

Preface

The developmental importance of ecological transitions derives from the fact that they almost invariably involve a change in *role*, that is in the expectations for behavior associated with particular positions in society. Roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels.

—Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*

“We can help you to be a better writer.” This writing center slogan displayed on posters across a college campus implies a theory of development that writers can indeed become “better” and provides an assurance that the writing center is an environment that promotes such development. Composition specialists in all the many roles they play operate from either tacit or explicit theories of development and owe their professional careers to the assumption that they know something about how to help people become better writers. They are called on as experts to help dispel myths about writing and to suggest effective teaching strategies to faculty across the curriculum. But what do we actually know about how the writing of students develops over the course of several years of college? This longitudinal study attempts to answer this question for a group of 20 students at a midsize independent university by following their development as writers over four years.

While some college faculty members and administrators cling to the myth that adequately prepared students should be able to write fluently and correctly on any topic, at any time, in any context, this study demonstrates that even students who were generally successful in high school are unable to fulfill this fantasy. I want to demonstrate in this volume why a one- or two-semester, first-year course in writing cannot meet all the needs of even our more experienced writers and show how students’ complex literacy skills

develop slowly, often idiosyncratically, over the course of their college years, as they choose or are coerced to take on new roles as writers.

Our study students did not necessarily learn to write “better,” but they did learn to write differently—to produce new, more complicated texts, addressing challenging topics with greater depth and complexity. They showed development as writers in terms defined by Scardamalia (1981), when she writes, “much of the story of cognitive development may be construed as taking progressively more variables into account during a single act of judgment” (p. 82; quoted in Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990, p. 13). They became better able to juggle the multiple literacy acts often required by the commonplace writing assignments of college courses.

The work of our study students demonstrates that the “basic skills” necessary to negotiate complex literacy tasks in college go far beyond the ability to produce grammatically correct, conventional, thesis-driven schoolroom essays. I argue that understanding the literacy demands placed on the student writers in our study will help us to teach the real “basics” more effectively to all students, including those labeled as “underprepared” or “basic writers.”

I address several different audiences in this volume: composition specialists who design and teach first-year writing courses, faculty across the disciplines interested in improving student writing, and administrators engaged in revising general education and major programs. I have aimed for a concise, practical analysis, useful to a broad audience. I write at a time when academics in the increasingly sophisticated field of composition and rhetoric seem beset by doubts about the value of the work they have traditionally undertaken in first-year composition, writing-across-the-curriculum programs, and writing assessment.

Sharon Crowley (1991, 1998), Lil Brannon, David Jolliffe, Charles Schuster (as cited in Connors, 1996), and others have recently argued for the abolition of the nearly universal first-year composition requirement on the grounds that it cannot deliver the writing skills that students and faculty across the disciplines expect and it creates a ghetto of underpaid writing instructors. Writing-

across-the-curriculum programs (WAC) have developed as a complement or alternative to first-year writing courses. Yet, here again, Barbara Walvoord (1996), writing on the 25th anniversary of WAC programs, notes “a pervasive sense of uncertainty” (p. 58). In her article, “The Future of WAC,” she summarizes some of the “threats and enemies” noted by experienced WAC leaders, which include “counterproductive attitudes and assumptions about writing and learning in the university” and the “lack of an appropriate theoretical and research base” (p. 58).

While teachers and administrators struggle with these uncertainties within the field of composition and rhetoric, they are increasingly under pressure to assess and demonstrate student learning. But recent volumes on evaluation (Cooper & Odell, 1998), on portfolios (Yancey & Weiser, 1997), on grading (Allison, Bryant, & Hourigan, 1997), and on assessing writing-across-the-curriculum programs (Yancey & Huot, 1997), as well as any issue of the journal, *Assessing Writing*, provide evidence of how difficult it is to identify what makes writing good and what should count as appropriate development, either in the classroom or in larger institutional settings.

Within the composition establishment, unfortunately, there is little research tracing the development of college writers over the long term that might inform discussions of these complex questions: What is the role of first-year composition? How can faculty best assess and support the development of students' writing abilities across the curriculum? Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know Them* (1997) stands out as a notable exception, following a group of writers from their beginning composition courses and demonstrating their growth in writing and learning in their major areas of study. She analyzes teaching strategies that do or do not support this growth. She convincingly argues that one-time institutional assessments often fail to capture development that occurs slowly over time.

In this volume, I offer a longitudinal study of another group of students and the literacy environment they experienced in college. While the problem areas I have sketched are too complex to be con-

sidered in-depth in any single study, examining literacy in college from the students' perspective does offer new insights. My analysis of the data collected in this study supports a limited but still useful role for first-year composition, demonstrates how students do learn to write differently across the curriculum in ways that may or may not be recognized by faculty, and examines the teaching and learning practices that promote or constrain student development.

Based on what was learned from students in my study, I make general recommendations to support students' development as they take on new roles as writers, both in first-year writing courses and in more specialized academic majors. As the quote by developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner asserts at the beginning of this preface, it is the almost "magiclike power" of these changing roles and expectations that alters college writers' ways of thinking and acting. Some of the recommendations in this volume will be familiar to faculty already engaged in writing across the curriculum or in teaching strategies that promote active learning and critical thinking. However, I want to demonstrate how student data support these recommendations and elaborate on how they play out in practice, especially in the practices of students themselves.

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis that students in college do not necessarily learn to write "better," but that they learn to write differently—to produce new, more complicated forms addressing challenging topics with greater depth, complexity, and rhetorical sophistication. What are often called "writing assignments" in college are, in fact, complex "literacy tasks" calling for high-level reading, research, and critical analysis. Both composition teachers in first-year courses and faculty in other academic disciplines may underestimate the difficulty of such tasks, students' needs for repeated practice, and the ways in which expectations for literacy differ across disciplines, courses, and professors. This chapter briefly reviews research that supports this more complex view of literacy and examines studies of writing across the disciplines. Four profiles of students writing in different academic disciplines preview the variety and difficulty of the new roles and tasks students are asked to take on during their college years. The chapter establishes a cul-

tural or environmental view of writing development drawing on the work of psychologists Lev Vygotsky (1978), Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), Jerome Bruner (1986, 1996), and Michael Cole (1996). The conclusion offers a challenge to composition specialists to rethink the first-year composition course and their role as “writing missionaries” to other academic disciplines.

In chapter 2, I sketch the culture of the college and the students presented in this study, situating the literacy practices of students and faculty within a school context and previous research on the politics of literacy. In the chapter, I describe the longitudinal, portfolio-based assessment project that provided data for this study, review the qualitative methodology used to collect and analyze data, and consider both the ethical and practical problems of validly representing participants in a qualitative study, especially in terms of gender, class, and race. Chapter 2 introduces, with brief profiles, the additional students in the study with majors in the humanities, communication, science, social sciences, and business.

In chapter 3, I examine how students' experiences in their first two years of college shape their development as writers. I look closely at some of the specific writing environments students encounter and demonstrate the frequently painful process that students undergo as they attempt to meet the varying literacy expectations of different professors. Writing across the curriculum is a roller coaster with much writing in some semesters and little in others. In their introductory classes in general education, students especially value literacy projects that mark points of transition, “milestones” in their learning in which they are able to make connections between their writing and their own developing interests. Some of the best of these projects are supported by “hands-on” learning outside the classroom. First-year writing serves as a transition from students' previous writing experiences in high school to the demands of the new roles they will take on in college. In composition courses, students focus explicitly on their own literacy and develop new writing strategies as they are “forced” to change their “normal” ways of writing. In their general education courses, students have few opportunities to write in-depth or develop a particu-

lar type of writing over time. A four-semester Great Books Colloquium offers one opportunity for this kind of sustained growth, though, as in first-year composition, the lessons learned do not necessarily carry over to writing in other disciplines.

Chapter 4 shows how students negotiate the writing demands of their major disciplines and challenges again the fantasy that students should already know how to write for situations they have not yet encountered. In this chapter, I examine how a variety of disciplines, some more than others, provide “scaffolding” to support students’ new roles as writers. Through research and writing courses, teacher and peer response, and “hands-on” experience, students develop a better sense of “what the professor wants” and come to explain some of these expectations as necessary, even useful, conventions of their academic fields. Students’ performances as writers are constrained as well as enabled by the circumstances of writing for the college classroom. Composition specialists need to understand diverse writing environments from the participants’ perspective, especially that of students. In this chapter, I demonstrate how students’ literacy development continues, though not always in linear and consistent ways apparent to individual faculty members in single courses.

Chapter 5 contains a summary of study conclusions, focusing particularly on the role of first-year composition in writing development, supporting the usefulness of upper-level writing requirements, and arguing for a more contextualized view of writing assessment. In the last section of this chapter, I propose recommendations for instruction across the curriculum, including taking seriously students’ questions about “what the professor wants,” examining closely the literacy environments we coconstruct with students, and altering these environments as necessary to support development as students rehearse new roles as writers.