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THEORY IN THE BASIC WRITING CLASSROOM? A PRACTICE

*Just when some of us were beginning to feel mentally exhausted from the stimulating workshop sessions, we were reinvigorated by Victor Villanueva. With an infectious energy, he got everyone working, writing, sharing, and totally engaged in the process of making meaning with words. Victor Villanueva, Jr. is professor in the English Department at Washington State University at Pullman and author of the critically acclaimed *Bootstraps: From An American Academic of Color*. He is also Program Chair of the 1998 CCCC Convention and, despite being inundated with preparations for the most important conference in our field, he made time to write this paper detailing some of his techniques for enabling student success in his basic writing classroom.*

A Personal History of the Practice

None of this started with me—these exercises and skits that I'm about to describe. They began with Ann Berthoff, in some sense, though mixed with Harvey Daniels and Susanne Langer, Kenneth Burke, ancient rhetoricians. And there was James Berlin, Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, and my responses to a once popular line of research and theory. A complex web. And like a web, having purpose and design.

But let me unravel this a bit, explain some of the thinking that led to the practice that I'll demonstrate below. I came to Composition Studies during Composition's romance with cognitive psychology. Composition was trying to figure out what it is writers do when they write, what kinds of cognitive processes are at play during writing. The models created by folks like Linda Flower and John R. Hayes told us a great deal. But there were the Basic Writers, those who seemed unable to write with the same fluency as those described in the well-delineated writing models. Sondra Perl looked to those less proficient writers, those whose writing proficiency seemed rudimentary at best, basic. She demonstrated that the basic writers displayed all the complexities of writing behaviors found among the more traditional first-year composition students. So saying, however, brought us no closer to understanding the disparity between basic writers and the first-year comp students we were more accustomed to seeing. One set of responses within a cognitive framework argued that the difference between the basic writer and the traditional was a matter of cognitive

development. Basic writers hadn't yet reached a level of cognitive development which would allow for the abstract reasoning required of college literacy, they said.

The idea that basic writers – in some important ways people very much like me – were developmentally dysfunctional posed problems for me. Not only were issues of class and race or ethnicity being circumvented; there were seeming contradictions that weren't being accounted for: cognitively deficient, said one line of research; cognitively sophisticated said another. Mike Rose, a self-avowed cognitivist at the time, made it clear that developmental psychology was not sufficiently understood in the labeling of basic writers ("Rigid Rules"). That meant another explanation was necessary in explaining what made for the basic writer. My own take was to look at the social and the political (which would include the economic). Among other things, I found a variation of Basil Bernstein's studies on the ways different social class assumptions take shape in language. Although I oversimplify, Basil Bernstein found that students from working-class backgrounds spoke in what he termed a restricted code, in which discourse is fragmented because there is a sense of a communal understanding among speakers. Everything doesn't have to be spelled out when there is great commonality. The middle class, according to Bernstein, could not assume the same degree of shared knowledge as the working-class, so their discourse displayed an elaborated code. Everything is subject to negotiation and must thereby be fully articulated. That code, the elaborated code, is the code which is rewarded in academic settings. But Bernstein was not studying American college classrooms. In the composition classrooms I studied, I found almost the opposite took place. That is, the basic writing students, although having a restricted code when speaking among themselves, tried to write in an elaborated code to their instructor, believing themselves distanced from that instructor yet finding themselves unable to transact effectively in that code, not having been sufficiently exposed to it. In social-class terms, the working class didn't know how to write for what they perceived to be the middle class. The middle-class students, apparently feeling at ease in the discourse of the community, worried less about the academic discourse community than teacher expectations. Not feeling a distance from their teachers' range of experiences and ways with discourse, the traditional first-year comp students focused on matters of correctness and adherence to their perceptions of teachers' expectations. Maybe better put, the traditional first-year comp students placed more attention on teacher expectation in matters of form or correctness; whereas the basic writers focused almost exclusively on being heard, though not knowing how to manipulate text so as best to be heard. While they worried over how to elaborate their ways of seeing to what they perceived to be a foreign audience, they had an inadequate repertoire with

which to be read by that audience. They could narrate as a rule but go no further in the ways of academic discourse.

The issue of basic writers and the ways of the academic discourse community was taken up by David Bartholomae. According to Bartholomae, although basic writing students have a wealth of experience, most often experiences of interest to those not of the same class or racial or ethnic background as the students, the students are compelled to frame those experiences and ways of seeing in a discourse they have little or no experience with. At the point in which first-person narrative is disallowed or discouraged (which should be quickly, as a matter of survival), basic writing students must pretend to be insiders within a foreign discourse community. Bartholomae doesn't say that basic writers need to learn basics, as in rules of grammar and the like (a cause of writer's block, according to Rose); he says, rather, that basic writers must learn the discourse conventions of academics (like all first-year writers, just more so). In a way, Lisa Delpit agreed, arguing that students of color, so often the students in basic-writing classrooms, do not believe they are being treated with respect when they are asked to engage in now-traditional writing-process pedagogy. Although the pedagogy arises from sophisticated theory and research, it is too often not perceived as such by too many of those we are seeking to reach.

How then to get basic-writing students to realize that, as Perl had shown, the processes they undergo are no different from others? How to have them realize that they possess innate abilities with language? How to demonstrate that their experiences have value? How to have students believe they will be treated with respect? One answer to all of these questions comes by way of an opening demonstration and lecture that I present to incoming students. This is almost a script that I present to experienced teachers, graduate students, and more typical first-year students in a predominately white institution. It was developed for basic writers, however, where it has proven its effectiveness, at least for me.

The Script

A basic-writing classroom. Not many before me, really, about twenty: a couple of students who have been through the series of ESL courses and still haven't placed in the regular 101 course, a couple of apparently (but not necessarily, I know) white male students, baseball caps on backwards, baggy T-shirts, slouched low in their seats, staring at the pen at the end of outstretched arms, doodling in the air an inch above the desk. A few apparently white women, the spectrum of hair colors with which women are too easily categorized: blonde-brunette-

redhead, none dressed like the other, though all smartly dressed (The Cube, The Gap), all in their mid-twenties, maybe, poised, friendly faces somehow. The rest, a cross-section of America's people of color: African-American men and women, the men in caps that recall cab drivers of a generation and a half ago, brims to the back, baggy clothes, seemingly new athletic shoes (black swashes and maple leaf symbols prominently displayed on white); the women in tight-fitting blouses and bell-bottomed pants and dress shoes, one African American woman sporting dark glasses and blonde hair. The latinos and latinas are short-haired hatless men; women with hair teased high in the front, baggy pants; the women and the men in baggy plaid shirts over baggy white T-shirts. The American Indians are mainly men and women dressed much like the latinos and latinas, though some sport pointed high heeled cowboy boots and tight Wrangler jeans. Minor variations, often a mix of Asian Americans and Asian Internationals, a Malaysian, maybe, an Iranian or someone from the United Arab Emirates, but pretty much the same basic-writing classroom in the northwest, the southwest, the midwest.

A short, bearded man walks into the classroom, the air of familiarity with which he walks to the front desk marking his role. A mutual stare, the teacher and the students, expressionless.

"Take out a sheet of paper!"

Audible sighs, eyes suddenly shut and held shut softly for too long, or eyes rolled up to the ceiling for just an instant, postures changing to upright for most, the shuffling that comes at this command, even when notebooks are opened on the desk and pens are in hand.

"Here's what I want you to do. On the upper left hand corner of the paper, write a word, any word. On the right, its opposite. Hot [gesture with the left hand]. Cold [gesture with the right]. Up. Down.

"Don't hesitate [staring at those staring back]! Just do it [softer tone]."

Pens scratch on paper. Almost all resistance fades. Curiosity has the upper hand.

"Now, go to that word on the left and generate a list of 15 words. Just write what comes to mind. Don't worry about logical connections. If *hot* makes you think of *weather*, write down *weather*. If *weather* makes you think of *sweat*, write that down [some smiles]. *Sweat* to *running* or to *deodorant*; whatever. Write it down without stopping to think. Go!"

And they write. And the Authority points to those who stop and look up or look to the side in that look of a writer thinking of what to write, the stares one sees so often in college coffee hangouts and student union buildings: "Write. Don't hesitate." Very soon the pens stop and the Authority sees faces rather than the tops of heads, the eyes more engaged than a few minutes ago.

"Now do the same with the word on the right; this time, generating 10 words."

And they do.

"You now have 27 words in front of you. Using 25 of those 27 words—and only those 25 words—compose a poem."

"You mean we can't add any helping words?"

"Using 25 of those 27 words, compose a poem."

Heads bend forward. A major undertaking, embarrassed smiles, some head-shaking sneers, some wrinkled brows, and always a couple (almost always literally two) who either stare at the page with pen poised but never touching paper or staring straight ahead or staring defiantly at the teacher. And he stares back with no sign of displeasure or discomfort. They fit his plan. They just don't know it.

Maybe ten minutes pass. A few are done, smiles of pride or embarrassment.

"Give it one or two more minutes."

Scurry.

Five minutes pass.

"Okay. Read over your poem and drop five words, making whatever changes you think become necessary in dropping those words."

A different kind of sigh. This time, relief. Three minutes, maybe.

"Drop three more words."

Some grumbles. Some glares. Another minute.

Students are asked to read the poems. Discussion—not about quality—but about what they hear in the poems. One poem from the blonde-haired, blue eyed, younger woman in khaki shorts, and sleeveless light blue cotton blouse.

Warm, soft smell

Tail, freckles

Sleeping poppy blue roads

Barking meadows, hot mountains

paws walk, castles,

Denmark

She reads softly, an English that speaks of California. Students say there's something there about her pet.

"Yeah, like she thinkin about her pet. She thinkin about her pet when she went on vacation to Europe."

"Yeah, but her pet's there with her, so maybe she lived there for a while."

"Yeah, right. More like a trip instead of a vacation. Know what I mean?"

This goes on in different ways for about two minutes.

[To the writer]: "So what do you figure might have been on your mind?"

And we learn that the California white woman among us is really an immigrant from Denmark feeling decidedly foreign within this crowd, missing the dog she had as a child, taking a momentary journey home.

We do this over and again, hearing from five or six and discussing what we have heard. There are plenty of volunteers.

“So what’s the point? The point is that when you say you have nothing to write, you mean that you don’t know what the teacher wants you to write. And if you found you couldn’t generate a list or compose a poem, it was either because you needed to know more about what I was up to or you worried that you wouldn’t produce what I was after. You’ve been convinced that writing is a set of ‘rigid rules and inflexible plans’ [Rose’s words]. But those rules and plans are later matters, what’s written, not writING. What we have just done is gone through a writing process: a free generation of ideas, a composing of those ideas (since composing means putting this with that to come up with something different, like a musician composing, like saving food leftovers for a *compost* which will make new foods possible in some sense). Then I asked you to revise. This is kind of artificial, of course, since all I allowed was deletion. But y’all grumbled and groused when I told you to delete a second time. And the reasons for that was first, that you knew you were being messed with [smiles and nods, but no laughter; being messed with is not a funny matter; but having it acknowledged is different]; and second, you had come to like what you had done. What you wrote came from within and thereby had meaning for you, was like that ashtray at woodshop, nothing to put in a museum but something crafted by you. That’s what writing can be: something from you, crafted by you. And finally, you published. You went public. And in going public, you found out how others interpret what you have written and how sometimes you yourself have to step back to interpret. Writing, all communication, is a matter of someone saying something to someone, even if that someone is the I speaking to its me.

“You see, writing is not a matter of inspiration, nor is it necessarily the special province of the gifted [using this very vocabulary as a matter of respect, a matter of introduction to the discourse of the academy]. Writing is a craft, a craft that can aspire to art—that cabinet that was first crafted by a cabinetmaker and was used, that then became an antique because it stood the test of time, that then became considered art, a Chippendale, say [a glint from a woman or two and one of the guys]. I’m talking about furniture, and you think of the topless dancing men. But that’s how they get the name: they’re men who crafted

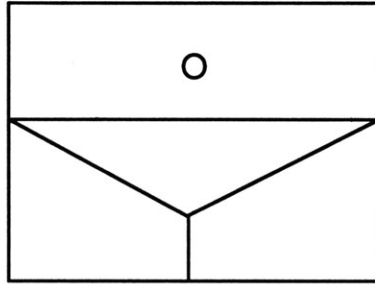
their bodies to become what some of y'all think of as art, maybe. The Chippendale furniture uses wood as its raw material. The Chippendale men use their bodies. Writers use their experiences, sometimes only their experiences with others' writing, but their experiences nevertheless, to express something to someone else. This is basic humanness.

"Let me do it this way. No experience is ever repeated. [Pause] No experience is ever repeated [said each time in a monotone]. No experience is ever repeated. Hear me out. There really isn't a contradiction in what I just did. The first time I said that, you looked at me seriously. It was a new idea for most of you. I got it from Plato who wrote that Socrates had said that. The second time, y'all looked at me a little funny, still thinking seriously and wondering about the apparent contradiction. The third time you started thinking I was downright silly. You did not experience those words the same way each time. The experience was not repeated. And time had passed. And even though I tried to keep my inflection the same, it couldn't have possibly been identical each time. The experience hadn't been repeated by me or by you. It only appeared to be repeated because of the words.

"Hold that in memory for a minute while I explore a related idea. We can sense more than we think we can sense. The five senses are only a scientific convenience. Our senses fall into one another. You can hear a blaring sound and think of a color. Some colors are loud, we say. Or you would say 'That tastes like crap.' How do you know? If you know empirically, by having actually eaten crap, I don't want to know [great laughter, but also that glimmer in eyes that all teachers know and try to recapture with every moment in every classroom]. We can say that because a taste and a smell and texture all suggest one another. That's why little children will not eat ugly food. We learn to taste despite looks (at least some of the time). Or think of the Eskimo. The anthropologist tells us that Eskimos have several words for snow. We don't in English. All we have are adjectives — powder, wet, dry, thick, et cetera. Even when we use the words as nouns — 'A fine powder' — we don't think of powder; we think of snow, the word *snow*. How are we different from the Eskimos when it comes to snow? [The answer always comes]. That's right, snow is an integral part of the Eskimo's environment, a part of their context, in a way that it isn't for us, as a rule (and when it is, it's no longer snow; it's a storm or a blizzard — words which don't mean the same as snow; they're different things).

"Hold that for a minute too. I'll tie things together in a bit."

[Now placing a drawing on the board:



“What do you see?”

Responses come, hesitantly at first—a martini glass with an olive descending, an abstract Christ figure, a close-up of a woman in a bikini [for which one student once complained that I had drawn a dirty picture on the board—not all understand]. Soldiers fresh from Korea saw a cabinet with a knob for a drawer and two cabinet doors, as well as the bikini and the martini. An American Indian student in the southwest saw a sunrise over a mesa. Returning students after long hours working in offices saw a message envelope. Young men in the midwest and the southwest (but not in the northwest) saw the pocket to a cowboy shirt. What the students come up with is discussed, as well as what students-past have come up with.

“We perceive meaningless lines and our imaginations strive to give them meaning, but in order to make its meaning complete, it must be named. And the meaning and naming come from experience. Eskimos experience snow differently from Americans living south of Canada; the snow carries several meanings, so it acquires different names. All of you know words that don’t translate well—the meanings of *dude* [mimicking the word with different inflections] or *get outa here* [mimicking] or words from another language that have no equivalents in English. Those phrases, or idioms, and those words carry cultural meaning that because they grow from within one culture’s experiences don’t always transport to another culture with different physical environments, and different values and concerns, with different ideologies or ways of seeing the world.

We can know more through our senses than we realize. And no experience is ever repeated. So how can we make sense of our world? Through language. We name the things that matter to us, to our cultures. Language is our sorting mechanism. To make sense, we name the things and the events that matter to us. Or we say one experience is very much like another—*simile*, remember from high school? *analogy* [writing the word on the board]—and we give it a word. No two home runs are the same, for instance, but hitting a ball a certain dis-

tance and within a certain set of lines which gives enough time for a person or more to go to a certain spot becomes similar enough that, even though never identical to previous events of the sort, are similar enough to warrant a name—*homerun*, which lots of folks spell as one word, like a thing that needs a name.

“We use language to make sense of our world. It is the thing that makes us unique among beings on the planet. I’m not saying language makes us different. We know that other creatures have language. But no other creature that we know of uses language the way we do. The wonders of science, the wonders of technology, none of it could have taken place without language, without the means by which we make sense of the world and communicate with one another. A rhetorician named Kenneth Burke [more about what that word *rhetoric* means will come up on other days] wrote that we are beings who are given to symbols. Now I’m not talking about symbols like you might have heard someone say was going on in a novel; I mean something that stands for something else. We are given to symbols—houses to represent whatever shelter we might have once known before we constructed houses (caves, say). Cars to replace our legs, symbols of an earlier form of transportation—car as short for carriage as short for horseless carriage that still has horsepower. Clothes to replace fat and hair and animal skins. Glasses for eyes. We love symbols. Math is a set of symbols that represent numbers of things. Algebra is a symbol of the symbol. But our basic symbols are language—sounds that represent things and ideas. And writing is the symbol that represents the sound that represents the thing or idea. That’s how we know anything—through symbols. Language is [to the board]

E - P - I - S - T - E - M - O - L - O - G - I - C - A - L
Epistemological—a word used by philosophers to mean how we come to know. Philosophers—a lot of them—are convinced that how we come to know is through experience and the experience is defined in language that we are exposed to from the moment we’re born (if not before).

“In other words, you are all already language users. In a sense, you are experts, since you’ve been using this thing—language—for so long. And you already know the symbols that represent the sounds (though I know it isn’t always one-to-one, but that’s historical; *through* was once pronounced with a guttural end that the *gh* represented). But the point remains—you are all language users. You are all writers who can compose if you don’t get hung up with rules. What you are at this point are simply folks who don’t yet know how to translate what you know into a way that is used in this culture—the university. And of course, you still have more experiences to gain, including the experiences that the books you will read throughout the years will provide.

“What we’re talking about here is how to use a knife and fork—

the conventions of a culture—the academic culture and later the culture of whatever your major will be. Go across the border to Canada. You'll see that proper manners with a knife and fork is to hold the fork tines down with the left hand, cut your food with the right, and bring the food to your mouth with the left hand, the tines still down [replete with gestures]. Proper U.S. etiquette is to put the knife down, move the fork to the right hand, and bring the food to your mouth with the tines up on the fork. Both ways make sense or are just as senseless. They're just matters of convention within particular environments. There are conventions of language use and conventions of evidence for arguments—"cause I said' never works here. That's what you've got to learn. Not how to write. But how to write within the conventions of the university."

We end the hour by returning to one of the poems the students constructed. On the board we work at translating it to prose. Then we fool with turning it to jargon. I make the final revision:

There is a recollection of the possession of a domestic canine companion. It contains small cancerous epidermal tissue and emits a scent that is pleasant to olfactory senses. It accompanies among flower-strewn byways, the while making sounds of possible contentment as we stroll the meadows overshadowed by apparently torrid mountainous regions, toward the ancient grand edifices of the land of the Danes.

I tell them that this is more baroque and fatuous than academic, really, and that we will speak of using jargon later [don't—until it's simply a part of the writer]. And we're done for the day.

A Beginning

There is no conclusion, only the beginning. A complex set of ideas that range from the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle to Kenneth Burke and Bakhtin has been presented to students with the assumption that they are worthy of an explanation of the pedagogy which they will take part in. An idea of worth is transmitted. Writing opens and closes the discussion—students' writing. The success that will come of this opening session is never complete: a couple of students will drop the course, one or two will stop working, most will not be converted into A writers. But most will believe themselves to be college students with conventions to learn. In the end, I will give them grades for their work as students, and I will tell each honestly what they would have likely gotten if the grade depended solely on their written products. We will talk of what they know of their writing processes, support mechanisms

like writing centers where more work can take place in refining those processes. We will have done what can be done in the less than 40 contact hours we're afforded in classrooms over a semester or quarter.

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