SNL students made the need for support for struggling writers particularly pressing.

We also had a less local problem in that the stretch course was not designed to help students transfer what they knew and were learning about writing. As a result, even those who took the two-quarter stretch writing class were not well served by it. The short essays that they were practicing in the class had little connection to the rich and varied knowledge these nontraditional students brought with them to class and little bearing on the much more complex writing tasks they were being asked to complete in their other classes. The stretch instructors did not want to overwhelm basic writers with these more complex tasks, but as a result students were not getting the support they needed to move from what they already knew to what they needed to know. Because of the low enrollments and faulty design, we discontinued the stretch class and developed Writing Workshop with the backing of both full and part-time faculty who were united in their desire to increase writing support (and frustrated by course cancellations).

### **Models: ALP, Writing Centers, and the Studio Approach**

With the desire for a course to serve advanced as well as incoming students on all campuses, we sought new models, such as Peter Adams' Accelerated Learning Project (ALP) at the Community College of Baltimore County. In ALP, rather than taking basic writing followed by freshman composition, a cohort of eight basic writers takes a developmental English course at the same time as they are enrolled together as 40% of a freshman composition class (Adams). The same instructor teaches both the eight-student basic writing and the twenty-student freshman composition course. With ALP, Adams has increased the number of basic writing students passing freshman composition from 27% to 63% (Adams). And, he does this for less money. Despite the eight-person basic writing sections, the ALP program costs the school slightly less per successful student than the traditional developmental program. Adams argues that ALP works because mainstreaming decreases stigmatization and eliminates the loss of students who drop out before taking college composition. Moreover, he asserts that students learn from their exposure to stronger writers in their classes, small classes and cohort membership increase engagement and attachment, explicit discussion of behavioral issues helps students learn successful college behavior, and discussion of life problems that interfere with schooling helps them cope and persist. Unfortunately, ALP would not work at SNL because we do not have the critical mass at our smaller campuses even if we found a way to include the more advanced students who needed additional writing instruction after passing college composition. However, ALP's small class size, student-centered discussions, and cost-benefit argument anticipated some of the advantages of Writing Workshop.

Another model we considered was to partner with our writing center. Individualized writing instruction has been provided by writing centers for years. In 1980, Lou Kelly described the credit-bearing instruction offered by the University of Iowa Writing Lab where tutors worked one-on-one with students. At Iowa, tutors started with what students knew, encouraged them to write freely about what interested them, gave them lots of practice writing, and helped them learn how to self-assess so that students might "become a perceptive and critical reader of their own writing" (Kelly 11, 22, 25). Students at all levels, from new at-risk freshman to graduate students, were welcomed and could take the individualized course for two credits or for no credit. Since the course was individualized, students could repeat it, although only a limited number of credits would count toward graduation



(Kelly 18). Like many of the students who struggle with writing at SNL, those at Iowa often were hampered by their lack of confidence and negative prior experiences with writing and writing instruction. To address students' negative perceptions of writing and lack of confidence, the Writing Lab encouraged students to "talk . . . on paper" about how they felt about writing and "to write about what they know best" (Kelly 10, 22). Like the Iowa model, we developed Writing Workshop to focus on individual students, to be open to students across the curriculum, to have students write about what interested them, and to help students learn how to read and revise their own writing.

We would have liked to have used DePaul's Writing Center in a manner similar to that which Kelly describes. However, at the time, the Writing Center was almost entirely structured around the needs of DePaul's "traditional" student population. The Writing Center did not have tutors at our three suburban campuses, it had very limited weekend, evening and summer hours, and it was just beginning to experiment with online tutoring.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of course options and Writing Center presence at our suburban campuses, a few part-time faculty had started tutoring some students. This tutoring was often uncompensated, informal, and only available when students connected with teachers willing to go the extra mile. We considered building on what these teachers had started by hiring teachers to tutor at each campus, but decided that this solution would not address the need for writing instruction in our program. In addition, while not initially a key consideration, we have come to value the combination of individual instruction and collaborative learning in Writing Workshop classes that would not have been available to students working individually with tutors.

Writing Workshop can also be understood as an "adaptation of Studio approaches" (Grego and Thompson 21). Rhonda C. Grego and Nancy S. Thompson developed their Writing Studio at the University of South Carolina in response to the elimination of basic writing courses. In their Writing Studio, small groups of writers came together to discuss writing they were working on for other classes. The instructor assembled the agenda for each studio session from the questions and concerns students brought with them about specific pieces of writing they were working on (12). Like the Studio approach, Writing Workshop students work in small groups on writing they bring from other classes. But Writing Workshop tweaks the model described by Grego and Thompson in two ways: First, Writing Workshop emphasizes the development of students' metacognitive and self-assessment skills, starting with having students place themselves in the class. Second, to avoid the fate of the Studio program Grego and Thompson describe, which was

cancelled with a change of administration, Writing Workshop is located in the institutionally established space of a credit-bearing, graded course.

Besides serving incoming students who select it through our placement process, Writing Workshop is one of three options for more advanced students who need help with their writing, including a Web site for students who need the least support, the Writing Center for face-to-face and online tutoring, and Writing Workshop for students who need the structure and support of a class. Our Web site offers students guidance to help them decide whether to take Writing Workshop or go to the Writing Center. Those advanced students who take Writing Workshop do so because they want more writing instruction or because, like Antonio, they are struggling with their senior projects. For this latter group, the course is a lifeline to graduation.

## **Structure**

Writing Workshop is a ten-week, four-credit class that counts toward graduation.<sup>4</sup> We initially offered it for two credits with the idea that students could re-enroll each quarter until they no longer needed the scaffolding of the class. In practice, students were reluctant to take the class more than once because they only earned credit toward graduation the first time they took it. However, the two-credit class did not provide enough time for most students to accomplish their writing goals, so both students and faculty were overloaded with work. Since students were struggling to complete and teachers were declining to teach the two-credit class, we changed it to four credits. The additional two credits hours gave students and teachers the time they needed.

In Writing Workshop, each student, in collaboration with the teacher, develops and implements a plan to improve his or her writing. Students start the course by assessing their own writing and receiving an assessment from their instructor (see steps one through four in the “Writing Workshop Teacher Toolkit” at <https://snlwriting.pbworks.com/w/page/13277307/Writing-Workshop>).<sup>5</sup> Students use these assessments to develop and implement a plan to build upon their strengths, address their most pressing challenges, and find resources for their ongoing writing development. As a result, rather than having set assignments, students work on writing tasks that are important to them. Thus, by encouraging students to write about what engages them and giving them the tools they need, Writing Workshop builds on the research of Carroll, Sternglass, Herrington and Curtis, and Beaufort and exemplifies SNL’s commitment to personalized, lifelong learning.

Because it is individualized and focused on developing writers rather than pieces of writing, Writing Workshop works for students with a broad range of learning styles, prior knowledge, goals, and needs. The course is structured so that the students who successfully complete the class have satisfied the Writing Workshop competence statement “can manage one’s ongoing development as a writer using principles and tools of assessment and feedback” (“Writing Workshop”). We break this competence statement down into four criteria.

*Criterion 1. Can assess his or her own writing and address areas of weakness* (“Writing Workshop”): Students get immediate practice and coaching on how to be realistic, comprehensive, and detailed in their self-assessments at the start of Writing Workshop. Before drafting their Writing Workshop plan, students answer thirty questions about their writing and writing process, complete a short grammar quiz, write about their goals for the class, submit writing samples, and do self-evaluations of each writing sample. The questions about writing and writing process, the grammar quiz, and the writing samples work not only as initial assessment tools, but also as a basis for learning at the start and sometimes throughout the quarter. For example, since students often see writing as simply a matter of getting “the right word,” the questions about writing process reveal the many options and decisions available to them as writers. By discussing students’ answers to these questions and the grammar quiz, faculty can address misconceptions about writing and give students the opportunity to identify what they already know. For instance, most students come into Writing Workshop believing that they have little understanding of grammar, so they often are surprised by how well they do on the grammar quiz. When the quiz and their writing samples have multiple, different errors, faculty prioritize and then focus on one at a time. When a number of the students in a class share a problem, we work with them in groups. We sometimes pair students, so they can teach their strengths to each other or both investigate a shared problem and then teach their classmates how to identify and correct it. In addition, students spend time during each class writing while the teacher works with students individually.

This criterion also requires that a student “can identify specific strengths in his or her writing and writing process and knows how to leverage these strengths” (“Writing Workshop”). This focus on strengths is necessary because students’ ability to write, to write well, and to improve is too often undermined by their lack of confidence. Students continue to practice and develop their self-assessment skills throughout the quarter,

doing self-evaluations of each draft, and ending with a final portfolio in which they reflect upon what they have learned. Beaufort stresses exactly this “practice of mindfulness, or meta-cognition, to facilitate positive transfer of learning” (182). We aim to develop these meta-cognitive skills through teaching students to assess their own writing as well as the genres, rhetorical contexts, and discourse communities for and in which they are writing.

*Criterion 2. Uses revision to produce significantly improved final drafts* (“Writing Workshop”): The second criterion underscores the importance of revision. Some of our students have never been introduced to the idea of writing as a process; others, who “never liked to edit myself” (Antonio), resisted it. In doing their initial assessments, students are asked to think about what does and does not work in their writing process. Then, they are introduced to steps they may not have considered and to multiple strategies for dealing with process problems. Because students do several drafts, they get to see what they can accomplish when they use some of these strategies: “I can start papers quickly now. I have learned how to brainstorm first, then write my thoughts, then I can organize them so they make sense. I have learned a lot about myself. I can really write” (Tonya). Because Tonya loved to talk, being told that she could brainstorm by talking out her paper, recording herself, or writing a preliminary draft as if she were talking was a revelation. Like Tonya, Writing Workshop students benefit from experimenting with multiple ways to generate ideas for, develop, organize, revise and proofread their writing.

*Criterion 3: Demonstrates improvement in writing as documented in a writing portfolio* (“Writing Workshop”): Writing Workshop is not focused on teaching students how to write particular kinds of papers, but on helping them improve as writers. Because students work on assignments for other classes, they learn how to manage a variety of writing assignments, not just those writing teachers create for them. Borrowing many of Beaufort’s recommendations, Dan Frazier of Springfield College in Massachusetts suggested coaching strategies to help students transfer what they learned in their freshman writing classes to their writing for other classes. Like Frazier, Writing Workshop teachers offer students coaching “grounded in the work students were doing now, helping them to understand what they knew about writing (or thought they knew) . . . and adapting that knowledge to the genres and purposes they currently faced” (53). Having students work on papers for other classes also has the advantage of keeping the writing teachers exposed to the kinds of assignments and the feedback their students will encounter.

For the final portfolio, students are asked to select from this work and use the self-assessment skills they have been practicing to demonstrate and reflect upon what they have learned. In the portfolio, students show how they have met the course criteria and the goals they set for themselves in their Writing Workshop plans. The portfolio provides a final opportunity to practice self-assessment and gives students the authority to select from their work and present themselves as writers.

*Criterion 4: Presents a plan for continuous, ongoing improvement of writing* (“Writing Workshop”): While the third criterion reflects back on the learning students have done in the class, the fourth asks students to present “a plan for continuous, ongoing improvement of writing” (“Writing Workshop”). This criterion helps students think deliberately about and have support for their future writing development. To meet this criterion, students explore, use, and evaluate for their classmates the writing support available to them in a handbook, online, and at the Writing Center. Like Mutiara Mohamad and Janet Boyd, our belief is that “the requirement that these students also concurrently seek existing support beyond the classroom, thirdspace support that is decentralized, is a crucial step for their sustainable success” (94). Students have reported that using these resources in class made it easier and less intimidating to use them later. We have seen increases in the number of visits to our writing Web site and in the number of our students using the Writing Center. As we promote both of these resources in a number of other ways and neither captures information about what prompted students to use them, we do not know the extent to which this criterion may be responsible for these increases. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that, while some students need additional prompts to consistently seek out resources when they need them, exposure to these resources in Writing Workshop increases students’ awareness of and willingness to use them. The idea is that students who meet all four of the Writing Workshop criteria will have enough of an understanding of writing, of themselves as writers, and of the resources available to them, that they can continue to develop their writing after completing the course.

## **THAT IT WORKS**

Writing Workshop has improved access for and the retention and success of basic and struggling writers at SNL. The improvement in access is dramatic. In all of 2005, we offered only one on-campus section of our

stretch class Intensive College Writing (ICW). In 2009, we offered eighteen on-campus Writing Workshop sections. We now schedule Writing Workshop on each of our campuses and often have multiple sections at our downtown campus and online. The availability of Writing Workshop classes is particularly important given our school's "commitment to the education of first generation college students, especially those from the diverse cultural and ethnic groups in the metropolitan area" ("DePaul's Mission"). Three of the five students in my Writing Workshop class were first-generation college students and all were African American or Latina students. While it was not possible to obtain data on the number of first-generation students taking Writing Workshop, the course is serving students from Chicago's "diverse cultural and ethnic groups" ("DePaul's Mission"). For example, 83% of the students who took Writing Workshop in Fall 2009 and choose to identify their ethnic group indicated that they were students of color. This is almost double the 45% of all SNL students who identified as students of color in 2008-2009. Without access to sufficient writing instruction, many of these students would be unlikely to prevail in a program in which almost all assessment is based upon written work.

Although Writing Workshop students are some of the weaker writers in a writing-intensive program, they are retained to the next quarter and to the following year at higher rates than SNL and national averages. Over seven quarters, 83% of the 178 students who passed Writing Workshop enrolled the following quarter. This retention rate is higher than the SNL term-to-term retention, which averaged 75% in 2008-2009 (Cameron, "Enrollment"). A year later, 62% of the students who passed Writing Workshop (n=178) were enrolled in classes, while the one-year retention rate for students who passed Intensive College Writing in 2005 (n= 24) was 44%. At SNL, the one-year retention rates range between 50 and 60% (Cameron, "School" 5). The national one-year retention rates in 2006 for part-time students was 53% overall and 56% for students in private, nonprofit four-year colleges like SNL (Swail 21).

Writing Workshop students are not just being retained, they are succeeding. Of 129 students who passed Writing Workshop, only 6% withdrew from classes the next quarter while 81% passed, earning an average letter grade of a B. Initial, albeit limited, data indicate that this success is enduring. Twenty-five students passed Writing Workshop in Winter and Fall 2007. Three years later, 15 Writing Workshop students remained enrolled at SNL with an average cumulative GPA of 2.88.

## CHALLENGES

Writing Workshop offers financial and teaching challenges. Because of the level of individualization, we cap Writing Workshop classes at ten students. Because of our commitment to access at every campus every quarter, Writing Workshop classes run if even one student is enrolled. Our online and downtown campus sections are often fully enrolled, but sections at suburban campuses are usually smaller. The financial challenge is plain: how can a tuition-dependent university afford to run classes with ten or fewer students and still pay instructors enough to make it worth their while to teach these classes?

Just as Peter Adams argues for ALP, we found that the university saves money when it runs small classes in which more students succeed. Writing Workshop instructors are paid the same for teaching a full section of Writing Workshop as they would be for any other four-credit course. When there are less than ten students enrolled in a class, part-time instructors are paid per student. Because we recognize that many classes will have only a few students with whom instructors will work one-on-one, instructors earn 50% more for each of the first three students than for students four through nine.

Despite instructors being paid more than normal per student, Writing Workshop saves the university money. Even with one student, the school does not lose money when part-time faculty, who teach most SNL classes,<sup>6</sup> teach Writing Workshop. When one student is enrolled, 60% of the student's tuition goes to the university to cover expenses. Just over 23% of the tuition covers the instructor's salary, leaving the college with a little over 16% of the tuition. When the course is fully enrolled with ten students and taught by a part-time faculty member, the college receives 22% of the students' tuition after paying the university and the instructor. While these classes do not lose money, they do generate less income for the university than the average SNL class. The loss of this additional revenue is made up for by the savings to the university through retention. When I, a full-time faculty member, teach Writing Workshop, the college only starts to make money if eight students are enrolled in the class. However, if I taught the class with just one student, the university would lose approximately \$3,000 less than if that student dropped out in their first year back to school.<sup>7</sup>

Besides economic pressures, Writing Workshop is a challenge because it is such a unique class to teach. In fact, when students and teachers enter Writing Workshop thinking of it is a class, it becomes less than it might

be. Like the only diners in an otherwise empty restaurant, students tend to wonder what the problem is when they find only a few other students in the class. The instructor must explain that, like an exclusive restaurant, the class is designed to be small and convince students that they are privileged to have such individual attention. Similarly, teachers can find the very small classes disconcerting. One instructor recently suggested that we cancel her class. When I asked why, she replied that she had no idea how to teach only one student.

The small size of Writing Workshop classes is one way this course's uniqueness reveals how we as teachers sometimes unconsciously act from outmoded mental models. We would do well to attend to Deborah Brandt's warning to researchers that "the habit of automatically seeing 'teachers' and 'students' and 'classroom organization' must be problematized. That a researcher can take such categories so easily for granted . . . only speaks to how widely sanctioned and understood are the roles of teachers and students and classroom life in general, how well embedded and routinized they are in normal life" (346). When I observe new Writing Workshop teachers, I invariably find them standing at the front of the room, sometimes behind a podium. This has been true even when there were only two students in the class and the teachers were experienced tutors or had participated in many creative writing workshops where they sat in the round. For both students and teachers, our normative conventions of what a class should look like can inhibit success.

While approaching Writing Workshop as a class can be counterproductive, so too can imagining it as a set of individual tutorials. Initially, I had suggested that instructors of small classes might meet at different times with each student. I was wrong. Both our face-to-face and online instructors have found it important to create opportunities for students to work with each other even when they are working at different levels and on different projects. Vincent Tinto has argued for a number of years that students are more likely to persist and learn when they are actively involved in learning with their peers as well as their teachers (3-4). Coming to the same conclusions as Tinto, one of our online instructors recommended pairing students to improve learning and retention: "Some of my most improved, most focused, and hardest working students are those who have gone out and found effective exercises or readings and shared them with the class. This drive to share information and update everyone on their own progress was very motivating" (Fitzpatrick). Yet, while collaboration does result in what one instructor called "a nice bond" between students even from "quite different



backgrounds,” it does not always result in successful course completion (Triller). As one instructor explained:

I find that the social nature of writing is certainly more apparent in this workshop format and has a BIG impact on student success/retention. The social nature of my Writing Workshop courses has been vastly different, and the group dynamics in such a small course can have a drastic effect on student outcomes. For instance, students in one Writing Workshop seemed more task- and structure-oriented and held each other accountable for getting drafts done. On the other hand, my Writing Workshop students this quarter had a hard time focusing on discussion about writing and instead wanted to talk about their personal lives and experiences (and had a lot in common in this regard). (Wozniak)

So while collaboration can enhance the learning environment, it does not necessarily enhance the learning about writing, particularly in such small classes. To address this challenge, we intend to borrow some of the reflective activities Frazier found effective when working with similarly small groups of students. By using these activities and bringing together students working on different assignments for different classes, he was able to help them “reflect across disciplinary boundaries and generalize about what they’re learning outside of the activity system of their work in progress” (Frazier 52).

The challenge of keeping students focused and moving forward is particularly pronounced with newer online students with weak time management skills. Online learning is not a good option for these students, and we advise them to take Writing Workshop on campus. Nevertheless, some take it online out of convenience or necessity. We have found that our online Writing Workshop students are more likely to be younger and more advanced than those in our on-campus sections. In 2009-2010, 68% of the students from other colleges at DePaul who took Writing Workshop did so online, while only 32% of SNL students who took Writing Workshop were in online classes. Students from other colleges at DePaul are more likely to be younger and more comfortable with learning technology than incoming SNL students. Online students also tended to have completed more classes prior to Writing Workshop than on-campus students. Only 28% of on-campus students had taken more than three classes before enrolling in Writing Workshop, while 41% of online students had already taken more than three classes. Despite their experience, online students were less likely

to complete Writing Workshop successfully than on-campus students. In 2009-2010, there was little difference in the relatively few students who withdrew, received incompletes or a D in online and on-campus sections. However, 7% more online than on-campus students received an F and 10% more received a failing grade of FX because they had stopped participating. This difference between online and on-campus outcomes is consistent with findings that online students in general are more likely to fail or drop than on-campus students (Bernard et al.; Carr). For those online students who did pass Writing Workshop, there was little difference between their term-to-term retention and that of students who took the course on campus.

### **ONE WRITING WORKSHOP CLASS**

In Fall 2009, I taught Writing Workshop at our smallest campus, which had never had enough students to run the stretch class. The five students in my class, four basic writers and Antonio, exemplify the need for a class like Writing Workshop. Each student brought to the class rich life experiences, deep engagement with topics as varied as financial literacy and foster parenting, commitment to complete their degree, and fear that writing could keep them from achieving this goal.

### **Tonya and Clarice: Returning to School as Basic Writers**

Tonya and Clarice chose Writing Workshop through our placement process. Both had decided to return to school over two decades after graduating from weak urban high schools. They attended school part-time, worked full-time, and were busy wives and mothers. Tonya was a first-generation college student who fondly remembered the high school journalism class that gave her the opportunity to interview Chicago's first African American mayor and had "notebooks filled with poetry that I have written over my life time." Like other high-achieving graduates of underperforming high schools, she was blindsided by the gap between what counted as successful writing in high school and in college. As a result, her confidence was shaken, and she was spending hours eking out one convoluted sentence at a time.

While Tonya had thrived in high school, Clarice wrote poignantly about her long history as a struggling reader and writer. At ten she realized that she was not keeping up with her classmates and went into what she

called her “academic shell.” She stopped trying and “became angry and frustrated with myself as well as with my teacher for passing me on to the next grade, knowing that I could not read or write.” Nevertheless, she graduated from high school by relying upon her siblings, who “had the formats down to a science” and would transform her rough drafts into passing papers. After raising her children, Clarice decided to return to school: “It took me most of my adult life to get over the fact that I did not learn as fast or as quickly as others, but I am there now.” Both Clarice and Tonya needed instruction on ways to draft and revise, on how to organize essays and support claims, and on strategies for recognizing and correcting errors, but both had much to say. Starting with encouragement and low-stakes practice and adding targeted instruction, I watched their confidence grow as they crafted increasingly powerful drafts.

### **Marion and Marta: Nontraditional Students Confused about Academic Conventions**

While Marion and Marta did not take Writing Workshop as a result of our writing placement, they were advised to take it in their first year back in school. Marion was fifty-three years old, while Marta was in her forties. Like Tonya and Clarice, these two women worked full-time, attended school part-time, and had families. Also like Tonya, Marion was a first-generation college student. Not only did she direct a youth training center, she was also first assistant pastor at the church she ran with her husband. Since her high school graduation, Marion had taken some business-related classes and one “very difficult” basic writing class at a local community college. Marta, like Tonya and Clarice, was returning to school for the first time since graduating from high school. She worked in financial services and, in addition to school, was studying for a series of licensing exams.

As with the students Lillis profiled, Marion and Marta’s main challenge was their confusion about academic writing. Because they lacked the cultural capital of those raised and educated to go to college, these women had many misconceptions about the various conventions for and uses of writing in college. For example, the first draft Marion brought to our Writing Workshop class was almost entirely copied from the web. She was not trying to cheat. In fact, she had thought a great deal about the topic, teen pregnancy, because of her work with teens at her church. However, unsure if or how she should express her own ideas in an academic paper, Marion decided to rely upon the experts much as she might quote scripture and

spirituals in her sermons without anyone expecting her to cite her sources. In this way, Marion was operating within “the African-American oral culture and folk preaching traditions, where language and ideas are viewed as communal resources to be shared and adapted” (Johannesen 185).

Like Marion, Marta was unsure how to present the expertise she had gained outside of school to an academic audience. In Writing Workshop, Marta worked on a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)<sup>8</sup> paper documenting what she had learned from her years of volunteer work on financial literacy in Spanish-speaking communities. In their recent exploration of PLA, Cathy Leaker and Heather Ostman echo Sternglass, Herrington and Curtis, Carroll, and Beaufort in stressing the importance of direct writing instruction: “many of our students have a good deal of ‘subject matter knowledge,’ but they needed explicit direction in the particular conventions used to articulate such knowledge within ‘academia’” (696). Like Leaker and Ostman’s students, Marta had learned much from her volunteer work, but lacked a sense of what her audience would want to know. The first draft of her PLA essay included a long bulleted list of the community organizations with which she had worked. Because she assumed her audience would not be familiar with these organizations, she included descriptions of each. What her audience would want to know, what she did with these organizations, and what she learned from these experiences, she took for granted and so did not explain.

In Writing Workshop, Marion and Marta both learned how to convey the knowledge they had gained outside of school to academic audiences. Marion learned not only about the conventions for citing sources in academia, but also about how to draw from her experiences and stand upon her own authority: “Before I took this class I was not sure how to express myself. I was inhibited in sharing my ideas and contributing my options about a subject matter I had chosen. I have learned that expressing my ideas bring depth and substance to my papers.” Marta analyzed the PLA assignment and sample essays to better understand the assessor’s expectations. She then was able to significantly improve her writing by thinking “as if I was the reader” and anticipating the questions her audience might ask.

### **Antonio: Stuck at the Finish Line**

Joining these women was Antonio, who would graduate when (and if) he completed his final project. Shortly after he began college, Antonio’s parents divorced, leaving him reeling from their breakup and without

financial support for school. He married his college girlfriend and started working two jobs as he and his wife tried to complete their degrees. As a result, “my grades started to become toasted. I could not finish classes and my instructors did not want to hear excuses.” Antonio dropped out of school, but was back within a year. He was not a basic writer. Antonio had already taken a creative writing class and three academic writing classes, earning an average grade of B+.

While the women in my class were just starting college, students like Antonio, who are further into their studies, can also need significant help with their writing. Carroll’s findings speak directly to Antonio’s challenges and frustrations – he was chronically overextended, confused about what he was being asked to do, and losing control of his writing as he struggled with a new and complex writing task. Like many adult students, Antonio was trying to do too much at once. Besides attending school, he was working full time, still sorting out the turmoil in his family occasioned by his parents’ divorce, and had started taking classes at a bible college, which was where his primary intellectual energy was directed. As a result, he did little writing outside of class. He would frequently come early, murmuring apologies about not getting his work done, then open his laptop and start writing.

Carroll points out that students are strategic about dealing with assignments: “Students are actively involved in figuring out ‘what the professor wants’ and how they, as young adults, can accomplish their own goals within the college environment” (24). Carroll’s research is with “traditional students,” but rings all the more true for adults who try to balance school with work and family responsibilities. Certainly, by the time he came to Writing Workshop, Antonio wanted to give his professors what they wanted: “Now I simply want to get my Advanced Project done and completed so that I can graduate out of DePaul University.” However, here he had a problem. He had little idea what they wanted.

Antonio told me, and his grades confirmed, that he knew how to write philosophy and political science papers, having learned to copy the writing style of the texts he read in these classes:

I noticed when I was taking only Philosophy and Political Science classes, my writing was very good at copying the styles and structure of the philosophical and political authors that I was assigned to read. . . . I learned that it is common for college students to be wordy in their sentences. I personified this mistake when I would read and write about philosophy texts. (Talk about long sentences!)

... This has led to me often being ineffective in styles such as corporate or creative writing while as a Manager of a Zales Jewelers, or a participant in creative writing courses at the SNL.

While the strategy of imitating the style he found in some course readings had worked for Antonio, he was discovering that this style was not transferable. Nor did he have any models to copy for his Advanced Project because each student's project is unique and because his project was interdisciplinary. One of Antonio's thesis advisors was a political scientist, the other worked in public policy, and Antonio wanted to learn how to write about his faith for an academic audience. Newly immersed in born-again Christianity, Antonio struggled in particular with how to move between truth claims that were persuasive to fellow believers and those that would meet the expectations of his professors. Carroll theorizes that professors "may underestimate . . . how much practice is needed to apply disciplinary specific concepts, knowledge, and conventions in writing" (6). On more than one occasion, Antonio complained that his professors' disciplinary differences resulted in feedback that was different enough to be confusing and expectations that were at odds with his earlier training.

Antonio's professors, in turn, were frustrated with his unsupported claims, convoluted sentences, and rambling, thirty-page drafts. (Nor did his last-minute work habits endear him to them.) His political science professor refused to read another draft until Antonio completed substantial revisions, while his other advisor was baffled about how to help Antonio move forward. When I first read his Advanced Project draft, I doubted the competence of the teacher who had passed Antonio in college writing even though I regularly explain to faculty members upset about students who "cannot write" that basic writing skills can suffer when students are attempting new writing tasks (Carroll 9). It was fitting then that I discovered I had been the teacher who had awarded Antonio a B- in an online college writing class over a year earlier. His papers from that class indicated that he was capable of much clearer prose than that which he was producing while muddled in his early Advanced Project drafts. The incomprehensible sentences and lack of structure in his Advanced Project were symptomatic of his struggle with this new and demanding writing task.

Antonio spent the quarter taking apart, rebuilding, and revising his Advanced Project. Watching Antonio, the other students were both encouraged to see that writing is a challenge even for advanced students and disappointed to realize that writing improvement was a long-term project that

would extend well beyond our one-quarter class. Antonio regained some confidence in his writing abilities when he was able to offer constructive feedback to his peers. Similarly, they gained confidence in their abilities as they realized they could help Antonio with his writing. For example, Antonio's professors and I told him that his thesis statement was too general and sweeping, but he was not convinced until his classmates started telling him the many things that they thought his thesis could mean. The revised thesis became the core of his vastly improved Advanced Project, and, at the end of the quarter, he wrote that he had learned "the vital necessity for a solid, clear and concise thesis statement as the foundation for any good academic essay." Antonio also reported discovering "that I learn well through repetition and reflection." This last-minute writer had learned to "review, reflect and digest" feedback and then "dive into the next draft."

The experience of these five students underscores the need for a class like Writing Workshop that students can take at any point in their studies, because "a one- or two-semester, first-year course in writing cannot meet all the needs of even our more experienced writers . . . students' complex literacy skills develop slowly, often idiosyncratically, over the course of their college years" (Carroll xi-xii). In our writing-intensive program, this need for ongoing writing support for both basic and more advanced writers was evident.

## **CONCLUSION**

Before graduating, Antonio took an extra class, "The Christian Experience," earning an A-. When I last heard from him, he was applying to graduate programs in theology. Over a year after we finished our class, the other four students were all enrolled in classes. Marion struggled. She did not take classes the quarter after Writing Workshop and then failed the two she registered for in spring. One of these failures was due to nonattendance, indicating that her pastoral responsibilities may have interfered with school. She took the summer and fall quarters off, earning a B+ when she returned. Like Marion, Marta took big breaks between classes, taking one class the quarter after Writing Workshop and then skipping three quarters before she enrolled again. Still, Marta did well in each of her classes, receiving Bs. Tonya finished Writing Workshop saying, "I realize I haven't mastered the concept of writing, but I'm on my way. I believe with continual practice I will become a better writer in the future." She is indeed on her way. Since

Writing Workshop, she has taken classes every quarter and has a 2.90 grade point average. Clarice, who began Writing Workshop worried that readers would not understand her, ended the class stating that “I believe that my readers will be able to comprehend what I am explaining to them . . . In the future, I would like to tell me great grandmother’s story in a book. How she and her siblings were born into slavery.” Notably, she took only the summer off and earned the highest grade point average, 3.117, of the five students who took Writing Workshop together.

While Writing Workshop is a challenging class to teach and we are certainly still learning how to do it well, it offers the flexibility to support increasingly diverse learners in a way that aligns with what we know about how students develop as writers. To help new faculty teach this class, we provide them with the Writing Workshop Teacher’s Toolkit, talk with them about the course, and then observe them in their first quarter of teaching. This observation is low stakes in that we do not complete a written report, but instead provide teachers with verbal feedback and discuss any questions or issues they may have. We also have a meeting each spring in which we focus on topics relevant to teaching Writing Workshop, collaboratively assess several Writing Workshop portfolios, discuss our findings, and make recommendations for improving the course and our teaching. More frequent interactions among instructors would be better, and the weekly or biweekly discussions Grego and Thompson describe would be ideal, but they are not practical given that our roughly fifteen part-time Writing Workshop instructors have other jobs and do not all live in the same state.

Writing Workshop has improved access for our basic and struggling writers who are now being retained at higher rates than other SNL students. It has also started to attract students from across the university who want the opportunity to receive individualized instruction on their writing. Not only are our students succeeding, our writing instructors are gaining exposure to the writing assignments students encounter in other classes, learning about ways students struggle with these assignments, and confronting our own unconscious assumptions about how to teach writing. Writing Workshop is one model for scaffolding the writing developing of students as they make their way through college. If universities wish to retain and graduate the growing majority of “nontraditional” students, then we need more such experiments.



## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks go to all of the Writing Workshop instructors and students who have contributed to the ongoing development of this course. In addition, I would like to thank the five students in my fall 2009 class for their willingness to share their writing and experiences. Finally, I am indebted to Kathryn Wozniak, Steffanie Triller, Susanne Dumbleton, Stephen North, Chip Cleary, and Hope Parisi and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions on drafts of this paper.

## **Notes**

1. Student names have been changed.
2. I use ellipses to indicate that I have removed the quotation marks from around “college level” that were in the original quote. The classes our students take while also taking Writing Workshop are, in fact, college level.
3. More recently, the DePaul Writing Center has expanded its outreach to and services for our students.
4. SNL is on the quarter system, so classes run for ten weeks with on-campus students meeting for three hours once a week in the evenings or on weekends. Online classes are asynchronous, with students expected to participate at least four times a week. Because SNL is a competence-based school, students must demonstrate fifty competencies to graduate rather than earn a certain number of credits. In most SNL classes, student can earn one competence for every two credit hours. However, students earn only one competence in Writing Workshop, Academic Writing for Adults, and Critical Thinking, all of which are four-credit classes.
5. This Toolkit includes significantly more information on the nuts and bolts of the class, including detailing of the course criteria, all of the initial assessment materials, directions for the final portfolio, and a sample syllabus.
6. SNL began as a college where practicing professionals taught adult students. Tenured and tenure-track full-time faculty were not originally part of the college, and most classes continue to be taught by part-time faculty.
7. In 2008, DePaul University’s cost of attrition for first-year, full-time, first-time undergraduates was \$6.3 million where the university spent \$16,591 per student on instruction, student services, academic support, operations and maintenance, and institutional support (“DePaul University”).

Assuming part-time students cost half of this, the university would lose approximately \$8,295.50 for a part-time student who did not return after one year, which is just over \$3,000 more than the \$5,202 it would cost the school for me to teach only one student in Writing Workshop.

8. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is used by many schools to award college credit to students, usually returning adults, for learning from their life experience. Quite frequently, students document their learning for PLA in papers.

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