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## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE IN PREPARING BASIC WRITERS FOR COLLEGE WRITING

*ABSTRACT: The workshop format—a format that supplements traditional writing class instruction with group work and individual instruction that emphasize the power of expressive language—is essential to basic writers for their development as writers. Writing workshops generate conversations and discussions that encourage social, political, and economic awareness to help basic writers discover who they are and where they are in society, so that they do not sacrifice personal voice for acceptance and recognition. Writing should be taught as an act of invention and expression in every step of the writing process to help basic writers become prepared writers, so they can be part of the mechanism that determines the way our written language develops and the way that written words signify meanings.*

Intrigued by the concept of including students' texts as part of "contact zone rhetorical strategies" (Bizzell "Contact Zones" 168), I realize how valuable and unique my teaching experience was five years ago when I taught Basic Composition and Freshman Composition writing workshops for the Educational Opportunity Fund Department (E.O.F.) at Montclair State University. Since most of the time the students attended different writing classes, one-on-one tutoring time for feedback on specific class-required papers became an integral part of their time with me. As a result of these small group workshops and one-on-one tutorial sessions, I had a unique opportunity to study the deeply personal process of acculturation that basic writers confront when they enter college. I was offered a look into what composition instruction produces when "students experiment with attending to suppressed aspects of their own history as part of establishing their writerly personae" (Bizzell "Contact Zones" 168). From this experience, I am convinced that the thoughts and feelings of basic writers captured in expressive language can be developed into linear modes of writing, preparing basic writers to write academic discourse without feeling betrayal and deprivation.

I am aware, however, that for many basic writers academic writ-

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ing has meant deprivation and betrayal. When writing is presented as a foreign language that requires imitation or conformity, it becomes disassociated from the everyday lives of students. Writing then serves to distance basic writers. Academic discourse is seen as a language that basic writers cannot call their own, a language that may even involve erasing the past to eliminate any traces of their marginalized or under-privileged conditions. When basic writers think that the only way to produce academic discourse is to deny themselves and their readers access to the language that expresses and informs their past, basic writers are then restrained, and traces of the pain and hardships caused by the dominance of academic discourse are hidden, as well. Ironically, they are deprived of the stories or scenes from their past that have the power to allow them to enter and contribute to the discourse of academia without being effaced by it.

Academic writing for many basic writers entails an element of betrayal: when this is unacknowledged, students may become passive. Min-zhan Lu is concerned about basic writers's passive response to academic discourse. Students who are not made aware of the changes that often accompany "mastery of academic discourse" can develop an irreparable sense of betrayal to their home life and language, and not realize their power to shape language ("Redefining" 34-35). In studying the link between oral and written expression of African American Students in her class, Arnetha F. Ball notes that her students risked failure in the academic arena when writing and "being labeled 'lame' within their informal vernacular speaking discourse communities" (34). Although failure and betrayal have their personal and social price tags, success may also be costly for basic writers. As Patricia Laurence writes about her students at City College, "Those students who make it in the college undergo rapid and difficult psychological, educational, and cultural change compressed in the space of one generation" (731). Basic writers who are deprived of their familiar discourses may feel powerless when they are advised to uncritically imitate academic discourse. Deprived of the familiar, they are given few if any opportunities to reshape academic discourse into a language that can resist the trappings of political, social, and economic dominance. Settings where basic writers are encouraged to speak and write for each other in familiar discourses may help to reduce the feeling of powerlessness and in fact increase their political, social, and economic awareness while developing their ability to question and change academic discourse.

In an effort to illustrate the degree and complexity of the alienation caused by the acculturation process that basic writers confront, I will describe three students who met with varying success in entering the academic discourse community. The first student, Maika, was one of seven students in a workshop I taught for incoming freshmen taking a Basic Composition course through the E.O.F. six-week precollege

summer program. One of the pre-writing activities we used was Peter Elbow's "loop writing," which prompts thirteen "directed freewritings" to unlock students' ideas from the stranglehold that enforced topics often inflict on writers. Some of these exercises include generating stories, scenes, and portraits from the topic (*Power* 59-77). Since I was aware that students would be viewing Frederick Wiseman's film *High School*, I thought loop writing would be a good way to have students relate to the topic by keying on their high school experiences.

Maika is a Latina ESL student, who despite hard work in the class remained unable to connect her familiar, personal, and expressive language to her academic discourse. For the loop writing assignment preparing students to see the film, Maika wrote the following responses:

Under "Instant Version":

High school for me was the most beautiful experience in my life. Those four years were of bad and good times but I really enjoyed.

Under "Narrative Description":

I felt sad the last two weeks of my high school life, because I was leaving all my good memories good teachers and most of all my friends.

Under "Scenes":

When I first entered as a freshman  
When I got lost like for five minutes  
The bell ringing every 40 minutes  
The fire alarm  
When I get mad with my math teacher because he wasn't fair with me

Under "Portraits":

My algebra teacher because she explain the class like it suppose to be and because she was a nice person. The vice principal she was always in a bad mood and she suspend you for nothing

Under "Vary the Time":

John F. Kennedy H.S. in twenty years in the future will be a very old school and people won't be able to attend there no more, is not that is in a bad condition but ..

I was excited over Maika' reaction to the loop writing because I thought that she had generated enough material to help her respond to a more formal writing assignment, a reaction paper to the film. In the paper, however, there was no evidence at all of her high school being "the most beautiful experience in [her] life," and no mention of

the specific experiences offered in the "Scenes" response. She remained unable to connect her high school experiences to her reaction to the film.

While there may be many possible reasons why Maika reacted the way she did to the assignment, I sensed that she was reluctant to share the experiences that she offered in her loop writing. It may be that the assignment—to write a reaction paper to the film—simply may not have prompted Maika to write about these experiences; in fact, overall she seemed to be concerned about the appropriateness of revealing personal details in a formal essay assignment. Unfortunately, Maika did not pass her summer course; she failed Basic Composition again in the fall, and struggled with the course again the following semester. The last writing I saw from Maika continued to show few signs of inviting the reader to share her experiences. I think she continued to have great difficulty because she did not trust the idea that her experiences expressed in written form were appropriate for college writing nor that they would result in the acceptance that she strives for in college.

Maika's lack of trust may result from years of compounded alienation experienced when confronting written assignments. Maika's failure illustrates the complex disassociation basic writers may experience when trying to fulfill written requirements in college. As Bizzell proposes, the difficulties of basic writers must be addressed by recognizing differences in dialects, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking ("What Happens" 297). The resistance that basic writers exhibit may be caused by their "feel[ing] that they are being asked to abandon their less prestigious, less socially powerful world views in favor of the academic" ("What Happens" 299). Awareness of why they find themselves resisting change gives basic writers more chances to survive in college. Bizzell sees that those who are aware are "sufficiently familiar" with the power behind the academic world view to influence society (299). Basic writers need to develop an understanding of why they write the way they do and of how their voices are their power and their unique contribution to academic discourse.

Let me share writing from another student in the group, Lydia, who was able to use expressive language in her academic discourse (avoiding betrayal and deprivation), and become aware of the reasons why she wrote as she did during the same six-week summer basic skills program that Maika attended, which included regular basic composition instruction supplemented by my basic composition writing workshops. Unlike Maika, Lydia's associative or expressive language was so integral to her personality that she could not exclude it when she wrote. At the end of our first session together, Lydia wrote about her writing in response to the following instructions:

Briefly describe your writing experiences at this point in your life. Feel free to be as informal as you like. What do you like about writing? What stinks about it? What do you do when you write? What kind of writing do you enjoy doing? What kind of process do you go through when you write? How has writing made you feel over the years? What works for you? What doesn't? You don't have to answer all of these questions. Just relax and describe how you and writing have gotten along.

She wrote,

I feel my writing techniques aren't that very good. I want to improve my vocabulary words now. I like writing what's on my mind and what I know about the subject I'm writing on. What stinks is I don't concentrate enough on the facts, my mind wanders off. I have the radio playing low, I try to get all my facts together, but it seems that my mind likes to wander. Writing on subjects as sex, cultural events, and racism. No process I just write and if it looks ok at that time find with me. Writing has made me feel that the way I represent myself on paper is the way I am in person. Getting an A+ works for me in my writing assignments, but how can I get an A+ when my facts and general ideas aren't in tact. Getting a C or D doesn't work for me. Because when I was in High School I rarely got a C. I never got a D in my work.

Much of what Lydia wrote was in response to each question presented, so it is unfair to approach her writing as an organized essay. In addition, the assignment called for freewriting. Lydia, however, pinpoints some of her writing shortcomings and areas of concern. She refers to a lack of concentration, wandering off, and an inability to stick to and collect facts--perhaps referring to things she's been told about her writing. But she comes to a startling observation near the end, "the way I represent myself on paper is the way I am in person." Connected to this awareness of her lack of concentration in writing is her sense that her writing is parallel to the way she expresses her person or personality. Lydia saw writing as a means of mirroring or reflecting her personality. While writing, she expressed who she was, and this perhaps disheartened her as it included the disorganization that surrounded her life. The associations, the inferences, the metaphors that accompanied her thought process surfaced whenever she wrote. However, she was also aware that in writing, ideas must be linked together one at a time in a linear fashion, and that words are used in writing in conventional ways and are expected to express specific pre-

determined meanings.

At the same time, Lydia also included in her writing the expressive discourse that made writing seem more natural to her--a discourse that basic writers often feel forced to reject when they write to fulfill the academic writing assignments. James Kinneavy sees the aim of all expressive discourse as being "to enable a new social personality to achieve self-determination" (410). I believe for basic writers expressive language is not the result of randomness, carelessness, or lack of organizational skills. It is "logical" in the sense that it is the result of an event or set of circumstances already experienced by the expressive language user. I believe that the "valued goal" for Lydia was to express her identity. Assuming this goal, she began using expressive language to "[work] towards its achievement." Or as Kinneavy might say that, by preserving expressive discourse in response to academic discourse, she aimed to "enable [her] new social personality to achieve self-determination" (410).

The problem with Lydia's response at this point in her writing experience was that she was unaware of the power of expressive language to achieve her goal of retaining her identity in writing. She lacked an awareness of the logic behind her expressive language. As a result, her expressive language often seemed to clash with what was required of her in academic writing. She needed to give a purpose to her expressive language that explored and questioned the reasons behind her distance from academic discourse. Without an awareness of the power of her expressive language to confront the dominating forces of academic discourse, Lydia was trapped, unable to reject writing due to her desire to be accepted in college, unable to conform to academic writing due to the political, social, and economic influences behind the controlling power of her own identity.

Linda Nelson, Professor of Writing at Stockton State College in southern New Jersey, tries to make her students aware of the power of using expressive language as a social force. She recalls how she herself, as a writer, succumbed to "the jacket voice" and had tried to erase any hint of her mother's Jamaican English which for Nelson had lower-class associations (172). She had learned to avoid her natural voice in order to gain recognition and acceptance. She had determined that the discourse required of success dictated that she become something that she was not. "The jacket voice" (172) resulted in good grades throughout elementary school and high school, but she was aware of what she was leaving behind and wondered what irreparable damage she was doing to her ability to express herself.

But I was keenly aware of other voices. Like an intimate long-ing, there was the voice of my father, a Mississippi sharecropper, who spoke to us sparingly in meandering folktales of

talkin'alligators in swamps, of culled boys making they way through grave yards at dusk, and of my great grandfather, a runaway slave who 'nare one heard tell of sense.' My father's voice was more like the voices of the parents, aunts, and uncles of my friends, as it spoke to me through the chords of his blues songs, from a cheap acoustic guitar and a small, metal harmonica. This was a rich, deep, tonal voice, a voice that was more metaphoric than literal, more hyperbolic than precise. (172)

Her awareness of what she was sacrificing enabled her to strike out against the standards of the academy. She no longer sought power in her words only, as her mother did, to "talk to white people and make them listen" (172), but instead she grabbed hold of the unconventional voice of her father, as she began to see herself as part of a social force. Writing was no longer "an act of conformity." Rather it became what Nelson defines as "an act of invention, which mirror[s] the truth of her experience" (173). As part of a marginal group that did not know it was being marginalized--that did not know it could be or should be a social force, she kept voices like her father's in check (174). She blames this on the ways that marginal groups often overzealously try to fulfill requirements in order to gain acceptance (174).

I believe that the writing that Maika produced when responding to her reaction paper assignment and the "jacket voice" used by Nelson are written discourses chosen by these writers to hide the evidence of the oppression, marginalization, betrayal, deprivation, and suppression that surrounds their lives. When expressive discourses like Maika's loop writing and Nelson's unconventional use of her father's voice in her writing are given space in academic writing they expose the malevolent trappings that control academic writing. Expressive discourse must be encouraged among basic writers in every stage of their writing processes, so that the dominant discourse does not dominate but simply resonates when other voices are purposely and strategically silenced for the benefit of the audience or reader used to or expecting the dominant discourse.

Basic writers often write with anger, but part of their underpreparedness is grounded in the fact that they cannot see the logic of their anger; and, like the young Nelson, they often feel compelled to hide this anger, unaware of the significance behind its force. Like Lydia, they are caught between the pressure to acquiesce to college standards for acceptance and their own personal commitment to familiar discourses. As Lu says, the audience that basic writers write to in college and the discourse they struggle to use are "strangers both in the political sense and linguistic sense"-- the world they are challenged to enter and respond to is a "world which has traditionally ex-



cluded people like the writer and his parents" ("Redefining" 32). But their thoughts, reported or recorded in writing without concerns about "how to sound 'right'" or the "anxiety to reproduce the conventions of 'educated' English" (Lu "Professing" 446), have the power to compete with the dominance of academic discourse, so that their expressive language need not be lost.

I think Lydia's writing changed as a result of a growing awareness of the power behind her marginality. She brought this newly found awareness of the political, social and economical reasons for her marginality to help her explain why she had been unable to enter the world of academic discourse before. In her final paper for the summer session, she included the following scenes:

When I was fourteen years old I terminated my first pregnancy. On June 13, 1988, at United Hospital in Newark, NJ. It was a mistake (the baby). I didn't know much about the facts of life, and when I wanted to know, my mother would reply her answers to my questions with absurd remarks. Remarks that I didn't want nor need to hear.

My biological father left me when I was three years old. I haven't seen him since. I always see pictures of him and I know I resemble him a lot.

Later in the paper she grapples to make sense of these experiences:

All the things she wanted to achieve in life that has failed her is now in my hands. I'm repeating all the mistakes she's made when she was my age. My mother conceived her first baby at the age of fourteen and in 1988 that's when I got pregnant. I guess she thought I was following in her footsteps, that I was going to be nothing like she is now. But she is totally wrong. My first baby was a mistake. Her first baby was a plan to use in order to get out of school faster and just stay home and do nothing. All she wanted to do is sit around and collect Welfare (Public Assistance).

I guess the reason why that my mother and I can't get along is because of my "father." All the pain and trauma he has caused her. It can also possibly be the fact that I look exactly like him. This makes her boil. Every time she looks at me she see a part of him, and that upsets her all over again.

In her concluding remarks, Lydia offered a solution and gave advice to her readers, showing that she could not only make sense of these scenes for herself in writing but could also take on the social



responsibility of informing others about the ill effects of her social and political conditions:

In summary, I would like to acknowledge to all youths that whenever they feel down or deeply depressed about a family dispute, seek professional counseling, or talk to someone who is willing to listen to you. Because the stress and lack of self-confidence could damn near kill them. I know because I traveled along that path many times.

This conclusion is a marked contrast to a conclusion from a paper that she offered earlier in the summer. Note below the reliance on the language of generalizations and cliches that she used to express her social awareness of how differently brothers and sisters are raised. Lydia was very happy with this paper at the time, but the struggle with having to make sense of her experiences is evident:

In summary, I feel there is not only a difference, but I do feel that there is a BIG difference in the way brothers and sisters are being treated. Whether the brother is older than his sister or the sister is older than the brother, whatever the case may be. Parents are more lenient with boys. The girls are sometimes looked on as "Ms. Likes". As the old saying goes; "boys will be Boys", and One, Twice, three times a lady."

Although she is aware of the social differences between brothers and sisters, this exposure of her awareness seems to have intimidated her into using cliches, a safer expressive language that hides the anger of being raised without the same privileges that her brother received, and that defies academic discourse by its lack of explanation.

She may have relied on this kind of language because she was struggling with her predicament. Instead of screaming out her rage on paper where she might reveal her vulnerability, she used language that offered little or no insight into her social identity. In a sense, she, too, succumbed to a kind of "jacket voice" — one that hides behind words rather than uses them for the more powerful purposes of illustration or explanation. Unlike Nelson, however, her "jacket voice" is associational and metaphorical. The discourse she uses is expressive under Kinneavy's definition — "with people we know well we do not have to fill in the background" (169), and it reflects an associative language more akin to discourses reserved for thinking and intimate speaking. Her mention of the "Big Difference" triggered off associations to "Ms. Likes," "Boys will be Boys," and "Once, Twice, Three times a lady," all intimate shorthand for an expressive language that does not reveal to the uninitiated. Her academic discourse reveals only partially, indi-

cating that she may be either reluctant or too intimidated to expose herself for fear of "betrayal" (Lu "Redefining" 35).

In this writing, Lydia reminds me of the boy that Mike Rose refers to in *Lives on the Boundary* (127-28). The boy was obsessed with the song, "My Boyfriend's Back"—he would play it over and over again, and sing the words with delight. Rose later learned that the boy's brother had disappeared to become a member of a street gang. The bits of the song that had phrases like, "My boyfriend's back and you're gonna be in trouble," represented a powerful expression for the boy, who perhaps lacked the self-awareness to express his deep sadness over the loss of the one guiding figure in his life. Like Lydia, the boy latched on to phrases that defined his conditions on the surface. Unlike Lydia later on, the boy could not at the time see the meanings behind his expressions, and, as a result, he could not yet enter into a discourse that expressed an awareness of his identity or an understanding of his social position. But Lydia was bringing discourses that she was already familiar with to her writing. She was beginning to entertain the idea that she could write in the way that she thinks. Her reliance on clichés and fragmented pieces of phrases and titles to express meaning signified that she believed writing could offer her the chance to express herself in an inventive way that reflected the intimacy of casual conversation among close friends. This step, taken to confront academic discourse, accompanied by her growing social awareness, demonstrated her willingness to take on academic writing rather than continue to be marginalized by it or have her expressive instincts consumed by it.

Without familiarity with the idioms associated with expressions and clichés, some basic writers can't even express themselves in this "safer" language within academia. The term "idiomaticity" is defined by Marion Okawa Sonomura as "what makes the expressions in a language sound appropriate and natural in that language" (1). Sonomura describes the "writings of unskilled writers as conspicuously unidiomatic" (2). Lydia used her familiarity with popular expressions to dare to write as if her academic audience would know what she meant. This took courage—the same courage it took to express the experiences with her abortion and the relationship with her mother. She used expressions and clichés in place of conventional idiomatic forms. By doing this, she could approach the intimacy that she needed from her writing audience. For someone struggling to use writing as a means of understanding her identity, this was a pivotal moment for her writing. It was important for her to believe that "they"—her audience—would know what she meant through the casual use of these fragmented pieces of language. Lydia's story is an affirmation of Lu's call to acknowledge that student writers have the same "political need and right of real writers to experiment with 'style'" (Lu "Professing" 446).

I would like to turn to another example of a basic writer whose discovery of the power of using expressive language in writing nurtured a social, political, and economic awareness that not only prepared him to use academic discourse but also taught him how to participate in shaping it to create a language that he felt comfortable calling his own. Anthony was introduced to me in a workshop I ran for the Legal Studies Division of the E.O.F. at Montclair State. In his last semester, he was anxiously anticipating graduation in the spring. It had taken him seven years to reach this point, and he took great pride in his ability to survive, overcoming the pain, temptation, and danger that go with being raised in the inner city. In our first session together, he spoke of many friends who had wasted away—the results of drug addiction and criminal activities. Anthony's voice spoke clearly as he related these personal stories—the scenes were vivid and painful to him, but he was eased by the pride he exuded from having avoided crime and drugs. Anthony was in my workshop with a clear purpose. His legal studies professor had given him a generous extension of a deadline for a paper on Malcolm X. He was given the opportunity to work on it the whole semester with me and to submit it in time to pass the class for graduation. He showed me the term paper that he had handed in last semester, and I had him do some freewriting on his writing process.

Since Anthony was a senior, I had assumed too much. Having heard him speak with confidence, I was convinced that his written expression would be powerful. I was mistaken. Anthony's writing was cramped and lifeless. He wrote in risk-free, short sentences, in a very deliberate and rehearsed fashion. He did not build up any argument nor develop nor extend any thought. He wrote, it seemed, only to state conclusions, not reach them.

His conclusions, however, lacked any impact because he did not allow any room for evidence, reasons, analogies, or illustrations to persuade his reader that his conclusions were verifiable. When he did cite authorities, he did not explain their relevance. In addition, he spewed propositions and claims that were not necessarily off-base or illogical (though many were) but primarily lacked justification. For example, in his second paragraph, he referred to the poor conditions of the schools and the lack of "transportation to and from school," but did not include enough detail to support his position in favor of Affirmative Action—the details he had articulated in our discussion about his background. Anthony's writing had no connection to "natural thinking" or habitual thinking" as described by Elbow. There was no effort to make associations or analogies to the vivid scenes he had described orally to me in our meeting. His writing, instead, reflected what Elbow would call a nervous voice, "flat, gravelly, monotone, and evacuated" ("Reflections" 147). It reflected an anxiety—perhaps caused

by a sudden feeling of being distanced from his conversational tone during our talk.

When I read his paper I could not picture the twinkle in his eye when he was relating his stories about inner city survival. Where did it go? Would I see it in the freewritten exercise I had just given him, I wondered, when I shook hands with him telling him how much I looked forward to our next meeting? As it turned out, his freewriting was as lifeless as the term paper:

Up to this point in my life, I find my writing skills to be somewhat awkward. Improvement could be made in some areas of my writing. One of the problems fall in the ability to develop my paragraphs and pages. I tend to develop writer's block whenever a writing assignment is given to me.

Anthony was a cramped writer. Unlike Lydia, he had not internalized the idea that he could bring his speaking or thinking habits to writing. Given the term paper deadline, I struggled with how I would have the time to present idea generating, prewriting exercises to him to help him summon the rich resources that seemed to be only given an outlet when he expressed himself orally.

Fortunately, at the same time that Anthony was attending my workshop he was also taking a nonfiction prose writing class, taught by Lee Khanna, a professor dedicated to using freewriting techniques. While I provided suggestions on how to address the subject of his term paper on Malcolm X, he was bringing in freewritings from his prose class about his job, the New York Giants, and getting a parking ticket. He wrote about what he liked to talk about. He began capturing the scenes from his life that meant the most to him, and he learned how to narrate; he began including details that built up suspense, developed connections between his ideas, and extended his meaning. His group work activities in the prose class also impressed upon him the need for a clear sense of purpose and audience.

My frustration was in seeing these marvelous gems develop while he ignored the Malcolm X topic. I kept asking for drafts of the term paper, but instead he kept bringing in papers from his prose class that he could not wait to read to me. As I read them I could understand why he exuded such excitement. One, entitled "Unnecessary Search" demonstrated not only the comfortable modes of expression for him, but in it he also began to "pay more attention to 'things out there' – to facts or logical, casual or chronological relations," as Kinneavy would call them (169). There was a thoroughness to his narrative, an effectiveness to his dialogue, and an ability to suspend information for a more powerful impact on his reader. This can be illustrated by the line, "Unfortunately, the officer did find something and it wasn't pretty."

Anthony ended the paper by describing his social awareness of being a victimized African American male:

I personally felt violated and angered. He claimed that his only reason for stopping me is that the rear license plate was crooked. I felt it was his chance to add another African-American male to the long list of drug dealers looking to make a deal. Fortunately, I don't use drugs nor deal with and I was clean.

What I failed to see initially in my frustration as the semester began to pass was how happy Anthony was to share his writing with me. I attribute this delight to the influence of his prose class. For the first time, Anthony was experiencing the pleasure of having his papers read by readers who listened carefully to his writing. Perhaps he was feeling the same pleasure he experienced when my attention was fixed on him as he spoke to me about his inner city experiences. He had earned what Brannon calls the reader's "assumption of the authority" behind the writer (158). And so Anthony was given inspiration to write, and to write about things he was an authority on—his life experiences. Brannon writes:

The incentive to write derives from an assumption that people will listen respectfully and either assent to or earnestly consider the ideas expressed. And ordinarily readers will make an honest effort to understand a writer's text provided that its ideas matter to them and provided that the writer's authority is sufficient to compel their attention. (158)

I am convinced that these essays, which offered him the chance to write academic discourse that include the expressive language with which he was familiar, worked as prewriting activities for his Malcolm X term paper. Anthony was learning to converse in writing. This conversational approach to writing released him from the restrictions that prevented him from expressing himself as fluently and cogently in writing as he did in casual conversation. To my delight, he entered my workshop in our next to last session with a term paper on Malcolm X. He was anxious to read it to me, the twinkle back in his eye as he retold me the stories (in writing this time) of his inner city experiences and how they related to the life of Malcolm X. I do not have a copy of Anthony's paper to reproduce—after he read it he rushed out with it to tie up the loose ends to prepare for his graduation. I learned later that Anthony received an A for his efforts on the paper, and that he did graduate.

By the time he graduated, Anthony did not feel as distanced

from writing as he had at the beginning of the semester. Writing was no longer disassociated from his everyday life. The writing he did that semester enabled Anthony to find a way to express his own voice and still write academic discourse. Empowered with the confidence to use the language that expressed and informed his past, he combined this with more traditional academic discourse to make sense of the political, social, and economic influences on his life, and to relate them to the subject at hand. He used his language and his experiences, instead of mimicry or imitation, to respond to an academic assignment.

How can composition classes allow basic writers the chance to achieve the preparedness for academic discourse that Lydia and Anthony apparently achieved? I believe that part of the goal can be reached if we accept expressive discourse in every stage of the basic writer's writing process. Gary R. Cobine explains the value of expressive language in writing:

As a writer confronts a topic, collects and recollects material, puts material into incipient forms, recognizes patterns of ideas and details, and reworks the material in various ways, the writer's expository modes are complemented and invigorated by the expressive mode. (2)

Such comprehensive acceptance of expressive language in the basic writer's writing process only can be achieved, however, when "politics of linguistic innocence" (Lu "Redefining" 27) and pedagogies of imitation are set aside for the freewheeling pedagogy of workshoping whereby students are encouraged to speak to and write for each other in discourses that are familiar to them. Such pedagogy rejects betrayal and deprivation as the unavoidable consequences of the basic writer's response to academic discourse. It is a pedagogy that strives to reshape academic writing into a discourse so that more and more writers like Maika, Lydia, and Anthony can choose to participate "in the context of the history, culture, and society in which they live" (Lu "Professing" 458).

Initially, for these basic writers, writing was an unfamiliar territory whereas thinking and speaking were known experiences. These students were distanced from academic discourse because it competes with the ways they are used to communicating their ideas to establish their identities. The writing workshop setting, however, made writing an essential factor for successfully communicating ideas and thoughts. It moved academia away from agendas that exist for the purpose of preserving a discipline (Rose 197) to conversations, interactions, and discussions that focus on students' intellectual development.

Workshops then invite basic writers to experience writing in a



context that mirrors how thought and speech develop. Writing is relied on to express what Elbow calls the "commonality of our hopes and fears and joys and sorrows, which we share as human beings" ("Example"). Relied on as such, writing can be trusted by basic writers to provide a discourse that is not just, as Sondra Perl puts it, a "cosmetic process where concern for correct form supersedes development of ideas" (436). This process involves a germination whereby basic writers begin to make sense of their expressive language leading to social identity and self-awareness moving the basic writer toward preparedness in writing. The causes and effects of their situations become more obvious, and writing becomes a way to make sense of and expose the conditions that have left them underprepared. Writing becomes not an act of conformity but a method of helping students empower themselves to enter into a discourse that once pushed them into the margins. The more basic writers become prepared writers who eschew the temptation to conform and imitate for acceptance, the greater chance our language has of becoming more sensitive to multicultural concerns and more openly accountable for the damage caused from academia's privileging of dominant discourses.

As I think back to my valuable and unique teaching experiences with Maika, Lydia, and Anthony, I also recall a "Diversity Day Workshop" I attended at Brookdale Community College about four years ago. The keynote speaker was Dr. David Abalos, Professor of Religious Studies and Sociology at Seton Hall University. I remember being riveted to every word during his lecture, "The Four Faces of Multicultural and Women's Scholarship from a Perspective of a Theory of Transformation," because what I heard him say about marginalized communities spoke to the lives of the basic writers I have encountered. Abalos talked about how minorities are afraid to reveal weaknesses in a world of power. They have to live lives of repression. Minorities, according to Abalos, often get over their inferiority in the face of powerful forces by assimilating—stripping themselves of uniqueness. But Abalos called for a "vomiting out" of the "poison" learned from the stories of patriarchy that conditions the powerless to repress their stories. Abalos advises instructors to assist students to tell their stories, so that students can recover from the traumas caused by physical abuse, mental abuse, and desertion.

Writing workshops enable my students to tell their stories in a discourse that has its roots in a language they can call their own, a language that survives when the entire process of writing is complete. The language that is closest to their own is the language of their thoughts and their intimate conversations with friends and family. Expressive language, therefore, must be encouraged when teaching basic writers if they are to see that writing is a form of communication that has space for their intimate thoughts and ideas to take shape. When ideas can



take shape, conversations and discussions can take place that encourage self-awareness. The discovery of who they are and where they find themselves in society needs to be significant enough to convince basic writers not to sacrifice awareness of their political, social, and economic conditions for acceptance and recognition. This is not easy, and it is a battle that I believe rages with every class that I teach. By making writing an act of invention and expression throughout every step of the writing process for basic writers, I give my students a chance to become prepared writers. And when basic writers are no longer distinguishable from prepared writers they can become part of the mechanism that determines the way our written language develops and the way that written words signify meanings.

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