

Brenda M. Greene

# EMPOWERMENT AND THE PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND RESOLUTION STRATEGIES OF BASIC WRITERS

*ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the issue of empowerment from the perspective that basic writers are empowered when they become aware that they possess the strategies that will enable them to become more responsible for the evaluation of their own writing. The author begins by discussing some of the scholarship that has helped us to form a pedagogy that empowers students in the classroom. She then draws on the research and scholarship of Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, Flower, Perl, and Hull to establish the framework that she used to conduct a case study of the problem identification and resolution strategies of three basic writers. The author observed the writers as they read and identified problems in their writing and the writing of their peers. Her findings suggest that basic writers are capable of evaluating surface level problems and rhetorical problems in both their own and peers' texts if we provide them with opportunities to do so.*

## **Issues of Empowerment in the Basic Writing Classroom**

Over the past decade, much of our pedagogy on basic writing instruction has focused on our recognition of the need for a more critical theory, one which empowers students by drawing on the

---

*Brenda M. Greene, chair and associate professor of English at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, teaches basic writing, composition, and literature. She has directed the College's basic language skills program and received several research grants in the areas of basic writing and writing across the curriculum. She has conducted workshops, presented papers, and written essays in these areas, and has published in English Journal and Community Review. Her forthcoming articles will be published in Writing Centers in Context: Models of Excellence (NCTE, 1992) and Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Curriculum (Heinemann, 1992).*

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1992

concepts of scholars and theorists such as Freire, Giroux, Bruffee, and Mayher. Freire's concept of a pedagogy that problematizes the existential situation of the learner has helped many of us search for tangible social issues which can be used to engage students on the margins of the traditional academy in the transformation of their reality. With this concept as a theoretical framework for our basic writing instruction, we have provided forums for students to articulate their opinions and suggest solutions to social problems in their environments. Some of us have drawn on concepts such as those articulated by educators such as Giroux and have "democratized our education" and addressed issues of authority and power in our classrooms by moving from teacher-centered to student-centered learning environments. We have embraced Bruffee's work on collaborative learning and established learning environments where students socially construct their knowledge as they read, write, and respond to texts. We have, using Mayher's construct of an uncommonsense approach to learning, begun with the student as we reflect on our traditional approaches and assumptions about learning and formulate an uncommonsense approach to learning, one whose primary goal is to aid students in becoming more critical learners.

In essence, we have called for a theory that Bizzell identifies as an "alternative critical literacy," a literacy that fosters the establishment of reading and writing environments where students can examine the political and social dimensions of texts from divergent and controversial perspectives. By providing our students with specific strategies that enable them to improve their writing competence through the use of extensive peer and teacher feedback and by engaging our students in the process of composing, revising, and editing, we have exposed them to instructional models where their sole audience is not the teacher, but a range of people from their peers to newspaper editors. Our pedagogy has been derived from a theoretical premise that empowers rather than restricts our students' growth as writers.

Although much of the recent research on basic writing pedagogy has focused on critical literacy and on providing strategies to help basic writers assume more authority, responsibility, and control for their writing, there has not been adequate research on the processes basic writers use when they are faced with having to identify problems and propose solutions to problems in their own texts and in their peers' texts. Specifically, there is a dearth of research on what questions emerge when basic writers have the sole responsibility for evaluating their writing and are faced with having to revise their texts. What happens when basic writing instructors give basic

writers complete authority for evaluating their writing? What motivates them to select one word over another? What is most problematic for them? Are they as Bridwell and Sommers report, more concerned with the surface level problems in their texts or are they more or just as concerned with problems related to meaning and organization? Furthermore, do basic writers find it easier to identify and propose solutions to problems in their own texts or in their peers' texts? Our experiences as writers, teachers, and scholars would lead us to come to the conclusion that it is less difficult to identify and propose solutions to problems in our peers' texts; however, how much research do we have to document this?

What implications do the answers for these questions have for instructors of basic writing? How many opportunities do we provide for our students to recommend solutions to problems in their own and peers' texts? Many of us use collaborative learning and peer response groups in our classrooms, but how much responsibility do we ultimately give the student for revising his/her text? How much are we guided by our students' responses that they are not in a position to evaluate each other's writing, that they have difficulty accepting and viewing as valid any feedback other than the teacher's?

Shaughnessy's seminal work on the errors of basic writers characterized the writing which basic writers in our classrooms produce as writing that reflects their difficulty with orthography, mechanics, and syntax, their dependence on a basic core of words, their inability to move between concrete and abstract ideas, and their failure to take their readers' needs into account. Her study, in addition to describing the errors of basic writers, provided a framework for examining the causes of these errors.

According to Shaughnessy, basic writers' errors, provide a window in much the same way that Goodman's reading miscues do, into the composing processes of basic writers. In other words, the making of errors naturally occurs as learners become competent readers and writers. Goodman notes that people read for meaning, and therefore miscues (word omissions, substitutions, insertions) occur because the learner's primary goal is to read for meaning. Shaughnessy's study revealed that, like readers, writers focus on getting their ideas down and as this process occurs, they may leave out text, insert text, and blur sentences and ideas. Her study urged us to analyze the errors of basic writers and to hypothesize about the reasons for these errors. We were compelled to look at these errors differently, to view these errors as basic writers' lack of experience with reading and writing Standard Written English, not as evidence of their failure to learn the conventions of Standard Written English.

These errors reflected the transitional stages that basic writers underwent as they attempted to master Standard Written English. Their attempts became what I call “mis-attempts” at composing Standard Written English and they occurred because “mis-attempts” are a natural part of the learning process. We began to analyze and to describe these errors systematically.

The research on error analysis with respect to basic writers continued with scholars such as Bartholomae, Perl, Flower et al., and Hull. Bartholomae used students’ oral reconstruction of their written texts to analyze and determine the patterns of errors basic writers made. He recommended a curriculum in which students would be given opportunities to determine patterns of errors in their written texts and to develop strategies for correcting these errors. Perl studied the errors of basic writers from another perspective. She used protocol analysis to discover the composing processes of basic writers and found that because basic writers spent too much time in premature editing, they miscued (inserted, deleted, and substituted words). She concluded that these miscues prevented them from seeing problems in their texts. The subject of error analysis by Flower et al., was approached from the perspective of examining the problem detection, diagnosis, and revision strategies of novice writers. Their findings revealed that novice writers tended to identify problems at the local level of discourse rather than at the global level of discourse. In other words, they had difficulty defining the rhetorical problems of the text. Hull, also interested in discovering the processes basic writers used as they identified errors in their texts, developed a taxonomy for describing the strategies that basic writers used. Her taxonomy classified errors as those involving basic writers’ ability to consult, intuit, and comprehend. The research of Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, Perl, Flower et al., and Hull reaffirmed the importance of a process rather than a product approach to error analysis, and as a result, we became less concerned with identifying basic writers’ errors and more concerned with providing the basic writers in our classrooms with specific strategies for determining and addressing their errors.

### **Context for a Case Study of Basic Writers’ Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies**

The questions raised above and the research of Shaughnessy, Bartholomae, Perl, Flower et al., and Hull provided me with a framework in which to supply further documentation for the processes basic writers used as they attempted to identify and solve problems in their own and in their peers’ texts. To this end, I

conducted a case study of three basic writers, called for purposes of confidentiality, Marie, Carol, and Diana, who were enrolled in a level one basic writing course at Medgar Evers College, a community college within The City University of New York (CUNY) system.<sup>1</sup> Although the findings from case studies are not statistically significant, this study does provide a basis for further research and validation of how basic writers define and recommend solutions to writing problems when they are presented with the opportunity to do so on their own.

Marie, Carol, and Diana were placed in a first level writing course because they had not met the minimum competency in writing required by the CUNY Writing Proficiency Exam. Students could receive a score of one to six on this exam and each exam had to be read by two readers. To achieve minimum competency, students were required to achieve a total score of eight, two scores of four each from two readers. The basic writers in my study received total scores of six or less on the placement exam, thereby placing them in level one (basic writing). Students who score at this level have difficulty with paragraph and essay organization and have limited control of sentence structure, verb forms, and inflectional endings. Those students who score a total of eight are placed in level two (developmental writing) and those scoring 10 or above are placed in college level writing.

I wanted to discover and observe what Marie, Carol, and Diana looked for as they attempted to revise their own texts and their peers' texts. I wanted to determine if they had concerns related to whether they had adequately expressed their intentions and had developed a cohesive and coherent text. I also wanted to identify the kinds of solutions they proposed to problems in their texts and to discern whether they were primarily concerned with proposing solutions on the local (sentence) level as opposed to the global (paragraph and rhetorical) level of the text. In addition, I was concerned with whether the solutions they posed created other kinds of problems such as Perl's "miscues" and Flower et. al's "ill-defined" problems. Miscues could occur when their misreading of texts that they wanted to revise resulted in the insertion, deletion, or substitution of an incorrect word or words. "Ill-defined" problems could be detected when they only detected limited textual problems and failed to see the larger problems of the text. In short, I wanted to determine whether the solutions proposed by the basic writers in my study improved the quality of the texts they were revising.

Lastly, I wanted to determine the extent to which Marie, Carol, and Diana read their own texts differently than they read their

peers' texts. In reading their peers' texts, would their reading, strategies, and proposed solutions to textual problems differ? Bartlett's research on inexperienced writers revealed that because of too much privileged information, inexperienced writers have difficulty rereading their texts and they cannot create enough distance from their texts; they, therefore, find it easier to revise their peers' texts. George's and Ziv's research on peer response groups revealed that students may give constructive peer response when they have adequate opportunities to provide feedback. I wanted to find further evidence to determine whether the basic writers in my study would have less difficulty revising their peers' texts.

Marie was from Guyana, Carol was from Belize, and Diana was an African-American student from Brooklyn, New York. Diana and Carol were in their early twenties and Marie was 27 years old. Although Marie was from South America and Carol from Central America, their first language was a dialect of English. Thus, they were placed in a learning environment where they had to improve their competence in the dialect of Standard Written English.

Marie, Carol, and Diana were enrolled in my course and were selected for the study on the basis of their willingness to volunteer to attend six one-hour weekly sessions outside of classtime. All of the sessions were conducted in my office and taped. Data were obtained through the use of oral reading of their own and peers' written texts, think-aloud protocols, and open-ended interviews.

The instructional context of the course was one in which students read and responded to essays related to a variety of social issues. Revision was encouraged and students wrote drafts of essays and then revised them after class discussion of a particular subject and/or instructor feedback. There was no instructor feedback given for drafts of essays that Marie, Carol, and Diana used in the study.

The first session was a practice session and its purpose was to provide Marie, Carol, and Diana with an opportunity to use think-aloud protocols in order to monitor their own reading and problem-solving strategies. Data from this session were not reported in the findings.

The practice session was the first time that Marie, Carol, and Diana used think-aloud protocols. Think-aloud protocols are used to obtain verbal reports of participants' responses to a specific task and may take the form of verbal reports that can be obtained either concurrently, retrospectively, or immediately after the task. In concurrent reporting, subjects are asked to think aloud as they engage in problem-solving techniques, and in retrospective reporting, subjects are required to report on what they remember thinking immediately after a directed probe. A stimulated-recall interview is

another form of the think-aloud protocol and it is conducted immediately after the task. Tomlinson suggests that the stimulated-recall interview is a way to overcome some of the limitations that may result from delayed retrospective interviews. Retrospective reporting and stimulated-recall interviews were used with Marie, Carol, and Diana.

At the first session, Marie, Carol, and Diana were asked to read orally a text that they wished to improve. This was required in order to obtain a record of their oral reading performance. The next phase required that they use retrospective reporting to reread the entire text, identify any problems they saw in the text, and explain how they would solve these problems. A different type of retrospective reporting was then used to obtain the participants' perceptions of their textual problems from another perspective. During this phase, they were asked to reread the text, stop whenever they saw a problem, and explain how they would solve that problem. Thus, their comments were obtained while they were engaged in the act of reading the text. Lastly, the stimulated-recall interview was used to ask Marie, Carol, and Diana to comment generally on any parts of the text which they viewed as especially problematic. The combination of these varying aspects of the think-aloud protocol enabled me to observe the participants' problem identification and resolution strategies from multiple perspectives.

During sessions two through five, Marie, Carol, and Diana repeated the tasks they had engaged in during the practice session. In sessions two and three, they responded to texts they had composed for class assignments. These texts related to social issues and they were asked to express their view on these issues. Each writer selected the text she wanted to improve at each session. During sessions four and five, they responded to texts composed by their peers who were not in their class; these texts also addressed social issues. All participants read the same peers' texts.

The last session consisted of an open-ended interview where Marie, Carol, and Diana described their educational background and discussed their concepts of the writing process. As the instructor/researcher, I asked them to describe a) where they came from, b) the kinds of schools they attended, and c) what they had studied in terms of reading, writing, and/or English. I also asked them to describe their concepts of writing, proofreading, editing, and good and bad essays.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were collected and analyzed in three phases. First, transcripts of the participants' oral reading performance were

transcribed, coded, and analyzed in order to determine whether there was evidence that they miscued as they read their own and peers' texts. I wanted to discover the extent to which Perl's (1979) study on the composing processes of unskilled writers would corroborate the findings of my study. Perl found that miscues accounted for approximately 25% of unskilled writers' composing problems thereby causing them to edit prematurely because they were inhibited from seeing problems in their own texts.

For the purposes of my study, I used a modified form of Goodman's Reading Miscue Inventory<sup>2</sup> to identify and classify the number and types of miscues Marie, Carol, and Diana made as they read their own texts and their peers' texts. At the time of this study, I had worked with basic writers for seven years and I had observed that basic writers, like many writers, created miscues and often deleted, inserted, or substituted words when they orally read a text. I wanted to determine whether these miscues were the natural result of their oral reading process or whether they were created because of basic writers' failure to recognize grammatical and mechanical errors in their texts. I also wanted to determine the number of miscues that basic writers created.

The next phase involved the collection of data from Marie, Carol, and Diana's think-aloud protocols and stimulated-recall interviews. Transcripts of their problem identification and resolution strategies were transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to a classification scheme developed by Baker.<sup>3</sup> I chose to adapt Baker's scheme for classifying students' evaluation of expository texts because her scale provided a means to a) determine whether students were able to recognize problems occurring on the surface or local level of discourse, that is, problems related to word choice, syntax, and mechanics, and b) determine whether students were able to recognize problems occurring on the meaning or global level of discourse, that is, problems related to informational clarity, cohesiveness, coherence, and consistency. For the purposes of my study, I used Baker's categories of lexical and syntactical standards to classify participants' comments related to the surface or local level of discourse and her categories of propositional and structural cohesiveness, internal and external consistency, and informational clarity and completeness to classify participants' comments related to the meaning or global level of the text. Although much of the research on the kinds of problems inexperienced writers detect in their texts reveals that they primarily identify surface-level errors and focus their comments on the features and conventions of the text (Sommers, 1980; Flower et al., 1986), my experience as an instructor of basic writing has revealed that basic writers identify



problems which occur on both the local and global level of discourse. I wanted to determine whether the data from my study would corroborate the research in this area or would corroborate my observations as an instructor of basic writing.

The data generated from the open-ended interviews constituted the last phase of the data collection. Transcripts of Marie, Carol, and Diana's interviews were examined to a) obtain background information, b) determine patterns related to their educational experiences and their perceptions of the writing process, and c) determine the correlations between their perceptions of how they read with the intention of improving texts and what they actually did as they read these texts.

### **Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies of Basic Writers**

The findings from my study can be classified as a) those related to Marie, Carol, and Diana's oral reading performance, b) those related to their comments on the kinds of problems they perceived and the ways in which they would resolve these problems, and c) those related to their perceptions of the processes they use as they read with the intention of improving and revising their own texts and their peers' texts. These findings enabled me to observe and determine the relationship and emerging patterns between participants' oral reading, participants' strategies for solving textual problems, and participants' insights into their problem-solving behaviors.

An analysis of Marie, Carol, and Diana's oral reading performance revealed that they made a minimal number of miscues, 3% to 10% when they read their own and peers' texts (see Appendix A). There was no major difference between the number and kinds of miscues they made in their own and peers' texts. Most of the miscues were word substitutions, followed by omissions and insertions, and a large percentage of the miscues were dialect-related, e.g., inflectional endings on nouns, verb tense shifts.

In order to determine whether Marie, Carol, and Diana's miscues prevented them from seeing problems in their own and peers' texts, I observed whether they repeated the miscues in the textual problems they identified. I inferred that if the miscues were repeated, the miscues had prevented them from seeing textual problems; however, if the miscues were not repeated, I could infer that the miscues were the result of the participants' natural reading process and were therefore not the cause of their failure to recognize a textual problem. My findings revealed that there were only several instances where the participants repeated miscues as they read and

identified problems; thus, the degree to which miscues may have interfered with the participants' ability to identify textual problems was very slight.

The core of the data generated from my study was from Marie, Carol, and Diana's think-aloud protocols and stimulated-recall interviews. This data provided documentation for the kind and number of comments participants made. The findings from an analysis of their problem identification and resolution strategies revealed that in both their own and peers' texts, they identified problems on all levels of discourse, that is, they identified problems related to the lexical level of discourse (word choice), the syntactical level of discourse (grammar), and the semantic level of discourse (meaning), and in both their own and peers' texts, they identified more problems related to the semantic level of discourse (See APPENDIX B).

The findings that Marie, Carol, and Diana made more comments on the semantic level of discourse, did not corroborate the research findings that basic writers tend to focus only on surface-level problems when attempting to revise their texts. These findings provide further support for the research which has urged us to examine the processes rather than the products that basic writers use when they attempt to revise texts. Examples of these processes are illustrated by examining Marie, Carol, and Diana's comments as they attempted to revise their own texts and their peers' texts.

Marie, Carol, and Diana's comments reveal that they were motivated to identify problems in their own texts because of factors related to whether they had logically developed their ideas, clearly expressed their intentions, and given enough examples and details to support their ideas. They commented on their texts when something did not sound right or when something appeared to be missing, and they were concerned with problems related to meaning on the global level of discourse.

Carol, for example, in discussing an essay on why dieting should be for health reasons, stated: "This paragraph doesn't make sense here. . . . There is no information in here about why you should diet to get slim." These comments indicate that Carol was concerned about the cohesiveness of her paragraph and about how the paragraph related to the entire essay. In short, she was concerned about problems related to meaning and informational clarity and about the logical relationship between the ideas in her paragraph and her essay as a whole.

Marie, on the other hand, in an essay on what male and female relationships will be like in the future, wanted to revise her first paragraph because:

In this first paragraph, it is not developed fully. This paragraph is too short. Paragraphs should have more than three sentences. This only has about one sentence so it's not fully developed.

Marie's comments indicate her awareness of the language used to define the paragraph and her knowledge that paragraphs should be adequately developed. She sensed that there was a problem with her first paragraph. One might also infer that Marie intuitively knew that she had not adequately expressed her intentions; thus she drew upon this intuition and used her awareness and knowledge about paragraphs to identify a textual problem on the global level of discourse.

Diana, in describing the problems in her second text on why husbands and wives should share equally in household work, stated:

I left out a lot of words. Another person might not read it the way I read it. They might not know what I was really talking about. I'm telling how I feel. They don't exactly know how I really feel. They don't know how I really feel because it's not expressed good enough.

These comments clearly indicate that Diana was concerned with whether she had adequately expressed her intentions. She recognized that because she had left words out, her reader would have to supply too much information. Unlike Flower's inexperienced writers who composed writer-based prose which was egocentered, Diana was concerned with constructing reader-based prose in a voice that articulated her ideas in a manner that would be clear to her audience.

When Marie, Carol, and Diana attempted to resolve problems in their texts, their recommendations for solving these problems were sometimes constrained by their inability to articulate the more complex problems of the text. As stated above, their comments suggested that they were aware of problems related to cohesiveness, coherence, development, and clarity, but their recommendations for solving these problems revealed that they were not aware of what Flower et al. classify as the larger rhetorical problems, that is, problems related to the text's argument and overall organizational structure.

When Marie, for example, in the text cited above indicated that her paragraph needed more development, she was partially right; in addition to needing more development, her introductory paragraph needed a clearer focus. The focus of Marie's paragraph was not clear

because she had not been able to define the rhetorical problem of her text. She knew that there was a problem with the paragraph and she knew the rules for paragraph formation, but she was not able to discern that she could possibly resolve her problem by articulating the argument of her text more clearly. Her intuition may have guided her identifying the rhetorical problem, but it did not help her to propose a solution for the problem. Her response to this problem represented a case between knowing and doing, that is of knowing that there is a problem but not knowing how to solve the problem.

Marie's comments on her second text also revealed her inability to define the larger rhetorical problems of her text. Her first comment after reading her text on why couples decide not to have children was: "I think I'm just repeating myself too much. There's a lot more problems." This suggests that Marie was concerned that her text had problems related to the overall development. Again, her intuition helped her to recognize that her larger rhetorical problem did not appear to be defined clearly; however, she could not see that this was problematic. Her text was repetitive because Marie had not, as Flower et al. have stated, been able to define the rhetorical problem of her text.

In addition to having difficulty with articulating solutions to their textual problems, Marie, Carol, and Diana sometimes made their problems more complicated or recommended solutions that represented what Shaughnessy calls "a mismanagement of complexity." Carol's essay on why people should diet for health reasons contains the following sentence: "Some children rather eat potato chips instead of their real food." In commenting on this sentence, Carol stated:

It doesn't sound right when you say some children rather eat potato chips. Isn't eat in the present tense? I would put: "Some children rather eating potato chips or corn chips instead of their real food."

Carol, thus, knew there was a verb tense problem; however, her recommendation to solve this problem made it more complicated. She either did not know enough about the structure of English grammar to select the appropriate verb tense form so that she could solve this problem, or she was in the transitional stage of learning how to form verb tenses in Standard Written English and her attempt at solving the problem reflected a "mis-attempt."

Marie's complication of a problem was demonstrated when she commented on a syntactical problem in her text on male and female relationships. She singled out her sentence: "Who have more

problems than anything else," and asked, "Who are we talking about?" She then stated that she would take out "who" and combine it with her previous sentence which read: "Now male and female relationship are more single men and women." Her revised sentence thus read: "Now male and female relationships are more single men and women having more problem than anything else." Marie indicated that she had taken out "who" because "... it didn't fit here." She was able to identify a problem in her text, but her ability to solve the problem adequately was again hampered by her "mis-attempt" at more closely approximating Standard Written English. In recommending a solution to her problem, she had blurred her sentences and complicated her problem in a different way.

Although Marie, Carol, and Diana did not always resolve the problems within their texts, their comments to solve these problems reflected an awareness that their intentions should be clearly expressed and that there should be a logical relationship between the ideas in their paragraphs and their essay as a whole. Diana's comments on her text related to child abuse, illustrated both aspects of this awareness.

In her text on child abuse, Diana began her discussion of problems in this text by commenting on how her last sentence which was written as a concluding paragraph was inadequately developed. The sentence read: "I feel that if these factors are looked into maybe we can prevent child abuse from occurring." Diana stated that she could add information which recommended that low income families be given a job in order to sustain their families and could offer statistics that revealed why child abuse was occurring. She also stated that if she developed her last paragraph more, she would be able to give someone the opportunity to "... prevent it from happening." Diana was thus concerned with the development of her ideas, with whether she had adequately expressed her intentions and with whether her ideas could effect a change in people's attitudes about child abuse.

Carol's recommendations for solving problems in her text on dieting also revealed her awareness of the logical development of ideas in her essay. In discussing her essay on dieting, Carol, for example, indicated that she would omit some paragraphs and restructure others. In commenting on the second paragraph in her essay, Carol stated that the paragraph did not clearly relate back to her position on dieting and that she should: "... give an example of how you should diet." She then indicated that she would follow this paragraph with another paragraph which recommended what one needed in order to be healthy. Carol also stated that she would

omit paragraph four of her essay. Her words were: "This paragraph doesn't make sense here . . . there is no information in here on why you should diet to get slim." She felt that this paragraph presented a problem because it did not clearly relate to an idea in her previous paragraph. She was concerned with the larger rhetorical problems of her text.

Marie, Carol, and Diana's comments relating to problems at both the global and local level of discourse reveal that when given the opportunity, basic writers can identify problems which occur at various levels of their texts. Their comments and strategies for solving textual problems are not restricted to what Flower et al. characterize as the features and conventions of the text or what Sommers characterizes as surface errors which occur on the lexical level of the text. Their problem identification and resolution strategies for their own texts reveal their concerns about meaning and structure on all levels of discourse.

As Marie, Carol, and Diana read both of their peers' texts with the intention of improving them, they were all concerned with the fact that the texts lacked a clear focus. The first peer's text that they read and attempted to improve and revise represented the writer's attempt to focus on the concept that traditions, ethics, and values within the American society were declining. The second peer's text focused on why people go into debt. Marie, Carol, and Diana's comments on both of these texts reflected a desire to reorder and elaborate sentences and paragraphs. As in their own texts, they were more concerned with problems related to the semantic level of the texts than they were with problems related to the syntactical and lexical levels (see Appendix B). Their comments reflected a concern with cohesiveness, coherence, and clarity.

Marie, for example, indicated that the writer of the first peer's text did not develop the idea that tradition, ethics, and morals were declining. She stated that: ". . . the writer should have developed it a little more, gave a little more, explained a little more and given more ideas and examples." As in her own text, Marie's comment revealed her concern with the development of ideas in the essay; however, in addition to expressing her concern with the development of ideas in the essay, she was able to comment on the overall argument of her peer's text. She was able to recognize that her peer had not clearly defined the rhetorical problem of the essay.

Carol and Diana's comments also revealed their concerns with their peer's development of ideas in the essay. In the writer's sentence: "In the future only the richest countries will survive," Carol stated that the writer should have explained how: ". . . only the richest countries would survive" and Diana suggested that the

writer should have explained what countries he/she was talking about. In Diana and Carol's view, the writer had not given adequate examples and had not clarified his ideas.

In discussing the second peer's text, Marie, Carol, and Diana also expressed a concern with the cohesiveness, coherence, and clarity of the text. Marie and Carol both had concerns about the last sentence in the second paragraph of the text. The second paragraph read:

Many people go into debt because they have over extended their credit. People are no longer able to save up for what they want today. The average person may spent his or her salary on other things, "for example," transportation, food and other home items. These things are very important and spending cash is most likely to happen. Advertisements are just another way to get people influenced in buying things they can't afford.

Marie suggested that the last sentence could be used to develop another paragraph and Carol stated that the writer: ". . . should add more details. She should say how advertisements influence people, like the jeans commercial." In commenting on the same paragraph, Diana stated that: "A few different thoughts are in this paragraph."

Marie, Carol, and Diana's concerns with clarity can also be observed by noting their comments for the first sentence in the third paragraph of the text. The sentence read: "The most important reason is that people are able to charge goods and services for their home and car." Marie stated: "This doesn't come across right." She recommended that the sentence be revised to read: "Today people are able to charge goods and service for their homes or car on credit." Carol recommended that the sentence be changed to ". . . the most important reason why people should use credit is because they will be able to charge goods and services for their home or car." Diana saw this sentence as problematic from another perspective. She indicated: "I don't know if that's the most important reason. If you have a salary, to me the most important reason is to be able to have the money for transportation to get back and forth to work." Therefore, in addition to questioning the lack of clarity in this sentence, Diana also questioned the validity of the sentence.

As in their comments on problems in their own texts, Marie, Carol, and Diana were also concerned with problems related to syntax and word choice in their peers' texts; however, in both their own and peers' texts, they spent more time commenting on problems related to the semantic level of discourse. The major difference between their comments on their own texts and their

comments on their peers' texts was that they were able to define the more complex rhetorical problems in their peers' texts. They could more easily recognize when the argument or focus of their peers' texts was not clear.

The open-ended interview revealed that Marie, Carol, and Diana saw reading with the intention to improve texts as looking for evidence of sentence and verb tense problems, determining whether paragraphs were cohesive and adequately developed, and determining whether what they had written was clear to them as both reader and writer. In commenting on what she did as she attempted to revise her texts, Carol stated:

I look for how to develop it, how I start the sentences and paragraphs; I try to add more facts and details, spelling problems, subject verb agreement. . . If the essay sounds good, I don't look for problems. . . . I only look for problems when the essay doesn't sound good.

Diana indicated that before she began this study, she had been used to just handing in her essay. In commenting on how she tried to improve her texts, she stated: "I take out material that is not necessary. I add more details."

In describing poor writers, Carol saw them as those who wrote about: ". . . facts you can't understand." Marie saw good writers as those who: ". . . explain to you as they write." These comments suggest that the basic writers of this study were aware of the importance of the reader in the writing process and were aware that their writing had to be understood and communicated to their readers in clear and understandable ways.

## **Discussion**

This was an exploratory study and its findings must be viewed as tentative for their verifiability is limited by the nature of the study. However, these findings provide some documentation for examining what basic writers do as they read texts with the intention of improving them. The significant findings are discussed below.

Basic writers' oral reading performance, that is their evidence of miscues, does not seem to be related to how they read with the intention of improving texts. Since they made a minimal number of miscues in the study (3% to 10%), the degree to which miscues may have interfered with their ability to detect problems in the text was slight. This finding does not support the research of Perl and Warters which suggests that miscues account for the reasons why basic writers engage in premature editing and have difficulty revising their texts.



Basic writers can identify and propose solutions to problems at the lexical, syntactical, and semantic levels of discourse. They are motivated to identify problems in their own texts when they detect problems related to their intention, clarity, cohesiveness, coherence, and completeness. Although they can detect these kinds of problems, they sometimes may not clearly see the larger rhetorical problems of their texts. In resolving problems, they may reorder paragraphs, reword sentences, and correct verb tense and spelling problems. However, these solutions do not always solve the problem and may create other problems.

In identifying and proposing solutions to problems in their peers' texts, basic writers are concerned with whether the writer has clearly expressed the focus of the text and developed the text in a logical way, and they find it easier to detect the more complex rhetorical problems of their peers' texts. They are also concerned with problems related to sentence structure, verb tense, and spelling. As in the reading of and attempting to identify and propose solutions to problems in their own texts, they are motivated to identify a problem because something does not sound right or they are not clear about the writer's intention and their proposed solutions to problems do not always solve the problem.

Lastly, when basic writers discuss their perceptions of the writing process and of how they read texts with the intention of improving them, their perceptions of these processes correlate with what they actually do as they compose and read texts. They may compose and respond to texts although they are not consciously aware, as Flower et al. have noted, that they have not adequately expressed their intentions or adequately formed a conceptual understanding of the topics of their texts. Although they are concerned with problems at all levels of discourse: lexical, syntactical, and semantic, they tend to focus their comments on the sentence and paragraph level of the text rather than on the rhetorical level of the text. This focus shifts however when they are reading their peers' texts. They find it easier to identify and recommend solutions to problems in their peers' texts for they do not have to do what Bartlett calls, inhibit the privileged information inherent in their own texts. They can create enough distance to observe and comment on the fact that the goal, purpose, theme, or thesis of their peers' texts is not clear.

### **Classroom Implications**

The implications of these findings for instructors of basic writing suggest that we reexamine what basic writers can and cannot do and

give them many opportunities to make the connections between the dichotomies of knowledge that Bruner outlines in *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. These dichotomies may be represented as the difference between “knowing that” and “knowing how.” Basic writers have an intuitive awareness of problems in their own and peers’ texts, but they have limited strategies for solving these problems. Their solutions to problems are often what Shaughnessy calls “mismanagement of complexity,” or what Mayher, Lester, and Pradl have called, “knowledge . . . poorly applied” (65). Basic writing instructors, therefore, should provide basic writers with opportunities to use their intuitive awareness about textual problems as a springboard for identifying recurring patterns in their own and peers’ writing and increasing their knowledge about the structure of the language. Basic writers can then use this knowledge to bridge the gap between “knowing that” and “knowing how.”

Since basic writers do not always adequately explore the intentions of their texts, they need to engage in activities which will encourage them to a) draw upon their own experiences as a framework for discussing their intentions and b) contemplate, rehearse, and explore these ideas in the classroom. We also need to provide them with many opportunities to read about topics and to use talking and writing to broaden and deepen their understanding about them.

In addition to exploring their intentions in their texts, basic writers need to see their texts as meaningful and as worthy of being read. They may come to view their writing as meaningful if they are given opportunities to write to real audiences. Their audiences may be their peers, community leaders, legislators, civic leaders, student government leaders, and newspaper editors.

George, in her research on peer response, reminds us that writing instructors are experienced readers of student texts. How experienced are our students? Although we use peer response groups in our classrooms, how much time do we allot for basic writers to read their own and peers’ texts, to read and respond to drafts of texts, to read, as Smith notes, like a writer and to find what Tierney and LaZansky call the void created when the contractual agreement between readers and writers is violated. Giving basic writers more practice in reading student texts may help them to create the distance that Bartlett suggests is needed to perceive problems in their own texts.

Finally, as basic writing instructors, we have to remind ourselves that there are theoretical assumptions which guide our pedagogy and we should always be clear about what these assumptions are. As we work with our students, we should be guided by our theory,

by our “uncommonsense assumptions,” and by what we have observed and learned in our teaching of basic writers. We must also remember to test our theory, for sometimes we find ourselves in teaching situations where theory and pedagogy contradict each other or where we do not apply what we know about learning. The act of learning is a dynamic process on the part of the learner and the teacher, and we must continually monitor what we are doing.

The concept of empowerment has been a pervading force in the last decade. We have advocated empowerment for our students, our teachers, and our community. In our attempts to empower our students, we have reshaped our instruction and classrooms to reflect what we know about how learners gain more control, authority, and responsibility for their writing. In the midst of all these acts of empowerment, however, a question lingers: How do we know when the basic writers in our classrooms are truly empowered? What is a true test of empowerment? It seems that a true indicator of this empowerment is manifested when basic writers can apply what we have taught them and believe that they have the competence and the ability to manipulate and control the language of Standard Written English. A true indicator of empowerment is revealed when they realize that they can detect and resolve lexical, syntactical, and semantic problems in their own and their peers’ texts. When the basic writers in our classrooms believe and consciously engage in this behavior, then we know that we have helped them to realize that they have the knowledge to empower themselves. That is the true test of empowerment and that is what we have to help our basic writers achieve.

## Appendix A

### Number of Miscues: Own Texts

Participant		Marie	Carol	Diana	Total
Text 1	Number of Miscues	22	9	19	50
	Number of Words in Text	226	239	227	694
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	10	4	8	7
Text 2	Number of Miscues	20	20	6	46
	Number of Words in Text	259	378	184	809
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	8	5	3	6
Totals for Texts 1 and 2	Number of Miscues	42	29	25	96
	Number of Words in Text	485	617	411	1503
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	9	5	6	6

Participant		Marie	Carol	Diana	Total
Text 1	Number of Miscues	26	15	21	62
	Number of Words in Text	454	454	454	454
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	6	3	5	5
Text 2	Number of Miscues	30	13	13	56
	Number of Words in Text	325	325	325	975
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	9	4	4	6
Totals for Texts 1 and 2	Number of Miscues	56	28	34	118
	Number of Words in Text	779	779	779	2337
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	7	4	4	5

## Appendix B

### Comparison of Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies: Own and Peers' Texts Summary

Partici- pant	Types of Strategies	Own Texts		Peers' Texts		Total	
		Num	%	Num	%	Num	%
Marie	Lexical	5	5	2	1	7	3
	Syntactical	37	38	37	23	74	29
	Semantic:						
	Propositional Cohesiveness	6	6	3	2	9	3
	Structural Cohesiveness	6	6	43	27	49	19
	External Consistency	0	0	1	1	1	0
	Internal Consistency	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Informational Clarity and Completeness	36	36	63	39	99	38
	Other	9	9	11	7	20	8
	Total		99	100	160	100	259

Partici- pant	Types of Strategies	Own Texts		Peers' Texts		Total	
		Num	%	Num	%	Num	%
Carol	Lexical	4	5	7	5	11	5
	Syntactical	27	34	34	26	61	29
	Semantic:						
	Propositional Cohesiveness	8	10	10	8	18	9
	Structural Cohesiveness	13	16	24	19	37	18
	External Consistency	1	1	8	6	9	4
	Internal Consistency	1	1	0	0	1	0
	Informational Clarity and Completeness	20	25	38	30	58	28
	Other	6	8	8	6	14	7
	Total		80	100	129	100	209

## Appendix B—Continued

Partici- pant	Types of Strategies	Own Texts		Peers' Texts		Total	
		Num	%	Num	%	Num	%
Diana	Lexical	8	9	2	1	10	5
	Syntactical	23	28	43	32	66	30
	Semantic:						
	Propositional Cohesiveness	15	18	29	22	44	20
	Structural Cohesiveness	3	4	17	13	20	9
	External Consistency	4	5	4	3	8	4
	Internal Consistency	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Informational Clarity and Completeness	15	18	29	22	44	20
	Other	15	18	10	7	25	12
	Total		83	100	134	100	217

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The findings from this case study are derived from my dissertation: *A Case Study of the Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies Used by Basic Writers as They Read Their Texts and the Texts of Their Peers with the Intention of Improving Them*. I wish to thank my students at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, and acknowledge the support of New York University Professors John Mayher, Lil Brannon, Angela Jaggard, and Gordon Pradl, whose guidance kept me motivated to pursue this research project.

<sup>2</sup> Goodman's Reading Miscue Inventory is a qualitative and quantitative evaluation instrument that can be used to determine the causes of a reader's miscues. The inventory which I used is taken from Goodman and Burke's *Reading Miscue Inventory Manual for Diagnosis and Evaluation*. I modified this inventory in order to identify the number and kind of miscues the subjects used as they orally read their texts and the texts of their peers.

<sup>3</sup> Baker developed a classification system to determine the kinds of standards college students used as they evaluated expository texts. These standards were classified as lexical, syntactical, and semantic. The semantic standards were further subdivided into standards representing propositional and structural cohesiveness, internal and external consistency, and informational clarity and completeness.

### Works Cited

- Baker, Linda. "Differences in the Standards Used by College Students to Evaluate Their Comprehension of Expository Prose." *Reading Research Quarterly* 20 (Spring 1985): 297-313.
- Bartholomae, David. "The Study of Error." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (Oct. 1980): 253-69.

- Bartlett, Elsa J. "Learning to Revise: Some Component Processes." *What Writers Know*. Ed. Martin Nystrand. New York: Academic, 1982. 345-63.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy." *Journal of Basic Writing* 10. 2 (Fall 1991): 54-70.
- Bridwell, Lillian. "Revising Strategies in Twelfth Grade Students' Transactional Writing." *Research in the Teaching of English* 14(1980): 197-222.
- Bruffee, Kenneth. "Writing and Reading as Collaborative or Social Acts." *The Writer's Mind*. Eds. Janice Hays et al. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1983. 159-69.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966.
- Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English* 41 (Sept. 1979): 19-37.
- Flower, Linda S. Et al. "Detection, Diagnosis and the Strategies of Revision." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (Feb. 1986): 16-55.
- Freire, Paulo. "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom." *Thought & Language/Language & Thought*. Ed. Maryanne Wolf, Mark K. McQuillan, and Eugene Radwin. Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1980. 363-81.
- George, Diana. "Working with Peer Groups in the Composition Class." *College Composition and Communication* 35 (Oct. 1984): 320-26.
- Giroux, Henry A. *Teachers As Intellectuals*. New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1988.
- Goodman, Kenneth. "The Goodman Taxonomy of Reading Miscues." *Findings of Research in Miscue Analysis: Classroom Implications*. Eds. P. D. Allen and Dorothy J. Watson. Urbana: ERIC and NCTE, 1973.
- Goodman, Yetta and Carolyn Burke. *Reading Miscue Inventory Manual for Diagnosis and Evaluation*. New York: Richard C. Owen, 1970.
- Greene, Brenda M. "A Case Study of the Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies Used by Basic Writers as They Read Their Texts and the Texts of Their Peers with the Intention of Improving Them." Diss. New York U. , 1988. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988. 88-12,506.
- Hull, Glynda A. "Constructing Taxonomies for Error. (or Can Stray Dogs Be Mermaids?)" *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers*. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: Random, 1987.
- Mayher, John S. *Uncommon Sense*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational, 1990.
- Mayher, John S., Nancy Lester, and Gordon M. Pradl. *Learning to Write: Writing to Learn*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983.
- Perl, Sondra. "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers." *Research in the Teaching of English* 13 (Dec. 1979): 317-36.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Smith, Frank. "Reading Like a Writer." *Language Arts* 60 (May 1983): 558-67.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Revision in the Composing Process: A Case Study of College Freshmen and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (Oct. 1980): 378-88.
- Tomlinson, Barbara. "Talking About the Composing Process: The Limitations of Retrospective Accounts." *Written Communication* 1 (Jan. 1984): 429-45.
- Tierney, Robert J. and Jill LaZansky. "The Rights and Responsibilities of

- Readers and Writers: A Contractual Agreement." *Language Arts* 57 (Sept. 1980): 606-13.
- Warters, S. "The Writing Process of College Basic Writers." ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED175008, 1979.
- Ziv, Nina. "Peer Groups in the Composition Class: A Case Study." ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED229799, 1983.