

# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**FALL 1991**

VOLUME 10, NUMBER 2

Using a "Write-Speak-Write"  
Approach for Basic Writers  
**Robert de Beaugrande**  
**Mar Jean Olson**

Clothing the Emperor:  
Towards a Framework Relating  
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Power, Authority, and  
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Computer-Adjusted  
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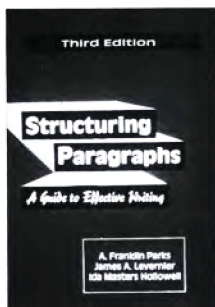
Orality, Literacy, and  
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Warning! Basic Writers at Risk:  
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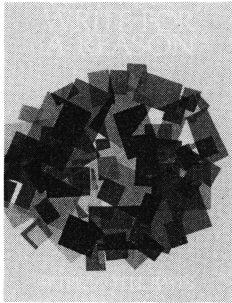
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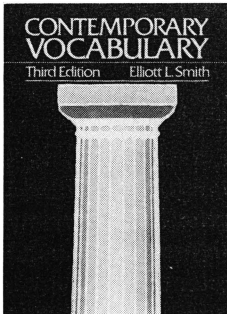
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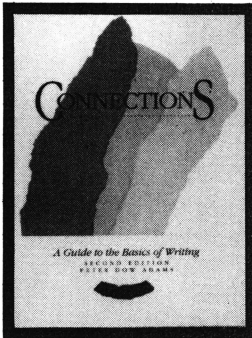
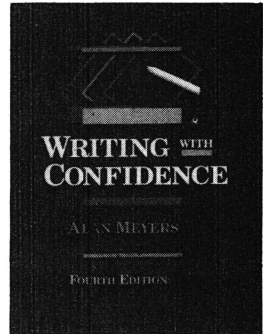
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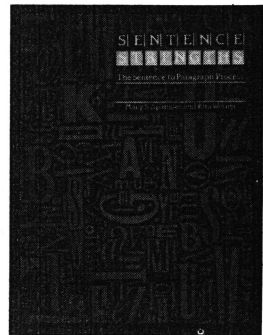
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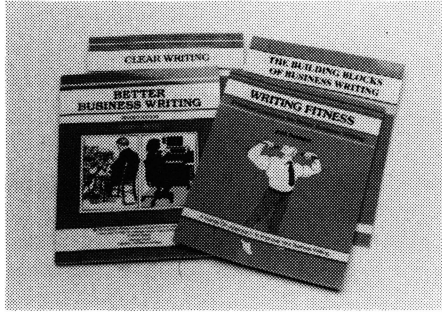
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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

**VOLUME 10      NUMBER 2      FALL 1991**

The *Journal of Basic Writing* publishes articles of theory, research, and teaching practices related to basic writing. Articles are refereed by members of the Editorial Board (see overleaf) and the Editors.

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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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## CALL FOR ARTICLES

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

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

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

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

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

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

## *Editors' Column*

With this issue, we complete our first three-year term as Editors of ***JBW***. We want to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have supported the *Journal* during our brief tenure. Above all, we want to express our appreciation both to our growing number of institutional and individual subscribers and to all those who have submitted manuscripts to the *Journal*. Without you, ***JBW*** could not exist as a meaningful enterprise. Second, we want to thank the thirty-seven members of the Editorial Board and our dedicated professional staff: Ruth Davis, Associate and Managing Editor; Marilyn Maiz, Associate Editor; and Richard A. Mandelbaum, Copyreader. Finally, we must acknowledge our advertisers, many of whom also publish books written or edited by ***JBW*** contributors and by members of our Editorial Board. We look forward to continuing to work with all of you during our second term.

One of our priorities during the 1991–93 term is computerization of the *Journal's* managing and editing of manuscripts. We recognize that we have an obligation to those who submit to ***JBW*** to speed up the editorial process, especially with respect to those manuscripts either rejected or returned for revision and resubmission. Ultimately, we need a system which will permit submission of manuscripts and reviewers' reports by electronic mail, as well as one that allows us to transmit the material for each issue to our printer directly. Budget permitting, we hope to have taken the first steps in this evolution by the time the current issue reaches you.

A second priority, continuing from our first term, is to make ***JBW*** a truly international and multicultural journal. Frankly, this has proven to be a far more difficult task than we at first envisioned. In spite of efforts by ourselves and members of the Editorial Board to encourage overseas submissions, ***JBW*** only receives a trickle of manuscripts from outside the United States, of which only one or two a year are of potential interest to our readers. Articles concerned with the theory and practice of basic writing in American

classrooms peopled by minorities are almost as rarely submitted. However, we shall continue our efforts to broaden the *Journal's* base during the next three years.

We would like to turn now to a brief summary of the articles in the current issue. If there is any emerging theme, it is the growing complexity of defining basic writers, delineating their attributes and capacities, and analyzing how awareness of this complexity influences our attitudes and practices as teachers.

In the first article Robert de Beaugrande and Mar Jean Olson present a view of basic writing that challenges prevailing linguistic, psychological, and educational theory and practice. The authors go on to report on a pilot project that interposes speech between successive written drafts, leading to writing of improved length, fluency, organization, and detail.

Alan Purves broadens and internationalizes the concept of writing communities as profound cultural phenomena each with its own rhetoric and conventions of transcription, language, structure, content, and style. Writing is to be studied almost anthropologically in relation to the models and conventions established within these communities.

Patricia Bizzell tries to bridge the theoretical impasse between a deep and abiding suspicion of any exercise of power in one's teaching with the desire to promote liberatory goals. In contrast to traditional notions of teacher-centered "power," Bizzell offers several, more complex forms of classroom "authority," and suggests how these new forms might enter into the design of composition curricula.

By employing computer analysis, George Otte attempts to define the seriousness of error in a class of upper-level developmental students who had failed the CUNY Writing Assessment Exam. The study shows that student recognition of their own errors is lower than one would suspect; that the most remedial error patterns tend to be those that are most clearly written conventions: capitalization, spelling, punctuation; and, most importantly, that few classwide error patterns exist, leading to the indispensable need for teachers to work with students individually.

Donald Lazere returns to the debate occasioned by Thomas J. Farrell's 1983 article, "I.Q. and Standard English," and suggests the importance of social class, among other factors, in assessing the broad range of basic writers who come to college from predominantly oral cultures.

Sally Barr Reagan presents the case study of Javier as an example of how to look more closely at the multitude of cultural and idiosyncratic factors that influence the feelings and behaviors of



basic writers at risk. The author goes on to suggest the need for teachers to change their attitudes and roles, instead of maintaining deficit-oriented definitions of their basic writing students.

Finally, Walter Minot and Kenneth Gamble challenge the assumption that basic writers are a homogeneous group, by studying the affective characteristics of basic writers with low writing apprehension and high self-esteem, suggesting important implications for composition theory and practice.

***Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller***

Robert de Beaugrande  
Mar Jean Olson

# USING A "WRITE- SPEAK-WRITE" APPROACH FOR BASIC WRITERS

*ABSTRACT: The authors begin by developing some reasons why basic writing is not at all "basic," but a serious challenge to theory and practice of the most advanced stages in linguistics, psychology, sociology, and education. The authors go on to advocate an approach focused on the communicative participants, rather than on the language or the text, for assessing potential language competence as it develops both in speech and writing, and for redefining the notion of "error." Finally, the authors present a pilot project in which the use of speech is found to assist basic writers in producing writing that is improved not merely in its length, fluency, and involvement, but also in its concrete detail and organization.*

## **Dilemmas for Theory and Practice**

It is not surprising that basic writing should be a long-standing practice for which academic research has been hard-put to supply a theory. Most theoretical work on language has been aimed toward a

---

*Robert de Beaugrande is professor of English and Linguistics at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and has been guest professor at the Universities of Minnesota (Minneapolis), Indiana (Bloomington), California (Los Angeles), Pernambuco (Brazil), Singapore, the Philippines (Diliman), Penang (Malaysia), Bielefeld (West Germany), and Leipzig (East Germany). He has also conducted seminars and workshops for language teachers in the U.K. and the U.S. as well as in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Brunei, Bulgaria, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Puerto Rico, and Spain. His books and articles address various aspects of text, discourse, literature, linguistics, psychology, and education, including papers in College English, English Journal, College Composition and Communication, and Written Communication.*

*Mar Jean Olson, doctoral candidate in English at the University of Florida, specializes in literacy programs for basic writers.*

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high level of abstraction, where deviations from general norms and standards are discounted or treated as marginal. Also, the samples of language and discourse addressed in such work have usually been in standard written prose, even when the researchers expressly declared the primacy of speech over writing.<sup>1</sup> When language varieties were studied, moreover, they were usually those current among some regional group and could thereby be understood as localized norms in their own right.

After a long delay, language research began to address the varieties belonging to social groups as well as to purely regional ones. The evaluative or judgmental implications at once became more acute. Labeling a dialect as "Low German" does not carry negative implications (the "lowness" belongs to the low-lying plains of northern Germany), but labeling one as "lower class" does.

The so-called "deficit hypothesis" about social language varieties, formulated in the 1960s and 1970s by a group around Basil Bernstein in London, offers an instructive retrospect. Its proponents had been comparing samples of the speech of "middle class" and "lower class" British children and finding that the first group manifested a more "elaborated code" and the second group a more "restricted code." In his early work (he later found it unwise), Bernstein cataloged the traits of the two varieties, which he at first called "formal speech" and "public speech"—two labels referring to situations rather than to traits of the "code" itself. But his labels for the traits were mostly code-based and resembled commonplace descriptions of basic writing, even though he was purportedly referring to speech. In contrast to the "accurate grammatical order and syntax" of the elaborated variety, the restricted variety manifested "short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences with a poor syntactic form," along with "simple and repetitive use of conjunctions," "little use of subordinate clauses," and so on (Bernstein 169f).

These traits were construed as indicators of psychological deficits as well as linguistic ones. Bernstein postulated an "inability to hold a formal subject through a speech sequence," a "dislocation of informational content," a "confounding of reason and conclusion," and so on (169f). This diagnosis may disturb writing teachers, who have good reason to consider such drastic extrapolations unduly pessimistic and premature, the more so as we lack a reliable consensus about how to draw direct connections between "form" and "content."

Predictably, the same trend toward psychological extrapolation surfaced in American studies of the speech of Black children, where social differentiation was correlated with racial. When Bereiter and

Engelmann (36) had trouble recognizing distinctly articulated work boundaries in “the child’s pronunciation,” the diagnosis was an “inability to deal with sentences as sequences of meaningful parts.” Thus, “the speech of severely deprived children” was believed to signal “a total lack of ability to use language as a device for acquiring and processing intonation” (34, 39).

This kind of extrapolation is ominous in view of the already confused educational policies in the Anglo-American world. The project to make education as general as possible and to base its success criteria on “merit” rather than wealth and privilege led to an uncritical faith in standardized testing. At the top of the hierarchy was “intelligence testing,” which claimed to measure a unitary, innate intellectual competence unrelated to social and cultural situations—despite the uncanny correlations, already shown by Cyril Burt in the 1940s, between IQ and parental income. A College Board Report presented the same finding for the SAT scores of 647,000 students tested in 1973–74.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, measurements of “intelligence” and “aptitude” address not so much the innate competence or fixed scholastic potential as the complex and variegated social situations in which some students develop their competence and realize their potential while others do not. This problem cannot be resolved merely by eliminating socially marked content (if that were possible) or introducing the content of a presumed “subculture.” High pressure test-taking, especially in abstract problem solving, is itself such a heavily acculturated middle-class activity that it cannot measure the competence of lower-class children. The “myth of the deprived child,” which, as Herbert Ginsburg has shown as a close corollary of the “deficit hypothesis,” is a product of narrow middle-class preconceptions about the relevant modes of being “intelligent.”

In the past, most standard intelligence and aptitude tests have not included a freewriting sample, not so much because the hybrid of testmakers like ETS is limited (it isn’t) but because the time and expense of scoring it would cut into profits. When language items have appeared on a test, they typically assumed the more tractable and ominous form of multiple-choice questions about tricky points of grammar that would not even come up except in rigidly standardized prose (like “Vote for whoever/whomever is best qualified”). Under recent pressure, the inclusion of writing samples is growing as a token gesture, but I doubt that the testmakers will provide scoring techniques which genuinely measure anyone’s intelligence or aptitude from a writing sample and certainly not those of basic writers, who may be even more effectively discriminated by the newer tests.



Thus, academic conceptions in linguistics, psychology, and standardized testing have united to reinforce, with more technical and protected rationales, the old folk-wisdom that nonstandard speech and basic writing are signs of inherent low ability. If even theoretical specialists are unable to transcend this folk-wisdom, the prospects are much bleaker for practicing teachers and administrators, and bleakest of all for the learners themselves. The danger persists that we may all take it for granted, at least secretly, that nothing decisive can be done. The eminent linguist Sir Randolph Quirk once told me I simply shouldn't expect everybody to learn how to write well: "You can't teach a dog to grow persimmons," he added.

When research findings and the diagnoses drawn from them tally with discriminatory social and racial attitudes, the researchers face three distinct choices. They can, as Arthur Jensen has done over the years, contumaciously insist that their findings represent "scientific facts" we must face, whether we like it or not: Blacks and poor children *are* inferior, period. Or, as Bereiter and Engelmann did, they can treat the findings as a factual condition we can resolve by remedial education: the children are inferior *now*, but can be "remediated." Or, as William Labov has done, they can scrutinize the underlying predispositions that led to such an interpretation of the "facts" and can provide other facts and alternative interpretations, showing for example how the same "deprived" Black children manifest impressive communicative skills in other types of situation: the children are *not* inferior, but are made to appear so by the skewed relationship between their own culture and the educational contexts we have created for them.

Most of us, including composition teachers, do suspect that writing plays a major role in psychological development and social advancement, but the relevant contexts, conditions, and causalities are hard to establish. The widespread nineteenth-century notion that merely transcribing texts word for word would do the trick is no longer seriously maintained; but an empirical study of grades 1, 3, and 5 in the mid-1980s showed that two-thirds of the total class time spent writing—the total itself being only 15% of the school day—still consisted of word-for-word copying in workbooks (Anderson et al.). Around the same time, a study of secondary schools found that less than 10% of the students' time in English instruction itself was spent writing connected prose (Hansen et al.). Under conditions like these, the potential of writing for psychological and social progress cannot be properly assessed, and the discouraging results obtained so far tell us very little about what might be achieved under more favorable conditions, provided we had the means to identify and create them.

To meet that provision, we must address a whole gallery of troublesome questions, such as:

- (1) What deserves to constitute the core or norm of a language?
- (2) What brands of language should be distinguished, and by what criteria?
- (3) What evidence can a given brand of language provide about the psychological or social status of the people who speak or write it?
- (4) How are a person's speech and writing related to each other, and how does each contribute to development of one's potential?
- (5) How can we gauge current writing skills?
- (6) How can we differentiate these current skills from potential skills?
- (7) How can we create conditions for encouraging the realization of this potential?
- (8) Where do writing skills fit in the overall picture of human abilities?
- (9) Where do writing skills fit in the overall picture of intellectual or academic progress?

For a long time, these questions were seldom raised, presumably because institutions believed that conventional education would deal with them in practice, at least for learners who were sufficiently meritorious, dedicated, gifted, and so on, whether or not we had any theory to explain how. Recently, such questions have been much more frequently raised but will keep getting confused with each other as long academic standard prose continues to be the pervasive dominant standard both for describing language and for judging academic abilities. This prose tends to form a closed circle which not only keeps the outsider from entering, but also hinders those of us who have mastered it from communicating reliably with those who have not.

### **Basic Writing as a Linguistic, Psychological, and Social Phenomenon**

A material improvement in the situation of basic writing presupposes a comprehensive statement of what it *is* rather than what it *is not*. At least three crucial standpoints can be distinguished.

From a *linguistic standpoint*, basic writing is essentially a written language variety reflecting the writer's speech patterns,

filtered only through some autochthonous strategies of transcription and deprived of all the expressive means not amenable to these strategies. From this standpoint, the central problem is that the resources of speech for expression and elaboration are not *inferior* to (more “restricted” or “dislocated” than) the resources of writing, but *different*. Caution is needed lest we assess this difference mechanically because we are distracted by the flagrant disparities in English between speech contours versus written orthography and punctuation. If we can genuinely free ourselves from our preoccupation with errors—a goal which has been frequently advocated and rarely achieved<sup>3</sup>—we may, by dint of conscious exertion, overcome the destructive bias of equating basic writing with “misspelled” and “mispunctuated” writing. As word processors become widely available, the instruction in spelling should be shifted away from episodic memorization of a sole *correct* spelling toward thematic heuristics for approximating a *plausible* spelling well enough to use spell-checking programs efficiently.

So far, linguistics has examined the more important organizational differences between speech and writing only occasionally, as in the work of the Czechoslovakian scholar Josef Vachek.<sup>4</sup> Even linguistics has been unduly influenced by the “folk belief, typical of a written culture, according to which spoken language is disorganized and featureless,” as “‘demonstrated’ by transcriptions in which speech is reduced to writing and made to look like a dog’s dinner,” due to “the disorder and fragmentation” in “the way it is transcribed” without “intonation or rhythm or variation in tempo and loudness” (Halliday xxiv). As far as I know, Michael Halliday was the first major linguist who completely abrogated this folk-wisdom:

The potential of the system is more richly developed and more fully revealed in speech. . . . Spoken language responds continually to the small but subtle changes in its environment, both verbal and nonverbal; and in so doing exhibits a rich pattern of semantic [and] grammatical variation that does not get explored in writing. . . . Spoken language can “choreograph” very long and intricate patterns of semantic movement while maintaining a continuous flow of discourse that is coherent without being constructional. (xxiiiif, 201)

Halliday’s vision suggests that part of learning to write is learning to *restrict* the richness of elaboration, rather than to enhance it.

Halliday’s argument bears directly on the research that led to the “deficit hypothesis,” with which he and his wife Ruqaiya Hasan were initially involved. Researchers like Bernstein and Hawkins in

the U.K. and Bereiter and Engelmann in the U.S. were evidently proceeding on the assumption that the *only* relevant resources for “elaborating the code” are those typical of standard written prose, the same variety linguistics had often treated as the most basic and general instantiation of language. This outlook can see only a “deficit” in varieties that use alternative resources. The transformation of spontaneous speech written down without regard for intonation, tone of voice, emotional nuances, and so on is compounded for the speech of a specific social or racial group whose pronunciation and grammar are further removed from standard orthography, e.g., in terms of marking the boundaries of words or the number and tense of verb forms.

Any genuine solution presupposes a description of the language based directly on speech rather than on writing. Like his teacher J. R. Firth (23), Halliday (xxiii) has called for a “grammar of spoken language” but has not yet provided more than an outline of it. His most important strategy, in my view,<sup>5</sup> is to shift the focus from the exhaustive segmentation of sentences, typical in both traditional grammar and linguistics, over to the functional expression of experiential and communicative categories, such as “mental process” or “circumstance.”

From a *psychological standpoint*, basic writing might be described as a rudimentary stage in which the learner’s expressive strategies were retarded or indeed arrested before they could be developed and refined to tap the special resources of written prose, such as the opportunity to reconsider and revise one’s choices. However, this description entails a possibly fictional assumption that a “normal” rudimentary stage of writing in fact occurs during language development. In some cases, writing may not have appeared on the agenda at all. Such was the situation of a group of college-age Sudanese refugees in a camp in Haifa, Israel, who were supposed to be prepared for education. They spoke only Amharic and had never written any language. To make literacy more accessible, I recommended a strong orientation toward their spoken culture, such as writing their most familiar songs and stories down first in Amharic with the Hebrew alphabet, then in Hebrew, before attempting to teach them the standard grammar of Hebrew—a language whose dependence on writing included the remarkable reanimation of the language from scriptural sources during the nineteenth century.

Moreover, Halliday’s argument indicates the perils of associating “spoken” with “rudimentary.” If one’s speech skills were fairly well developed during the stage when basic writing was leveling out, the written texts should consistently reflect at least some speech-like

elaboration. But if one's speech skills were not developed, the written texts should show little consistency except what might arise from the basic writer's guesses about the organization of writing, whose creative and ingenious quality, as Mina Shaughnessy first pointed out, is routinely overlooked by teachers who judge the results purely as academic prose.

It is therefore essential to uncouple the issues of psychological development from those of linguistic development. For example, we could examine the ability of basic writers at various ages to give and follow instructions for performing tasks of varying complexity, using speech and writing alternately. Or we could have them read a story written down by another basic writer and retell it in both speech and writing. However, such probes would have to be carried out under conditions where the learners would not be self-conscious about their language, and, in the bounds of conventional schooling, this might be difficult.

From a *social standpoint*, basic writing is a highly specific variety of language whose users create it more through individual efforts than through communal consensus. Its audience is solely the writing teacher or a similar institutional representative. It therefore carries a chiefly "metacommunicative" significance, indicating how the writer proceeds rather than conveying a pertinent message.

Although users of basic writing constitute a recognizable minority, the latter is not defined in terms of writing skills per se, and the prospect that they might be organized to assert their human rights is virtually nil. The discrimination to which they are subjected is nowhere regulated by statute. And since the current trend in court decisions is to legitimize discriminations against nonstandard speakers of English (on the fiction that the problem is individual and personal rather than social or racial), nonstandard writers have little to hope for in the future.

The social diversification, to which "equal opportunity education" was intended to be a response, is reconverging today upon a steadily constricting bottleneck of economic opportunities whose scarcity counsels more urgently than ever against any deviations from the standards recommended for "upward mobility." Moreover, minorities are increasingly suspicious that they can be integrated only if they consent to being estranged from their own language and culture. And even if they should consent, they have no guarantee that a distinct improvement in individual status will ensue; or that such an improvement might not be used as an alibi for leaving the social disparities themselves unaltered.

From an *educational standpoint*, basic writing is the product of the disequilibrium between two contrary tendencies: to make

education more general, but to continue centering it on a special variety of language and culture whose users form an ever-smaller minority as the educational process expands. This minority not merely enjoys an enormous advantage throughout their personal schooling, but also continues to serve as evidence and pretext for a wishful model of the hypothetical student at whom the average textbook or instructional method is usually aimed. Their exceptional success furnished a justification for retaining these materials or altering them only in cosmetic or gradual ways.

Thus, higher education has admitted a nontraditional population of students, yet has continued to discriminate them indirectly by making standard prose a central yardstick all across the curriculum yet not providing genuinely workable means to describe it in their own terms, let alone to produce it. This impasse is unlikely to be relieved until we can make a much more encompassing assessment of how basic writers come to be “basic,” and what their current skills and future potential might be. We must above all understand the conditions of basic writing as a linguistic, psychological, and social phenomenon in its own right, and not as a mere negation of some other phenomenon or as an anarchy of deviations and disruptions. This understanding should help us to appreciate not only why basic writing has the traits it does, but why it presents such a challenge to both theory and practice.

### **The Language versus the Participants**

We can encourage such understanding by orienting our theories and practices toward communicative criteria. The focus of attention would then be the *participants* rather than the *language* or the *text*, which has occupied center stage in nearly all areas of theory and practice in traditional grammar, linguistics, and composition. Such an orientation has recently been advocated both in writing research and in the evaluation of students' products, but because the means for implementation are not well accounted for, we continue to focus on language and its formal properties, whose “correctness” appears to offer us a convenient and straightforward frame of reference.

Dispassionate examination of communication in a wide variety of settings, including other languages than English, leads to a significant conclusion: formal correctness is not crucial for communicative success. The process of “pidginization,” which improvises an intermediary language for everyday use, proves that formal correctness can be extensively relaxed without adverse effects on one's ability to communicate. By building a bridge between the languages of the participation groups, the pidgin is the

only practicable medium in such settings. The pidgin English spoken in Ghana, for example, is the only medium of nationwide communication among the speakers of more than forty indigenous languages.<sup>6</sup> Its elementary but flexible structure—which might well be counted a “deficit” by the research cited in this paper’s first section—enables it to accommodate the diverse formative principles of these languages without jeopardizing comprehensibility. On the other hand, British English, the language of the former colonizers, is ridiculed by pidgin speakers as “booklong,” a term which points up the Ghanaians’ awareness of the close link between standardization and extended written texts.

At first, the Ghanaian values seem paradoxical: the very features that count as markers of correctness in British schools count in Ghana as errors—more social errors than formal ones. But this paradox disappears if we adopt a communication-oriented definition of “errors”: a class of language events not intended but perceived as negative metacommunicative signals about the speaker or writer rather than about the message. Errors are disputatious because different people or groups vary dramatically in their “error-consciousness,” that is, in their ability and disposition to perceive and interpret such signals. Composition textbooks, such as the recent one falsely claiming that “a sentence fragment doesn’t really say anything” (Glazier, 67), often imply the dubious theses that errors entirely blot out the message, and that a high level of error-consciousness is therefore both widespread and desirable and should be internalized while learning to write. Since basic writers know better from their own experience in conversation, they understandably resent being asked to internalize an attitude that inaccurately disqualifies their own language as a means of communication. Most of the error-consciousness in the English-speaking world is either the property of English teachers or the product of their ministrations to propagate it.

This communicative redefinition of “errors” illustrates the proposed focus on the participants. The traditional focus on the language or text, in contrast, has helped to entrench the pernicious notion, dear to self-appointed guardians of language like Wilson Follett and Edwin Newman, of an error as a tangible absolute for all participants and contexts. This notion reinforces the folk-belief, cited above, that everyday speech is crammed with errors. Only by shifting our focus to communicative participants can we hope to bring about more tolerant and enlightened public attitudes about language, as advocated by Anne Gere and Eugene Smith in *Attitudes, Language, and Change*.

This newer focus reopens the question of which participant groups have the right to decide what is or is not an error. In the past,

this right was simply seized by persons whose claim to authority was based chiefly on their own exaggerated error-consciousness, and who felt free to inflate the catalogue of supposed errors with their personal whims and dislikes, as Dwight Bolinger has shown. And as long as errors are held to be tangible absolutes, none can ever be removed from the list, and whoever disputes the wrongness of any censured usage gets rebuked for “destroying standards” and “corrupting the language.”

The participant orientation has been largely neglected in linguistics, which remained language-oriented to the point where, in generative grammar, the “speaker-hearer” faded away into an idealization devoid of nearly all human qualities, like the “abstract automaton” invoked by Chomsky.<sup>7</sup> Recently, however, linguists working in “pragmatics” and “discourse analysis” have shown how many important regularities of language must be described in terms of participants.<sup>8</sup> The problem at present is that attempts to draw the full consequences of this insight are still hampered by the language-oriented theories and terminologies inherited from the past.

A participant orientation would offer a means to reappraise the difference between speech and writing. An intriguing finding in research so far has been that only a few people, among them trained public speakers and radio broadcasters, produce spoken texts that closely resemble their written texts in linguistic terms. The large majority, including most academics, exhibit two quite divergent brands of language in one mode versus the other. Speech transcripts from videotapings made here at the University of Florida, for example, displayed English professors speaking in ways fairly similar to ordinary freshman writers.

If the same participant demonstrates such consistent patterns of diversity irrespective of skill level, speaking and writing must involve at least partially different types of competence, which can and often do develop in quite divergent ways. Many problems regarding usage, particularly in America, have arisen from the tendency to overlook this potential difference by extrapolating naively from one modality to the other. One of these problems is the misconception that if writing is to be standardized, we must first standardize speech to resemble it as closely as possible. This idea entrains writing teachers in an endless crusade far beyond either our authority or our capacity. We extend our already overdeveloped error-consciousness to cover the students’ speech as well as their writing, and end up asking them to adopt a brand of speech which, within their peer group, might count as a conspicuous (and possibly ludicrous) deviation, like the “booklong” British English in Ghana.



Another problem in confusing speech with writing is the belief that because the speech competence of our students has been essentially stabilized by the time they enter our classes, we will not be able to influence their writing competence very materially. The fact of the matter, I suspect, is that our methods and textbooks are largely designed on the—increasingly wishful—assumption that the learners' writing competence has also been at least partially stabilized by that time. Our methods and textbooks work best when this is so, e.g., among children of middle-class or upper-class families maintaining a literate environment, but are otherwise ineffectual; and the lack of stabilization among basic writers is readily misunderstood as a disability to develop competence at all, irrespective of age.

Yet another problem arises when basic writers also confuse speech with writing. By projecting their difficulties with writing over onto their speech, they acquire a mistaken feeling of incompetence to use the language in general. Their major language resource to invest in writing, namely their speech competence, thus gets disqualified as a liability, leaving them with the sinking sensation of trying to start from absolute zero, which really *is* impossible. We should thus not be too surprised when basic writers pass through years of schooling without attaining functional literacy and become steadily more alienated from the whole enterprise.

To recover their motivation, basic writers need to accept two beliefs: that their speech competence is a key resource, not a liability, and that it does not have to be transformed before their writing competence can develop. These beliefs can be fostered through an approach which actively encourages them to invest their speech capabilities and helps them to appreciate how writing differs according to its own particular conditions and purposes. The main focus would be placed on recognizing and controlling potential problems involved in those differences and on exploiting the resources specific to writing.

In such an ambience, the task of writing can be decomposed into subtasks whose number and scope are tailored to fit the group of learners at hand. This principle obliges the basic writing teacher to adapt the design of instruction to each group. The added demands on the already overburdened teacher can be offset, however, as the students become steadily more capable of evaluating and revising their own products. The traditional task of "correcting papers," which improves the teacher's competence while leaving the learners crucially dependent on outside reactions, is thereby transferred to the learners. The teacher's function is then to identify

problems and suggest strategies, whereas the learners must find and alleviate the specific instances on their own.

Tasks and criteria must be carefully designed lest the learners' error-consciousness be raised in an inhibiting way. Teacher-performed correction raises this consciousness only vaguely and disconcertingly by suggesting that errors are frequent if not unavoidable but also that the teacher alone is competent to find and remedy them. Instead, we must try to convey the message that most issues of usage depend on what suits the context and purpose and do not demarcate a borderline between "right" and "wrong." Learners should become attuned to potential problems at the same time as they acquire strategies for identifying and alleviating them. The resulting consciousness will then be more focused and more practicable than that fostered by teacher-performed correction.<sup>9</sup>

One reason for the meager and undependable results of traditional "remediation" is that it fails to take the writer seriously as a communicative participant with a concrete social history. Such remediation is often one more rehearsal of the same methods that led to the basic writer's predicament in the first place. The metalanguage imposed by the materials is not helpful because it is either too technical (e.g., "finite verb," "gerundive") or too vague (e.g., "a sentence" is "a complete thought") to apply to real communication. Noncommunicative drills merely become steadily more meaningless through recapitulation. Error-consciousness is intensified but no effective or practicable strategies for applying it are inferred. Creativity is not rewarded but discouraged as a further source of errors. Finally, the remedial situation—even the term "remedial" invokes the spirit of the deficit hypothesis—and its disappointing outcome reinforce the learners' belief in their own incompetence in the language.

Paradoxically, basic writers most need the help we are least prepared to give. We are still not adequately informed about their language abilities and about the nature and origin of their problems. Our curriculum represents to them a ladder with the lower rungs missing, rungs which are supplied by learners from more literate backgrounds. Our preoccupation with upholding and protecting unrealistic "standards" keeps our offerings out of reach. And emphasizing mechanics as the basis for good writing is tantamount to recommending rigorous training in pronunciation as the proper basis for effective speaking; the term "mechanical" itself invokes the alienating quality of the repetitive drills often applied to these issues.

Materially improving the state of affairs requires much comprehensive work in both theory and practice. We should observe and

record spontaneous speech under real-life conditions, and pay close attention to those resources of expression and elaboration which do not carry over into written samples in standard orthography, such as indicators of personal interest and involvement. We should then compare these speech resources to the corresponding resources of standard writing. Finally, we should develop workable training programs for mediating these resources to basic writers on whatever level they may be encountered.

### **A Pilot Project**

A pilot project with basic writers might help to make some of the arguments advanced above more concrete. Mar Jean Olson, a graduate student in English here at UF, was delegated to conduct a special writing class within the Office of Instructional Resources Special Program for Athletes. Like many basic writers, these students had invested their talents in sports, where their success stood in a far more tangible and reliable ratio to their efforts than in English. The cliché that athletes are “not intelligent” no doubt reflects their frustration from trying to correlate their intellectual development with stringent and uncreative school assignments and attaining unpredictable and uncontrollable results.

Preliminary contacts and interviews indicated that—again like many basic writers—these students were articulate and animated speakers. We hoped that these abilities could be deployed to improve *fluency*, i.e., how easily and extensively the students produce texts, and *involvement*, i.e., how strongly they can identify the writing activity with their personal priorities. These two factors should help to counter-balance some of the more debilitating effects of the intense but vague error-consciousness instilled by traditional instruction.

In that semester, the contingent assigned to Olson consisted of fifteen University of Florida scholarship athletes. Instead of writing a formal paper on an assigned topic, they were to “choose a game they played and explain it to someone who wouldn’t know how to play it,” first in writing, then in speech, and then again in writing. For the first session, students had half an hour. The second session took place one week later, when each student attended an individual conference. During their monologues, which were recorded on tape, Olson listened attentively, but tried not to display conspicuous encouragement or disapproval. At the final session during class one week after the taping, the students were given both their first drafts and the typed transcripts that Olson had made from their recorded speech, plus written instructions saying: “Here is

what you wrote when you explained a game that you play, and here is what you said. Read through both, and then explain the game to me in a final draft." The time allotment was again half an hour, as in the first writing session.

We conjectured that this approach might encourage the students to view writing as an open, multistage process of drafting, comparing, and revising. This view could work against the problem commonly reported (e.g., by Lillian Bridwell) among inexperienced writers who, when asked to "revise" a paper, follow the first draft much too closely and incorporate a few cosmetic minor changes (of presumed "errors"), focusing on grammar, spelling, and penmanship. Our design interposed a spoken version produced long enough after the first draft that the students could not repeat themselves. The contrast between the first draft and the spoken transcript could draw attention to the open relationship between content and expression. This contrast was highlighted by the graphic appearance of the transcript. Instead of standard punctuation, we used one slash mark for a short pause and two slash marks for a long pause; stressed words or word-parts were written in upper case. This means of transcription retains at least some of the intonation and avoids the interpretations we would have to make by inserting our own punctuation. The compendious *Survey of English Usage* at University College, London, directed by Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, has adopted similar conventions for its spoken corpus.

We expected that the first written draft would be relatively low in fluency and involvement, whereas the spoken second version might be substantially higher, since participant orientation is naturally more direct and conspicuous for spoken communication than for written. Ideally, some of this increase might carry over to the written third version. For the purposes of the project we disregarded the mechanics of spelling, punctuation, or grammar, which could be introduced later on, after fluency and involvement have improved.

In the first session, the students indeed showed scant involvement and visibly fretted about making errors. They manifested no significant motivation to be informative or personal. On the contrary, they appeared to feel restrained by the very activity of writing from conveying what they thought and felt. In the speaking session, the students proceeded with noticeably greater freedom and confidence, displaying more animation, direction, and conviction.

These tendencies did carry over to the writing of the third version. The students appeared to be encouraged by having usable

sources in front of them. This time, the familiar questions posed in the first session did not appear, such as, "How long does this have to be?" or, "Do you want a whole page?"

In nearly all cases, the final draft was not only longer than the first, but also superior in several ways I shall try to describe. Although these final drafts still did not conform to conventional composition standards, the remaining defects were largely mechanical. For example, words the student had misspelled in the first version and Olson had spelled correctly in the transcript often turned up with the original misspelling in the final version, such as "furst" for "first," "elven" for "eleven," and "cassel" for "castle." The missing "-s" from plural nouns and third-person singular verbs also tended to stay missing. Evidently, the writers were not focusing enough attention on spellings to notice the discrepancies between the first version and the transcript, especially when a dialect form was involved.

The openings of the three versions produced by one student clearly signal an increase in involvement and enthusiasm:

- (1) Miss olson, I play the game called chess. Chess is a game on a checkerboard. The board is for checkers.
- (2) chess is a GREAT game / if you DON'T play chess / you're REALly missing something / there's NOTHING like sitting down to play a game // you GOT TO CONCENTRATE // WATCH your men when you play chess
- (3) You really should play chess. It's a great game. Chess is a game that is played on a checkerboard. It needs two people to play it. What you need to play is concentration. You sit at the board with your men.

Whereas the original (1) opens with a dry statement that the writer "plays a game" "on a checkerboard" and spends a sentence on explaining the name of the board, the spoken version (2) opens with a declaration of enthusiasm and goes on to project the feeling of actually being in a game. The written version (3) follows up, again expressing enthusiasm (albeit more restrained) and taking the viewpoint of "sitting at the board with your men." The "checkerboard," omitted from (2), is retained in (3) but without the banal explanation of its name.

A more complex and interesting relationship obtains among these three openings:

- (4) Football is a game where guys play on a field. The field can be out of grass or artafischal turf.
- (5) Football has TWO teams // there's ONE ball // EVERY-

body wants to get that ball one way or the other // the GATor field has 120 yards to it

- (6) The University of Florida Football team is called the Gators. I play on this team and am proud of it. We play on Florida Field. The football field has 120 yards to it. Our field is made of artafischal turf but you can play on grass.

We see a similar rise in personal involvement along with the dramatic change from version to version. The original (4) opens impersonally, and the focused end position of the sentence goes to “field” rather than “game,” suggesting that “field” is the main topic. Version (5) focuses first on the “teams,” tells what every team member “wants,” and then turns to one particular “field” the speaker knows from experience. Version (6) further raises personal involvement by citing the writer’s own “team” and declaring his “pride” in “playing on” it. Taking “play” as a main topic makes the transition to a particular “field” much less abrupt than it was in version (5). The overall topic flow is smoother and more concrete, and the writer’s role as participant in the activity has replaced the abstract content orientation of version (4). This shift of focus toward participants, which calls to mind the trends outlined for language research in this paper’s section, “The Language versus the Participants,” may well have been encouraged by having interpolated a spoken session into the writing procedure. Additional evidence of greater involvement came from the ending of the spoken version, which had no equivalent in the written ones:

- (7) football has lots of action and you’d just LOVE it // I could talk forEVER about football

A discourse analysis of a complete set of three versions from the same student may bring out some organizational trends that register the student’s positive achievement and underlying skills beyond the concerns of mechanics, as proposed in the previous sections. For convenient reference, these versions and their constituents are numbered, which of course was not the case in the versions the students saw. The written first version (8), the spoken version (9), and the written third version (10), ran as follows:

- (8.1) I play basketball for fun. (8.2) It only takes a ball and hoop. (8.3) That’s it. (8.4) You lucky if you got a hoop. (8.5) There ain’t no net were I live. in Gainesville. (8.6) You try to cruize the ball down the hoop. (8.7) Its easy. (8.8) The court you are on about two time as long across length. (8.9) Its good if you see lines. (8.10) Lines are were to stand. (8.11) You can’t go pass them. (8.12) You start from the jump. (8.13) G

o

to your court. (8.14) Play your half till you go down. (8.15) when you sink a basket. (8.16) Win

(9.1) You play basketball all by yourself if you want to / (9.2) it's SO good / (9.3) sometimes when you don't want ANYbody / I mean NObody to tell YOU WHAT to do // (9.4) basketball has a hoop // (9.5) you and the hoop / (9.6) MAN / that's CLASsic // (9.7) BUT / when you play your BROTHers / you stick to rules // (9.8) only when there's rules do SOMEbody win // (9.9) I don't care a whole lot about winning because it's a COOL game whether you win or lose // (9.10) SO / you got the BALL // (9.11) I play Wilson / (9.12) then the court // (9.13) let's see // I might play CEment or gravel or dirt // (9.14) it REALly doesn't matter // as long as YOU know where your lines are // (9.15) that's SIDelines / (9.16) you CAN'T go out them sidelines // (9.17) at the ends of the lines at the ends of the court hang the hoops / TEN feet up // (9.18) SO // after you got the ball and the hoop and the court / you need the PEOPLE // (9.19) basketball games have two team // (9.20) you got your FORwards / two of them // (9.21) you got two guard and a center / (9.22) the center / he's the TALLEst and he stand around the basket // (9.23) you know / he REbounds // (9.24) the guard is the MASTer of the dribble // (9.25) he moves you downcourt / (9.26) OR / you can pass // (9.27) when you SHOOT / you SCORE // (9.28) a game has a halftime // (9.29) and in the LOCKer-room / you can talk strategy // (9.30) YOU know / you talk about man-to-man or about zone DEfense

(10.1) I play basketball here in Gainesville. (10.2) I like to play all alone because than nobody bothers me. (10.3) but I like to play with people too. (10.4) When you play with people you got to have rules. (10.5) The rules are to stay in the lines. (10.6) The lines go around the court. (10.7) The court is about two time as long as its wide. (10.8) The next rule is that you cant foul the other guy. (10.9) You cant touch or hurt him. (10.10) Than the next rule is that you gotta shoot to get points. (10.11) you shoot the round ball thro the basket. (10.12) I like to shoot the Wilson ball. (10.13) When you play ball you can play gaurd if you dribble. (10.14) You play center if you are a tall player and than you rebound. (10.15) You play forward if you shoot good. (10.16) A team has two guard, one center and two forward. (10.17) It don't matter if you play man to man or zone defense. (10.18) You get points when you shoot. (10.19) And you win when you score the most point before time.

The word count shows a typical curve, 91 words for (8), 228 for (9), and 174 for (10). By comparison, the averages for the whole group were: first version 102 words, second version 150 words, and third version 139 words. This curve shows the length of the written third version consistently moving up toward the length of the spoken version—an encouraging trend. Moreover, the longer versions showed an appreciably wider range of vocabulary.

The first version (8) is highly typical for basic writing: short, choppy sentences and a miscellaneous flow of topics without an evident plan or logic. Compared to the opening version (11) of a series on football we shall look at in a moment, the tone is positive, putting “fun” in the key end position of the opening sentence (8.1) and devoting a later sentence to the “easy” quality of “cruizing the ball” (8.7).

The active agent of (8) alternates between “I” and “you,” closely but fuzzily identified with each other. In view of the way the later versions emphasize the student’s fondness for playing basketball alone, the absence of the rest of the team in this first version seems significant. The writer’s tactic for discovering and organizing content in (8) appears to have consisted in mentally taking up a position on the court and reviewing what would be visible: “ball” and “hoop” (8.2–4), “court (8.8), and the “lines” whose capacity to be “seen” is expressly commended (8.9–11). This approach through mental imagery reminded the writer of some amenities he has not always been “lucky” enough to have, such as “hoop,” “net,” and easily visible “lines.”

Again typical for basic writing is the rough and episodic topic flow, whose key words are: “basketball - ball - hoop - court - lines - play - win.” The opener announces the game and its goal, i.e., “fun” (8.1), the prerequisites are named (8.2–5), and the action of play commences abruptly (8.6). Instead of carrying the imaginary player through to the score, as did the original football text (11) shown below, the topic shifts over to “the court you are on” and thence to the “lines” circumscribing it. Then, we are just as abruptly returned to the play, now (finally) at the proper “start,” which oddly is mentioned before the player has even “gone to your court” (8.12–13). The perspective next jumps from the single play to the whole “half,” belatedly invokes the scoring move of “sinking a basket,” and ends with a monosyllabic adjuration to “win” (8.14–16).

The spoken version (9) is quite superior in involvement, concreteness, and organization. The student’s enthusiasm is featured at greater length than in (8)—e.g., “SO good” (9.2), “CLASsic” (9.3), “COOL” (9.9)—and justified as an existential



compensation for situations in which you have somebody “telling YOU WHAT to do” (9.1–3). This justification is followed up with a somewhat philosophical observation, reminiscent of Rousseau or Thoreau, that “rules” are created only “when you play your BROTHers” and “SOMEbody” has to “win” (9.7–8). The writer’s previously asserted enjoyment of playing alone is now logically linked to his “not caring a whole lot about winning because it’s a COOL game whether you win or lose” (9.9). Personal involvement is also increased by stating his predilections regarding types of “ball” and “court” (9.11, 13).

The topic flow is another major change over version (8). The perspective of the opening statement suggests that the topic might be not just “basketball,” but in the speaker’s solitary enjoyment of it. This statement naturally calls for explanation since the game is supposed to be played by whole teams. The explanation indicates, as we saw, a personal ratiocination about the organization of society versus sports.

Then comes an unmediated topic shift, using the conversational transition marker “SO,” over to the ordinary requirements like “ball,” “court,” and “hoops” (9.10–18) with greater experiential detail than in version (8), e.g., the stipulation of the “hoop” being “at the ends of the court” and “TEN feet up” (9.17). Having gathered up these requirements, the speaker now moves on to the “teams” and the players’ positions, all of which rated no mention in version (8). The enumeration moves from the front players (“FORwards”) toward the “center,” who stands out by height and location (9.20–23). Rather like the basketball itself, the perspective is rapidly passed from player to player, so that it is not clear who the “you” might be (9.25–27), unless it covers the team as a whole. The portrayal concludes not at the end of the game, but at “halftime,” thus getting the “you” into “the LOCKer-room” to “talk strategy,” such as “man-to-man” or “zone DEfense” (9.28–30).

The third version was noticeably influenced by the interposed spoken version, but developed a somewhat different organization. Concrete details are added again, e.g., “the court is about two time as long as its wide” (10.7) and “you cant foul the other guy” by “touching or hurting him” (10.8–9).

The topic flow is better controlled as well. “Playing basketball” is announced as the topic proper in a sentence of its own, and the “playing all alone” is reserved for the second sentence and thus made to seem less topical than it did in (9). The justification for this solitary preference is rendered again, but in a sufficiently different style from the spoken version as to suggest that the student has some sense of overall conventions of writing; compare: “you don’t

want ANYbody / I mean NObody to tell YOU WHAT to do” (9.3) versus “nobody bothers me” (10.2); or “when you play your BROTHers / you stick to rules” (9.7) versus “When you play with people you got to have rules” (10.4). The philosophical rumination is more terse here, however.

The “rules” are used now as a strategic topic for grouping together the “lines,” the “fouling,” and the “shooting,” each being presented as one instance of a “rule” (10.5–10). Since the content of these instances is not parallel, the grouping is a trifle bumpy, but nonetheless reveals a feeling for the need to make the statement sequence more coherent than it was in the spoken version. By placing the “shooting” at the end of the list, the writer leads up to the high point and can dilate upon it to bring in the significance of the “basket” and his preference for one brand of “ball” (10.11–12), which had previously been situated among general conditions before play started (9.4–5, 10–11).

The next topic grouping is the team and its members, where consolidation and parallelism have once more been improved over version (9). Now, the “you” is the common agent who may, if meeting the respective stated qualifications, “play” either “guard,” “center,” or “forward” (10.13–15). Only after this parallel listing is the team totaled up and its positions counted (10.16). The writer brings in the issue of “man to man or zone defense” as an aspect of “play” (10.17) instead of as a subject for “talk” in “the locker room” (9.29–30), and thus ends up still on the field, citing the accumulation of “points” and the “winning” at the final “time.” Thus, the end of the text coincides with the end and goal of the game, yielding the kind of convergence that (to expropriate a phrase from Frank Kermode) promotes “the sense of an ending.”

The evolution was still more significant in this set of three versions:

(11.1) Football is a real easy game to watch but a hard to play because you get beat up but its more harder because the rules are hard. (11.2) Furst off you needd a place to play and a ball. (11.3) And some people. (11.4) Then you line up. (11.5) Then the quarterback snap to his man. (11.6) If You read your man thats hard. (11.7) If your man catch the ball you can score. (11.8) You can run the ball to. (11.9) But the quarter back he has lots of plays. (11.10) You score and the other guys get the ball. (11.11) You need elven guys. (11.12) And the same thing again. (11.13) You gotta get points to win football.

(12.1) football’s NOT hard to play // (12.2) you get a BALL

/ (12.3) the ball is brown (12.4) // THEN / you gotta get enough PEOPle to PLAY // (12.5) SO / you gotta get eleven strong MEN / (12.6) they make ONE team / (12.7) you have TWO team // (12.8) THEN / you throw a QUARter to see who play the ball / (12.9) heads or tails / YOU pick // (12.10) you start at the FIFty-yard line // (12.11) THERE / you line up you face your man // (12.12) SO AFter you line up / you GOTta get a PLAY // (12.13) you pass OR you run // (12.14) BUT / you GOTta be GOOD cause you're going to the OTHer end of the GREEN // (12.15) WHEN you CROSS it / you get the GLORy // (12.16) that what my HIGH school coach CALL points / GLORy // (12.17) they're the GOLD / or whatEVER YOU want // (12.18) BUT / FIRST / you GOTta get to the END zone // (12.19) make SURE you got a good KICKer / a real dependable foot // (12.20) ANYway / AFter you line up / the FUN parts start // (12.21) on DEFense / you got TACKlers / CORnerbacks / end / free-safety / and backers // (12.22) they're ALL big TROUble // (12.23) on OFFense / THEY got the ball / (12.24) THEY got the quarterback // (12.25) he call the play // (12.26) sometimes // he be a BOMBER or a SHORT-yard passer // (12.27) you got HIM / you got ENDS / guards (12.28) // THEN / you got the quarterback // (12.29) he called the CENter / (12.30) he the BIG man // (12.31) you got backs on DEFense // and you got TACKles (12.32) / EVERYbody's got a job to do // (12.33) AND / if YOU do YOUR job / YOU / win the game // (12.34) STILL you don't ALways win // (12.35) BUT / it's ALways fun to play football

(13.1) Glory is what you want in football. (13.2) That's what you get when you cross the endzone and score. (13.3) You first need eleven guys. (13.4) And you line them up on the line. (13.5) You need two team. (13.6) First you need one team that got tacklers, cornerbacks, ends, freesafety and backs. (13.7) There defense. (13.8) Next you got the other team. (13.9) On the other team you need ends, gaurds, and one big center. (13.10) That team play offense. (13.11) But most important on offense you got the quarterback. (13.12) He be the one who throw the ball. (13.13) He hand off the ball to. (13.14) You see the offense is the ones that got the ball. (13.15) Only the team who got the ball can score. (13.16) You score when you cross the endzone like for a touchdown. (13.17) You score to when you kick a feild goal. (13.18) That's the glory, the score.

The differences in length were again typical for our whole group:

a short written first version (108 words), a long spoken second version (244 words), and a written third version falling in between (140 words).

The greater length of version (12) over version (11) is accounted for partly by a wealth of added details: a “brown” ball (12.3), “strong MEN” (12.5), “the FIFty-yard line” (12.10), “TACKlers / CORnerbacks / end / free-safety / and backers” (12.21), “a BOMBer or a SHORT-yard passer” (12.26), “ENDS / guards” (12.27), and so forth. This enrichment of concrete detail is all the more marked in view of some rather empty stretches in version (11), such as “And some people” (11.3) or “And the same thing again” (11.13) (presumably meaning eleven more players), plus the wordy pessimistic opening about how “hard” the game is (11.1). Version (12) opens with an optimistic reversal by proclaiming that “football’s NOT hard to play” (12.1).

The rise in length also reflects increased involvement, witness the expressions conveying immediate experience and personal viewpoint: “THEN / you throw a QUARter to see who play the ball, heads OR tails” (12.8–9); “THERE / you line up you face your man” (12.11); “You GOTta be GOOD cause you’re going to the OTher end of the GREEN” (12.14); “WHEN you CROSS it / you get the GLORy” (12.15), “my HIGH school coach” (12.16), “make SURE you got a good KICKer / a real dependable foot” (12.19), “the FUN parts start” (12.20), “they’re ALL big TROUble” (12.22), and “it’s ALways fun to play” (12.35). This increase, which we observed in the texts of several other students as well, suggests that the students were somewhat uncomfortable about reporting or displaying their feelings in the first writing situation, but more at ease when speaking about the same topic. We need to investigate in more detail how far personal expression is systematically discouraged by the standard school writing instruction with its unrelenting emphasis on “formal styles” and its straitlaced avoidance of “opinion and emotion” as well as the first and second person.

The flow of topics was fairly jerky and miscellaneous in the first version (11). The flow opened with the “hardness” of the “game” and its “rules,” cited “place,” “ball,” and “people” in vague terms, and “then” went to the “line up” (11.1–4). In the play itself, the perspective of the active agent vacillated confusingly among “quarterback,” “his man,” “you,” “your man,” and “the other guys” (11.5–10). The number of players and teams followed as an obvious afterthought (11.11–12), and the ending capped a series of statements (11.1, 2, 3, 13) that would apply to many games, not just to football.

The topic flow of (12) is far smoother and more coherent. The

flow opens with the claim that the “game” is “not hard” after all (12.1), cites the ball and the people in more concrete terms “brown,” “strong” (12.2–5), and puts the number of players and teams in a logical place (12.5–7) before starting the action moving. The speaker evokes the toss of the coin, the exact location of the “line-up,” and the “play” (12.8–12). This time, the agent focus is consistently placed on “you,” zeroing in from your whole team (12.10–12) to the individual player (12.13–15), who successfully completes a touchdown. “Your man” is reserved this time for one of the opposite team (12.11), and the confusion of agents is gone. Version (12) then sticks to the point by naming a “dependable foot” as a requirement (12.19)—the only passage suggesting how the game got its name. We then flash back to the “line up” and the “fun parts” just about to “start,” thereby getting the teams back into the handiest array for naming the types of players, of whom only the “quarterback” had been mentioned at all in version (11). Some of them are introduced along with helpful comments about what they are or do. The repetition of “quarterback” in (12.28) was apparently needed to define him further as “the CENter” and “the BIG man” (12.29–30). The “DEFense” gets less focus and development than does the “OFFense” (12.21–31), probably because the latter viewpoint applied to the “you” who dominated the “play” (12.12–18). The flow then goes fairly logically from the players to their respective “jobs,” whose well “done” performance leads to “winning the game” (12.32–33). The final point of having “fun” even without “winning” (12.34–35) has no correlate in the written versions, and, as did samples (2), (7), and (9), again suggests the higher enthusiasm we might expect from spontaneous speaking over writing.

The third version (13) follows (12) more than (11) in its presentation of details, such as: “tacklers, cornerbacks, ends, freesafety and backs” on “defense” (13.6–7), “ends, gaurds, and one big center” on “offense” (13.9–10), and “You score when you cross the endzone” (13.2, 16). The “score” for “kicking a feild goal” (13.17) is mentioned for the first time. One important statement indicating involvement has not only been preserved from the spoken version (12.15–16), but given new prominence by occupying the strategic initial and final positions: “Glory is what you want” (13.1), and “Thats the glory” (13.18). The trend among the three versions thus runs from the pessimistic tone of (11) that opened with players “getting beat up” and with “rules” making the game so “hard” (11.1), to the more optimistic tone of (12) with the game being “not hard” and “fun” even without “winning” (12.1, 34–35), to this peak of optimism with “glory” first and last.

The topic flow of (13) also differs from that of (11) and (12). Placed in lead position, "glory" attains topic status and leads naturally into the action of "scoring." The flow shifts back to the prerequisites "you first need" (13.3). This time, the topic proceeds from the occasion of "lining up" and embarks directly on the players and positions of the two teams. Now, an attempt is made to even out the coverages of "defense" and "offense" by making them partly parallel (13.6–11). This sequencing, without skipping from "DEfense" to "OFfense" and back (12.21–31), prepares the way for zeroing in on "the most important" person in running the play and getting the "score" (13.11–15). The strategic nature of this arrangement is especially clear: unlike (11) and (12), version (13) ends on the highest note and ties the end back to the beginning—both hallmarks of well-written prose on more advanced levels.

Undeniably, the written third version (13) is superior in organization and flow both to (11) and (12), and at a degree of subtlety and strategy one might well not expect from a basic writer. The intervening speaking session clearly had a positive effect on the evolution of the text in terms of fluency, involvement, and concrete detail, but the subsequent writing went considerably further in terms of far more sophisticated aspects than the "mechanics" so often drilled in basic writing classwork. We see some hallmarks of good prose already emerging on rudimentary guises, even though the student was probably not aware of them as such.

All the students we looked at followed a similar pattern with regard to their sources. In each case, the written third version utilized material left out of the written first version but covered in the spoken version. More importantly, the flow of topic and the organization of ideas steadily improved. A conspicuous case in point was the strategic deployment of beginnings and endings, which was not fully managed until the third version. Psychologists, who have long known that beginnings and endings are privileged in many mental processes, have recently pointed to the role of these stretches of text for indicating the topic or plan of the discourse. This factor is patently more crucial for written texts than for spoken ones, and our basic writers examined here seem to have shown at least an intuitive appreciation of the difference despite their overall lack of standard writing experience. At least, I see no other way to explain why these basic writers so consistently picked different and more effective beginnings and endings for their third version than for their previous two versions. Further investigation should probe whether switching modes between speech and writing reliably

yields occasions to reconsider one's selection and relative focus of topics and viewpoints.

## Conclusions

Although a pilot study with fifteen basic writers who happened to be excellent athletes allows no general conclusions, some interesting tendencies emerged. The interposed speaking session evidently had positive effects on the process of reworking the written paper. The students were apparently freed from the typical revision tactic of basic writers who cling slavishly to their originals. The versions increased not merely in length, fluency, and involvement—which we had predicted—but also in concrete detail and strategic organization of topic—which we had *not* predicted.

In this approach, the divergencies between speech and writing are not construed as a mere hindrance to instruction or an indicator of low intelligence or ability, but actively enlisted to encourage detachment from the first draft and to invest the learner's prior language skills. In the process, we can also refine our knowledge about speech skills by gathering more and more on-site data. In addition, detailed discourse analysis of the kind I have illustrated here brings home Halliday's point about the complexity of speech that has gone unappreciated for so long.

A reasonable next step might be to use such a technique on a regular basis for an entire experimental course in basic writing. If, as seems likely, it is not feasible for the instructor to prepare transcripts on a steady basis, the students could work in the third session by replaying their own tapes, provided such a tactic does not interfere with the outcome. We should also explore how far apart the sessions should be spaced, since intervals of a whole week would be too long for most curriculum frameworks.

A particularly difficult issue is how such a write-speak-write approach might be coordinated with more conventional work emphasizing mechanics. Because basic writers have usually been alienated by an overdose of such work with poor results, the potential benefits of a write-speak-write approach might be reduced if mechanics were stressed too early. A better option might be to proceed with write-speak-write alone for a time sufficient to encourage a shift in attitude and an increase in confidence. As word processors become higher-powered and generally available, much of mechanics, especially spelling, might well be dealt with through student-paced sessions using appropriate software.

How much time and effort will be needed to make a real difference for basic writers is an empirical issue widely misunder-

stood as an administrative or curricular issue. Empirical evidence indicates that the usual period of “remediation,” typically one or two semesters, does not suffice; but the design of the remediation is, for reasons I have attempted to expound, often inappropriate to begin with. A further factor is the prospect that a change of approach to the teaching of basic writing in the elementary and secondary schools could greatly ease the problems we are now facing at the college level.

If we expect basic writers to change themselves, we need to change ourselves at least as dramatically. Writing teachers have long harbored a justified mistrust of theories and their conversion into practices, because theorists typically devoted too little realistic concern to the basic problems of writing. The trend toward socially relevant and participant-oriented models of discourse offers a welcome occasion for basic writing teachers to voice their problems and requirements. In return, they should be willing to reconsider their own entrenched assumptions about what the priorities and standards in general should be, and about the role and significance of errors in particular. Recent trends in these directions are already very encouraging.

The highest goal of theory and research about discourse should be *to support the human freedom of access to knowledge through discourse*.<sup>10</sup> This goal may sound unfamiliar and disturbing in view of the narrower and more abstract goals of past research, and the mechanical or puristic loyalties of past instruction. The inability to use writing for oneself and for others in pursuit of this goal remains a hindrance to freedom in “the free world” and everywhere else. We must therefore untiringly confront the tasks of change, affirming their enormous difficulty, but also their supreme urgency.

## Notes

(Written by Robert de Beaugrande)

<sup>1</sup> This theme is retraced in the original works of prominent linguists in my latest book, *Linguistic Theory* (1991).

<sup>2</sup> See Allan Nairn’s comprehensive and alarming scrutiny of the ETS as “the corporation that makes up minds,” available through Ralph Nader, P.O. Box 19312, Washington, DC 20036.

<sup>3</sup> For an assessment of this advocacy by authorities like Maxine Hairston and Joe Williams, see my book on *Text Production*.

<sup>4</sup> Extensive references are provided in Chapter V of my *Text Production*. Unlike my book, Vachek’s valuable deliberations were inspired not so



much by the politics of literacy and composition in the U.K. and the U.S. as by the perspective of a special Czechoslovakian “functional” brand of “structural descriptive linguistics” for which I provided an overview in my 1990 report to the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences, to be published shortly, under the title “The heritage of functional sentence perspective from the standpoint of text linguistics,” in the new journal *Linguistica Pragensis*. Preprints may be requested from me at Dept. of English, The University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

<sup>5</sup> I offer a comprehensive reading of Halliday’s work in Ch. 9 of my new book on *Linguistic Theory*.

<sup>6</sup> I follow here the findings of a thorough survey conducted in Ghana by Joe Amoako, later my student at the University of Florida.

<sup>7</sup> In a recent interchange with Chomsky in issues 11.1 and 11.2 of the *Journal of Advanced Composition* (1991), I have undertaken to demonstrate in some detail the scientific incoherence and the self-centered intellectual debility of his engagement with language. I would consider it unwise that we try to apply it to basic writing, as Rei Noguchi suggested, quite apart from the problems its extravagant terminologizing would create for our students.

<sup>8</sup> These trends are surveyed in two recent papers of mine, once in the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* for 1990 and the other in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*.

<sup>9</sup> I undertook to implement this approach in a student textbook (*Writing Step by Step*). But the textbook was not specifically designed for the type of basic writers described by Mina Shaughnessy, even though I hoped it might be easier for them than the usual textbooks. I could not be more specific because I lacked a consistent population to work with. My university does not have a special track for basic writers, though studies at our Writing Center by Willa Wolcott and Dianne Buhr have called attention to the special attitudes of such students.

<sup>10</sup> *A New Introduction to the Study of Text and Discourse*, in preparation by Wolfgang Dressler and myself for Longman, pursues this prospect in detail.

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# CLOTHING THE EMPEROR: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK RELATING FUNCTION AND FORM IN LITERACY

*ABSTRACT: The paper argues that literacy as a technic needs to be separated from the social models of literacy which define how it will be used by whom and in what circumstances. These models of function are set by literate communities and lead in turn to models of text including physical appearance, conventions of language, structure, content, and style. The problem for many students, particularly those now labeled "at risk" is that they are unaware of those functional and textual models which have been established by the academic communities of schools and universities. Such models can be taught successfully without denying the autonomy and authenticity of students.*

*Once Upon a Time . . . . I live in the country outside of Troy, New York, and I have lived in a rural setting for most of my life. As a child in the Depression, I was taught to cut firewood by my father; together we plied a "two-man saw" as it was known, although at first I was simply along for the ride. When I was six he gave me my own saw for my birthday, and I was proud. I even felled trees for recreation (or to show my manhood). No George Washington, I once blamed beavers for my handiwork when my mother found me beside one of her prized willows. In the 1960s I bought my first*

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chain saw, and I am now on my fourth. For years I have been proud of the fact that I can supply most of my own firewood and do some clearing of the wood lot and windfalls. In my life I have had but three accidents cutting wood—each with an ax, and I have learned to respect and care for my tools to the point where I can perform most routine maintenance and repair.

I can use the chain saw after a fashion, although I am not adept at felling large trees; I am scared of the machine, and certainly cannot use it to create log sculptures or do anything more than speed up the kind of sawing that I did as a child. Occasionally I have hired professionals and have admired the finesse and agility with which they can handle the machinery; the differences among their acts when felling, limbing, clearing brush, or sawing; the degree to which they are aware of the hazards that surround them; their knowledge of the angle of a cut and its effect and of the kinds of cut that are best for felling particular trees (based on a knowledge of the properties of trees that are alive and those that are dead); of the precise angles for sharpening their saws and the precise qualities of different saws and blades. You might say that I am a minimally functional woodchopper, but certainly I cannot call myself a logger, a woodsman, or a forester, much less a millwright—each of which bears its own special set of distinctions and its own complex body of knowledge and skills. In the chain saw store, where I take my chains to be sharpened or go to see the new merchandise, I am acknowledged as a customer but clearly excluded from the professional communities and subcommunities of the profession.

At about the same time that I was given the saw, I began school where, I suppose, I learned to read and write, although I was read to a great deal and the whole family wrote little verses and stories as part of the evening's entertainment. I took part in readings of Shakespeare with a group of my mother's friends when I was eight and nine, and I played with word puzzles frequently. Every car trip of over two miles involved the alphabet game with road signs. Although my penmanship was execrable at school, I became an adept reader and writer and part of the literate world, so much so that I brought rare books to school as a hobby exhibit, volunteered in the school library, and helped in a cousin's bookshop.

From this beginning, I moved almost inevitably into schoolwork in literature, history, and languages. An English major at college, when I graduated, I faced the decision as to whether to go into publishing or English teaching. I also learned to do architectural lettering, to type after a fashion (eventually to use electric typewriters and word processors) and I studied layout and design. I chose graduate study and teaching and I moved up into the ranks as

a professional person of letters, accepted into the various guilds wherein I have continued to prosper. I am a member of one of the literate world's elite scribal groups, and I have tried my hand at others including poetry, fiction, and direct mail marketing.

I tell this about myself because I want to establish an analogy in order to enable us to begin with some definitions. I see the word processor I am using like the chain saw, and the earlier two-man saw like the pencil or perhaps the mechanical typewriter. I see writing and reading as analogous to using cutting instruments; written language as analogous to cordwood, lumber, cabinetry, or pulp; and literacy as the capacity to use the tools to produce the wood products. In my literacy community—academe—I am the equivalent of a woodsman, if not a forester. That wood and writing are connected in my mind is probably not entirely fortuitous, given the history of printing over the past 200 years. Both inventions have accrued multiple functions as well as complex technologies and social structures.

As do the environments engendered by other technologies such as the clock, the wheel, or the saw, the literate environment exerts its influence on everyone from the newborn child to the aged, from the remote rural dweller to the urbanite. Like other inventions in our environment, it has become a social and cultural emperor, dominating our consciousness and our actions. All under the rule of this emperor participate in what might be called a "textual contract" not unlike the social contract of the *philosophes* (Purves, 1991). But participating in that contract is not the same as prospering in a given literate community, much less a scribal one. Further, the terms of the contract vary according to the culture of the literate or scribal community that an individual inhabits. The number of scribal communities is larger than that of woodcutting communities, to be sure, but the nature of the two is similar.

As I shall note below, the terms of the scribal contract may be understood in terms of functional and textual models which are interdependent, and determined less by the nature of the medium than by the uses to which the technology and the practices are put, uses as determined by a cultural group. By being subjected to models and therefore standards, written language becomes not simply a tool nor literacy simply a capacity, but both are artifacts and definers of culture. The problem for many labeled marginally literate, including those who come from other cultures, is that neither the textual nor the functional models which they are expected to accept and by which they are judged are made explicit to them, and so they are perceived to be failures. We know this is the case of the non-native speaker, so we make an attempt to teach

our models, but we somehow expect native speakers of our language to be aware of and subscribe to our various models, to be members of our culture. The fact is some do not, and we label them slow, remedial, or illiterate.

It seems to me plain as a pikestaff that if we want to help others become members of our scribal society, the best way to do so is to teach them the rules of the game. I use that phrase advisedly, because research on models shows that the rules of literate discourse are rules created by social groups or communities partly as matters of efficiency and partly to serve functional rhetorical needs. But these rules have the later consequence of serving to bring people into the group or keep them out of it. The rules are not given by God, and they are indeed changeable over time as the perceived function changes. Why should people follow these rules? Because, that's why. The models of literacy are like those of *Monopoly* or checkers or using a chain saw; they can be taught and learned without any great psychic damage to the learner. Violating them, however, can mean a forfeit.

Models of text and literacy are socially constructed and exclusionary. So are the models of felling, trimming, and logging. Both sets as well as others have been so since the dawn of the technology; scribal societies and forestry societies are as ancient as the technologies they use. One cannot change the fact, but one can illuminate it and perhaps change the rules of the literacy game. By learning that literacy is a game like other games, many students whose parents fear literacy and schooling as threatening have the chance of becoming players and winners. Helping the "at risk" or marginal students in our society become good players at the scribal game is not to guarantee them entry into the middle class of our society, of course; there are always a multitude of factors in play.

In this paper, I develop a framework by which we may view literacy as a culturally mediated technology so as to elucidate its nature and use in the world; such a framework points to the dynamic relationship between the functions that literate acts play in society and the particular forms that they take or the text forms they evoke.

**I. *The Emperor Introduced: An Initial Definition of Literacy as a Socially Mediated Technology.*** Written language is a tool, what Marshall McLuhan (1964) called an "extension of man [sic]," a human tool for recording, storing, and retrieving information in a visible form that we have come to call text. In Western societies, these texts are alphanumeric; in some other societies they are ideographic, encompassing both linguistic and numeric constructs (if the two can be separated). Written language at first appears to be not particularly different from other tools, such as the wheel, the

steam engine, or the lever. If written language is a tool, literacy is the human capacity to use that tool in the reciprocal activities of storing and recovering information. Since it is a capacity, literacy is not an absolute, something that one has or does not have, but something that people can have to greater or lesser degrees of proficiency and can use in different ways, given the social function to which it is put. And there begins the clothing of the emperor.

We should note that these activities always take place within a complex social framework. As a tool, written language has both been incorporated into, and changed the fabric of, that social framework in many subtle ways. It facilitates urbanization, specialization, ecumenical religion, history, and law, as Jack Goody (1985) and many others have pointed out. Once having been developed and put into use it could not readily be abandoned. Those who became literate found written language all too useful in their daily commerce, in their capacity to record history or to codify other kinds of knowledge or lore both religious and secular. They found it impossible to renounce it once they had it. In many societies people even came to venerate the physical text and ascribe magical or curative powers to books and scrolls. Although the first literates may have shared their capacity with others, people soon came to see that being literate was both power and privilege. From the very earliest times across civilizations as diverse as the Chinese, the Hindu, the Mesopotamian, and the Greek, scribal communities emerged and literacy came to be associated with castes and classes, to be guarded through various systems of gatekeepers. These communities set the rules and standards for levels of membership and they continue to do so, although the scribal communities in our technological age have become highly complex. The emperor's palace resembles Kublai Khan's pleasure dome (or perhaps Kafka's castle).

Those who have grown up in a world where the tool of written language and various texts were readily available have found their world changed too. Just as people who cannot drive nonetheless find themselves thrust into an environment where roads and automobiles are the custom not the exception, where not to own a car or to be able to drive are seen as aberrations; so too those who grow up in a literate environment cannot ignore it. Indeed, it permeates their very lives to such an extent that they may not be aware of it. In such an environment, literacy is a social habit, so that an individual may paradoxically be seen as unable to use the tool of written language except haltingly but yet able to participate in the activities of the literate social world (Langer; Connerton; Wagner). Thus it is, that we cannot say that a child in a literate culture

resembles a person in a nonliterate culture; ontogeny, in this case, does not recapitulate phylogeny (Foster and Purves, 1990). For the child in a scribal society where texts are ubiquitous (even on diaper covers), the environment exerts its influence willy-nilly.

**II. *The Tailors Arrive: Literacy and Social Structures:*** We cannot, however, claim that there is a single psychological or social construct called “literate thinking” or “literate culture”; as I shall argue such notions of universality must be replaced by sociocultural ones. In making this argument, I join Scribner and Cole, Goody, and Street in opposition to the universalist ideas of people like Ong, Havelock, and McLuhan. Because written language and literacy have come to be part of the social fabric, they have been used as instruments of power and privilege and have had the effect of sorting society into groups ranging in proficiency from those nearly ignorant of written language to those who are highly adept and adaptable by being literate in several languages or sublanguages. As information has grown, the literate society has become more complex in its myriad scribal groups, which now range from literary theory to newspaper composition, from accounting to seismology. Together with the obvious variations in use of the tools of written language and text in various parts of the world, subgroups and strata have brought with them sets of values so that people in the larger scribal society associate cleanliness, punctuality, honesty, piety, patriotism, and other civic virtues with literacy. “The style is the man.”

Division and stratification have also brought with them some of the controversies concerning literacy cited by Wagner (1991) in his distinction between “emic” and “etic” views of literacy, or Street in his distinction between literacy in theory and practice. The activity of literacy has become a technic embedded in complex social practices which serve to set the conditions and boundaries of its use.

A technical definition of literacy would have it that those who are marginally literate are those who approach the lower end of the spectrum in having no technical ability—what is called dysfunctional or dyslexic. I would argue that many of them can maneuver in a world of literacy and text but they have not mastered it. They can function in a literate world but they are not literate in the sense of having control over that world and its social structures. They are excluded from many of the literate communities that constitute the “scribal society”; those who control our literate culture. One reason for this state of affairs is that they may not have adequate knowledge, which is to say adequate mental models of the functions of literacy by which the communities of the other strata operate and



which in turn drive the textual models that are the visible tokens of the scribal world (Purves, 1990); the clothes of the emperor.

From this sociocultural perspective, we can modify our definition of literacy by arguing that in order to master the activity of literacy in a given culture or subculture and be part of the scribal society, an adept literate possesses the following kinds of knowledge:

1. A portion of the information that is to be encoded or decoded. They know the vocabulary of what they are reading and writing about—probably as much as 75% of it before they begin to read or to write.

2. The graphic symbols that encode and structure that information (e.g., the alphanumeric system, punctuation, paragraphing, and document design). They can recognize complex text forms from simple stimuli—such as seeing pale orange newsprint and recognizing it as a financial newspaper.

3. The techniques for encoding and decoding using an appropriate technology (from a crayon to a computer). They can select appropriate technologies for their work or recognize the technologies that have been used.

4. Genres or different types of text and their uses, including models of successful text types (e.g., the differences between shopping lists and business letters). They know what these genres look like and how long they are expected to be as well as what purposes different genres serve.

5. The functions of text and text types in storing or communicating information, including the relative social utility and importance of these text types, and the appropriate ways to approach and use these types as information (e.g., the difference between real mail and junk mail). They know what to do with the variety of texts that are presented them in their environment and they know what text forms best serve their immediate and long-range purposes.

These five form the constituent underpinnings of literate behavior, and the fourth and fifth become all the more crucial as the society becomes more complex in its uses of written language. The most adept literate can employ them in a variety of activities, commercial, religious, cultural, communal, and domestic and do so in a manner that is seen as appropriate to each situation. The adept is not only articulate with written language and text, but fluent and socially appropriate as well. What appears to guide adept literates is the possession of a complex array of mental models of the functions and forms of written discourse (by discourse I mean text which can be seen as containing information; a computer keyboard

is not discourse but a shopping list is). Having these they can proceed to read or write; not having these in their full complexity literates are unable to survive except as marginal to an information society.

**III. *The Emperor Gets Dressed: Models of the Functions of Literacy.*** Cross-cultural research in literacy has suggested that when people write and read, they engage in an activity that is bounded to some extent by existing models of text and behavior toward text (Purves and Purves, 1986, Purves, 1988). I prefer the word *models* to “schemata,” “frames,” “scripts,” or “preconceptions,” although all four words suggest the strong visual basis to whatever it is that drives and controls our literacy. These models are dictated by people’s previous experience of actual written texts (both those they have seen in their environment and those to which they have been exposed through instruction, particularly in school) and the ways in which those texts were handled by others. These models determine the habits of a literate society (Connerton) and help form the culture surrounding writers and readers (Heath; Scribner and Cole; Takala, Buckmaster, and Purves). These models of text have carefully delineated formal properties, as we shall see, but those forms are or were driven by the functions of text in a given community. At times the forms cease to be fully functional and either remain vestigial or are replaced. “RSVP” used to require a handwritten text centered on a vellum page; now a note or a telephone call suffices.

The variation in text models follows from an antecedent variation in what people perceive as the various functions of texts and literacy in a community. These perceptions can be divided into three aspects. The first of these aspects is the relative stress given to the functions of discourse: expressive of the writer, referential to the external world, conative or persuasive to the reader, metalingual or about the medium itself, poetic or to serve aesthetic ends, or phatic to maintain a link between writer and reader—(Jakobson and Sebeok). The aspect may also be seen in the particular function or combination of functions called for on a given occasion. To a certain extent, these functional demands of discourse dictate both the content of the text and the forms it will take.

The second aspect we may think of as the cognitive demand of the discourse (Vähäpassi), which is to say the degree to which the writer must “invent” either the content of the written text, the form of the text, or both, or to which the reader must note or more deeply ponder it. Written language can range from transcription, through organization or reorganization of material that is known to the writer, to invention or generation of both content and form or

structure. Reading can range from recognition, to following procedures, to interpretation or evaluation.

The third aspect concerns the social function of discourse: who is to write, when, and with respect to whom as audience and who is to read what with what intended outcome. The social function determines or is determined by who are the parties to a given text—a love letter excludes many people that a classified advertisement would not. The former involves one person at the writing end and one at the reading end (although in some societies there may be scribes or other interveners); the latter involves several writers to produce the final text and presumably a large number of readers. It also determines the amount of time spent upon the writing or reading, the occasion when the writing or the reading is to take place, and the outcome of the text, which includes the subsequent actions of the writer and the reader.

These three sociocognitive functions interact with each other in any given situation, which interaction in turn affects the text produced by changing the mental model held by the writer. That is to say that writing a letter in a business setting to a colleague differs from writing to the same colleague from the home. Reading a bedtime story to a child differs from reading the labels in a supermarket or the recipe on one of those labels in the kitchen. Reading a story to a child differs from reading a story in a classroom, and the stories may differ as well. School literacy, in particular, differs greatly from nonschool literacy and has its unique set of constraints and models; therein lies the “problem” of the “at risk” student (Heath). In school, literate acts must be put on display through talk or action, and school texts and reading and writing have their peculiar forms and structures (Purves, 1990).

I would represent the interaction of these aspects of the role of literacy as having their effects on text models as in Figure 1 (see Appendix). The three key features that bound text models are (1) the amount and type of information included in a given text; (2) the formal characteristics of the text including visual layout, discourse structures, and stylistic devices; and (3) the tools and constituent acts and operations in writing or reading (e.g., the kinds of implements selected and the surfaces upon which the text is placed and relevant operations such as spelling, revising, skimming, or criticizing). What binds each of these is what binds the functions of literacy, convention; which is to say that literate acts are always social acts and as social acts are constrained by the conventional models of a given community. The particular interaction helps to form both rhetorical and interpretive communities (Fish; Purves

1989), which together we might call literate or scribal communities, subgroups of the larger scribal society (Purves, 1990).

The models, I believe, are firmly determined by and, at the same time, define the cultures or the communities that people inhabit (a community may best be defined as a subgroup of a larger ethnic or literate culture), and the fact of cultural variety explains the seeming failure of some people to survive in what to them is an alien community. A student who comes to an academic setting from a workplace where certain kinds of texts are admired will soon find them scorned in an English classroom. So too will a student who does not understand that people are to discuss what they read or that they are to come up with the approved interpretation.

The communities of literates within a country as diverse as the United States may be as distant as the community of loggers and that of weekend woodcutters, despite the fact that the two may seem similar to an outsider. They even differ in the ways by which they tolerate others' expertise. Just as I hire a forester, so I hire an accountant, because I am not adept in that community; so, too, my wife hires an advertising consultant for her business. We do so without shame or guilt. In many English classrooms, however, hiring a writer or an editor is shrouded in shame and secrecy; the student is to do everything alone.

**IV. *What the Emperor Wears: A Functional Rhetoric of Text Models.*** Just as we can move from the functions of logging to the types of cuts made and the ways by which those cuts are performed, so we can move from the functions of literacy to a rhetoric of text models based not upon speech but upon a full understanding of text. The aspects of the text models that research has made apparent are outlined in Figure 1.

Clearly any text has a semantic and propositional content: it is about something and it presents words and arrangements of words in what is called discourse. There may be variation in the amount of information as well as in the selection from the total information on the topic. We may simply write "bread" on a shopping list rather than a minute description of the shape, size, and texture of the bread. On other occasions full depiction is preferred. There is also variation in the level of abstraction or detail in the text. There is further variation in the perspective from which the material is viewed, the degree of ostensible objectivity of the writing, or the degree to which figurative language is to be employed.

The forms of texts derive from their visual elements and appearance. Much of the writing about literacy has focused on the historical and cultural relationship between written and oral

language, and suggested that written language differs from conversation but resembles formal oral language in that both use certain stylized and conventional patterns and devices of language so as to make the relationship between speaker and hearer and writer and reader easier to manage (Olson; Ong; Akinnaso, 1982, 1985; Goody). Both types of language are more constrained by convention than is conversational oral language which relies on the face-to-face interchange of speaker and listener. But written language undergoes greater conventional constraints because it must mediate between writer and reader. Instruction in literacy, these writers have argued, needs to account for this relationship with formal and ritualized spoken language.

I would like to suggest that the distinguishing feature of written language has an antecedent that as strongly affects it: pictographic representation. Writing can be seen as a descendant from various pictorial or graphic representations of the world of the "painter," such as cave drawings, hieroglyphs, and petroglyphs, and various sorts of nonverbal signs and symbol systems (Gaur; Harris). These representations have clearly influenced such aspects of written language as its progression in Western systems from upper left to lower right, its use of size or boldness to indicate emphasis, and its use of white or blank space to indicate divisions between segments. The nature of many of these visual conventions is known to designers, as are the diverse rhetorical effects of typefaces, spacing, illustration, and other graphics. Some of this knowledge seems intuitively held by young readers and writers, many of whom are adept interpreters of comics and other graphic texts. Such knowledge is used in everyday literate acts such as making a list, using a directory, a calendar, or a timetable. There has as yet been little serious study by rhetoricians and educators of such matters as the visual conventions in written language, how these conventions are known by writers and readers, and how this knowledge might best be used in instruction.

It is apparent that written language or text has the characteristics of segmenting space with print in order to make meaning. Primarily this is done with the use of a set of conventional symbols called letters, which are combined into groupings called words, and the words into phrases, sentences, and other units. The spatial segmentation on the page, then, can be seen as demarcating units which have been assigned some sort of meaningfulness. Such is the case with the sentence that has just been written, which can be observed as containing a violation of the conventions of segmentation (known as a typo), and that sort of meaningfulness is often confounded with natural language.

But the meaningfulness of spatial segmentation is much more than the demarcation of word and sentence boundaries. The following texts provide examples of other demarcations (Figure 2 in Appendix). The letter and the poem are two obvious examples of text that give a clue as to their meaning from their placement of marks in relation to white space. In addition one of them uses another characteristic of written language, darkness to give an index of meaning. Meaning and rhetorical effect can also be portrayed by size of the writing, underlining, and other devices that are peculiar to written format.

Another aspect of the visual presentation of written language that cannot be overlooked is the use of diagrams and illustration as a part of the total text. These form a clear part of the impression and the meaning in magazines, textbooks, research reports, and other forms of writing, and they are often used in literary writing as well. Such visual forms constitute a part of the text model that helps writers determine when they have achieved the sort of text that they have been asked to produce (Purves and Purves, 1986; Purves, 1990).

Beyond these visual aspects of form are the various possible structures of content at either the level of the text or the level of discourse. By the former, I refer to the structure provided in lists and tables, by the latter I refer to what is traditionally thought of as arrangement or disposition of ideas.

Children are early exposed to the graphic and visual aspects of written texts, primarily through picture books, but also through the environment including television's presentation of text. In fact these images of what a text looks like may well exert a dominating effect on early writing and literacy, but curiously they are not made a part of instruction in writing except in the formation of letters and in early penmanship (Harste, Woodward, and Burke).

The final element of the models of text is a dual one concerning the production and reception of text. Texts are produced on surfaces and the particular marks and shapes are created by a variety of instruments which can render two-dimensional or three-dimensional texts. They can be as solid as wooden blocks or neon tubing or as evanescent as a wisp of smoke or a set of lights on a screen. The persons who produce texts produce both the palpable text and the discourse (Purves, 1990). Text-producing acts include the manual act of inscribing and the subsequent act of editing to insure the legibility of the text. Discourse-producing acts include what is called drafting and the subsequent act of revising what has been drafted to make sure it serves its purpose.

Parallel to these productive acts are the reproductive acts of

decoding or going from the graphic representations either to sounded or to unsounded language. At the same time the reader seeks to make meaning by summarizing, personalizing, interpreting, or evaluating the text (Purves and Rippere). These responses may take on a further social dimension, which at times can be ritualistic or further dictated by the situation. The responses can range from the tacit act of ignoring the text to more passive and social acts such as holding an extended discussion of the text. They may also lead to the act of producing another text that responds to, glosses, or comments upon the text just read.

Each of these models of text and the acts related to texts derives from the perceived function of the literate act in a given social context. No one is inherent in the fact of text, although the total sum may derive from that fact. At times, of course, the model has become divorced from the function; at times, too, the model tends to force a particular functional use upon the writer or reader. The model of the scholarly article in some fields is explained by a style sheet rather than by a discussion of the rules of evidence and proof in the discipline. Similarly the four-page letter in direct mail advertising becomes a constraint placed on the advertiser rather than being seen as a way of establishing a rapport with a reader. Both of these examples of models may be vestigial rather than functional.

**V. *The Emperor's Parade: The Controlling Role of Models.*** One may well assent to the idea that all of these models of text and of the acts involved in composing or reading and responding are highly conventional, but probably functional (Scribner and Cole; Goodman; Reder; Purves, 1991). One could probably argue that in this respect literacy is not unlike woodcutting, where much of what is done comes from the perceived functions of cutting and splitting modified by the demands for safety and productivity. These then take on a social aspect. So too with many of the functions of literacy within a society. Convention and need dictate the occasions for writing or reading as well as the functions and demand of discourse appropriate to those occasions. It is a convention to write a thank-you letter after a visit and this convention imposes constraints upon the content and form of the letter. The need for public records of meetings imposes a demand for minutes and the form is often that dictated by the potential for lawsuit.

From convention and need the writer or the reader then applies knowledge of both the content and form appropriate to a function on a particular occasion and conducts the appropriate search of the long-term memory. The writer goes on to certain text-producing as well as discourse-producing activities (Takala, 1983). The text-producing activities include the more mechanical or physical; the

discourse-producing activities include those related to the selection and arrangement of content. The reader goes on to both decoding activities and types of response to the text material ranging from discarding, to committing, to memory, to critical analysis. Again these activities are bounded by social convention and interact with text models (Purves, 1988). Within the scribal world, these activities help define rhetorical and interpretive communities. Such communities appear to exercise great control on the individual but some are more or less tolerant of deviation. A learned journal style is much more rigid than is that of a general interest magazine.

The idea of mental models, their conventionality, and the control they exert upon writers and readers is not new; it goes back as far as Aristotle's *Poetics*, but in many cases the models for specific kinds of texts have not been well-elaborated, and the result is that literates and their teachers and judges operate in a world that is ill-defined and therefore not easy to learn to manipulate. We are unclear with our students how the various aspects of text models coalesce in a given situation such as a classroom essay, a final examination, a summary of an experiment, or the like. We are also unclear with them how these specific exemplifications differ from a shopping list, a telephone directory, a letter from a grandparent, or a notice from the municipality. Furthermore, we are unsure how each of these manifestations serves its particular social and discursive functions. When we know more about these matters, the literacy curriculum becomes much easier to present to students.

As a profession we need to elaborate on models of literacy and text and to devise teaching strategies that will make them apparent to children and adults. Such an approach differs from current instructional practice because it approaches literacy as beginning with the knowledge of the functional and textual models of our society that underlie the ability to participate in a complex activity, rather than with a set of basic technical skills (which are only aspects of operation within that system).

**VI: *What the Little Boy Sees: By Way of a Polemical Conclusion.*** Teachers and students operate by models even though they are not clear about them. Students often see good writing in terms of inscribing (e.g., neatness and spelling) rather than discourse (structure and style), and reading in terms of decoding the sounds rather than meaning making; such is particularly the case of students who are not successful in schools (Shaughnessy). Teachers often label students "remedial," "marginal," "at risk," "basic," or "illiterate": labels given by the judges, not the judged. There is ample evidence that models of text are used by those who judge the reading and particularly the writing performance of students. The



first major study of this phenomenon nearly thirty years ago indicated the existence of powerful scribal communities, which often did not agree with each other as to the appropriate model (Diederich, French, and Carlton). They found that teachers' models of text differed from those of lawyers or editors or other professionals.

Most of the systematic research on the use of models in judgments of literacy has been performed at higher levels of education, although implicit models of grammaticality, spelling, and neatness, oral miscue, or malapropism serve to mark the judgments made of those who are younger or outside of the academic mainstream (Goodman; Applebee, et al.; Purves and Hawisher, 1990; Spandel and Stiggins). At the level of discourse, however, these judgmental levels are less explicit. In reading, at-risk students may be castigated for not pursuing elaborated interpretations (Heath). Purves and Hawisher (1990) suggest that the mental model behind such graders as those trained for The College Board and the Test of English as a Foreign Language can be operationalized as what, in textbooks and style manuals, are the desiderata of the infamous "five-paragraph theme," a mental model of academic writing as raters think it should be practiced by students.

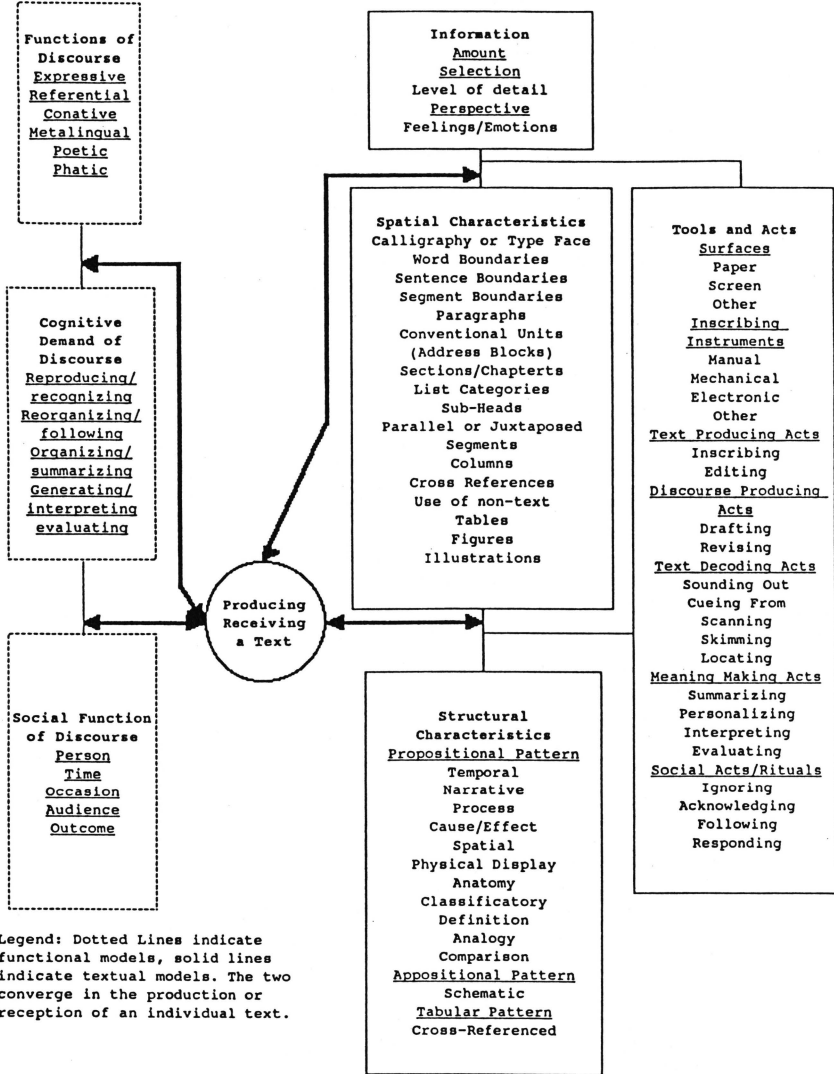
That text models exist in readers' heads and that these models form the basis both for their acceptance of particular texts into an appropriate generic group ("this is an essay," "this is an interpretation") and their evaluation of the sufficiency of the text to the model ("this is a good essay," "this is a valid interpretation"). Such text models appear to be culturally specific and they appear to affect the rating of student writing and to impose themselves as models on students and thus get passed on from generation to generation. They are used in the gatekeeping role of academic assessment of literacy and they exert an influence upon whom is admitted to the community and thereby upon student beliefs and ultimately upon their actual writing performance. These models of text derive from the sociocognitive models of the functions of academic literacy that pervade an educational system. The origins of our current models may be obscure but they were probably born of necessity rather than caprice. I wonder if the five-paragraph theme became popular because it could be written in a single hour's sitting. Once in the system, the models are often difficult to change.

I would urge teachers of literacy at any level to be honest about the sociocultural nature of literacy and its dependence on functional models that produce formal ones. I would urge teachers to be explicit about these aspects of text and literacy. I would urge an approach to literacy education that brings the whole textual

world into the school and places school literacy into a broader context; and that directly confronts the sociocultural nature of models of literacy and of text. I have argued that the curriculum should be bound to the concept of text in its myriad forms (Purves, 1990). I would reiterate that charge. All forms of text from graffiti to epic poems, from cereal boxes to telephone books should become part of the curriculum and should be explored in terms of their functions and forms. Academic literacy has become overly separated from real-world literacy and made a value in its own right. Teachers and their students need to see academic texts in the broad social matrix of junk mail, business letters, computer programs, greeting cards, and gothic romances.

Teachers and their students should explore this world as a fascinating human world whereby the various functional needs to store and retrieve information in print to serve particular rhetorical and social purposes has brought forth a complex array of textual models to meet those needs. They can explore how they succeed and where they fall short of their end; they can explore the human drama in creating this complex web of worlds that exists on paper and on the computer screen. It can be exciting, challenging, and it can have the payoff of bringing those who have been marginalized by academic literacy into the scribal society.

## Appendix



**Figure 1. The Interrelation of Functional Models and Text Models**

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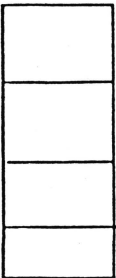
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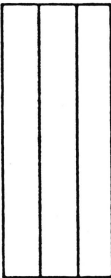
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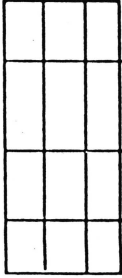
3



4



5



These are three pages. Which is meant to be read across only? Which across and down?  
**Figure 2. Five Typical Text Shapes**

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Patricia Bizzell

# POWER, AUTHORITY, AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

ABSTRACT: This essay addresses the problem of left-liberal educators who want to promote their own values through their teaching but fear that doing so would contradict these values. The problem may arise from an oversimple notion of power as always oppressive; whereas a three-part model of power can show that it has legitimate forms, e.g., "authority." The notion of authority is developed through analysis of the work of Henry Giroux, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and bell hooks [this author spells her name without initial caps].

Let me begin by assuming that many of us teaching today feel caught in a theoretical impasse. On the one hand, we wish to serve politically left-oriented or liberatory goals in our teaching, while on the other, we do not see how we can do so without committing the theoretically totalizing and pedagogically oppressive sins we have inveighed against in the systems we want to resist. Another way to describe this impasse would be to say that we want to serve the common good with the power we possess by virtue of our position as teachers, and yet we are deeply suspicious of any exercise of power in the classroom.

I want to address this impasse in two ways. First, I will examine the theoretical bases for our suspicion of exercises of power. I will suggest that the categorical rejection of all uses of power results

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from an insufficiently differentiated concept of power; in other words, it results from a totalized notion of power as a unitary force with uniform effects. I will attempt to derive a more usefully articulated concept of power from work in critical pedagogy by Henry Giroux, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and bell hooks. I understand the term “critical pedagogy” to refer to Marxist-influenced theories of education that seek both to delegitimize forms of pedagogy that imitate and generate unjust social power relations, and to delineate forms of pedagogy that imitate and generate egalitarian social power relations. “Critical pedagogy” should be taken to refer to a variety of practices, not one orthodox methodology.

Second, if I can outline a concept of usable power, I then want to suggest how this power might be brought to bear in the design of composition curricula. I will argue that we have not yet sufficiently examined the question of the content of composition courses; we have held ourselves aloof from the canon debates in literary studies and supposed that the controversy over cultural literacy did not have much to do with us. On the contrary, I will suggest that we look at what notions of cultural literacy we are implicitly conveying in the way we teach composition, and what alternate notions we might want to convey.

## I

One might read the history of modern composition studies as a series of attacks on classroom uses of power. Key books in the modern formation of the field, such as Ken Macrorie’s *Telling Writing* (1970), Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971), and Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), all call into question in one way or another the teacher’s traditional role as controller of classroom activities. What Maxine Hairston called in 1982 a “revolution” in the teaching of writing comprised a new pedagogical paradigm emphasizing students’ control of their own writing processes as they generate texts meaningful to themselves. In 1990, Andrea Lunsford described our field as “non-hierarchical and exploratory, intensely collaborative,” “dialogic, multi-voiced, heteroglossic,” and “radically democratic” (76).

It seems to be crucially important to our sense of ourselves as professionals that we do not exercise power oppressively in the classroom. For some time now, composition scholarship has shown an affinity for critical pedagogy, because we see ourselves as sharing with critical theorists a rejection of oppressive pedagogical power. Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire is perhaps the best known critical theorist to scholars in composition studies, and I believe

many of us would agree that his concept of “banking education” names what we reject in traditional writing pedagogy. We are less sure, however, whether what we admire can be comprised in his concept of “education for critical consciousness.” An implicit objective of my analysis here is to explore what we might do instead of “banking education.” Given the impasse I described earlier, I think it is now time for us to reexamine our relations to the concept of power. I suspect that we hold an insufficiently differentiated notion of power, such that all exercise of power is bad. Let me suggest, instead, a three-part anatomy of power.

One sort of power might be imagined as exercised by A over B, regardless of B’s consent or best interests. Here A uses B to benefit A, and there’s nothing B can do about it. I will call this sort of power “coercion.” This is the sort of power, I believe, that we reject when we reject traditional writing pedagogy. To give this rejection a left-oriented political interpretation, I might say that we reject the coercive pedagogy because we see the teacher, A, imposing standards of good writing on the student, B, which will not really help B to become a better writer but will only test to see whether B is already a member of A’s elite group. The student who can meet the teacher’s standards is allowed to stay in school and progress to the positions of social power granted to college graduates; the student who cannot meet these standards is thereby identified as someone who comes from a group to be denied access to positions of social power, and someone who therefore should be expelled from school.

A second sort of power might be imagined as exercised by A over B only with B’s consent, which is given only if B is convinced that doing as A suggests will serve B’s best interests. I will call this sort of power “persuasion.” This is the sort of power, I believe, that we would like to think we exercise under our new pedagogical paradigm. We do not set standards for good writing that we can compel students to attempt to meet. Rather, we simply try to create a classroom climate in which the students can generate their own standards of good writing. We may try to have some say in what standards they generate, even if only by way of gently preventing one grammar-obsessed and vocal student from dominating the discussion. But our guidance can only be offered in the form of advice on how the students may best accomplish their own goals. For example, we might recommend a change in a piece of writing, or further work on a draft, not simply because we as teachers require that it be so, but because, as we might say to the student, “This will help you convey to the other students how you really felt when your grandmother died,” or “This will help you convince the history

professor that you really understand Voltaire's place in the Enlightenment."

Notice that in these examples, A must enter into B's thinking in order to figure out how to convince B that B's interests will be served by the course of action A recommends. In other words, A must be able to imagine being in B's place in order for A to exercise the kind of power I am calling persuasion. Ever since the era of Socratic Greece, rhetoricians have argued about whether A can do this with no consequences to A, that is, whether A can enter into B's thinking sufficiently to change B without A's own thinking being affected. My own position in this argument is that A cannot enter into B's thinking sufficiently to change B unless A also is changed, but I do not want to pursue that argument here. For the purpose of the definitions I am trying to lay out now, let me simply say that if A is able to change B without being changed, then what we have is an instance of coercion, not persuasion. In persuasion, it is key that A not be using power on B instrumentally, with no consequences to A, but rather that A and B are engaged in a kind of collaborative enterprise. It is our preference for persuasion that leads Lunsford to employ such terms for composition studies as "dialogic" and "non-hierarchical."

I certainly share this preference for persuasion over coercion, and yet I am uncomfortable with classroom situations in which persuasion becomes inadequate to the task of moving students in the direction of my own left-oriented political goals. For example, suppose I am unable to convince the class that this student's paper we are reading makes a weak argument when it rejects feminism on grounds that women are biologically determined for the sole occupations of wife and mother. If I reject a return to coercion such that I require students to adopt a feminist perspective and penalize them with bad grades if they do not, what recourse do I have in such a situation?

I want to begin to answer this question by defining a third sort of power, which I will call "authority." Authority is exercised by A over B instrumentally in the sense that sometimes B must do what A requires without seeing how B's best interests will be served thereby, but A can exercise such authority over B only if B initially grants it to A. This means that I am imagining authority as being exercised through a two-stage process. The beginning of the exercise of authority lies in persuasion: A must persuade B that if B grants A authority over B, B's best interests ultimately will be served. This stage of persuasion would be subject to all the conditions of collaboration described earlier in my discussion of persuasion. But, once B has been persuaded to grant authority to A, their relationship

changes to a less dialogic one. B empowers A to direct their course of action without A's having to exercise persuasion at every step taken.

In a writing class, this might mean that the teacher A can require the student B to try to argue in a certain way, to enter into a particular audience's point of view, or to give credit to another writer's reasoning, even if these activities seem very uncongenial to the student at the time. The student's initial reluctance to undertake these activities is not allowed to prevent their practice, however, or to delay it while a lengthy process of persuasion is undertaken. The student agrees to attempt these activities while they still seem quite uncongenial, because the student has decided to trust A's assurance that some good for the student ultimately will come out of it.

I know that we postmodern people all love stories in which trust in authority turns out to be disastrously misplaced. Even though I've suggested that the collaborative exercise of persuasion must precede the exercise of any legitimate authority, I fear that some will accuse me of recommending blind faith to students who have little reason to trust that the American educational system has their best interests at heart. To be sure, the requirement of persuasion means that we would have to talk to our students about the problematic nature of our relation as liberatory teachers to an oppressive system before we could hope to get our students to trust us. We would have to present not only our professional but also our political credentials. I think many of us do this sort of thing now, informally, and perhaps without quite realizing what impulse prompts us to do so—we find ways to share our own writing with the class, to talk about our own educations and publications, to drop hints about our extracurricular political activities, and so on. I'm suggesting that this kind of self-validation perhaps should be foregrounded in the introduction of every course we present.

In other words, I am describing a kind of authority that cannot take itself for granted. The teacher cannot ask students to grant him or her authority simply on grounds that anyone appointed to the position of teacher is thereby certified to be worthy of authority. Nor can the teacher appeal to some merely personal, that is universal, grounds for granting authority such as that the teacher loves each and every student individually. Rather, I am imagining a form of argumentation in which the teacher demonstrates links between his or her own historical circumstances and those of the students, to suggest that their joining together in a liberatory educational project will serve all of their best interests.<sup>1</sup>

My thinking here has been strongly influenced by the work of critical education theorist Henry Giroux, who has recently devoted

much attention to working out what he calls a concept of “emancipatory authority.” The general thesis of his book *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (1988) is that if teachers rely only on what I have called persuasion, they will be put at a crucial disadvantage in an educational system in which existing power relations are far from the egalitarian ideal required for true collaboration. In other words, you cannot persuade someone whose social and political power over you makes it unnecessary for them to listen to you; by adopting a persuasive stance, you only make it easier for the powerful person to change you by requiring you to accommodate to his or her thinking. By the same token, you cannot persuade someone over whom your own social and political power remains an implied threat of coercion behind your seemingly conciliatory and consensus-seeking words; by adopting a persuasive stance, you only awaken the mistrust of your audience who suspect that you are trying to manipulate them unawares—unfortunately, a common reaction of students to the collaborative classroom. Giroux’s solution to this problem is twofold:

First, the purpose of schooling can be defined through a democratic public philosophy based on an ethical discourse that is critically attentive to the issues of public responsibility, personal freedom, and democratic tolerance, as well as to the necessity of rejecting norms and practices that embody and extend the interests of domination, human suffering, and exploitation. On the basis of such a public philosophy, teachers can defend the curriculum choices they make through a discourse that aims at developing an educated, empowered, and critical citizenry. Second, such a public philosophy provides the guidelines for carefully mediating between the imperative to teach and defend a particular selection and view of knowledge and the necessity of avoiding a pedagogy that silences the voices of students. (107–108)

It seems to me that Giroux is here describing a moral position for the teacher that can be demonstrated to be consistent, or at least to be attempting consistency, both in the teacher’s curriculum choices and in the way the class is conducted. Giroux here gives the example of a teacher who chooses to teach material relating to the Holocaust. Giroux explains:

In this instance, the teacher would not assume a position that suggested to students that supporting the Holocaust represented simply another point of view. At the same time,

different voices in the class could be engaged around questions on how the Holocaust developed, the nature of the ideology that informed it, why people supported and/or participated in it, what such an event tells us about the present, how a similar logic might be manifested in different social and cultural forms of contemporary daily life, and so on. (108)

In "Postmodernism and Border Pedagogy" (1991), Giroux discusses this kind of authority in terms of what he calls a "border pedagogy." Border pedagogy adopts a thoroughly postmodern view of texts as heteroglossic, crammed with a diversity of speaking muted voices that have accrued and changed their relative positions over time. This historical construction of texts becomes the object of study, but Giroux emphasizes that students will have to be guided by the teacher to engage in such study fully, to submit their own preferred histories and narratives to analysis as well as the discourses of power they want to debunk, and, as Giroux says, not only "to develop a healthy skepticism towards all discourses of authority, but also to recognize how authority and power can be transformed in the interest of creating a democratic society" (248).

The teacher is to model this kind of transformative authority in the classroom; here, Giroux's examples have to do with pedagogy committed to attacking white-supremacist racism:

This suggests that teachers use their authority to establish classroom conditions in which different views about race can be aired but not treated as simply an expression of individual views or feelings. . . . An anti-racist pedagogy must demonstrate that the views we hold about race have different historical and ideological weight, forged in asymmetrical relations of power, and that they always embody interests that shape social practices in particular ways. In other words, an anti-racist pedagogy cannot treat ideologies as simply individual expressions of feeling, but as historical, cultural, and social practices that serve to either undermine or reconstruct democratic public life. These views must be engaged without silencing students, but they must also be interrogated next to a public philosophy that names racism for what it is and calls racist ideologies and practices into account on political and ethical terms. (250-251)

I find Giroux's theories challenging for the bold assertion of the teacher's right to set a classroom agenda, bold in the sense that

Giroux must assume a postmodern audience for whom the common wisdom is that pedagogical assertiveness is oppression. Perhaps this notion of authority requires a leap of blind faith from us teachers, faith in our abilities to realize our intention to serve our students' best interests, to go beyond the primary Hippocratic principle of doing no harm to them. In one sense, I suppose, this objection can be answered only by recommending the doubter to prayer. But in another sense, we might draw courage from looking at two accounts of critical pedagogies in the classroom, one where it goes wrong and one where it goes right.

## II

Elizabeth Ellsworth has attacked one version of critical pedagogy on grounds that its concept of pedagogical power is coercive; whereas I believe that her difficulties with this critical pedagogy stem from her attempts to practice it using persuasion rather than authority. In contrast, bell hooks gives eloquent personal testimony about how she as a marginalized and disenfranchised student benefited from the exercise of authority by her teachers, whom she now wishes to emulate as a critical pedagogue.

Ellsworth expresses her critique of critical pedagogy through a discussion of a graduate education course she taught at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The announced aim of the course was to design educational materials to combat the white-supremacist racism evinced in recent incidents on the campus. Ellsworth also announced that she intended to employ critical pedagogy in the class, that is, that it would be collaborative and dialogic. This seems to be an admirably conceived experiment in critical pedagogy, and one would think that the students who selected the course would have been ready to carry it out. Nevertheless, Ellsworth reports that the course was a failure. The group fragmented along lines of race, sexual preference, religion, social class, country of origin, and/or physical size and health (the thin and able-bodied constitute a privileged group, Ellsworth points out). Students became tongue-tied when they felt that their group's interests were being pushed aside in class discussions. Most of their effective learning, Ellsworth suggests, took place outside of class in what she calls "affinity groups" in which students felt they could talk more freely and provide reality checks for each other.

When Ellsworth's students began to complain about their group's interests not being respected in the classroom, Ellsworth responded with dismayed acknowledgement of the extent to which her own culturally interpreted positions, as white, middle-class,

thin, and able-bodied, prevented her from fully appreciating their difficulties, regardless of the insight into oppression given her by being a heterosexual female. Ellsworth argues that critical pedagogy did not help her deal with this situation because it is couched in language that is too universalistic, tending to assume that all people of good will have essentially the same interests and that rationality alone is enough to enable people to recognize and act on these interests.

Ellsworth therefore calls for critical pedagogy to be corrected by what she calls a “pedagogy of the unknowable” (318ff.). If the “critical” in critical pedagogy implies rational control, Ellsworth wishes to destabilize this control by asserting that teachers and students alike must approach the classroom in the dark about what forms the social construction of difference will take in their work together. Moreover, all participants in the educational process must acknowledge that whatever perspectives they bring to the classroom or acquire there must always be partial, limited, conditional, and “‘potentially oppressive to others’” (324).

Ellsworth’s pedagogy of the unknowable seems praiseworthy to me in that it would bring everyone into the classroom in a frame of mind conducive to persuasion—alert to the limitations of their own perspectives and committed to trying to understand how each other thinks in order to communicate their perspectives and arrive at some mutually beneficial bases for educational projects. I do think, however, that she attacks other critical pedagogues somewhat indiscriminately. As I read him, Paulo Freire may indeed be susceptible to the charge of universalism and insufficient attention to barriers to teacher-student communication; but Henry Giroux seems quite attentive to these barriers and committed to addressing them in a historicizing way. In making a rather sweeping condemnation, Ellsworth backs away from the next stage of analysis critical pedagogy calls for, namely how one moves from the stance of persuasion to authority in the classroom.

As I read Ellsworth, she does not wish to claim authority in the classroom. Her understanding of the partiality, in every sense, of her own perspective incapacitates her for the function of facilitator of classroom discussion. The students’ competing discourses of oppression and victimization seem to have confused Ellsworth—like the old woman who lived in a shoe, she doesn’t know which way to turn first. Even in her essay, she can’t mention the social construction of difference without reminding us that she knows it comprises many categories by listing them: racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, classism, homophobia, able-ism, and fat oppression. It isn’t that these aren’t all forms of oppression that need to be



resisted; and it seems futile to engage in debate as to whether the pain suffered under one category is greater or lesser than that under another category. The point is that in the face of this diversity, all Ellsworth seems to be able to do is to name the problem as the “unknowable,” and to predict in advance that the classroom cannot become a site of border crossings into the unknowable by condemning what she calls “the essentially paternalistic project of education itself” (306). Apparently, she now rejects even such authority as she exercised by setting the liberatory agenda for the graduate education class whose failure prompted her critique.

Ellsworth seems to think that if the universalistic, rationalistic argument for assent to critical pedagogy is removed, then she has no basis on which to work for her students’ assent. All she can do is to recognize difference with them, her voice having no more power than any others’. Leaving aside for the moment the obvious contradiction here, namely that Ellsworth is still the teacher with the teacher’s grade-giving power, I want to point out that Ellsworth has also missed Giroux’s discussion of how the teacher must establish his or her claim to authority in a highly contextualized way, with reference to historical interests teacher and students share. Ellsworth’s class, it seems to me, desperately needed her guidance to help them see that their various experiences of negatively constructed difference might be brought together around a shared project of fighting all oppressions, today anti-white-supremacist racism, perhaps, but tomorrow homophobia or anti-Semitism. The teacher who helps students see this vision of collective action is not paternalistic, in my view, but Utopian.

Perhaps the key to my sense of the limitations in Ellsworth’s position can be found in her negative view of Utopian thinking. She seems to regard the term “Utopian” only in its popular, pejorative sense, meaning something like “self-deluding” or “criminally negligent of social realities.” I would argue, on the contrary, that there is a place for Utopian language in education, not to pretend that we all already have common interests when in fact these have to be laboriously constructed through a dialogic process, but rather to assist this process by projecting images of what we might achieve. I want to turn now to the account of critical education furnished by bell hooks, for I think that what she is demonstrating is, in effect, the power Utopian thinking exercised in her own education and in her vocation as a teacher.

Bell hooks comes from a working-class Black family in Kentucky, where she attended largely Black public schools before moving on to Stanford, and ultimately to a Ph.D. in English literature and a series of prestigious academic appointments (she is

now at Oberlin). In her recent collection of essays on feminist theory and critical pedagogy, *Talking Back* (1989), hooks speaks positively about Black women teachers she had as a child, who used their very directive classroom authority both to acquaint her with a wide range of accomplished Black and White writers, and to encourage her to believe that she could range over their styles and develop an accomplished literary repertoire herself. These teachers' stance toward hooks reminded her of the demanding kind of support she got from her own strong female relatives, who themselves argued, cajoled, and "talked back" with great vigor but fostered her development of a similarly strong voice by denying her the privilege of speaking until she was strong enough to demand it. Hooks describes her dismay upon encountering a version of the new composition pedagogy in her college writing class, where she was urged to employ a so-called "authentic voice" that the teacher and other students assumed would be some form of Black dialect (16). Hooks felt she was capable of speaking in many voices, and she refused, as she says, to speak "as 'other,' speaking to difference as it is constructed in the white-supremacist imagination" (16).

When she discusses her own practices as a teacher, hooks often invokes the name of Paulo Freire, and clearly her educational project aligns with a version of critical pedagogy, although I think hooks's theories are really more in line with those of Giroux, since she is similarly alert to the historical contexts of pedagogy and to the ways pedagogical power must indeed be exercised but in a transformative project (note that Giroux's book *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics* is dedicated to hooks). Hooks explicitly rejects not only "traditional ways of teaching that reinforce domination," but also a simple inversion of this position whereby the students' personal experiences become the sole topic of discussion while the teacher sits passively by (52). Hooks seeks a form of legitimate power in the classroom, and it seems that she persuades her students to grant authority to her. Here is how she describes her pedagogy:

My classroom style is very confrontational. It is based on the assumption that many students will take courses from me who are afraid to assert themselves as critical thinkers, who are afraid to speak (especially students from oppressed and exploited groups). The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice. Unlike the stereotypical feminist model that suggests women best come to voice in an atmosphere of safety (one in which we are all going to be kind and nurturing), I encourage

students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion. Many students find this pedagogy difficult, frightening, and very demanding. They do not usually come away from my class talking about how much they enjoyed the experience. (53)

I hear echoes here of how hooks herself learned to “talk back” as a girl. She is clearly exercising authority as I have defined it, in that she is asking students to continue with practices that they find uncongenial, even painful, in hopes that the eventual outcome will benefit them.

Hooks argues that it is a mistake to view all painful experiences as negative—when her students talked openly “about the way in which learning to see the world critically was causing pain,” hooks wanted to present “the possibility that this pain could be a constructive sign of growth” (102, 103). Although she says she is often hurt by students’ initial negative responses to her pedagogy, hooks seems to be more willing than Ellsworth to persevere in the face of their discomfort, and hooks testifies that “students who often felt they hated a class with me would return later to say how much they learned. . . . I began to see that courses that work to shift paradigms, to change consciousness, cannot necessarily be experienced immediately as fun or positive or safe and this was not a worthwhile criteria to use in evaluation” (53).

Like the strong Black women who educated her, hooks is able to win authority from her students because she first persuades them that she has their best interests at heart—this is the conviction that keeps them working in a painful class. Moreover, I suspect that hooks is able to persuade her students partly because she initially links her interests to theirs through open avowal of her own moral agenda. She can assure her students that it is very important for her to feel that she is fighting sexism, white-supremacist racism, and other unjust social hierarchies in her pedagogy—hence, reimposing an oppressive hierarchy in her own classroom would damage her interests by hurting her sense of her own self-worth. Once hooks has persuaded her students to grant her authority, then, she can use her power to take them through a course of study only the cumulative effect of which can be seen by them to be fostering education for critical consciousness.

### III

I will now conclude with some applications of the notion of

authority I have been developing here to issues in the design of writing courses. I have suggested that the modern trend in our field has been to reject what we now see as coercive pedagogical models in favor of persuasive ones. This has meant letting students develop their own composing processes and standards for good writing instead of requiring that they follow set techniques, such as the Roman-numeraled outline, and perfect their Standard English.

This has also meant changing the kinds of reading incorporated into the writing class. Fiction and belletristic essays by canonical authors may once have been assigned simply as patterns of good style for students to imitate. Now the students' own papers are likely to form the only set of texts for the course; or if we use a reader, we use one that is pluralistic as to the race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, and social class of its contributors, and we assign or let students select essays whose subject matter is likely to be of interest to them. I would venture to guess that the anthologies used in writing courses became culturally pluralistic in these ways some time before we saw changes in the anthologies of fiction and poetry. Even student essays are now published in many composition readers, while we have yet to see undergraduate fiction and poetry in the literature anthologies.

Therefore, I do not mean to suggest that the pluralism of our reading material is not praiseworthy. But I do think we have perhaps been a little inclined to take it for granted that if the available material is pluralistic, then left-oriented or liberatory issues are bound to be addressed. Yet we often leave the choice and handling of this material entirely up to the students, with the result that they are often stunningly successful at normalizing or defusing material that we might have thought was politically explosive (for testimony on this point, see Mahala). This really should not surprise us, since leaving so much up to them sends the message that what one does with politically explosive material is entirely a matter of personal choice. One's ideological conditioning, the intertextuality of interpretations, seems to be allowably left outside.

An example of a textbook whose apparatus itself seems to take this attitude is *Ways of Reading*, edited by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. The European and American authors represented here are indeed diverse as to race, gender, and social class, and the editors' taste runs to pieces that are politically provocative, even including a selection from critical pedagogy work, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Yet the essays are presented in alphabetical order by author, with very little historical information offered about them, and with reading and discussion questions that treat each writer as a philosopher grappling with decontextualized

questions such as the nature of education in the abstract. Moreover, in the exhortatory introduction to the volume, the editors encourage each reader to develop his or her own “strong reading” of the essays included, as if each writer were a lonely striver for fame and intellectual supremacy.

What does such a book imply that a student needs to learn in the composition class? Whatever it is, apparently it is something that either comes from inside, the inner strength to project an individualistic interpretation against the weight of tradition, or else it is an acquaintance with texts that do indeed encourage collective resistance but whose acquaintance one makes, as it were, by accident, by happening to pick one essay rather than another to read. The teacher who would leave the student’s acquaintance with resources for resistance to chance might well be presumed by the student to feel little urgency about the student’s becoming an active resister, a politically alert or critically conscious citizen.

I would suggest that we need to do two things. We need to develop readings from composition courses that are not simply pluralistic, but politically engaged in a variety of ways; and we need to exercise authority as teachers to try to get students into these texts even if they initially seem very uncongenial. Actually, I think that we already have ways to make good use of our authority. Thanks to the new pedagogy in composition studies, we already know a lot about how to help students read, discuss, and compose arguments. Among the many excellent models of practice we have here, indeed, I would include David Bartholomae, who has been profoundly influential on my own teaching. But what we need is to develop more critically stimulating reading material.

We have an opportunity here to articulate our own notion of cultural literacy, or rather to promote an alternative, critical literacy. We should not be hindered from doing so by a mistaken notion that it would be an oppressive exercise of power; we need not bow to the quietism inherent in many attacks by literary scholars on the truly oppressive literacy work of E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom. My own idea for the direction in which we might turn is to develop a set of readings drawn solely from American political documents.

I argue for political documents because, like many other critical pedagogues, I want my teaching to have political impact and I want schooling in general to work for radically democratic ends. Moreover, as I understand the nature of the United States, the country has never been united by anything other than political compacts. We are not racially homogeneous, we have not lived on the same terrain for centuries, we have not developed longstanding and widespread small-scale cultural responses to these homogene-

ities such as a cuisine, a religion, or a common set of kinship practices. We have never even all spoken the same tongue. We are not a people in the sense that the Navajo are, for example, or the French.

I would define “political documents” quite broadly, however, to take into account that the political history of the United States can be read as a story of negotiating difference in order for some union to be achieved. In my preferred narrative, there has never been a univocal discourse of democracy, but rather a series of contending voices. Thus I would select as political documents the Puritan John Winthrop’s disquisitions on natural versus civil liberty, for example, but also the Iroquois Nation constitution called *The White Roots of Peace*; the Declaration of Independence, in its several drafts, but also critical commentary on it by Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and other African-American intellectuals. I would also urge that to a set of political documents presumed to have national importance, each region add more materials relating to its own history, ethnic patterns, geography, and so on.

Putting together such materials could become an exciting project involving students and faculty from a variety of disciplines, and also diverse people from our local communities. I personally favor the idea of a citizens’ committee selected by lot. At any rate, we would want to ensure that the selection process was not controlled by a few academic experts, but that academic experts could still contribute their expertise to the decision-making process. This might become the kind of critical pedagogical project that could be ongoing within a particular town and gown relationship.

What I like most about the idea, however, is that it might foster what Henry Giroux calls “democratic dreaming,” the encouragement of visions of solidarity among our diverse American groups. Chester Finn has recently noted that the move to pluralize the American college curriculum does not seem to have resulted in increased tolerance, but rather in a collection of nonoverlapping curricula, as he says, “each designed to tell the members of a particular group about themselves, their ancestors, their unique qualities, how superior they are, how oppressed they have been and how suspicious they should be of people unlike themselves” (A40). Finn calls instead for a “*constructive* multiculturalism” that would draw material from all the diverse groups and weave them into a curriculum that everyone would study, drawn together by the common values Finn confidently hopes to find amid the diversity. I might argue that at the very least, American cultures must all find some way to value dealing with difference—that is, I would want to

tell the story that what it means to be an American, of any variety, is to commit yourself to deal openly with difference. Finn says:

The combined cultures represented in the United States in 1990 are a richer blend than is available anywhere else in the world. But this is not something many students will come to understand on their own. Would it not be better for our educational institutions to find ways to convey both the richness and the unifying themes of this extraordinary cultural amalgam rather than to deepen the lines that divide us from one another? (A40)

My answer to his question would be yes. This is a project to which I will gladly contribute my authority.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> This anatomy of power has been strongly influenced by my reading of Patricia Roberts's work on Hannah Arendt (unpublished), and my correspondence with her.

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George Otte

## COMPUTER-ADJUSTED ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS

*ABSTRACT: Since no reliable accounting of general attitudes toward errors exists, this article necessarily represents an attempt to define the seriousness of errors by other means (computerized tabulation) and in a limited context. Computerized error analysis, strikingly successful in terms of instructional results, nevertheless had the effect of foregrounding the fuzzy but compelling issue of attitudes toward errors in classwide instruction. It also underscored the importance of individualized instruction in usage conventions—and the labor-intensive nature of developmental instruction generally.*

Errors are hard to talk about. The very word “errors” is suspect, as is the inclination to use it. What are errors anyway? Slips of the pen? Verbal fumbles? Departures from the norm? Finding in his study of student and professional errors that “the freshmen and the professionals are almost equally prone to commit errors,” Gary Sloan suggests that “if ‘error’ is defined as deviation from the linguistic practices of skilled writers, one might wish to reexamine the definition” (302–03). But it’s worth noting that Sloan’s sense of what constitutes an error is cued by the handbook component of *Writing with a Purpose*, where errors are construed so as to include such stylistic features as verbiage and triteness.

Most of us teaching basic writing take a less expansive view of what error amounts to, one rather less prescriptive and proscriptive. The party line goes something like this: errors are violations of the

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conventions of Standard English. Since that is by no means a uniformly codified body of conventions (as Cresswell and Williams have demonstrated), we allow that some violations are more irksome than others. We tell our students that errors “distract” us, but it might be more honest to use the locutions Maxine Hairston used in her famous survey: they bother us a little or they bother us a lot. As teachers we are of course quick to add that they bother us because they bother other people, especially denizens of the so-called real world. We might even go so far as to suggest that, if making errors is a little like breaking laws, then we’re all scofflaws to some extent, particularly in conversation.

But this enlightened relativism does not begin to describe what errors are and what they do. We may be scofflaws when it comes to the conventions of Standard English, but most of our basic writing students have been branded outlaws—and without quite understanding how or why. How much do *we* really understand when it comes right down to it? Some of the best work in basic writing has had the effect of telling us errors amount to a bigger problem for us and our students than we would like to admit. Making a point Sondra Perl would later confirm, Mina Shaughnessy pointed out that errors trouble the production as well as the reception of writing; that basic writers, “inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled” (7). Mike Rose has documented the affective dimension of errors for students who come to us trailing behind them “their dismal history of red-pencilled failure” (*Lives*, 141). David Bartholomae has shown that errors need sensitive interpretation and contextualization, stressing that “an error can only be understood as evidence of an intention” (255). And Joseph Williams has demonstrated that we are likely to find errors where we look for them, that our reading of professional prose is happily oblivious to error whereas the reading of our students’ prose is hard-nosed and scrutinizing; Shaughnessy’s basic writer is apparently right to think her writing passes “into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer’s eyes, searching for flaws” (7). Even and especially because perceptions vary according to what he calls “the phenomenology of error,” Williams has challenged us “to determine in some unobtrusive way which rules the significant majority of careful readers notice and which they do not” (168).

There have been attempts to do just that (Hairston’s survey, for instance), but none so ambitious as the study done recently by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, a “major nationwide analysis of actual college essays” designed to determine just how many

errors could be found—and had been found—in the writing of college students. Lunsford and Connors oversaw the tabulations of errors—and of errors marked—in a stratified sample taken from 20,000 solicited college papers. But precisely because of the scope of their study, Lunsford and Connors may raise as many questions as they answer.

When three of the five most common errors (besides spelling, which they sort out of the survey) boil down to the lack of a comma (after an introductory element, in a compound sentence, and before and after a nonrestrictive element), what are we to conclude? When the most frequent error—“no comma after an introductory element”—is also the second most frequently marked, do our questions about the importance of this error get answered with any more certainty? Lunsford and Connors themselves admit that “teachers’ ideas about what constitutes a serious markable error vary widely. . . . Teachers’ reasons for marking specific errors and patterns of error in their students’ papers are complex, and in many cases they are no doubt guided by the perceived needs of the student writing the paper and by the stage of the composing process the paper has achieved” (402). (They are perhaps being kind. Greenbaum and Taylor’s 1981 study suggests that teachers may often be unable to identify errors in the first place.) Moreover, “. . . the reasons teachers mark any given error seem to result from a complex formula that takes into account at least two factors: how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be at a given time for both teacher and students, and how difficult it is to mark or explain” (404). This means that neither the frequency of an error nor the frequency with which it is marked necessarily reflects the seriousness of an error in a “phenomenological” sense.

Lunsford and Connors’ study, like Hairston’s, proved fine grist to the mill of handbook publication, but it told me little about what I should tell my error-afflicted students. The fact is that no reliable, genuinely and generally useful study of attitudes regarding error exists. The problem is really not that surveys like Hairston’s of professionals or Hewett’s of English teachers-to-be seem too limited in sample or scope. Nor, for that matter, is it that a survey like Lunsford and Connors’ casts its net so wide that important distinctions (levels and kinds of instruction, pedagogical differences, etc.) are lost or blurred. The real problem is that our thinking about usage is so muddled that any survey of attitudes would leave a host of questions unanswered. As Greenbaum’s 1975 study “Language Variation and Acceptability” shows, we may well say one thing about usage and do another. And, of course, Williams’ “phenomenological” reading of our way of reading errors

demonstrates that what we see or do about errors varies enormously according to the context—and in ways we don't always acknowledge.

With bilingualism and bidialectalism in colleges and universities very much on the rise, clarifying attitudes toward the related issues of usage, error, and acceptability is something the profession is increasingly duty-bound and increasingly reluctant to do. (In Jenefer Giannasi's 1987 bibliographic essay "Language Varieties and Composition," pieces treating these issues published between 1965 and 1975 outnumber those published in the subsequent decade by three to one.) Just how do we define errors and their seriousness? Until that grail is found—and, again, it is scarcely quested after in earnest at present—there remains an alternative approach to determining the seriousness of errors, the one championed by Mina Shaughnessy (and done so partly to clarify our attitudes toward errors): seeking out patterns of error in the work of individual basic writing students. I decided to do just that. And I proposed to establish patterns by using computers to do the kind of tabulating and quantifying I could never manage to do without such means.

My study was an intensive look at a limited but specific sample: one class of upper-level developmental students (19 all told), each of whom had received a score of 6 on The City University of New York Writing Assessment Test (WAT), the score just below that which defines "minimum competency" according to standards shared throughout CUNY. Here's what two trained and normed scorers had to agree was true of each of their writing samples:

The essay provides a response to the topic but generally has no overall pattern of organization. Ideas are often repeated or undeveloped, although occasionally a paragraph within the essay does have some structure. The writer uses informal language occasionally and records conversational speech when appropriate written prose is needed. Vocabulary is often limited. The writer generally does not signal relationships within and between paragraphs. Syntax is often rudimentary and lacking in variety. The essay has recurrent grammatical problems, or, because of an extremely narrow range of syntactical choices, only occasional grammatical problems appear. The writer does not demonstrate a firm understanding of the boundaries of the sentence. The writer occasionally misspells common words of the language.

And here's what two scorers would have to find descriptive of any essay whose author could be set free from remedial instruction:

The essay shows a basic understanding of the demands of essay organization, although there might be occasional digressions. The development of ideas is sometimes incomplete or rudimentary, but a basic logical structure can be discerned. Vocabulary generally is appropriate for the essay topic but at times is oversimplified. Sentences reflect a sufficient command of standard written English to ensure reasonable clarity of expression. Common forms of agreement and grammatical inflection are usually, though not always, correct. The writer generally demonstrates through punctuation an understanding of the boundaries of the sentence. The writer spells common words, except perhaps so-called “demons,” with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Now it's clear from the above that errors are not the be-all and end-all when it comes to passing (or failing) the WAT, but it's equally clear that they loom large, particularly when the WAT is retaken as an exit examination. By that time, almost any student who earned a “high-fail” has learned the rudiments of essay organization, at least in formulaic form. Besides, thinks the student, ineffective expression is a matter of opinion; it's incorrect expression that they nail you for. WAT scorers, in their own way, agree. Failing a student on the retest means giving someone who's had fourteen weeks of remediation another fourteen weeks; a controlling idea insufficiently in control can be tolerated, chalked up to the topic. Give the kids a break unless they overwhelm you with errors. Fail WATs with a low incidence of errors, and you'll be awash in appeals. Pass WATs with a high incidence of errors, and you'll have those WATs thrown down before you like gauntlets by the instructors who get the students in the next term.

I note the WAT scorers are people too, not just because I've been one for years, but also because “the phenomenology of error” gets focused in a context like the WAT-as-retest. I had a special context- and purpose-driven sense that errors matter, and I had to pass that sense on to my select group of students. Still, I was also a writing teacher enacting the role of so many writing teachers: I was a teacher on the lookout for what other teachers were on the lookout for, what other readers would react to. “From such a vantage point,” Shaughnessy wrote, “one feels the deep conserving pull of language, . . . and one knows that errors matter, knows further that a teacher who would work with B[asic] W[riting] students might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes . . .” (13).

The logical place to begin was with the WATs that got my

students placed in my remedial course. I created a word-processed version of each one, and then, using a method developed during previous work in error analysis, I created a second version, one coded for errors so that a program called Error Extractor (developed by my colleague Gerard Dalgish) could tabulate them. On the class's first day in the computer lab—which was also the second meeting of the term—each student found her WAT waiting for her on one of the terminals. After introducing the students to the word-processing program we were using, I gave each a full hour to edit her text for errors, stressing that editing was all that was called for. (One of the virtues of word-processing, of course, is that it facilitates copy editing still more than revision—and helps to keep the two distinct.) All but two students felt they had done all they could well before the hour was up (and those two were given extra time). Just how little they had done became apparent when I ran coded versions of the original and corrected versions through Error Extractor and used another program to do word counts. The bottom line in such analyses is the error-to-word ratio (simply the number of errors divided into the number of words): with the exception of three students (who improved their error-to-word ratios from 1/11.5 to 1/15, from 1/11 to 1/13, and from 1/6.5 to 1/8 respectively), no one improved the error-to-word ratio by a factor of more than one. Two students had higher incidences of errors on their corrected versions because of hypercorrection.

This first discovery still seems the most significant. We are inclined to suppose that the incidence of errors in student writing—particularly off-the-top-of-the-head, under-the-gun writing such as the WAT elicits—is attributable to nothing so much as sloppiness, haste, or inadequate proofreading. The problem in this group, however, was error recognition plain and simple: the students just did not see the errors they made. The use of word processors may be regarded as a nuisance variable, but, particularly in light of the hour allotted to editing a text averaging just over 250 words, I am convinced that this failure to see errors is a verified fact, at least for this group.

Where to go from there? First came a two-page handout that explained my error codes and the errors themselves, in each instance giving an illustration culled from the students' WATs. A few examples will suffice to show that my categories for errors are not identical to everyone else's:

#### SP

**indicated a spelling error.** The most common misspellings result from confusions of **homophones**—sound-alikes like

*there, their, and they're*. Problems with **apostrophes** (confusions of *it's* and *its*, spelling *parents' advice* as *parents advice*) are really spelling problems of this kind and are so indicated.

### GS

**indicates garbled syntax:** the syntax of sentences that begin one way and end another or get lost somewhere in between. The most common instance of this confusion of alternate constructions occurs when part of an introductory phrase gets picked up as the sentence's subject—e.g., “By exercising regularly can help you keep fit.”

And there were other things some might think idiosyncratic. What most people call incomplete sentences or fragments I called incomplete constructions. I distinguished between **WW** (for **wrong word**) and **WC** (for **word choice**). The former code indicated clearly wrong alternatives (e.g., *affect* for *effect* or *easy understand* for *easily understand*), the latter, instances of wording problems where the appropriate choice wasn't entirely clear (as when a linking verb is made to do the work of a transitive verb). Surely other lists of errors might include things I omitted and vice versa—doing it all over again, I think I would create a special category for apostrophes—but at least I could try to be clear to my students and consistent with myself. The list of eighteen types of error I began with turned out to cover a multitude of sins. I was given no reason to add to it, so my students and I shared a fairly short and increasingly familiar set of terms.

For each piece they wrote, then, students were responsible for doing a word-processed version I could check against the original and code for errors. An error analysis was done for each and given to the student, together with a printout of the coded version, which indicated, at the beginning of each sentence, the number and kind of errors contained therein. When the student corrected that flagged version, she received an error analysis for that. With the proviso that no example can be deemed representative of the entire group, here two such analyses, a “before” and an “after” appear in the Table below.

As you can gather from the figures, the procedure resulted first and foremost in a clear pinpointing of each student's predominant pattern(s) of error. The error analysis program tabulated not just numbers and kinds of errors, but also the percentage any one kind of error represented in terms of the total number of errors. Typically, a single error pattern accounted for about a quarter of all the errors made by that student; in some cases a single pattern accounted for more than half. In addition, the error analysis allowed me to

WAT2		ERROR/WORD RATIO: 1/7.5	
Type	Number	Percentage	
# (Number)	2	7%	
<b>SP</b> elling	7	25% *	
<b>S</b> ubject- <b>V</b> erb Agreement	1	3%	
<b>A</b> rticle	1	3%	
<b>I</b> diom	1	3%	
<b>G</b> arbled <b>S</b> yntax	3	11% *	
<b>PUN</b> Ctuation	4	14% *	
<b>R</b> edundancy	4	14% *	
<b>R</b> un- <b>O</b> n	1	3%	
<b>C</b> omma <b>S</b> plice	2	7%	
<b>?</b> (Omission)	1	3%	
11	27	100%	

WAT2-C		ERROR/WORD RATIO: 1/28.7	
Type	Number	Percentage	
#	1	14%	
<b>S-V</b>	1	14%	
Incomplete Construction	1	14%	
<b>GS</b>	1	14%	
<b>R</b>	1	14%	
<b>CS</b>	1	14%	
<b>?</b>	1	14%	
7	7	100%	

Note: the Error Extractor program rounds off percentages so their total is not always exactly 100.

determine patterns of what, for want of a better word, I'll call correctability. Unlike Lunsford and Connors, then, I did have a fairly stable, measurable way of determining the seriousness of an error, one not subject to the vagaries of varying perceptions of its seriousness. A serious error was one that loomed large in proportion to errors overall and/or proved stubborn, resistant to recognition and correction.

Still, inescapably, I had to consider that other kind of seriousness, the seriousness that lies in the eyes of the beholder, the "phenomenological" seriousness Williams discussed, the offensiveness of errors Hairston sought to determine. There was, moreover, the question of why errors happened in the first place. Concerns about the causes and perceptions of errors as well as their frequency made me do most instruction on errors in individual conferences, where I could tell students things the error analyses could not and ask questions those analyses left unanswered. Take a single error as an instance: *becuase* for *because*. How important was it? Scoring standards for the WAT underscored the importance of spelling at least common words correctly, so *becuase* was effectively defined as



a more serious error than, say, *psychological*. On the other hand, it wouldn't confuse the reader the way spelling *tow* for *two* might. How much of this did the student actually need to be told? And why had the misspelling occurred? Was the student at least consistent in writing *becuase*? Did this participate in a larger pattern of letter transpositions? How important were misspellings for this student generally?

Individual conferences were indispensable in addressing such questions, so I had a minimum of four (or about one conference for every two formal compositions) with each student. Taking my cue from Bartholomae's "Study of Error," I had students read their texts aloud, noting the errors they corrected or stumbled over as well as those they didn't seem to notice. I asked them why they thought errors, especially recurrent errors, were made. (Teachers would be terrified by the number of times I learned an "always" from them had been misheard as a "never"—or vice versa. One student never capitalized *I* as the first person singular pronoun for this reason—and stood uncorrected by a legion of teachers tolerant of this presumed idiosyncrasy.) I asked students to wonder with me why they failed to spot certain errors, especially errors I had flagged, and thereby uncovered assumptions I should have been shrewd enough to suspect. For instance, students automatically assumed that **SP**, the code for a misspelling, meant a problem with a big word and not something like *to* for *too*, though the latter sort of misspelling was much more common.

Clearly, the consequential revelations, not least of all for me, occurred in those one-on-one conferences, but that doesn't mean the class as a whole didn't evince patterns of error (and error recognition) edifying (or at least suggestive) enough to pass on. Before I get on to that, though, I need to acknowledge one last revelation from the conferences: writing done outside of class gave me unreliable data because the time spent on such assignments varied enormously. (In-conference confessions taught me that.) Differences between in-class and out-of-class writing were instructive in specific cases, especially when students let me know enough to see the differences could be chalked up to such things as trying to do an assignment on the subway ride to class, but I learned to be wary of drawing conclusions from writing done in circumstances beyond my control or observation. Error analyses of timed in-class writing done in response to prompts designed to be commensurate (i.e., WAT prompts) were a different matter, and those are the results I want to share.

First, a synchronic view. Here are the figures for the class's performance on the original WAT:

<b>ERROR</b>	<b># BEFORE</b>	<b>% OF TOTAL</b>	<b># AFTER</b>	<b>% CORRECTED</b>
<b>SP</b> elling	163	25%	86	47%
<b>PUN</b> Ctuation	85	13%	63	26%
<b>Garbled Syntax</b>	68	10%	44	35%
<b>Capitalization</b>	43	6.4%	11	74%
<b>Idiom</b>	42	6.3%	32	24%
<b>? (Omission)</b>	40	6%	20	50%
<b>Verb Tense</b>	40	6%	29	28%
<b># (Number)</b>	32	4.8%	25	22%
<b>Pronoun Reference</b>	31	4.7%	22	39%
<b>Subject-Verb Agreement</b>	29	4.4%	17	41%
<b>Incomplete Construction</b>	20	3%	15	25%
<b>Run-On</b>	14	2%	2	86%
<b>Comma Splice</b>	10	1.5%	4	60%
<b>Sentence boundary errors</b>	44	6.5%	21	52%
<b>Wrong Word</b>	24	3.6%	10	58%
<b>Article</b>	13	1.95%	7	46%
<b>Word Choice</b>	11	1.65%	9	18%
<b>Redundancy</b>	9	1.35%	7	22%
<b>Double Negative</b>	1	.1%	0	100%
<b>TOTALS</b>	665	100%	403	39%
<b>TOTAL WORDS:</b>	5112	<b>AVERAGE TOTAL:</b>		269

**AVERAGE ERROR/WORD RATIO: 1/7.7**

Spelling, as you can see, was the single most common problem—and also one of the most correctable. Errors in punctuation were only about half as frequent but nearly twice as difficult to spot and correct. And so on down the scale to errors of relative infrequency, like the one double negative in this batch of nineteen WATs. But frequency will only tell of half of what error counting is capable of revealing. For the other half, we need to see how stubborn certain types of errors proved in the long run.

So let's move to the diachronic perspective. The Table below shows a distillation of error analyses run on a practice WAT administered two and one-half months after the term began—the last such exercise all 19 of my students were there for.

Students at this point in the course—less than a month before reconfronting the WAT—were making about half as many errors. And the hierarchy-by-frequency had to be reconfigured: spelling, punctuation, and garbled syntax remained high on the list, but certain formerly frequent errors like number and capitalization had

<b>ERROR</b>	<b># BEFORE</b>	<b>% OF TOTAL</b>	<b># AFTER</b>	<b>% CORRECTED</b>
<b>SP</b> elling	93	24%	37	60%
<b>PUN</b> ctuation	67	17%	25	63%
<b>Garbled Syntax</b>	35	9%	25	29%
<b>Verb Tense</b>	30	8%	16	47%
<b>Pronoun Reference</b>	23	6%	14	39%
<b>Subject-Verb</b>				
Agreement	21 <sup>12</sup>	5.4%	10 <sup>4</sup>	52% <sup>86%</sup>
Idiom	19 <sup>10</sup>	4.9%	14 <sup>7</sup>	26% <sup>30%</sup>
<b>Wrong Word</b>	19 <sup>14</sup>	4.9%	11 <sup>6</sup>	42% <sup>57%</sup>
<b>? (Omission)</b>	18	4.6%	6	67%
<b>Incomplete</b>				
Construction	20	5.1%	9	55%
<b>Run-On</b>	3	.8%	0	100%
<b>Comma Splice</b>	19 <sup>14</sup>	4.9%	11 <sup>6</sup>	42% <sup>57%</sup>
<b>Sentence boundary errors</b>	42	11.2%	20	52%
<b># (Number)</b>	8	2%	3	63%
<b>Capitalization</b>	6 <sup>3</sup>	1.5%	2 <sup>0</sup>	67% <sup>100%</sup>
<b>Word Choice</b>	4	1%	2	50%
<b>Redundancy</b>	2	.5%	0	100%
<b>Article</b>	2	.5%	1	50%
<b>Double Negative</b>	0	0%	0	—
<b>TOTALS</b>	389	100%	186	52%
<b>TOTAL WORDS:</b>	5046	<b>AVERAGE TOTAL:</b>		266

**AVERAGE ERROR/WORD RATIO: 1/13**

dropped significantly. And while the incidence of error was down, the rate of correctability was up—students did better than twice as well at spotting and correcting punctuation errors, for instance. Some patterns of error became so localized that I felt the need to factor out the one student responsible for most of the errors and put the more representative numbers in superscribed notations just to the right (so that, for instance, with the one student who made four out of the six capitalization errors factored out, there was a correctability rate of 100%).

This urge to factor out extremes in the latter classwide sample returns me to the difficulties of generalizing from individual cases—disappointing difficulties since I had hoped to be blessed with any number of general revelations. The ones I had visited upon me only made me that much more uneasy about making easy extrapolations. For instance, I had three native speakers of Chinese and supposed that I would discover interesting, even profound similarities within this subpopulation. What I found were three very different cases: one of my most longwinded students together with one of my tersest, one student with a severe idiom problem and

another who was not just idiomatic but downright slangy. I also learned that there were patterns of error within patterns of error, that homophones were indeed responsible for the majority of misspellings while punctuation errors were almost evenly divided among omissions, unnecessary inclusions, and the use of one sort of mark where another was called for. What's more, changes in the writing were accompanied by changes in the error patterns. Despite their unreliability as sources of data on errors, out-of-class assignments consistently proved distinctive in some respects; they were, for example, likely to have fewer omissions but a higher incidence of punctuation errors. And I'm convinced that an increasing sophistication in the students' syntax accounts for similar totals in sentence boundary errors over time. Uncovering the whys and wherefores of these variations would have required not just a more sophisticated and rigorous research design but a capacity to interrogate and tabulate that would have pushed me, at least, past the limits of possibility.

My biggest disappointment was the limited bearing all my error counting had on in-class instruction. I had supposed classwide patterns would emerge that would pinpoint the sort of help I should give the class as a whole. It's true enough that I gave spelling lessons à la Shaughnessy (and had plenty of justification for doing so), true enough that students obligingly supplied me with enough examples of garbled syntax or sentence boundary problems so that class time going over typed-up collections was clearly class time well-spent. But it only took a few minutes' work with incomplete constructions or instances of garbled syntax to uncover at least half-a-dozen reasons why such errors occurred. Repeatedly, I had the discomfiting point driven home to me that the more carefully I scrutinized and analyzed error patterns, the more generally applicable and uninvolved solutions eluded me, the more I knew I needed to work with the students individually. I suppose I should have known better. In addition to Bartholomae's similar conclusions drawn from error analysis, I had Rose's and Hartwell's cases against formal grammar instruction to wean me away from the idea that going after errors with teacherly generalizations of any kind was anything but a doomed enterprise—another quixotic attempt to write the Key to All Mythologies, this time with the help of computers. James R. Squire—it's worth noting that he's speaking as the Senior Vice-President of the publishing house Ginn and Company—has argued that:

. . . we suffer from a serious misinterpretation of the substantial body of research in English grammar that has

demonstrated conclusively and correctly the lack of relationship between the study of grammar and improvement in the ability to compose. What we have failed to see clearly during these many years is that the very knowledge of the structure of English that contributes little to the improvement of writing is essential to the improvement of editing skills. (35)

I'm not so sure. I am convinced that what any one of my students needed in order to develop the requisite editing skills was something at once considerably more focused and considerably more complex than anything I could find in any textbook—and, believe me, I looked. The students' patterns of error and blindspots in error recognition had a kind of individually circumscribed specificity and at the same time a causal intricacy that made going after them with any of the available textbooks like going after shrimp with a tuna net. Even class time spent with the students' own writing was best spent as general, limited preparation for more individualized and intensive work in one-on-one conferences.

Ironically, most of the class time spent on errors—perhaps as much as a third of the class time overall—was spent on the murky matter of how they are perceived. Without ever telling my students that they might, as Robert Pattison fears, be thought “uncivilized, unreflecting cretins who offend against a culture merely by opening their mouths or applying pen to paper” (200), I did want them to know that unreflecting cretins might well make mistaken assumptions about their intelligence on the basis of their ability to communicate in Standard English.

Nothing was more helpful in driving this point home than Hairston's survey, which I spent some time going over with the students. Hairston herself is quick to note the survey's limitations in terms of design as well as the range of respondents, but it seems wonderfully rich when it comes to the sensitive issues that need to be brought out into the open. For instance, the seven most “bothersome” errors (out of slightly more than sixty) are all dialectical variations, with the most offensive of them all being the use of *brung*. Such errors have their own indisputable logic—“*Ring, rang, rung*: why not *bring, brang, brung?*” I asked, and I noted my three-year-old's entirely intelligent attempt to make English make sense by saying things like *caught* for *caught*. What's more, they often have prestigious precedents: aristocrats used to say “He don't” (back before it was one of these especially obnoxious solecisms, of course), and Chaucer was a master of the double negative (which shows up twice among the seven most bothersome errors), occasionally even managing triple negatives.

That sort of thing was the easy part. Chaucer's English is obviously not today's Standard, and so the present points of contrast are dialects like Black English Vernacular, the language of the dazzling verbal display and rhetorical facility that rap represents but also the butt of considerable linguistic prejudice. "The nettle of error in writing and, of course, in speech as well," Glynda Hull has observed, "is that it points away from itself towards social issues" (166). My students needed to know that many of their errors, particularly the most stigmatizing, betrayed not a lack of intelligence but a kind of outsiderhood, nonmembership in the class of the educated, moneyed elite. And so I supplemented my individualized instruction in errors with classwide instruction in the sociopolitics of language use. It was rudimentary instruction, to be sure—none of it amounting to anything my present audience doesn't already know—but it did mean I generalized most in class about what I find either just useless or too difficult to generalize about here: attitudes toward errors. And, again, this was partly instruction by default. My error counts consistently forestalled generalizations and returned me to individuals.

Still, I think some general conclusions from my admittedly limited, quite possibly overdetermined, sampling are warranted. My study convinced me, at least, of four things. First, we need to be wary of supposing that students can recognize their own errors, even if these are pointed out to them; error recognition tends to be lower than we might think or hope, particularly (as we might expect) for students for whom "correct" usage does not come easily. Second, the most remediable error patterns for the generality of basic writing students tend to be those that are most clearly written conventions: capitalization, spelling, punctuation. Third, as a kind of corollary, those patterns that seem most stubborn are "translations" from the students' spoken competence, especially as dialectical forms retained in the attempt to produce Standard Written English, with the chief among these being verb inflection and idiom. Finally, a little error recognition can go a long way. All of the students began the class by failing to meet the CUNY definition of minimum competency. At the end of a fourteen-week term, most of the students could satisfy that definition.

Invoking the CUNY WAT and the standards by which it is scored reminds me that, though my sample is small, it is specific. The students placed into my class by generating texts that, taken together, represent a fair sample of what, almost but not quite, minimal competency is, according to carefully audited standards applied throughout the nation's third largest university system. The errors such students make are important for reasons Mina

Shaughnessy took pains to enumerate back in the early days of CUNY's Open Admissions policy:

First, there is the reality of academia, the fact that most college teachers have little tolerance for the kinds of error B[asic] W[riting] students make, that they perceive certain types of errors as indicators of ineducability, and that they have the power of the F. Second, there is the urgency of the students to meet their teachers' criteria, even to request more of the prescriptive teaching they have had before in the hope that this time it might "take." Third, there is the awareness of the teacher and administrator that remedial programs are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers, correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing. (8-9)

Lunsford and Connors' sweeping study found that the average student makes 2.26 errors per 100 words—an error-to-word ratio of 1/44. Without at all wishing to impugn that figure—again, I'm dealing with a much more specific and homogeneous population—I've sampled for you two slices of time during which my students went all the way from an average error-to-word ratio of 1/7.7 to one of 1/13. Less than a month after the compositions distilled to that latter figure, all nineteen students took the WAT. Fifteen passed, for a pass rate of 79% (the universitywide average is 50%). The four who did not pass were all chronic absentees, each with at least three weeks' worth of absences. The students who did come regularly and did do the work all managed to satisfy the sense of minimum competency held by normed readers who did not know my students or my methods. When all is said and done and tabulated, those are the results I care about.

Still, like all teachers, I move on to other courses, other terms, other students. I have not yet taught another group of "high-fails," and when I do it won't be this success rate that will be uppermost in my mind. Two other things will be. One is that image of all those students looking long and hard at their failing writing samples—texts they assured me would have passed if they'd only had more time to "clean them up"—and finding nothing wrong. The other is that endless succession of individual conferences my computerized error counting had seemed to press on me and my students. Even after technology had done with errors all I knew how to ask it to do, I found no easier, softer way, no quick fix. Alas.

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Donald Lazere

# ORALITY, LITERACY, AND STANDARD ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT: This article examines the debate initiated by Thomas J. Farrell's 1983 article, "IQ and Standard English." The author finds that Farrell's critics exhibit many of the shortcomings they often ascribe to Farrell, without necessarily refuting Farrell's thesis concerning orality and literacy. The author goes on to suggest the importance of social class in assessing the situation of basic writers coming to college from predominantly oral cultures, who are generally unprepared to write critically, follow complex lines of argument, or handle new vocabulary and allusions.*

The coalescence in the past decade of theoretical studies in developmental psychology and cognitive differences between oral and literate cultures invites a revised look at earlier disputes over problems in college basic writing instruction related to dialects. For one example, the 1974 Special Edition *College Composition and Communication Students' Right to Their Own Language* now appears to focus too narrowly on defending a single aspect of students' language—nonStandard versus Standard English oral dialects. Thus, other problems are minimized, including differences in stages of cognitive development between students whose language and culture are primarily oral and those who have assimilated the written language, the body of literate knowledge, and the codes of academic discourse on which college-level reading

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and writing depend. Likewise, responses to Thomas J. Farrell's article "IQ and Standard English" (*College Composition and Communication*, Dec. 1983)—an article that was a tacit rebuttal to *Students' Right*—have emphasized questions of Black versus standard dialect, while overlooking the central points Farrell made about Black English as the language of a predominantly oral culture. In this article I will look at some of the less-explored implications of these issues, using Farrell as the main point of departure.

Farrell's article begins by addressing the low performance of Black children on IQ tests, which he attributes to the measurement by such tests of performance in cognitive operations and mastery of syntactic structures intrinsic to Standard English as a grapholect. He goes on to assert that many Black students—particularly those from inner-city backgrounds—have been socialized in the purely oral cognitive patterns of Black English, which is essentially a spoken rather than written language. Consequently they lack control of the full panoply of conjugations and coordinating and subordinating syntax that distinguish Standard *written* English and that form a necessary matrix for abstract and analytic thought. Farrell singles out the incomplete conjugation of the verb "to be" in American Black English as the sign of a restricted sense of time and as a handicap to propositional reasoning. He concludes with a proposal for instructional techniques designed to help students bridge the gap between Black and Standard English, between dialect and grapholect.

It is difficult to make a balanced evaluation of Farrell's article because, beyond his titular subject, he has audaciously attempted to synthesize topics and sources covering nearly the whole range of recent theories of literacy in regard to both linguistics and literature—with very mixed results. Valid points are mingled with more questionable ones. Many of the criticisms offered by his four respondents in *CCC*, Karen Greenberg, Patrick Hartwell, Margaret Himley, and R. E. Stratton, are sound, in my opinion. They say his sole emphasis on Black oral culture as the cause of Blacks' difficulties in schooling is reductive, isolating matters of oral and written language from matters of vocabulary and subject matter—as well as from the larger social context in which learning does or does not take place. He endorses conventional, teacher-centered pedagogy as opposed to interactive literacy of the kind advocated by Shirley Brice Heath and Paulo Freire. He accepts Arthur Jensen's and R. A. Figueroa's use of a "digit span" IQ test as a valid measure of abstract reasoning proficiency, although he rejects Jensen's theory of racially inherited IQ. Greenberg and Hartwell effectively refute Farrell's premise that the incomplete conjugation of the verb "to be"

in Black English indicates a cognitive deficiency in that dialect. John Ogbu, in an article published before Farrell's in 1983, rejects the theory that American Black children's problems in school are primarily attributable to their oral culture. He makes a compelling case that different social groups from oral cultural backgrounds vary widely in adapting to literate schooling, and he offers, as an alternate explanation for Blacks' problems, an array of more influential factors involving specifically anti-Black social and cultural prejudice.

Along with these valid points by Farrell's critics, however, are others that are disputable. To begin with, his critics, like the authors of *Students' Right*, tend to reduce the issues to a defense of nonstandard dialect, making dubious use of William Labov's research establishing the linguistic equality of Black vs. Standard English. Critics of this school have overlooked qualifications that Labov himself made about his work that are crucial to the issues at hand: his research dealt with spoken rather than written language; with children rather than with college-age youths; and with informal discourse rather than scholastic language. These limitations call into question certain attempts to apply Labov's studies "wholesale" (one of Labov's own phrases) to college-level reading and writing, as *Students' Right* seemed to do, although it never made clear whether it was meant to apply to college students. Farrell himself could also be clearer about what age level his article deals with; he talks about IQ tests, which are given before college, but his pedagogical proposals come out of techniques used in college courses by other instructors he cites (480) and by himself, saying that he has taught college-level English to Black inner-city students for ten years (481). As Labov said in a central passage discussing studies by Basil Bernstein of middle-class vs. working-class language in England:

The verbal skills which characterize middle class speakers are in the areas which we have been calling "school language" in an informal sense, which speakers confined to a nonstandard dialect plainly do not control. There is no reason to presuppose a deep semantic or logical difference between nonstandard dialects and such an elaborated style. Some aspect of the formal speech of middle class speakers may very well have value for the acquisition of knowledge and verbal problem solving. But before we train working class speakers to copy middle class speech patterns wholesale, it is worth asking just which aspects of this style are functional for learning and which are matters of prestige and fashion.

The question must be answered before we can design an effective teaching program, and unfortunately we have not yet begun to answer it.

Working class speakers also excel at a wide range of verbal skills, including many not controlled by middle class speakers. . . . Most of these skills cannot be transferred wholesale to the school situation. Until now there has been no way of connecting excellence in the verbal activity of the vernacular culture with excellence in the verbal skills needed in school. Yet it seems plain that our educational techniques should draw upon these nonstandard vernacular skills to the better advantage of all concerned. (38)

In its last sentence, this 1969 passage provided a cue for the subsequent, fruitful efforts at drawing upon vernacular skills by scholars such as Mina Shaughnessy, Shirley Brice Heath, Mike Rose, Ira Shor, and other followers of Paulo Freire. But it also provided justification for Farrell's emphasis on the reading and writing problems of nonstandard speakers under the present conditions of schooling. Farrell is seriously attempting to define "just which aspects of this style are functional for learning" and consequently to "design an effective teaching program."

A second shortcoming in Farrell's critics is that, in rejecting his reductive overemphasis on orality and literacy, *they* reductively dismiss the case that oral culture may indeed be one significant factor, among others, of the difficulties faced in school by Blacks and other children whose formation is that of oral culture. (Ogbu too, while enumerating many other, external factors in Blacks' scholastic problems, never really shows that Black oral culture is *not* an important issue.) Farrell's analysis could apply equally, with variations, to most oral cultures and languages, not just those of Blacks. He had followed much the same lines of argument in his earlier articles that did not discuss race but that made the case that many of the problems of college basic writers in general stem from their predominantly oral cultural background. Drawing from Vygotsky, he enunciated the intriguing thesis that the patterns of cognitive development in children between acquisition of speech and of reading and writing proficiency (and also, at a higher level, the patterns of development between college basic writers and more advanced students) recapitulate the historical development from oral to literate societies, as delineated by Farrell's mentor Walter J. Ong. It was those earlier articles that first brought Farrell to my attention, since his explanations confirmed my observations of my own students, who are overwhelmingly White and middle class, but

whose language is primarily the oral one of television, radio, popular music, and peer conversation.<sup>2</sup>

Another necessary qualification about Farrell's analysis of Black culture in particular is that Farrell fully appreciates the literary and linguistic richness of the Black oral tradition in the United States, as well as its roots in African culture; his familiarity with and admiration for this culture belies some critics' charges of racism against him. He argues, however, that for reasons grounded in the past denial by Whites of Black access to schooling, Black culture has not been strongly attuned to the written word or academic discourse. Farrell also makes it clear that his thesis does not apply to all American Blacks, but only uneducated ones: "There are educated blacks who speak standard English, and their children generally score better than most of their black ghetto peers on IQ tests. This paper is obviously not about them" (479). He might have pursued this point further, to stress that he really is talking more about issues of class than of race. His points could apply to any comparison of working-class groups whose culture is oral to groups in higher classes with access to literate culture, with all the implications of Basil Bernstein's theory about restricted working-class versus elaborated middle-class linguistic-cognitive codes.

Thus Farrell hypothesizes that the culture of uneducated Black English reflects traits typical of oral cultures and nonliterate speech, which tend to use paratactic language and thinking, that is, placement of phrases or clauses one after the other without logical connectives or sequence. In contrast, literate cultures and written language make more use of hypotactic (subordinate) and syntactic (coordinate or sequential) structures and ideas. In other words, oral culture tends to be appositional and formulaic, while literate culture tends to be propositional in reasoning, so that writing facilitates a much greater degree of abstract and analytic reasoning.

Perhaps the key issue here is not Standard English or even written language per se, but the whole greater repertory of both syntax and reasoning that becomes possible through the resources of a grapholectic system, particularly in academic discourse. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* remains a timely source of clarification on this point, as on so many others. Shaughnessy uses both the phrase "academic discourse" (237) and a variety of other phrases to describe what I mean here, including "the dominant code of literacy" and "the general dialect of literacy" (13), "the code that governs formal written English" and "the dialect of formal writing" (45), "academic language" (187), "the vocabulary of general literacy" (237), and "the idioms of academic prose" (287). Her chapters on syntax and on vocabulary are especially illuminating, in

her delineation of the kind of syntax and words—and their interrelation—that constitutes academic discourse. Her categories in the vocabulary of general literacy that basic writers must master (216–21) incorporate elements of Hirschian cultural literacy (e.g., *Gandhi, the French Revolution, Marxism*), logical and critical thinking terminology (*generalize, document, prove, causation, condition*), modes of discourse (*define, compare, summarize, interpret*), and literary terms (*irony, figures of speech, fiction, drama, novel*).

In light of the recent tendency for phrases like “academic discourse” to be consigned along with “Standard English” to the realm of the politically incorrect in the cause of cultural pluralism, the introduction to Shaughnessy’s chapter on vocabulary is pertinent:

The language the BW student inherits when he enters college is a language that has been developed over several centuries by writers who were discovering and exploiting the analytical powers of written English. It is not the purpose of this study to describe the ways in which that language has been and can be misused—how it has served to sharpen class divisions or dull the wits of captive readers or camouflage the mediocrity of people’s thoughts—but rather to view it as the common language not only of the university but of the public and professional world outside, in short as a language BW students need to learn if they are to cope with the books and lectures and papers that constitute the work of college

.....

But even more important than remembering the forms and definitions of words is having the judgment to use them in appropriate ways, a judgment that comes not from the study of vocabulary lists but from having been a steady reader of the kind of writing people do in college. . . . The availability of certain words within the academic lexicon opens up the possibility of changing the thought-style as well as the word-style of [the basic writer’s] writing. . . . Words learned well clarify and extend meaning. Like tools in a craft, words prompt the writer to do more—elaborate, compare, condense, define, allude, etc.—than he could have done without them. (187–89)

In other words, academic discourse is not just arcane scholarly jargon or an oppressive device “to sharpen class divisions,” but the key to entering what sociologist Alvin Gouldner, in an essay titled “The New Class as a Speech Community,” terms “the culture of

critical discourse.” It is the discourse of serious journalism and literature, the higher circles of government, business, economics, and the professions—which most people in today’s information-oriented society need to learn in order to be adequately informed about their social world, whether for purposes of participating in it or developing critical opposition to it.

There is, to be sure, a chicken-and-egg problem in the relation of Standard English to academic discourse in general; it may not be possible to determine whether cognitive advances are made through mastery of complex written syntax or from the acquisition of knowledge, vocabulary, and complex ideas in the subjects embodied in academic discourse—even though mastery of the syntax may be a precondition to mastery of the ideas. So Farrell’s point might be modified to say that Blacks (or Whites) whose language depends in large part on the patterns of oral discourse are at a double disadvantage in having limited access to both the syntactic complexities of academic language and to the body of knowledge and ideas embedded in it.

*Students’ Right* cites Labov’s and other sociolinguists’ studies showing that nonstandard dialects do not impede learning to read and write. But here again, the application of Labov is too casual: the fact that dialect differences do not form a major impediment to reading or writing at the elementary level does not alter the reality that restriction to Black English or any other oral language with a nonscholastic vocabulary and syntax *is* an impediment to successfully dealing with the complexities of college-level reading and writing. Gearing subject matter close to students’ own experience, and using interactive teaching methods as advocated by Freire, Heath, Rose, and others, can only go so far to bridge the gap if students have not stored up necessary background knowledge and have not developed habits of analytic reading and writing, so that they are out of their element in the codes of academic discourse.

My own thinking about these issues has evolved from the experience of teaching works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” and *The Fire Next Time* in Freshman English and advanced literature classes. My expectation that working-class Black students might better be able to relate to the subject matter has been thwarted by their difficulties with the syntactic and intellectual complexities. Many White and Black students alike have difficulties in sustaining sufficient attention to read through and retain the complete work, in following the complex sentences and lines of argument, and in handling new vocabulary and allusions, leading many students to give up in frustration. Furthermore, their summaries of these works tend to be

limited to the narrative events, overlooking the analytic and critical content, confirming National Assessment of Education Progress and psychological studies indicating that there is a difficult stage-developmental step between reading or writing narration and critical analysis.

Regardless of the prior social causes of educational deprivation, then, college faculties are left in the position of teaching many Black and other students who simply aren't prepared for college-level reading and writing. At this point, Farrell's pedagogical strategies for helping students make the transition from oral to written discourse—oral reading of or listening to recordings of texts, French-style *dictées*, etc.—must be considered on the grounds on which he presents them: do they work? (Cultural pluralists take offense at Farrell's recommendation of McGuffey's *Readers* as oral texts for transcription, although this was their original use; if McGuffey's content is culturally biased, many other readings, including those by Black authors, would serve as well.)

Farrell's case would be stronger, had he presented testimony from his Black students or others having undergone similar techniques, that they found them beneficial. By the same token, some of Farrell's critics seem more intent on laying down a correct political line than on considering what real Black students happen to want. Farrell, after all, does not advocate forcing these techniques on all students, but offering them to those who want to improve their academic reading and writing skills and performance on tests, or who want to learn to use Standard English—in *addition to*, *not instead of*—Black dialect. If they judge that McGuffey or any other resource has helped them, who is to deny the legitimacy of that judgment? Moreover, Farrell's general position receives tacit support from Lisa Delpit, whose recent article, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Black Educator," concludes from her experience teaching Black inner-city children that they dislike the current neglect of standard form and mechanics and *want* instruction in the formal skills they need to progress in schooling.

Is Farrell's article racist, then, as its critics in *CCC* and elsewhere have charged? I think not, if racism entails malice toward a race, prejudices and overgeneralizations about it, or the advocacy of discriminatory policies toward its members. None of these, I believe, characterizes Farrell's position, since his aim is to help Blacks to attain educational equality, and since he is not discussing all Blacks but only those of a certain level of class and education, whom he recognizes are the victims of past White discrimination. Karen Greenberg's response in *CCC* concludes, "Advocating a separate pedagogy for students because of differences in their genes



or in their language is racist'' (460). But it is necessarily racist to advocate a separate pedagogy based on different levels of linguistic or cognitive achievement among members of one race, or of all races?

There are, of course, larger issues involved in Blacks' relation to academic culture, as Ogbu and many others have convincingly argued. The whole history of denial of education, segregated and underfunded schools, and undeniable prejudice in the classroom against Black culture has been the major determinant in the widespread alienation of Blacks from formal schooling. Pedagogical policies like Farrell's cannot be viewed in isolation from the much more important political agenda needed to redress imbalances between Blacks and Whites in multiple socioeconomic relations, of which education is only one. Nevertheless, if blaming Blacks as the victim is one error to be avoided, another is an attitude on the part, not only of many Blacks but of some White cultural critics, that categorically rejects the notion of cultural deprivation—specifically in reading and writing achievement—as a factor in academic performance, that denies any value in conventional academic culture and regards it as monolithically oppressive rather than potentially liberating, and that pretends that Black or any other subculture in isolation can form an adequate basis for higher education.

One form of this attitude is sometimes found in contemporary America among not only Blacks but other groups, e.g., Appalachian Whites, who have maintained a strong oral tradition as a resource for retaining the group's identity in the face of deprivation of access to literate culture. When any such groups finally begin to attain that access, they are bound to feel a large measure of distrust toward literate culture because of its past discrimination against them, and to feel that they may be deserting or denigrating their own culture. Richard Rodriguez's autobiography *Hunger for Memory* poignantly expresses this problem in his life as a Mexican-American. This psychology is understandable but can be contrary to their own potential benefit, as it often produces defense mechanisms causing advocates of their culture to deny any value in the dominant, literate culture.

This attitude has also been visible in recent polemics over cultural pluralism, revision of the academic canon, and college courses in Western Civilization. This is not the place to delve extensively into these disputes, so I will limit myself to a few comments directly pertinent to our concerns here. First, many of the great Black writers from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Maya Angelou did not regard

Standard English and Western literate culture as a source of oppression, but of knowledge leading to liberation. James Baldwin attacked the racism of Western culture and discrimination against Black English, but, like Frantz Fanon attacking France's cultural and linguistic domination of its colonies, did so in a voice that had mastered the dominant culture and language, drawing from the sources of opposition within them. Likewise for leaders in other countries who formulated revolutionary ideas within the traditions of standard Western languages and intellectual culture, including Marx and Engels, Trotsky, Lenin, Gandhi, Chou En-lai, Gramsci, Ho Chi Minh, Castro, and Allende. Such leaders in the U.S. and the Third World have frequently placed more value on literacy in the standard language for their people than do many American middle-class intellectuals bending over too far backwards in the cause of multiculturalism.

Several of the authors in the superb Greywolf Annual Five anthology *Multicultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*, while amply chronicling the history of discrimination against minority cultures and emphasizing their overlooked contributions to Western culture, support my arguments here. Japanese-American poet David Mura pinpoints the error in the extreme versions of cultural pluralism:

Of course, arguing for multiculturalism is not the same thing as saying that, as a minority writer, I don't need to read the works of European culture. . . . [Mura would] agree with Jesse Jackson that there was something wrong with those students who greeted his appearance at Stanford with the chant, "Hey, hey, ho ho/Western culture's got to go." As Jackson pointed out, Western culture was their culture. It is difficult to strike an appropriate balance. (144)

Another contributor, Michelle Wallace, a Black professor of American studies at SUNY Buffalo, deplors cultural illiteracy in American public education, including the failure of CUNY, when she was going there in the days of open admissions in the seventies, to require Chaucer and Shakespeare—as well as John Hope Franklin and W. E. B. Du Bois—although she also notes that “the classics may make more sense to some of us as records of blindness to the plight of the world's majorities than as sublime masterpieces” (170).

Writing elsewhere in a similar vein, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., one of the leading contemporary Black literary scholars, discussed the double vision needed by African-American writers and critics:

Learning the master's tongue, for our generation of critics, has

been an act of empowerment, whether that critical language be New Criticism, so-called humanism, structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism, new historicism, or any other “ism” that I may have forgotten. Each of these critical discourses arises from a specific set of texts within the Western tradition. For the past decade, at least, many of us have busied ourselves with the necessary task of studying these movements in criticism, drawing upon their modes of reading to explicate the texts of our tradition. (26)

. . . Let us—at long last—master the critical traditions and languages of Africa and Afro-America. Even as we continue to reach out to others in the critical canon, let us be confident in our own black tradition and in their compelling strength to sustain systems of critical thought as yet dormant and unexplicated. (45)

Both the balanced judgments of these authors and the daunting ambiguities in the issues surveyed earlier suggest that if defenders of Standard English and mainstream academic culture, like Farrell, can sometimes perhaps be simplistic, their critics are sometimes no less so in simply dismissing as racist any attempt to grapple with these issues in their full complexity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to John Baugh, Frederick Crews, and Tal Aronzon for their comments on a draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> My own studies and teaching have convinced me, along with many scholars in diverse disciplines, that television and other aspects of mass culture have contributed to a decline in literacy and a regression to the most negative traits of oral culture—while maintaining few of the positive traits—among nearly all social classes and ethnic groups. For a synthesis of sources on this topic and rebuttal to those who argue that literacy or cultural pluralism has been positively promoted by mass media, see Lazere, 1986–87 and 1987, especially my general introduction and the introduction and readings in the section “Media, Literacy, and Political Socialization” in *American Media and Mass Culture*.

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Sally Barr Reagan

## WARNING: BASIC WRITERS AT RISK—THE CASE OF JAVIER<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT: Despite the abundance of research on basic writing, most definitions are reductionist and deficit-oriented. The implication that improved pedagogy and increased literacy experiences will solve all the basic writers' problems puts the blame on the students when they continue to fail. These definitions and their implied solutions ignore the multitude of cultural and idiosyncratic factors which may influence the feelings and behavior of those who fail—the basic writers at risk. The following case study illustrates these factors and our failure to recognize them, and suggests that rather than continually defining the basic writer, we should begin to redefine and reexamine our roles and attitudes as teachers of basic writers.*

One gets all kinds of students in basic writing, with all kinds of problems. As Mina Shaughnessy pointed out, “not all BW students have the same problems; not all students with the same problems have them for the same reasons” (40). This variety in students and “problems” has led to a variety of definitions and explanations for basic writing. Most researchers agree that these students are underprepared, but go onto find little agreement on what characterizes such lack of preparation or how it can be remedied.

Patricia Bizzell (1978) and David Bartholomae (1989) define basic writers as those students unable to handle the conventions of academic discourse. Sondra Perl's (1979) studies conclude that basic writers have a truncated composing process and that they fail to reflect. Mike Rose maintains that they have a “limited notion of

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what composing is” (1983, 116). Nancy Sommers (1981) agrees with Shaughnessy that these students are rule- and sentence-bound. In her survey of research on basic writing, Karen Greenberg concludes that “errors of basic writers result from problems in ‘performance’ rather than from any linguistic or cognitive deficiencies” (1987, 192). These students are characterized as “struggling with the complex demands of different writing tasks, rigidly following rules that impede their progress, and worrying almost continually about error” (201, 02). Such problems may be exacerbated further by poor reading skills and inexperience, cited in studies by Lunsford (1978), Ong (1978), and Bartholomae (1987), among others. (See Stotsky for a review of reading-writing research.)

David Bartholomae synthesizes these definitions when he notes that “the problems of basic writers can be seen more immediately (and more generally) as a writing problem—as a problem, that is, that all writers face” (1987, 69). In other words, if all writers were arranged on a ladder, the more experienced would be at the top, while the basic writers would be along the bottom rungs. But they wouldn’t all be on the *same* rung. If we extend the analogy, some basic writers would be lower than others.

Perhaps due to the abundance of definitions, there has been little or no research which looks specifically at those denizens of the lowest rungs, the basic writers at risk. Troyka refers to them as those who “give up, or ‘stop out’ for a while” (3). In “The Rhetoric of Empowerment in Writing Programs,” Harriet Malinowitz defines them as students who “often possess at least some of the following traits: they are working class, people of color, and older than the conventional college age; they speak English as a second language or a nonformal dialect of English; and they are the first or among the first in their families to attend college” (161).

These students are different from their counterparts. While their peers are usually able to climb the academic ladder, no matter where they start, these students often stay where they are, or simply fall off. These are the students who show signs of progress early, but then drop off, or drop out. They are not anomalies. According to Ann Murphy, such behavior occurs in basic writing classes “with startling frequency” (183).

Out of frustration, we may characterize these students as slow or lazy, not “college material.” Hull, Rose, Greenleaf, and Reilly have found that despite the abundance of research about basic writers, “locating the blame for educational failure in students’ character or intellect [is] still very much with us. . . . It is easy—and common—for older, deficit-oriented explanations for failure to exist side-by-side with these newer, more progressive theories . . . in fact,

the old notions can and do narrow the way newer theories are represented and applied, turning differences into deficits, reducing the rich variability of human thought, language, and motive” (1991, 7).

Such thinking can lead not only to a reductionist view of the causes of some basic writer’s educational failure, but also to over-simplified solutions. Many definitions of basic writers are deficit-oriented; they imply the need for improved pedagogy, one which will raise the students’ consciousness or broaden their literacy experiences. But if that were all they needed, we would not have students who fail. These definitions—and their implied solutions—ignore the multitude of idiosyncratic factors which may influence our students’ feelings and behavior. The following case study illustrates these factors and our failure to recognize them, and suggests the need to get beyond classification of deficits so we can get “inside” the basic writers at risk.

The original purpose of this study was to describe the effects of combined reading-writing instruction on the composing processes of basic writers. The subjects of this study were Indiana University students enrolled in a special section of basic skills, a linked reading-writing course team taught by two instructors, one from English and one from Reading. Unlike many traditional research models, where the researcher appears only to test, I attended each class, completed reading-writing assignments, and participated in discussions and collaborative sessions, so that my presence would appear as natural as possible.

Rather than conduct an experimental study which focused on the curriculum, I decided on a research project centering around two case studies. To collect case study material, I interviewed students and instructors, videotaped students’ composing episodes, audiotaped post-writing discussion of these sessions, and read all of the students’ written work. The interviews covered the subjects’ home environment, educational background, composing strategies, attitudes towards reading and writing, and reflections about and evaluations of the linked courses.

The videotapes were films of the two case study students writing each draft of three major writing assignments. Instead of completing these assignments at home or in the dorm (like the rest of the class), the case study students brought all notes, reading and writing materials necessary to complete the assignment, and composed each draft seated at a desk in my office. This was a familiar space, since it was just down the hall from their basic skills classroom, and was where they and their peers had come for interviews. Behind the desk was a videotape camera focused on their text. The students

were left alone to compose and were interrupted only when the videotape was changed at thirty minute intervals.

Following the composing session, the student and I would review the tapes and discuss what thoughts and strategies occurred before composing began and during observed pauses. All comments were taped and later transcribed for analysis. Based on the work of Bloom (1954) and Rose (1984), stimulated recall was used, because it proved more reliable than students' memory alone and less intrusive than oral protocols. When I interviewed the case study students at the end of the semester, they confirmed that the videotaping had not interfered with their composing; if anything, the context was more conducive to writing than their dorm rooms.

Following Graves' (1981) recommendation that case studies include a variety of data to provide a sound contextual base against which to examine the work of individual students, I also subdivided the class into groups for various levels of observation and data collection. Group I was composed of the entire class. Data collected from this group included pre- and post-semester reading and writing tests and interviews. This information helped me select a representative sample of six students (2 high, 2 medium, and 2 low ability writers) to form Group II. Data from Group II consisted of all of the above, plus additional interview information. This information was used to corroborate generalizations drawn about the entire class, to select two students (one high ability, one low ability) to participate in case studies, and to serve as a stratified base against which to compare the findings drawn from Group III, the case studies.

This essay focuses on the work of Javier, one of the case study subjects. I chose Javier because of his attitude and ability. From his early writing sample, it was clear that he was one of the least experienced writers in the class. He knew this, but said he wanted to work on his writing, and thought participating in the study might lend further help. Shy but friendly, Javier said he was "honored" to have been chosen as a case study subject.

### **The Class, the Curriculum, and the Cultural Environment**

Javier enrolled in the basic skills linked reading-writing course on the advice of his academic advisor. The courses were taught by a reading instructor and a writing instructor who collaborated on course design, content, and teaching strategies. The class met two hours a day, three days a week, for one semester. The students had reading instruction the first hour and writing instruction during the second.



The reading curriculum was not what could be termed “developmental”; it was a survey of theories of learning. Students read various texts ranging from articles by Piaget to Richard Rodriguez’ *The Hunger of Memory*. Instruction centered on strategies to aid comprehension, such as previewing texts and predicting their content, writing summaries, mapping organizational structures, synthesizing material, and identifying key concepts. The reading instructor used writing and discussion to help students learn these strategies. These strategies were reinforced in the composition course, where the students read and wrote about education. But the pedagogy was less traditional. The writing instructor taught the composing process by using freewrites, multiple drafts, and peer evaluation. Writing assignments included narrative, short analysis, argument, comparison/contrast, and research papers. These assignments grew in complexity, gradually drawing on the texts and skills taught in both courses.

The basic skills linked reading-writing class was composed of two Hispanic, two Black, and nine Caucasian students. Since this study was conducted in the Midwest, Hispanic students might seem atypical. However, in the basic skills classrooms, as in society in general, Hispanics are rapidly becoming the largest minority group. As such, Javier represented a significant constituent of the basic skills population.

There was no such minority representation among instructors, however. Both Ms. F., who taught reading, and Mr. A., who taught writing, were White/Anglo. Of the two, Javier seemed more comfortable with Mr. A. He was an easygoing, approachable man whose concerns were teaching the composing process by lessening apprehension, building confidence, and concentrating on the development of content. In early interviews, Javier said he felt secure in the writing class because of the relaxed environment and because there was little or no emphasis on mechanics, which he perceived as his weak area.

Ms. F. was not unapproachable. Yet her subject matter, psychological theories of learning, was beyond Javier’s range of experience and interest. Her assignments—extensive independent reading accompanied by written summaries—were much more difficult than Javier had ever encountered. As well, Ms. F. appeared more demanding than Mr. A. Since writing was taught as a process, Javier could revise his drafts. But he didn’t have this opportunity, or theoretical approach, in reading. There was no drafting. Consequently, when Javier turned in “substandard work,” Ms. A. often asked him to redo it. In that class, revision may have been seen as punishment, not polishing.

My role as observer and researcher made my status unclear. As a fellow class member, I could be considered a peer; however, as a researcher, I became part of the authoritative triad. Nevertheless, my relationship with Javier began positively. Initially, he arrived promptly for his composing sessions. But as the semester progressed, his attitude and performance changed. He started skipping class and arriving late to our composing sessions, although he usually called to let me know. Then, he began arriving late without telephoning. Finally, toward the end of the semester, he skipped some appointments altogether. When I asked him to call and cancel, he would agree, but then wouldn't do it. As a peer, I was not in a position to punish or even chastise him; as a researcher, I was at his mercy. Since his participation was integral to my study, Javier's absences worried and frustrated me. However, as I became less a peer and more an authority figure, he grew more resistant. He didn't confront or openly defy me; he was passively resistant.

At the time, his behavior was inexplicable. But in hindsight, his actions seem related to his feelings about school in general and about the linked reading-writing course in particular.

### **A Case Study of Javier**

At the time of this study, Javier was 19, the youngest of four children ranging in age from 19 to 24. He had two brothers and a sister. One brother was in the Marines and one was in college; his sister was married. Originally from Puerto Rico, Javier's parents moved to the United States before he was born. Family structure was patriarchal—his mother was a housewife, his father a construction worker who made all the rules. Although they had lived in the U.S. at least twenty years, his parents still spoke Spanish around the house, while the children answered them in English. Spanish was reinforced by nightly watching of Spanish television. In sum, Javier came from a bilingual environment.

Javier's family appears to have sent mixed messages about education. His mother taught him to read his name and write numbers, the alphabet, and his address before he entered public school; his father helped with math homework during grade school. And both parents were regular readers. Yet they did not, to his memory, ever read to him. When asked about this, Javier laughed and said, "They never read nothing to me. They always tell me, 'Pick up a book and read it yourself.' That was it." Javier refused. Instead, he spent much of his time with his oldest brother, who read comic books to him.

This relationship was apparently highly influential. Even in

college, Javier's main hobby and source of relaxation was reading and collecting comics. Moreover, he indicated that instead of attending college, he would prefer to further emulate his brother by enlisting in the Marines. Javier believed that life as a Marine would be much more fun and interesting than attending college. This attitude may have also been influenced by his relationship with his other brother, whom Javier called "the smart one." This brother was always able, in Javier's eyes, to read and write with ease, although he never helped Javier with his English classes. When asked if anyone helped him with English, he replied, "No, I just had to face it on my own."

Javier felt he would never be a student like his "scholarly" brother. Nevertheless, his parents insisted that he also attend college. His feelings about this are illustrated in one of his first freewrites, where he declares, "The reason I came to college was because I had no other choice. . . . The decision in coming to college was my Mom [sic] and dad telling me what I was going to do."

High school had not prepared Javier for the amount of writing and the type of reading required in college. He had much more reading than writing experience—and the reading may not have been extensive. Texts alternated between classics and books of the students' own choice. Javier usually chose books he had read before or those which had been made into television movies, like "the Newburgh [sic—Lindbergh] baby." Writing consisted of quizzes and short summaries. The only class requiring writing was in his junior year; it focused on the research paper. Javier paid no attention to the teacher, did none of the work, and failed the course. When I asked him why, he replied, "I don't know. I thought it was too much reading for me, about to blow my brain out or something. So I just said, 'I'm going to ignore it.'"

Because of his high school grades, Javier was designated a "borderline" student and placed in Indiana University's summer Groups program, a specially designed sequence of precollege courses to aid the success and retention of minority students. Unfortunately, this placement improved neither his skills nor his attitude towards school.

To learn about Javier's work in summer school, I interviewed his advisor, Mrs. J. She told me that even though he was taking a class for native Spanish speakers, Javier did little or no work until she assured him he had a chance to pass. At that point, he began to work and received a C in the course. In Language and Study Skills, his progress was mixed. His teacher said that in class discussions, Javier's grasp of the reading material was obvious and seemed far above that reflected on his placement test. However, when required

to write summaries or syntheses of what he'd read, his work was failing. Initially, his summaries consisted of sentences taken verbatim from the reading assignment. When his teacher pointed out that this was not acceptable, the summary writing degenerated to a series of non sequiturs plucked from the assignment, and eventually ceased altogether.

Mrs. J. talked extensively with Javier about his grades and his attitude towards school. While it was difficult for him to admit his feelings, eventually he revealed that he didn't know what he wanted to do. These feelings vacillated throughout the summer and were reflected in his grades. Because of his poor performance during summer school, Javier was admitted to college for the Fall semester on academic probation. He attended classes for 2 weeks, then dropped out, citing problems with financial aid. At the beginning of the second semester, financial problems apparently resolved, Javier returned to school. That's when I met him.

I first spoke with Javier in the initial interviews with each member of the class. During this session, we discussed goals and expectations for the linked reading-writing course. Javier's attitude towards writing was rather fatalistic. He felt that the ability to write well was a gift, not a skill. He cited his "smart" brother as an example, "God gave him his ability, so he had to take it." When asked if any other factors were involved, he said his brother's "smartness" helped. Because of these two "gifts," Javier believed his brother could sit down and write about anything at all. But not Javier: "I can't pick up a pencil; I don't like to pick up a pencil and just write about anything. And, you know, I have to know what I'm writing about, and what I'm going to write about." Like many basic writers, Javier saw his need as a negative trait, a skill he did not possess. Consequently, he seldom wrote. Javier believed that reading was easier than writing: "Reading is just right there at you, you know, you ain't got to write or nothing. It's more better." When we talked further about reading, Javier mentioned that his brother was such a good writer because he read a lot of books. Moreover, when his brother read, "He used to circle, underline words, main features of the book." Javier said he couldn't do that either because, again, he was "not as smart." In sum, he viewed academic reading and writing as unattainable skills. The time he devoted to homework further revealed these feelings.

During this semester, enrolled in fourteen hours of classes, Javier estimated that he spent one hour a day reading for school. The bulk of his outside reading centered on his superhero comic book collection, which he termed "like a career to me," and on which he spent about two hours a day. Javier said he didn't like to read books;

he preferred reading comics because they were more interesting and he could look at the pictures. Given these priorities, it is not surprising that Javier showed little interest or engagement in the activities of his reading-writing course.

Although the basic writing students completed a total of five essays, I videotaped the composing processes of only three: Essay 1, a narrative; Essay 3, an argument; and Essay 5, the research paper. I chose these essays because they occurred approximately every four weeks, so they would show the change in the students' writing abilities as the semester progressed.

The topic of Essay 1, the narrative, was "a problem which occurred in school." Javier wrote about when he had to face up to a bully. Despite considerable prewriting, Javier arrived at the first taping session with only paper and pen. Using no notes and none of the prewrite material, he wrote a four-page draft in twenty-seven minutes. Unlike the stereotypical basic writer, Javier's composing was neither slow nor overly recursive. He paused six times during the process. But like many inexperienced writers, he did not reflect or rescan. As soon as he was done, he stopped and stacked his pages together. When asked if he wanted time to look over the draft, he declined. He wrote and quit.

To encourage revision, the writing class required first, second, and third drafts. When Javier returned to work on these, videotapes and discussion during stimulated recall revealed that this time he did reread and revise. In draft 2, he made minor revisions in each paragraph until page 3, where he added seven lines, and page 4, where he added seventeen. On draft 3, he added dialogue throughout, plus ten additional lines at the end. The result was a much more detailed and interesting draft than the first.

Javier was interested in and involved with this paper because it centered on his personal experiences. But as the semester progressed and the topics became less personal, Javier became less interested and less involved.

While students worked on Essay 1 in their writing course, they were discussing what learning entailed and were introduced to new comprehension strategies in the reading course. The first task was to write about four learning experiences—two successful and two unsuccessful. Javier completed three out of four. His example of unsuccessful learning is revealing: "Learning not to do as well as others because sometimes my brains malfunction or I'm thinking of something else." He expanded on this idea in his first essay in the reading course on learning. In this paper, he said that to him, learning was an either/or situation. As he put it, "Learning is something a person really wants to do . . . and he or she succeeded

in it. . . . Some experiences produce learning because it is right to learn something. . . . Others do not . . . because they never try to learn something they never try to do.”

Javier illustrated this attitude through his work in the next series of reading assignments. The class was to preview twelve articles on the psychological and cognitive processes involved in learning, predict what questions the articles would answer, and mark the main points. Javier didn't write any predictions. Instead, he copied some off the board. He didn't read twelve articles; he marked the main points in three. Of these, one summary was apparently written without looking at the article, since its content was totally unrelated. For the next series of assignments—reading, summarizing, and synthesizing articles—Javier relied on his habits of the previous summer: he copied a series of unrelated phrases and sentences. Apparently, Javier was either uninterested or unable to grasp the reading material. Consequently, he reverted to earlier, successful strategies.

The third essay in the writing course was an argument for or against attending college. To lend credence to their personal arguments, the students were to cite or refute one of two essays: “Where College Fails Us,” by Carolyn Bird, or “Does College Really Matter Anymore?” from *Changing Times*. The students were also to bring in an additional article to support their thesis. Given Javier's attitude, this essay seemed like a good opportunity to vent his feelings. And he did so in his preparatory freewrite: “I believe people come to college because of Family Pressure [note the caps]. When you are to graduate from school your parents are already on your back telling you or pushing you to come to college. You are so confused that the next thing you know you are in college.” Such feelings could have been easily supported by citing one of the class articles. However, Javier read only half of the first article and none of the second.

Because he had not read the articles, Javier was fairly unprepared and uncertain when he began to write the first draft of his essay. Before beginning to write, he spent twenty seconds scanning what he'd underlined in the Bird article. Then he began to write—or rather, to transcribe. His composing process consisted of copying almost verbatim (without quotation marks) underlined portions of Bird's article, stopping to think how to refute her, then writing that down. When asked how he chose his refutations, he said “I just started out with whatever came to my mind first.” This process continued until the middle of Bird's fifth page. At that point, Javier copied the first twenty lines of his outside article,

stacked his papers together, and did not look at them again. Composing was done for the day.

During the next class period, following peer evaluation, the students were to write a paragraph on how their draft could be improved, then hand in the paragraph and draft for the instructor's comments. Javier did neither.

Javier's work in the reading course proceeded at about the same level. Most assignments weren't completed, and those which were had to be redone. As a result, Javier's midterm, which was to synthesize ideas on learning contained in twelve articles, was less than a page long and included references to only the first two articles. So Ms F. asked him to do it again. His second midterm appeared more developed; however, a close reading revealed that it was once again copied verbatim from the original texts and that it still contained nothing beyond the first two readings. Nevertheless, for this work, he received a C+ and this comment: "These pages are well-written but you need to tie them into Piaget's theory of learning."

An examination of Javier's work up to this point reveals that his last original writing was handed in on February 25. When his first midterm was rejected and his second one accepted, his fate was sealed. Javier's behavior suggested he had discovered that he could pass with minimal effort. As the reading and writing became more complex, Javier became less and less involved.

During the last third of the semester, the reading and writing instructors team-taught the research paper. The topic was education. Students were encouraged to narrow that to an area of personal interest. Javier chose to research alcohol's effects on students.

Research strategies included reading and summarizing ten articles on the topic and making three organizational maps. Javier completed two maps and wrote no summaries. Prior to writing the first draft, the students were to organize their material for an oral report. All notes were to be paraphrased and written on note cards which included a full bibliographic reference. Javier's notes were copied directly from source materials onto full sheets of paper and contained incomplete bibliographic references. Moreover, discussion with the instructors revealed that all information had been taken from only one source rather than the ten required.

Javier's notes were ten pages numbered consecutively. Video-tapes of composing showed that he copied each sheet, stopping periodically to insert a fictional author's name and a page number. When he finished his draft, Javier heaved a sigh of relief. "Boy, I'm glad I got that all done," he said. He meant this literally. Javier wrote no more that semester.

## Why Would a Student Behave Like This?

When I was conducting this project, Javier's behavior confounded me. The other case study student had made slow but steady progress. In fact, she made her most significant gains during the research paper. So I couldn't understand why Javier failed to work and improve. As I began to reflect on the semester, however, his behavior became more understandable.

Javier appeared to be an alienated student, ambivalent about his relationship to the university, and resigned to his fate. His interview responses suggested resentment, low self-esteem, and a fear of failure. These responses were echoed in his journal, where he revealed that he didn't want to be in college because he didn't think he was smart enough. Academic reading seemed too difficult, ". . . about to blow my brain out or something." Writing skill also seemed unattainable requiring "a gift from God" and "smartness." Javier's lack of self-esteem appeared most evident in his paragraph about unsuccessful learning, where he stated that he was "learning not to do as well as others because sometimes my brains malfunction or I'm thinking of something else."

Given these feelings and his educational history, it is not surprising that Javier had difficulty with the reading-writing curriculum. The readings, psychological theories of learning, were outside the realm of his interest or experience. As Mina Shaughnessy points out, the vocabulary alone would be threatening. Her examples of words used in the first twenty minutes of a psychology lecture—"legacy, mechanism, theological, philosophical, neural, rational, modalities, synthesize, empirical, apperceptive . . . , therapeutic, milieu, stimulus-response"—closely parallel those Javier encountered in the reading class. Shaughnessy maintains that ignorance of these words' meanings "reinforces the students' habit of not expecting to understand what teachers are talking about" (218). The vocabulary problem is exacerbated when students must "associate new concepts with familiar words or familiar concepts with new words." Basic writers sometimes resist learning this vocabulary, as if they "were consenting to a linguistic betrayal that threatens to wipe out not just a word but the reality the word refers to" (211-12).

Writing summaries about the readings probably contributed to Javier's feelings of alienation. Such assignments don't involve the students. Rather, summary writing "places them outside the working discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do" (Bartholomae, 1989, 278). To learn from academic texts, "the writer must get inside of a



discourse he can only partially imagine” (284). Javier chose not to do this.

This attitude is not surprising when we recall that Javier’s principal reading experience was with his comic books (“like a career to me”). On the cognitive level, such limited reading experience would not have helped him develop the schemata necessary to comprehend the vocabulary and the sometimes convoluted syntax, or to follow the discourse structure of academic texts. On the affective level, articles taken from psychological journals would have been completely alien. Because they lacked familiar characters and context, and were written in an unfamiliar register, Javier must have felt like he was, again, not a part of this discourse community. No wonder he felt like these texts made his brains “malfunction.”

Initially, this feeling of alienation may not have been so strong in the writing course. Javier completed all his assignments, and was certainly engaged with the personal narrative. However, he became less engaged as the topics grew less personal, centering on learning and education. In this, his behavior paralleled that of patients in analysis. According to Ann Murphy, “Just as Freud’s patient eventually and inevitably resisted the energies he was eliciting, . . . so basic writing students often begin a reaction against their previous optimism—and sometimes against the teacher. Their initial rapid progress subsides or regresses; attendance may drop; commitment wavers; changes which at first seemed so possible and miraculous become difficult to sustain. Not for all, but for some the initial wonder of discovering their potential in language and self-expression gives way to doubts, fears, even hostilities and withdrawal” (183–84).

Javier coped with the curricular changes by reverting to a previously successful strategy—what the academy calls plagiarism. Such behavior might have seemed dishonest, but it was more likely inadvertent. Shaughnessy attributes this behavior to an ignorance of the sin of plagiarism compounded by a reverence for the printed page. Some basic writers believe they could not possibly reproduce the published author’s ideas any more clearly. “For [them], the ‘right’ word is usually the word someone else has in mind” (222).

John Ogbu attributes these beliefs to cultural differences. He maintains that different cultures have different communicative strategies that may lead to “miscommunication” about how to deal with texts (228–29). These strategies are further complicated and misconstrued when students have to learn to speak the language of the academy. As David Bartholomae says, they must find “some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the

requirements of conventions, their history of a discourse.” To cope, they must learn “to appropriate . . . a specialized discourse” (Bartholomae 273, 276). Javier’s strategies demonstrate a literal appropriation. Yet Hull et al. suggest that such behavior “has a logic that merits careful observation” (12).

Recall that when it was time to write his argument for or against attending college, rather than rely on his own feelings, Javier copied Carolyn Bird’s arguments from “Where College Fails Us.” The legitimacy of this strategy was probably confirmed in the reading course, when copying Piaget onto his midterm earned him a C+ and the praise, “These pages are well written.” It should have come as no surprise, then, that Javier copied the bulk of his research paper.

The purpose of the linked basic skills courses had been to build a bridge between reading and writing. Instead, the reading course’s reading and writing assignments created a barrier which kept Javier out of the academic community. Viewed in this light, his failure to complete the assignments becomes more understandable.

On one level, Javier’s case illustrates what happens when a marginal student receives mixed messages in two “linked” classes. The idea of linking reading and writing classes makes sense. Research in the last decade has concluded that writing instruction is most effective when linked with reading (Stotsky, 637). But for this linkage to be successful, the curriculum and pedagogy must have a common theoretical focus and implementation.

The traditional focus in the reading class on summary, synthesis, and key concepts probably reinforced Javier’s misperceptions about the inaccessibility and irrelevance of academic reading. It certainly contradicted and most likely overshadowed the process approach and reflective essays in the writing course. When the two courses finally did link up during the research paper, the traditional approach from both teachers may have confirmed Javier’s belief about the inaccessibility of language.

I would not have taught the linked course this way. Even so, its problems were not evident to me as I participated in it. The assignments were easy for me and relevant to my research. As I collected my data, I did not stop to consider why Javier had given up. The other case study subject (Elsa) was successful and motivated, so I was initially more interested in her: she confirmed my theories about the effects of combined reading-writing instruction.

In fact, Elsa’s improvement was typical of slightly less than half the class. Of the thirteen students who began the course, six improved their scores and attitudes, five regressed or remained

static, and two dropped out. The six who improved were highly motivated to succeed. The other seven, however, paralleled Javier in attitude and motivation: they missed an average of two weeks of class, turned in late or poorly done assignments, and found the reading “boring” and incomprehensible.

Javier is representative of this type of basic writer. Their problems do not lie in their writing per se. If we compare Javier’s work, among the weakest in the class, to samples in Troyka’s 1987 national study of basic writers, it would rank as one of the stronger essays in the average group. His writing fits many of the definitions of “basic writer”: he could not handle the conventions of academic discourse, he had a truncated composing process, he struggled with the increasingly complex demands of different writing tasks, and he lacked reading experience. This is how he started the semester, and this is where he ended. Clearly, the problem goes beyond writing.

### **How Do We Help These Students?**

Javier’s is a cautionary tale. At the very least, it suggests that we resist the temptation to oversimplify. Introducing students to academic discourse, making them aware of writing as a process, letting them freewrite, linking reading with writing—none of these is a panacea, a sure answer. More importantly, Javier’s case illustrates the complexity of basic writers and hints at the social and cultural forces which shape them. If we are going to help these basic writers, we need to be aware of these forces and how they influence not only our students’ attitudes and behaviors, but also our own.

My irritation with and dismissal of Javier is symptomatic of some researchers and research studies—and of some teachers. If we have more successes than “failures,” we tend to look at what works, and fault the students for not working. Javier’s case suggests that the “failure” is not wholly his fault. The problem may lie more significantly on the approach to teaching and the assumptions behind it.

Just as we cannot assume that pedagogy is the answer, we should not assume that our students will benefit from our curriculum, be able to deal with it, or find it relevant. It may seem obvious to state that our backgrounds differ from theirs. But our backgrounds have shaped our curricula and our expectations. The reading-writing curriculum, centering on education and theories of learning, sounds empowering, and it is—from the perspective of White, middle-class teachers. But Javier’s (and his peers’) lack of progress suggests these connections weren’t made.

Failure to consider our students’ needs and backgrounds when

designing curricula and assignments can lead to what Malinowitz calls “intellectual vigilantism, in which the insiders—that is, the students who demographically most resemble their teachers—swim, while the outsiders sink” (153). Because of our backgrounds and experience, we may be asking the “outsiders” to write in what Mike Rose calls a “cognitive and social vacuum” (1990, 181). Sharon Nelson-Barber and Terry Meier caution that teachers should not “expect to meet the needs of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds without access to the perspectives of individuals who come from those backgrounds” (1–2). While this doesn’t mean that we must be familiar with the differing cultural expectations of each of our students, an awareness of potential differences may remind us to vary our expectations and teaching strategies.

I am not saying that we should lower our expectations. I’m saying we should broaden them. If some students do not improve, or if some who were making progress suddenly stop, we should see these as calls for help, not signs of sloth. If they begin making new writing errors, we should view them as signs of growth, not regression. If some turn in work that is obviously not their own, we should consider this a sign that they may not understand the conventions of the academy, not that they are lazy or dishonest.

In sum, rather than continually define the basic writer, perhaps we should reexamine our attitudes as teachers of basic writers. The case of Javier illustrates just such a need. Teachers working with basic writers need to take a researcher’s view of their at-risk students—stop, ask why, be flexible, adjust the curriculum to meet their needs. The students in the lower levels of basic writing are part of a microcosm of American society. If we are going to meet the challenge these students represent, we are going to have to change.

### Note

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# SELF-ESTEEM AND WRITING APPREHENSION OF BASIC WRITERS: CONFLICTING EVIDENCE<sup>1</sup>

*ABSTRACT: The term "basic writer" has been assumed to point to a homogeneous group of students who are poor writers. But some studies have questioned whether their cognitive characteristics are really so similar. This particular study examines the affective characteristics of basic writers and questions the hypothesis that they suffer from high writing apprehension and low self-esteem. Indeed, the study offers evidence of a group of basic writers in a larger group who had both low writing apprehension and high self-esteem. Their variance from hypothesized expectations has important implications for composition theory and practice.*

The terms *basic writing* and *basic writer* have become well-established in the lexicon of writing. Calling students *basic writers* implies that they are writers who will eventually succeed in becoming more skilled and more accomplished with appropriate specialized instruction. Thus the notion of *basic writing* seems

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connotatively and denotatively more acceptable than such earlier appellations as *bonehead English* or even the seemingly less pejorative concept of *remedial writing*.

Still, by its very existence, the term *basic writer* demarcates a subgroup of the writing population, sets this group aside for some special treatment, and, more importantly, implies that this group is, in some significant ways, very different from other writers. Since the validity and usefulness of a concept such as this hinges on the existence of well-established shared characteristics among basic writers, it is critical to examine the evidence offered to support such a notion. Generally, studies have focused on measured or hypothesized cognitive or affective characteristics which are supposed to differentiate basic and nonbasic writers. As we will show, it is by no means clear from the literature available that basic writers can be construed as a distinct group based on the dimensions that have been studied. Moreover, the results of an empirical study of self-esteem and writing apprehension in college writers carried out by the authors in 1987 will be presented to challenge the concept of basic writers as a homogeneous group.

It is important to note that basic writers have been found to come from a variety of backgrounds with distinct writing problems. Shaughnessy has pointed out that many are minority students who speak and write a nonstandard form of English or who have a primary language other than English (179). Others are what Troyka describes in "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980's" as *non-traditional students*, adults who have returned to school from the workplace, usually on a part-time basis and often with a background of marginal academic success. Still other basic writers may not differ from other students in any externally identifiable way except that their writing performance on specific writing tasks and in specific writing courses falls below that of the average freshman at that college—perhaps in grammatical, mechanical, syntactical, or organizational skills as determined by their teachers. (Interestingly, Richard H. Haswell has suggested that many basic or "bottom" writers exceed their better-graded peers in organizational ability, wit, and complexity of thought.) Despite these marked situational differences and the different causal bases for writing difficulties they imply, all of these students are likely to be labeled *basic writers*. Once identified as such, researchers and teachers alike will probably view them as a homogeneous group and will pay little attention to the important differences that might exist within the group.

We find similar instances of oversimplification and overgeneralization in areas where more sophisticated theories of behavior have

been applied to writing. In "Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism," Rose has described the tendency of American education to use dichotomies reductionistically to minimize cognitive complexity (268). He finds this same orientation to be a common feature in descriptions of basic writers:

We see it . . . in those discussions of basic and remedial writers that suggest that unsuccessful writers think in fundamentally different ways from successful writers. Writing that is limited to the concrete, that doesn't evidence abstraction or analysis, that seems illogical is seen . . . as revealing basic differences in perception, reasoning, or language. (267)

Rose's analysis also demonstrates how theories of cognitive style (field-dependence), brain research (left or right brain dominance), cognitive development (Piaget's theories), and historical literacy (orality-literacy) have been used in highly oversimplified ways to explain the behavior of basic writers. Jensen expresses a similar position in the "Reification of the Basic Writer." His composite characterization of the basic writer, is that of a gregarious person who "talks but does not think, who does not value planning, who has difficulty developing concepts, is overly concerned about correctness, likes to please the teacher, and prefers the basic five-paragraph theme" (54). But Jensen doubts that this composite is accurate. The *basic writer* comes to be viewed as an entity with a limited set of characteristics rather than an abstract concept referring to a wide variety of persons with diverse problems.

In support of his claim that existing descriptions of the basic writer are misleading, Jensen presents Myers-Briggs Type Indicator profiles of basic writers from Georgia State University and from the University of Illinois at Chicago. The profiles failed to fit the composite picture of the basic writer suggested by the literature and were found to be markedly different at the two schools. The typical Georgia State basic writer was an introverted-sensing-thinking-judging type, while the Illinois basic writer was an extroverted-sensing-feeling-judging type (58). Moreover, despite some overlap in the profiles, the Georgia State basic writers fell into all 16 Myers-Briggs categories (56–58).

Evidence of the cognitive reductionism and reification that Jensen argues against is also found in studies that relate more to the affective characteristics of basic writers. In this domain, there is a widely held belief that basic writers generally suffer from a high degree of writing apprehension (or fear of writing) and a poor self-image or low self-esteem. For example, Greenberg, in reviewing studies of basic writing, assumes the existence of high writing apprehension in basic writers (197), and that view does have some



empirical support. Faigley, Witte, and Daly found that apprehensive writers tend to score lower on standardized tests of writing aptitude and on such tests as the SAT and ACT. Daly and Miller also found that highly apprehensive writers had lower expectations of success in writing than other writers. Two other studies by Daly alone showed that “highly apprehensive” writers produce poorer quality writing than “low apprehensives,” thus further strengthening the theoretical link between apprehensiveness and the basic writer.

That basic writers suffer from poor self-images or low self-esteem is also a widely held belief, though the evidence for this notion is relatively weak when compared to studies of writing apprehension. In fact, many of the assertions about self-esteem are based on intuitive analysis. Roueche, for example, sees remedial or developmental students (whether in basic writing or in other courses) as lacking self-confidence and feeling inadequate and powerless (12). Kasden characterizes basic writers as having poor self-images, low aspirations, and feelings of powerlessness (3–4). Lederman, in analyzing a writing exercise in which basic writers pretended to be animals, found the most common image used to be that of a bird, a largely negative self-projection of a creature who was “alone, frightened, oppressed, limited” (686). Similarly, Andrea Lunsford, in analyzing the content of essays students wrote for entrance into a Canadian university, found that basic writers generally have poor images of themselves, picturing themselves as victims in a cold, dangerous world. Both Lederman (688) and Lunsford (284) suggest that helping students improve their self-images might help them become better writers. Some empirical support for this view comes from Daly and Wilson, who found that self-esteem was inversely related to writing apprehension. The prevailing view is that if basic writers are marked by high writing apprehension, then they must also suffer from low self-esteem. (Shaughnessy in her early review essay on basic writing did cite Geraldine McMurray Bartee’s dissertation from 1967 that “found no support for the assumption that disadvantaged freshmen and by implication, basic writers, have lower self-concepts than other students” [184], but that study has not received much attention.)

### **Conflicting Evidence: An Empirical Study**

Despite the evidence that basic writers are likely to be highly apprehensive and that they are likely to suffer from low self-esteem, we have data that casts some doubt on the validity of this characterization of basic writers. As part of a larger study on the impact of certain kinds of writing assignments on self-esteem and writing apprehension, we studied 19 sections of freshman writing at

Gannon University, 16 sections of regular composition courses, and 3 sections of basic writing. Students were selected for the basic writing courses on the basis of their scores on the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), with those scoring below 33 being selected (unless other factors such as high school rank, average, or average in English or verbal SAT indicated solid language skills). Those scoring between 33 and 36 were selected if these other indicators were also low. Students were then invited but not required to enroll in basic writing courses. Of 85 invited, about half elected to enroll in basic writing.

Students were given pretests on the first day of class using the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS), a standard instrument to measure self-esteem, and the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test (WAT), the most commonly used instrument for measuring writing apprehension. They were then given posttests using the same instruments during the last two weeks of the semester (the exact day being at the individual teacher's discretion). Although it was not our central hypothesis, we believed that the basic writers would probably have the lowest self-esteem and the highest writing apprehension.

To this general hypothesis, there was one remarkable reversal of expectation. Based on the results of 337 students who took both the pretests and the posttests, we found that one basic writing section, contrary to any hypothesis in the literature, had the highest self-esteem and the lowest writing apprehension of all 19 classes in the study, both on the pretest and on the posttest. On the pretest of the TSCS, this class scored 350.67, which is above the national norm of 345.57 and well above the Gannon average of 333.34. In fact, the next highest class was a regular section of freshman English at 340.21. On the pretest of the WAT, this same basic writing class scored 62.11, well below Daly and Miller's mean of 79.28 and below the Gannon mean of 71.29. Since this testing was done on the first day of class, there is little reason to believe that teachers did much to affect these scores. Indeed, another section of basic writers with the same teacher had a TSCS score of 326.38 and a WAT score of 77.77. The third section of basic writers had a TSCS score of 333.08 and a WAT score of 85.92. Clearly, that one special class contradicted the claims that basic writers are highly apprehensive and lack self-esteem.

Closer examination of this unusual class of 11 students revealed that a number of students had extremely high self-esteem and extremely low writing apprehension. On the pretest, one student scored 37 on WAT and 400 on TSCS, while another scored 41 on WAT and 421 on TSCS. Clearly these students did not fit the profile of basic writers as apprehensives lacking in self-esteem. However, even within this class there was a good deal of diversity. On the

pretest, one student scored 256 and another scored 295 on TSCS. Nevertheless, there were no high scores on WAT on the pretest. The only score above Daly and Miller's mean of 79.28 was an 84. Likewise, on the posttest, only one student (a different one) scored above that mean with a 90. Thus, despite a few students with relatively low self-esteem, there were none in this basic writing class with an extremely high level of writing apprehension. (The other two basic writing classes averaged 329.60 on TSCS, below the norm, and 81.68 on WAT, slightly above the norm. But even that figure doesn't seem to indicate a high degree of writing apprehension compared to the Daly and Miller average. The TSCS figure does seem to be significantly below the norm for self-esteem.)

As a kind of qualifying note on this unusual class of basic writers, we wish to respond to comments made by several experienced writing teachers and researchers who inspected these results. These researchers suggested that the low WAT scores and the high TSCS scores were indications that these basic writers probably had not taken writing very seriously and had not invested much of themselves into their writing. This plausible hypothesis is weakened by the fact that these students actually increased their self-esteem and decreased their writing apprehension. This would seem to indicate that they took the course and their writing seriously and benefited from what the course had to offer, both in increasing self-esteem and in decreasing writing apprehension. They were hardly happy-go-lucky students oblivious to academic goals. Their self-esteem increased 7.33 on TSCS, and their writing apprehension decreased 6.23 on WAT.

Clearly the size of this study, at least insofar as it deals with basic writers, is limited. But the fact remains that a whole class of basic writers had lower writing apprehension and higher self-esteem than 16 classes of regular composition students in our study. Thus, it is evident that not all basic writers suffer from writing apprehension nor from low self-esteem. And this has implications for the way programs in basic writing are conducted. As Rose and Jensen have suggested, administrators and teachers must avoid oversimplification in defining the basic writer. Instead, they must be aware of Troyka's observation that basic writers have diverse personalities and skills, and they should perhaps follow her suggestion of offering individual pedagogies for these diverse types ("Defining" 2-3).

## **Implications**

This study, like the studies of Rose and Jensen, suggests that the basic writer as an isolated entity may not exist. What seems like a convenient label may turn out to oversimplify a great variety of

persons with a wide variety of emotional characteristics, cognitive styles or levels of development, and social and cultural expectations. And, as Joy S. Ritchie suggests, the writing process itself is so complex that "we cannot describe the process of learning to write as a tidy, predictable process with predictable results. . ." (171). Moreover, we must be aware of the possibilities of reductive stereotyping. Shaughnessy cites an early study (1961), Gerald A. Silver's dissertation entitled "A Comparative Investigation of Motivation in the Achievement of Remedial and Non-Remedial Students at Los Angeles City College," that found no difference in motivation between remedial and nonremedial students but found that faculty rated better students as more motivated (184). Thus, in dealing with a cloudy issue of emotional response, teachers tended to equate achievement and motivation. This last bit of evidence ought to be a caution to all researchers that the psychological factors that relate to writing are complex and difficult to determine.

Do these findings indicate that teachers and administrators need not be concerned about writing apprehension and self-esteem in basic writers? That may be going too far. Studies with younger children certainly indicate a relation between self-concept and academic achievement (Felker 12-13), and a positive self-image may be more important than good grades in keeping a student in college (Kasden 2). Moreover, Wolcott and Buhr found in their study that students with "positive attitudes toward writing" improved more than students with neutral or negative attitudes (7). Furthermore, the dimensions of writer apprehension and self-esteem may contain important variables that cut across the classification of basic and nonbasic writers. Thus, the emotional atmosphere surrounding writers may be important at many levels of writing skill.

In viewing the emotions of basic writers, teachers may want to make some finer discriminations instead of simply labeling basic writers as apprehensive and lacking in self-esteem. As Rosenberg cautions, low self-evaluation in academics is often based on self-judgments about specific skills, not on low global self-esteem (279-80). And as Brand and Powell note, anxiety (or apprehension) may not be the chief emotion involved in writing, even for unskilled writers (284). Further, both Larson and Bloom suggest that the emotions are affected by other factors. Larson found that emotions may be either disruptive or facilitative (20) and that while an overarousal of emotion can produce excessive anxiety or writing apprehension, underarousal can produce boredom (21). Apparently there is a moderate level of emotion that is helpful in the writing process. Bloom, in studying the effects of anxiety on two mature writers, found that anxiety is complicated by such internal factors as intellectual, artistic, temperamental, biological, and emotional characteristics and by such external

factors as personal, social, and academic context (122–23). Similarly, Brand, in her recent book, *The Psychology of Writing*, has alerted us to the need to see the relationship between emotions and writing as a highly complex issue.

Finally, as far as specific strategies or pedagogies for basic writing classes are concerned, a few practical points can be made. First, teachers should test for writing apprehension early in the semester before they assume that overcoming writing apprehension is important for their students. Second, teachers should try to use appropriate strategies for individual students and not assume that criticism will severely damage the self-image of every basic writer. Third, in constructing assignments, teachers should not necessarily lean toward less-focused writing assignments than they would use in a regular writing class. Indeed, Brand and Powell suggest that students may be more comfortable emotionally with writing topics assigned by teachers than with self-sponsored topics (284); and Faigley, Witte, and Daly suggest that students are often more apprehensive writing about personal experience and feelings than about more objective content (20). Thus, to assign personal, loosely constructed assignments to basic writers may actually inhibit rather than encourage their writing. Finally, teachers ought to try to remember that basic writers are, as persons, just like other writers—only less skillful.

### Note

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## NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

**The Council of Writing Program Administrators** is currently accepting proposals for its 1991 research grants. The Council will award several small grants (up to \$1,000) for research relating specifically to the concerns of writing program administrators. Proposals should not exceed four single-spaced typed pages and should describe (1) the research problem and objectives, (2) the procedures for conducting the research including sample, design, instrumentation, and personnel, (3) a time-line, and (4) a budget. Researchers planning to conduct surveys may include in their proposal the free use of the WPA mailing list. All WPA grant recipients will be asked to submit their research report to the Council's journal, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, for possible publication before submitting it to other journals. Please include your name, affiliation, address, and telephone number on your proposal. **Deadline:** October 17, 1991 (extension of deadline date may be possible). Send proposals *and two copies* to Prof. Karen Greenberg, Chair, WPA Grant Committee, Dept. of English, Hunter College, CUNY, 695 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021.

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**The fourth National Basic Writing Conference** will be held at the University of Maryland in College Park, on the outskirts of Washington, DC, **October 9-10, 1992**. Keynote speaker: David Bartholomae, University of Pittsburgh. The conference is sponsored jointly by CBW (the Conference on Basic Writing, a special interest group of CCCC), the University of Maryland, and NCTE. Early proposals or suggestions for papers, panels, single presentations, or workshops are welcome; the **deadline** for proposals will be in April 1992. For details or to be put on the mailing list, **contact** Carolyn Kirkpatrick, York College/CUNY, Jamaica, NY 11451, 718/262-2470.

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**The New York College Learning Skills Association (NYCLSA)** will hold its Fifteenth Annual Symposium on Developmental Education **March 29-31, 1992** at The Nevele Country Club, Ellenville, NY. A **Call for Proposals** has been issued with appropriate topics including all aspects of developmental education and learning support services at the college level. **Deadline:** October 25, 1991. **Submission data:** Barbara Risser, Associate Prof. of

English, Onondaga Community College, Syracuse, NY 13215.  
Phone: (315) 469-2424.

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**Regional Language Centre (RELC)**, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, will hold its "RELC Regional Seminar on Language Teacher Education in a Fast-Changing World" **April 20-23, 1992** in Singapore. Papers/Workshops related to the following areas are invited: (1) Theoretical perspectives in language teacher education. (2) Processes of language teacher education, the assessment of relevant skills and competencies of both student teachers and in-service teachers; methods, criteria, and standards of assessment for entry into the profession and for promotion. (3) Factors affecting language teacher education: student teachers, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum, instruction, instructional materials, assessment, certification, and accreditation. (4) Problems and issues in the planning of and research into language teacher education. (5) Directions in language teacher education research and their implications for language teaching. Plenary/Parallel Papers will be lectures lasting forty minutes plus fifteen minutes question time. Workshops will be two-hour demonstrations/discussions with active involvement of audiences. **Submission data:** A 200-word abstract plus a 50-word biodata postmarked no later than November 30, 1991 (proposers will be informed by January, 1992 if their proposals have been accepted), and a floppy diskette and/or a hard copy of the complete text of the paper/workshop selected for the Seminar submitted no later than March 10, 1992. RELC reserves the copyright on all papers presented. **Contact:** The Director (Attention: SEMINAR SECRETARIAT), SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 30 Orange Grove Road, Singapore 1025, REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE. Phone: (65) 7379044; Fax: (65) 7342753; Telex: RELC; Cable: RELCENTRE SINGAPORE; E-mail: GBORELC@NUSVM

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**OMISSION:** The Spring 1991 *JBW* inadvertently omitted acknowledging that Sandra Schor's "The Short, Happy Life of Ms. Mystery" originally appeared in *Teaching at CUNY* (1989), published by the Professional Staff Congress and the Instructional Resource Center of The City University of New York, who kindly granted *JBW* reprint permission.



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