

Editor's Introduction:

"Why Are We Here?"

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

Articles in this volume of *Open Words*, Hope Parisi and Lara Rodriguez's in particular, convinced me that things needed to change on the first day of my studio. This is not for a second to suggest that the above questions are not important or that they never came up in studio. In fact, variations of them came up quite often, and I think they are of defining significance for any teacher committed to educational access and student empowerment. If anything, articles collected in this volume underscore the significance of these questions, especially as they might serve to connect academic discourses with aspects of students' work and home lives. Tim Barnett's "Love Letters": Narrating Critical Literacy Theory in the First-Year Writing Class," for instance, calls out his open-access students' "many strengths and [argues that these students] need an education that helps them understand the multiplicity, complexity—even the difficulties—of their backgrounds as potential sources of intellectual strength rather than simply as 'problems' to be overcome." Likewise, Frank Alexander, in "A DOI: [10.37514/OPW-J.2013.7.1.01](https://doi.org/10.37514/OPW-J.2013.7.1.01)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Works Cited

Grego, Rhonda C. and Nancy S. Thompson. *Teaching/Writing in Third Spaces: The Studio Model*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2008.