

## 2 / Studying College Writers: Context and Methods

Mike Rose, in “The Language of Exclusion,” describes long standing laments in American colleges about students’ lack of skills; indeed, such complaints were found at Harvard in the 1870s.

—Lynn Troyka, “Defining Basic Writing in Context”

**M**arilyn Sternglass (1997), who studied students labeled basic writers at City College in New York, calls for in-depth studies of students in many different contexts if we truly want to understand the development of literacy in college. Pepperdine University, on a hilltop overlooking the Pacific in Malibu, California, is about as far as you can get from City College and still be in the continental United States. Though Pepperdine students might sometimes be stereotyped as rich kids and surfers, they, in fact, come from a wide variety of backgrounds. However, most would identify themselves as middle to upper class, and they fit the profile of “traditional” college students, 18–22 years old and going to school full-time (although they may also be working and accumulating substantial loans). And yet, even these relatively advantaged students struggle with the advanced literacy tasks of college and, perhaps paradoxically, through that struggle become more competent writers. In the process, they often hide their confusion, boredom, anger—emotions they fear will jeopardize their chances for good grades and continuing success. And as at Harvard in the 1870s, as noted in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, so too do professors at Pepperdine University now lament students’ lack of writing skills.

*Writing and Literacy in a Cultural Context**The School Culture*

Lynn Troyka shows in her classic essay, “Defining Basic Writing in Context” (1987), that judgments about who is prepared or underprepared for college level work are relative to the institutions and individuals making the judgment. An adequately prepared student at City College might be underprepared at Yale, and the literacy tasks expected of the undergraduate might vary as well. John Alberti in a more recent essay, “Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Majority Second-Tier Schools” (2001), argues that too many academic discussions of issues, such as admissions standards, skills assessment, and general education reform, focus either on major research universities like Stanford and Berkeley or on high-profile cases such as the decision to remove “developmental” English and math courses from the open-admissions City University of New York. Alberti, who teaches at Northern Kentucky University, argues for a more fine-grained analysis of “place” in such discussions, giving more recognition to a wider variety of institutions where the majority of postsecondary students are educated.

The place of Pepperdine University and the kinds of literacy students practice there is in a somewhat ambiguous position along the continuum from elite research universities and selective liberal arts colleges to Alberti’s second-tier, regional four- and two-year schools and for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix. Founded in 1937 by George Pepperdine, who started a small mail-order business in auto parts and built it into the Western Auto Supply company, Pepperdine College was located near downtown Los Angeles until 1972 when the school moved to 830 acres of donated property in Malibu, California. At that time, the institution, begun by George Pepperdine as a small Christian college affiliated with the Churches of Christ, embarked on an ambitious program of expansion, leaving behind its urban origins.

Today, like many other institutions, Pepperdine University is something of a hybrid, and its conflicting goals are reflected in the

literacy practices of students and faculty. The undergraduate school, Seaver College, which is focused on in this study, has sometimes been described by faculty as a preprofessional school masquerading as a liberal arts college. Although the university as a whole enrolls approximately 7800 full-time and part-time students, the undergraduate college is small, only 2700 students. The students at Seaver College are required to complete a fairly traditional core of 65 units of general education courses, about half the total units required for graduation, but the majority of students major in career-oriented programs in either business—with degrees in accounting, business administration, and international business—or in communication—with degrees in advertising, journalism, public relations, telecommunications, intercultural and organizational communication, and speech. Other career-oriented programs that are popular with students include teacher education, which offers an undergraduate teaching-credential program, nutrition, sports medicine, physical education, computer science, and, in the land of show business, theater and music. Student peer-advisors during orientation tell new students to sign up for general education courses as soon as possible and “get them out of the way,” so they can move on to the important courses in their majors. Like undergraduates at other institutions, our students are understandably impatient when course work seems to have little relationship to their personal or career goals.

In addition to the tension between liberal arts and career education, several other conflicting institutional goals also cause frustration for students. Seaver College charges a very high tuition, over \$24,000 a year but also gives about 70% of students financial aid in order to attract high-success high school students, outstanding athletes, members of the school-affiliated Churches of Christ, and diversity in the student body. Students and parents expect continuing academic success in return for the sacrifices necessary to support a student, even one with a financial-aid package, at an expensive school. Recruiting for diversity itself comes in conflict with the conservative, mostly white, Christian culture of a campus located in a notoriously expensive retreat from urban Los Angeles.

In the entering class that included our study students, 71% of the students identified themselves as White, 4% Black, 9% Hispanic, 8% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 7% as other or unknown. Of our total student body, more than 7% are international students, many of whom are from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious traditions. These international students are generally from wealthy families who can afford to pay full tuition for an American education in relatively protected surroundings. Though some efforts are made to recruit a more diverse student population, not all students feel welcome or at home on a still predominantly White campus.

Literacy in this academic environment works two ways, as it does in many American universities. On the one hand, it draws on a belletristic, liberal arts tradition that seeks to transmit cultural knowledge as cultural capital to the children of the middle and upper classes, though whose culture is transmitted is often hotly contested. On the other hand, literacy education also looks toward producing skilled workers for business and the professions and, in its most ideal iteration, knowledgeable citizens in a participatory democracy, two strong traditions in American postsecondary education. It is into this hybrid environment that, in 1994, our study students entered college as hopeful first-year students ready to start the next phase of their literacy education.

#### *Background of the Study*

In 1994, the General Education Committee at Seaver College received modest funding from the university to study a randomly selected sample of 46 incoming first-year students in order to assess student learning in our general education core curriculum. These students were to receive a unit of credit per year that they spent in the study and a small stipend for collecting syllabi, papers, exams and other written work from all their classes, for participating in interviews and focus groups, for completing assessment questionnaires, and, we argued to justify the unit of credit, for studying their own learning. Of our initial cohort of 46, about 30 students provided substantial data for the project, and 20 completed the four-

year study, reviewing their portfolios in their senior year and participating in exit interviews.

The General Education Committee at Pepperdine was dissatisfied with previous attempts at curriculum evaluation that focused on student and faculty ratings of courses and on faculty syllabi indicating what faculty were teaching but not necessarily what students were learning. After reviewing projects at other institutions, particularly a large scale portfolio project at Miami University of Ohio and assessment seminars at Harvard University, the committee decided that a new study needed to include multiple sources of information, to be longitudinal, and, if findings were to have any credibility, to involve faculty across the disciplines.

The codirector of the assessment project, Don Thompson, a mathematician and now academic dean of Seaver, and I began to meet with students in a cluttered office in a corner of the library. We videotaped focus groups in which students discussed their initial experiences of college life and regularly collected from students either the originals or copies of all their written work (except course notes). At the end of each semester, students came to our office to update logs cataloging their work and to complete written self-assessments commenting on successful and unsuccessful learning experiences for each semester. Near the end of each year, writing center peer-tutors who had been trained to conduct interviews asked students to explain how and why they felt they had changed in 15 different areas ranging from involvement in service activities and interest in other cultures to mathematical/quantitative and communication skills. Interviewer notes and the taped interviews were added to each student's comprehensive portfolio. Though writing was not the only focus of the portfolio project, it was, of course, my primary interest, and as students discussed their written work, it became clear that writing played a central role in shaping and documenting their development as learners.

The original goal of the assessment project, to develop a comprehensive assessment of general education courses, was perhaps overly ambitious, considering the voluminous and "messy" nature of portfolio data. Nonetheless, small groups of faculty did meet in

summer 1995 and 1996 to examine how general education courses addressed three areas: critical thinking, writing, and moral and ethical development, an especially important concern at a Christian university. Findings from the summer seminars fed into subsequent faculty workshops and ongoing discussions of general education reform.

Don Thompson, trying to reduce the general “messiness” of portfolio data, began experimenting with ways to have student materials scanned and stored on CD-ROM disks and officially dubbed our study the CD-ROM Portfolio Assessment Project. In fact, as the project evolved, web technology became more flexible, and in their senior year, the 20 students who completed the study selected representative samples of their work to create digital portfolios on individual web pages. Appendix A includes additional information about what is now called the Digital Portfolio Assessment Project (DPAP) at Pepperdine University, and the web address of our assessment office which houses the project. Although individual student portfolios are password protected to maintain student privacy, researchers may contact the assessment office through the web site to request access to view student portfolios.

#### *Representing Our Students*

I came to know the students in our study in interviews and meetings over four years. On a small campus, our paths crossed in classes and in the writing center. One of the study students worked in our project office, two others spent a semester studying abroad with me in Florence, Italy. Our final group of 20 students represented five of the seven academic divisions at Seaver College. Though there were no religion or fine arts majors, one student was a minor in religion, two had minors in art, and one in music. Our study group also represented a range of SAT scores and high school grade point averages typical of their entering class at Pepperdine. The mean SAT of the class of 1998 when they entered Pepperdine in 1994 was 1128; their mean high school GPA was 3.36. The SAT scores of our study group ranged from 830 to 1240, with 5 students scoring below 1000 and 3 students scoring above 1200. The high

school GPAs of our study group ranged from 2.74 to 4.00, with 6 earning below a 3.0 and 5 earning above a 3.5. The final Pepperdine cumulative GPAs of the study group ranged from 2.2 to 3.8, a few points lower than their high school GPAs, but, again, with 6 students earning below a 3.0 and 5 students earning above a 3.5. A chart listing students' names (which have been changed to provide anonymity), majors, SAT and ACT scores, GPAs, and ethnicity is included in Appendix B.

We have not done a formal, follow-up study on the students who were in our original group of 46 but did not continue with the project. Our original group was a random sample of two students from each freshman seminar class in the fall of 1994. A computer-generated list of names included 36 women and only 10 men. We went ahead with this group even though it did not reflect the actual ratio of 59% women to 41% men on our campus. In the final group of 20, there were 16 women and 4 men. Of the 26 students who did not complete the project, we know that more than half, 14, did not continue at Pepperdine, and many of these transferred to other universities. We have partial data on most of the remaining students who stayed at Pepperdine but did not continue to participate in the project. Generally, these students reported that they were too busy or found it too burdensome to collect and turn in materials and come to interviews. The 20 students who completed the study reported that they liked being asked about their experience and having an impact on education at Pepperdine. They enjoyed being part of a special group. They also felt rewarded by having a record of their college experience and the tangible product of personal portfolios to represent their work. During their senior year, students chose from their comprehensive portfolios, collected over four years, anywhere from four to over ten pieces of work especially representative of their learning in college. These works were scanned to create a web-based digital portfolio for each student.

To represent participants in a qualitative research project is an endeavor fraught with opportunities for misrepresentation, a topic explored in-depth in a volume edited by Mortensen and Kirsch (1996), *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*.

This is especially true when subjects in a study are particularly categorized as “other” on the basis of class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, et cetera. And yet, to erase these politically charged “differences” risks erasing socially and personally important parts of the subjects’ experience. Nonetheless, I hesitated in this study based on a small sample of students to generalize about the effects of “difference,” unless students self-identified themselves and pointed to the significance of such categories. Brenda Brueggemann (1996) in an essay in the Mortensen and Kirsch volume explains why she also avoids such generalizations in reporting on her research.

For if there is but one thing I have learned well from my experiences tutoring and researching deaf students at Gallaudet it is that the diversity of their audiological, educational, family, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds makes characterizing a “representative” profile of such a student virtually impossible: there is simply no way to sum up what literacy skills might be expected from such students by the time they reach college-level course work. (p. 29)

Similarly, I resist making any of our study students representative of an essentialized “other.”

However, this position causes particular problems describing students at Pepperdine, where most students see themselves as “mainstream” and many are politically conservative. The majority of European American students tend not to view their own “Whiteness” as a significant racial category and are reluctant to identify social class as a factor influencing their experience. In addition, even though there were 36 women and 10 men in our initial study group and 16 women and only 4 men in our final group of 20, these young, successful students seemed relatively unaware of how gender differences might have affected them in the classroom or as writers. On the other hand, a student who had immigrated with her family to the United States from Pakistan explained how she filtered much of her learning through her own cultural perspective. A shy,



quiet, young White woman, Jeanette, majoring in accounting, could not find a comfortable role as an independent woman in college and went home every weekend to suburban Orange County where she worked at Disneyland. Most significantly, the two African American women in our study were keenly aware of “difference,” and they explicitly connected race to some of the problems that they identified with their teachers, their writing, and their experiences on a mostly White campus.

In this study, while I must generalize to make sense of the data, I try to stay close to the voices of the study students, even at the risk of glossing over gender and racial or ethnic differences and appearing, perhaps, to single out the “difference” of African American students while ignoring the “Whiteness” of the majority. A saving grace, I hope, is that this first portfolio study did effectively highlight the overall lack of cultural awareness on our campus. With a grant from the James Irvine Foundation, another cohort of students is now being studied specifically to examine their perspectives on cultural diversity in more detail, and multiple programs are under way to attempt to diversify our campus through faculty development, cocurricular activities, curricular reform, and student and faculty recruitment. But that is the subject for another volume.

For the study presented here, I would not want to pretend that our small study group is somehow representative of the experience of college students in general. I leave it to readers to decide if the profiles of literacy I offer seem to fit at least some students at a variety of postsecondary institutions. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, despite a range of family backgrounds, all of the students in this study would be likely to identify themselves as middle to upper class, and certainly as “non-poor.” Our students attended college in pleasant surroundings with well-equipped classrooms and generally easy access to their teachers and were successful in graduating with bachelors’ degrees. They studied writing in first-year classes limited to 18 students, unlike their peers at local community colleges who are often enrolled in writing classes with as many as 39 other students, with the presumption that many students will drop out.

Although our students may choose to be unaware of or to deny the effects of social class, their family backgrounds have, of course, shaped their access to educational opportunities, their literacy aspirations, and their literacy experiences. Elspeth Stuckey (1991), a passionate teacher who worked with me in an adult literacy program sponsored by the University of Southern California, puts the importance of social class in the most forthright and harshest terms when she writes, "Literacy itself can be understood only in its social and political context, and that context, once the mythology has been stripped away, can be seen as one of entrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it" (p. vii). Though schools also speak to "a very real need on the part of all socio-economic classes to learn about and transform the nature of their existence" (Giroux, 1981, p. 184), it is certainly in the interests of students, parents, and teachers at Pepperdine (and I include myself here) to acquire and promote advanced literacy as a source of cultural, economic, and political power.

At least 30 years of research has closely examined the effects of class structure on literacy practices, from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1982), Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), and Bowles and Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) to extensive work in the 1980s and early 1990s by, to name just a few examples, Giroux (1981), Heath (1983), Shor (1987), Berlin (1992, 1996), and Villanueva (1993), as well as many others. More current works, like Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* (1997), Tom Fox's *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* (1999), Gleason's "Evaluating Writing Programs in Real Time: The Politics of Remediation" (2000), and review articles by Adler-Kassner (2000) and Tinberg (2001), demonstrate how heavily cultural and social class differences influence which students are labeled as "prepared" or "underprepared" for college and what, usually very different, kinds of resources are available for their education.

To describe the social-class landscape of education in our own city, Los Angeles, Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (1990) is especially instructive. Rose illustrates how class and cultural differences

and unequal access to educational resources can mark students as marginal, what Rose calls an “educational underclass.” Rose grew up in South Central Los Angeles and struggled to complete college at Loyola Marymount University, another “religious” school situated over the hill and down the freeway from Pepperdine. Rose managed to continue his education at the University of California, Los Angeles, and now teaches there, UCLA, the big school in Westwood, with the highest status in the local, postsecondary scene. Rose chronicles how poverty can place a student outside the boundaries of educational success, how it feels to try to cross boundaries, and the resources needed to make the journey.

If our study students are representative at all, they are the students on the “inside” of that boundary, though some come from families that have only recently and only narrowly crossed from the “margins” to the “mainstream” of class and culture. Like the adults and children described in Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989), these students want to keep the advantages their families have accrued and, if possible, improve their status. The literacy practices analyzed in this volume, then, are not simply a generic set of skills, practices indicative of the way advanced literacy in college must be or ought to be, but the specific practices of a specific group of students in a particular time and place.

Four of these specific students—Sarah, Carolyn, Kristen, and Andrea—were introduced in chapter 1. Here, before I go on to analyze their literacy in more detail, I want to briefly introduce our other study students and some examples of key pieces of writing they selected, during their senior year, for their digital portfolios. These profiles and portfolios offer a further introduction to both the similarity and diversity of our students’ experiences.

#### *Humanities Majors*

Like Sarah, Elizabeth and Terri majored in the humanities. Sarah was a star intellectual in English, and her senior honors thesis, “A Study in Autobiography: Maxine Hong Kingston and the Literary Chameleon,” was published by the humanities/teacher-education

division. Unlike Sarah, Elizabeth, who sometimes scraped by with D's and C's, could not mention a single course or project that truly engaged her. When pressed, she thought a long time, then considered that she somewhat enjoyed modern British and Irish literature because it reminded her of the time she spent in London during her sophomore year. Terri included in her portfolio a test in Religion 301 during the fall of her sophomore year. It was her first "A" in college. After some writing in her first year about her experience as an African American woman in Los Angeles, she decided to avoid topics directly related to her personal experience. She struggled to modify what she identified as her own voice to write acceptably in her history major and earned an 88 on her senior thesis, "Shut-door Theory, Millerites, and Denominationalism: 1845–1846."

#### *Communication Majors*

Vanessa was a talented and experienced student writer. For her digital portfolio, she selected a detailed history of her extended Mexican-German family, reflections on her experiences as a tutor at a local juvenile detention facility, and a twenty-page report/analysis of artist Gustav Klimt. She also included three pieces of her work as a journalism major: an award-winning newsletter written with two other students, an article from the college newspaper about Pepperdine's ill-fated choice of special prosecutor Kenneth Starr as dean of the Law School, and, another article, an in-depth investigative report about drug use on campus.

Natalie, Leslie, Deborah, and Carolyn, who were also communication majors, all had semiprofessional news stories, ad campaigns, and public relations projects to include in their portfolios. Natalie, the first in her family to graduate from college, financed her education in part by a \$6000 beauty pageant scholarship and \$20,000 in student loans. Although she had an internship with the Nickelodeon children's network, she also hoped to pursue a career in entertainment by trying out as a cheerleader for the L.A. Lakers.

#### *Science Majors*

Kristen, Randall, and Susanna sat together at a portfolio project meeting in fall 1997. Their compatriot George was off studying

sports medicine in Australia for the semester. When we talked about writing, these science majors wanted to make sure that they would not be assessed by “English” standards. On a questionnaire filled out at that meeting, Kristen wrote, “I have a difficult time being creative in my writing. I’m so used to being a straightforward writer that I’m rusty on my creativity.” Randall responded, “Writing subjectively is very difficult for science majors because we are forced and trained throughout to write objectively and with extreme detail.” However, in the winter 1998 semester, Randall selected for his portfolio “Density Control and Distribution of the Great White Shark, *Carcharodon carcharias* Along the North American West Coast” and said this is “where I made a turnaround.” He added, “Well, this is the first paper where I took the science data, talked about what was said, what they found, and then what *I* thought, what I thought was either correct or incorrect about their findings.”

#### *Social Science Majors*

Andrea came to Pepperdine because it offered her the best financial aid package. She was the only political science major in our study. Stephen, Georgia, and Paul were majoring in psychology. Stephen, who was minoring in religion, was difficult to contact as a research subject. Most of his nonclass hours were spent on campus ministry and other extracurricular activities. Georgia’s portfolio traced her goal of working with children. It included papers on children’s risk factors for depression and on self-esteem and a children’s book she had written that also illustrated her interest in art. Paul selected for his portfolio philosophical essays from his Great Books seminars, a response paper on religion in Japan from an Asian studies course, and lab and research reports from his psychology major. He said he could have had a higher GPA but “I guess there are times when I just think there’s more important things than doing the work. I’ve got like a 3.2 now, so it’s a decent GPA, and I’ve had some good social interaction.” Although his father was a lawyer and his mother with an M.S. in business ran a family-owned hardware store, Paul worked all summers and every semester, beginning in his sophomore year, including almost 40 hours a week as a manager at Blockbuster Video during fall 1997.

*Business Majors*

Allison, Jeanette, Julia, and Bhakti, as business majors, selected papers mostly from their general education classes for their final portfolios. When asked about writing in her specialization, business administration, Julia said, "Most of it's just tests and exams. . . . Or, if we do do projects, like, actually we did a big marketing project . . . they keep them, so. . . . well, we turn them in at the end of the semester and then I don't know what happens to them." Allison, in accounting, included one auditing research project in her portfolio, explaining how she conducted a sample audit and drew conclusions and reported succinctly, using numbers and short bullet points of one or two sentences. Allison was the first in her family to graduate from college. Her father was retired from a twenty-year career in the navy and fixed computers. Two months before graduation, Allison already had a job with a major accounting firm in Los Angeles and had received from them a new laptop computer as a perk for signing on at a salary she said was \$10,000 more than she had expected to make.

These are the students who agreed to participate in the Digital Portfolio Assessment Project and stayed with us for four years providing data about their college experience. This data was both rich and messy including piles of folders, student self-assessments both on paper and in computer files, and boxes of audio and video tapes.

*A Qualitative Methodology for Studying Development*

We first seriously examined this data during the summer of 1995 when one instructional librarian and eight faculty members from mathematics, English, communication, biology, and psychology gathered to analyze the portfolios, assessments, audio tapes, and videotapes collected during our study students' first year. Although the Digital Portfolio Assessment Project (DPAP), which provided the data for this study, had from the beginning used qualitative research methods and strategies developed from the contemporary assessment movement, especially as promoted by professional organizations such as the American Association of Higher Education

(AAHE), methodology was a subject of discussion among faculty members from very different research traditions. A literature review essay, "Qualitative Research Methods in Higher Education," (Crowson, 1994) from the comprehensive *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), provided grounding for these discussions. While Crowson acknowledges that there is no single definition of what constitutes qualitative research and that terms such as *ethnographic* or *naturalistic* are contested, he concludes:

At best, it can be said that to work "in the style" of the qualitative research is to consistently employ such practices of data collection as participant observation, the discovery and use of unobtrusive measures, informal interviewing, life history construction, content analysis, and videotaping—and to seek from one's data *understanding* of the phenomena observed rather than some generalizable knowledge or explanation, prediction, and control. (p. 169)

Crowson's loose definition fit my own sense of how best to research a complex system such as a college general education program and the development of students within such a system. My previous experience as a teacher and department chair at an urban high school, as director of a National Writing Project site, and as an instructor at two independent universities and a professor at a third, Pepperdine, and my work, at different times, as a writing center director and a writing program administrator helped me to observe Pepperdine's programs both as an outsider familiar with quite different settings and as a participant within our general education program. My dissertation had been a qualitative study of an adult literacy project, and I had had previous training in anthropology as an undergraduate and in sociolinguistic research as a graduate student. Crowson's review summarized both the advantages and problems of qualitative research.

My colleagues from different research traditions and I struggled especially to find ways to make sure our qualitative study findings

learning. The director of assessment, Henry Gambill, has written two documents, available on the web site described in Appendix A, that further review the history and methods of the Digital Portfolio Assessment Project. Additional documents focus on specific methods and findings of the projects, and there are links to other useful assessment resources.