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TEACHING BASIC WRITING:
AN ALTERNATIVE TO BASIC SKILLS

At the University of Pittsburgh, we teach Basic Writing to around 1,200 students each year. The instruction is offered through two different courses—Basic Writing (3 hours, 3 credits) and Basic Reading and Writing (6 hours, 6 credits). We also have a Writing Workshop, and basic writers frequently attend, but their attendance is voluntary, and the workshop is not specifically for writers with basic problems.

The courses are not conventional remedial courses: they carry full graduation credit and there is little in the activity the courses prescribe to distinguish them from any general or advanced composition course. In fact, because of the nature of the assignments, the courses would be appropriate for students at any level. This is certainly not to say that there is no difference between a basic writer and any other student writer. There are significant points of difference. But it is a way of saying that writing should be offered as writing—not as sentence practice or paragraph practice—if the goal of a program is to produce writers. The assignments, about 20 in a 15 week term, typically ask students to consider and, from various perspectives, reconsider a single issue, like "Identity and Change" or "Work and Play."[1] In the most general terms, the sequence of assignments presents writing as a process of systematic inquiry, where the movement from week to week defines stages of understanding as, week by week, students gather new information, attempt new perspectives, re-formulate, re-see, and, in general, develop a command of a subject.

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1. For an example of such a sequence of assignments, and for discussion of sequence as a concept, see: William E. Coles, Jr., *Teaching Composing* (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1974) and William E. Coles, Jr., *The Plural I* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978). My debt to Bill Coles will be evident everywhere in this paper.

The instruction in writing, which is basically achieved through discussion of mimeographed copies of student papers, directs students in a systematic investigation of how they as individuals write, and of what they and their fellow students have written. The assumption behind such a pedagogy is that growth in writing ability is individual; that is, it will follow its own developmental logic, one that derives from a syllabus "built into" the learner, and such growth takes place not through the acquisition of general rules but through the writer's learning to see his language in relation to the languages around him, and through such perception, to test and experiment with that language. Such a process begins not with the study of Writing in the abstract, but only when a student develops a way of seeing his own writing, and a way of seeing that his writing has meaning beyond its paraphrasable context, that it is evidence of a language and a style.

We set out, then, to construct a pedagogy to develop that analytical reflex that would enable students to see their writing as not only "what they said," but as real and symbolic action: real, as deliberate, strategic, and systematic behavior, not random or outside the realm of choice and decision; and symbolic, as dramatically represented through such terms as "voice" or "writer," "audience," "approach," and "world view."[2] For the basic writer, this might mean the recognition that the errors in his writing fall into patterns, that those patterns have meaning in the context of his own individual struggle with composing, and that they are not, therefore, evidence of confusion or a general lack of competence.[3] This perspective might mean the recognition that one's writing defines a stance in relation to an imagined audience or an imagined subject and that any general improvement would include improved control over that kind of imagining. Or this perspective might bring about the recognition that writing is deliberate and strategic, not random, not something that just happens to a writer. When students are able to see that they have been making decisions and exercising options, other decisions and other options become possible.

The nominal subject of the course, then, is defined by an issue like "Work and Play," but the real subject is writing, as writing is defined by

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2. I am making a distinction here very similar to that in Richard Ohmann, "In Lieu of a New Rhetoric," College English, 26 (October, 1964), 17-22.

3. I am, of course, summarizing one of the key findings of Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). This paper draws heavily on Shaughnessy's work.

students in their own terms through a systematic inquiry into their behavior as writers. Behind this pedagogy is the assumption that students must be actively writing and simultaneously engaged in a study of their own writing as evidence of a language and a style, as evidence of real and symbolic action.

Most basic writing programs I observe, and most basic writing texts, are developed as though this were not possible. They begin with the assumption that the writing of basic writers is a "simpler" version of a universal writing process, or that it is evidence of unformed or partially developed language behavior, that the performance of basic writers is random, incoherent, as if basic writers were not deliberately composing utterances but responding, as the dominant metaphor would have it, mechanically and doing so with unreliable machinery. The end product of this reasoning is that basic writers need, finally, to learn basic or constituent skills, skills that somehow come prior to writing itself. Before students can be let loose to write, the argument goes, they need a semester to "work on" sentences or paragraphs, as if writing a sentence in a workbook or paragraph in isolation were somehow equivalent to producing those units in the midst of some extended act of writing, or as if the difficulties of writing sentences or paragraphs are concepts rather than intrinsic to the writer and his struggle to juggle the demands of a language, a rhetoric, and a task. These basic skills are defined in terms of sequences—"words, sentences, paragraphs, essays" or "description, narration, exposition, persuasion"—that, in turn, stand for a pedagogy.

Such a pedagogy meets the immediate needs of teachers who are frustrated by an almost complete inability to understand what could be happening in the heads of students whose writing seems to be so radically different from their own, or from the writing they've learned to read. And it is the convenience of this pedagogy, which frees all parties, teachers and students, from ever having to talk about writing, that leads teachers to hang on to it in the face of evidence that it produces limited returns. The skills curriculum is not founded on any investigation of the language that students produce, nor any systematic investigation into how writing skills are acquired. If there is a syllabus common to such skills courses, it derives its logic and its sequence from the traditional study of the sentence and the paragraph, units the learner is seen as incompetent to produce, rather than from any attempt to imagine a sequence of instruction drawing on the syllabus built into the learner, corresponding to his particular competence and the stage of his development in the acquisition of the formal, written dialect.

The distinction that needs to be made, I think, is the distinction between competence and fluency.[4] Mina Shaughnessy's brilliant study of the writing of basic writers in *Errors and Expectations* shows the fallacy behind the thinking that equates signs with causes, that necessarily assumes a student misspells because he can't spell, leaves endings off verbs because he doesn't know how tenses are formed, or writes a sentence fragment because he doesn't understand the concept of a sentence. Her work defines both the theory and the method of analysis that can enable us to see student error as other than an accident of composing or a failure to learn. In fact, she argues that the predictable patterns of error are, themselves, evidence of students' basic competence, since they show evidence that these writers are generating rules and forming hypotheses in order to make language predictable and manageable.[5] Errors, then, can often be seen as evidence of competence, since they are evidence of deliberate, coherent action. Error can best be understood as marking a stage of growth or as evidence of a lack of fluency with the immensely complicated process of writing, where fluency can be as much a matter of manipulating a pen as it can be of manipulating constituents of syntax.

A pedagogy built upon the concept of fluency allows distinctions analogous to those Frank Smith makes in his analysis of the reading process. A fluent reader, according to Smith, is one who can immediately process large chunks of information, as compared to the reader for whom the process is mediated by mental operations that are inefficient, inappropriate or a stage in some necessary developmental sequence.[6] Basic skills, then, are basic to the individual's ability to process information and can be developed only through practice. The natural process of development can be assisted by pedagogies that complement an individual developmental sequence, and by those that remove barriers, false assumptions, like the assumption that readers read each word, or read sounds, or understand everything at every moment.

BASIC WRITING

Our program begins, then, with the recognition that students, with the exception of a few who are learning disabled or who have literally never

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4. For a discussion of this distinction between fluency and competence see David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," *Linguistics, Stylistics and the Teaching of Composition,* Donald McQuade, ed. (Akron, Ohio: Akron University Press, scheduled for publication in November, 1978).

been taught to form words, possess the skills that are truly basic to writing. They have the ability to transcribe speech into writing, and the writing they produce is evidence of the ability to act deliberately in the production of units of discourse to some degree beyond the single sentence. We separate out, as secondary, what can justifiably be called mechanical skills, skills that can be taught as opposed to those that can only be developed.[7] D'Angelo has defined these skills as handwriting, capitalization, punctuation and spelling.[8] Since a knowledge about these is of a different order than linguistic or rhetorical knowledge, they are not the immediate subject of a course in composition. Since, however, errors of capitalization, punctuation, or spelling are not necessarily due to a simple lack of information about capitalization, punctuation, or spelling but must be seen in the context of an individual's confrontation with the process of composing through written language, this is not to say that a concern for those errors is secondary.

A responsible pedagogy, I've been arguing, begins by making the soundest possible speculation about the syllabus built into the learner, rather than imposing upon a learner a sequence serving the convenience of teachers or administrators. We have decided that the key to such a sequence lies in what we might call a characteristic failure of rhetorical imagining, a failure, on the part of basic writers, to imagine themselves as writers writing. Or, to phrase it another way, the key to an effective pedagogy is a sequence of instruction that allows students to experience the possibilities for contextualizing a given writing situation in their own terms, terms that would allow them to initiate and participate in the process by which they and their subject are transformed. This, I take it, is the goal of Friere's pedagogy for non-literate Brazilians, a "problem-posing" education that enables the individual to turn his experience into subject matter and himself into the one who names and, thereby, possesses that subject.[9]

The goal of instruction in basic writing at the University of Pittsburgh is to enable students to locate ways of perceiving and describing

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5. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations,* 104-5, 117-18.

6. Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971).

7. John Warnock, "New Rhetoric and the Grammar of Pedagogy," *Freshman English News,* 5(Fall, 1976), 12.

8. Frank J. D'Angelo, "The Search for Intelligible Stucture in the Teaching of Composition," *College Composition and Communication,* 27 (May, 1976), 142-147.

9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968). See chapter two.

themselves as writers. We've chosen to do this by involving them, through class discussion of student papers, in the regular, systematic analysis of what they have written and how they went about writing it. The only text for the course, then, is the students' own writing and if there is a theory of instruction, it is embodied in the kinds of conversations we have in class about that writing. The classes are designed to enable students to develop, for themselves and in their own terms, a vocabulary that will allow them to name and manipulate their own idiosyncratic behavior as writers. The conversations in class, as the class evolves over the term, approach writing in four ways. The approaches, of course, overlap and at times seem identical rather than different, but for convenience's sake let me describe four perspectives we want students to develop on their performance as writers.

The first of these "approaches" asks students to consider writing as an experience by asking them to analyze and describe their experience with our assignments over the course of the semester. If they do nothing else, discussions about how an assignment was done, what it was like and how it felt can enable students to see the ways in which writing is a human activity, one that can be defined in personal terms. For students who see writing as a mystery, or as a privilege of caste, it is liberating to hear others, including instructors, talk about how sloppy the process is, or about ways others have dealt with the anxiety and chaos that so often accompany writing. It's liberating to hear of the habits and rituals of other writers. It's liberating to find out that ideas often start out as intuitions, as a sense of a connection it would be nice to make, and that the ideas only become reasoned and reasonable after repeated acts of writing. It's helpful to discover that other writers get stuck or have trouble starting at all, just as it is helpful to hear about ways others have found of getting past such blocks. And finally, it is always liberating for students to hear that successful and experienced writers produce good sentences and paragraphs only after writing and throwing away a number of lousy sentences and paragraphs. This is not how writing is described in our textbooks, and students, even if they know how to talk about "topic sentences," "development," or "transitions," don't know how to talk about writing in ways that make sense given their own felt experience with the process.

Writing is a solitary activity and writers are limited by the assumptions they carry with them to the act of writing. They are limited, that is, by the limits of their ability to imagine what writing is and how writers behave. The basic writers we see characteristically begin with the assumption that

good writers sit down, decide what they want to say and then write straight through from an Introduction to a Conclusion without making any mistakes along the way. So if it is liberating to hear about the struggles and rituals of other writers, the power of such liberation extends beyond the comfort that one is not alone, since the process of identifying a style of composing, and seeing that style in relation to other styles, is the necessary prelude to any testing and experimenting with the process of writing.

In addition, the activity of collecting information from the reports of other students, generalizing from that information, and defining a position in relation to that general statement recapitulates the basic intellectual activity of the course. It is exactly what students are doing as they write papers on "Work and Play."

One way of approaching student writing, then, is to have students, once they have finished an assignment, gather specific information on what was easy and what was hard, what was frustrating and what was satisfying, where they got stuck, what they did to get going again, and so on.

Another way of approaching writing is to have students analyze their performance as a task or a problem-solving procedure.[10] Since writing is, by its nature, a strategic activity, any discussion of strategy in general ought to begin with students' analyses and descriptions of the strategies underlying and perhaps inhibiting their own performance as writers. The point of such discussion is not to give students rules and procedures to follow, recipes for putting a paper together, but to put them in a position to see their own writing as deliberate, strategic activity and to put them in a position to find labels for that phenomenon.

There are any number of ways of initiating such an inquiry. We ask students, once they've finished a series of papers, to go back and find what they see to be their best piece of writing in order to draw some conclusions about where those ideas or where that writing came from. We also ask students to conduct a general survey of how people write. Each student is asked to describe the preparation of a specific assignment as evidence of distinct "stages" in the writing process, and each class

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10. For a "task analysis" approach to writing see: Susan Miller, *Writing: Process and Product* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1976). For writing as problem-solving see: Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process," *College English,* 39 (December, 1977), 449-462.

develops its own model of the composing process by pulling together the information from the individual accounts and defining categories, or general definitions of stages. This model, and the labels students invent to define it, serves as a point of reference throughout the term. Students may return at a later date to consider their activity in a single stage, like revision or pre-writing, through the same process of analysis. Again, students are gathering information, generalizing and locating themselves in relation to general truths.

Clearly one of the lessons that emerges from this inquiry is that there is no one way of describing writing, since individual composing styles will define points that can't be brought together by a generalization. So if it is true that a writer's performance is limited by his ability to imagine how writers behave, then the process of objectifying a composing style and measuring it against the styles of other writers, and against models for the composing process offered by the instructor, is one way of improving that performance.

There are two occasions when the instructors step in and impose terms on the general inquiry. Early on, if students' own responses don't lead us to it, we make a distinction between generating and editing, since we are anxious to involve students with two different "modes" of writing—one self centered or subject centered and the other audience centered. Writing in the first mode, which can be tentative, exploratory and risk-free, a way of talking to oneself, doesn't ever emerge without extensive prompting.

We also direct students, after the first few weeks, to both write and re-write. And re-writing is defined as separate from editing, which is presented as clean-up work. Re-writing is defined as the opportunity for the discovery of new information and new connections, where the first draft serves as a kind of heuristic. It is also the occasion for consolidating and reshaping the information in the first draft, where the first draft is a rough draft. Every assignment, in fact, falls into a sequence in which papers are re-written at least once. The re-writing is done with very specific directions and the resulting papers are reproduced and considered in the next class discussion. The emphasis on rewriting reflects our own bias about how successful writers write, and about the importance of enabling non-fluent writers to separate the various demands, like generating and editing, that writing makes upon them in order to postpone concentrating on some while focusing on others. In conjunction with this, there is an assignment that asks students to consider successive drafts, both their own and others', in order to draw conclusions about what they see happening, and to come up with advice they could offer to other writers.

The third focus for conversation is the students' writing as evidence of intellectual activity, as a way of knowing. Each focus could be represented by a basic question. The questions for the first two might be something like, "What was writing like?" and "How did you do it?" The question representing this third area of focus would demand a much higher degree of reflexiveness, since it asks students now to see their writing as symbolic action. The appropriate question would be something like, "Who do you become by writing that?" or "What sort of person notices such things and talks about them in just such a way?" Or perhaps the question would be, "Who do I have to become to take this seriously, to see reading this as the occasion for learning and discovery?" The aim of such questions is to enable students to imagine a rhetorical context, another way of seeing "meaning" in their language beyond its paraphrasable content. If writing is a way of knowing, each act of knowing can be represented by dramatizing the relation between writer, subject, and audience. A student's uncertainty about how one establishes authority in a paper, or about what constitutes intelligent observation, can be represented for that student in dramatic terms when, for example, the discussion in class leads to a description of the writer as a parent pounding on the dinner table and giving Lessons on Life to a wayward child.

It's been noted in several contexts that when basic writers move from report to generalization they characteristically turn to formulary expressions, Lessons on Life.[11] In response to students' difficulty in producing meaningful generalizations, much attention is being paid to research in cognitive psychology, presumably in hopes of finding a key to the mechanism that triggers generalization. A response more in keeping with our own training, however, is to acknowledge the motive in such an utterance and to redirect the writer by asking him to re-imagine both his audience and his reason for writing. While it is initially funny for students to realize the role they have cast for me and for themselves in such writing, discovering an alternative is a problem they will wrestle with all semester, since it requires more than just getting things "right" the next time. It means finding a new way of talking that is, at the same time, a new way of representing themselves and the world.

This approach to the relation between the student's language and the conventions of academic discourse is more likely to engage a student's

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11. See, for example: Thomas J. Farrell, "Literacy, the Basics, and all that Jazz," *College English,* 38 (January, 1977) 446-447, and Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations,* 230-233.

own sense of his knowledge, of the ways in which he can become an intelligent observer and recorder, than any set of lessons on the structure of academic prose, since it is based in a student's own writing and represents that writing as a dramatic act of verbal placement rather than as the mechanical yoking of something called "ideas," on the one hand, and "form," on the other.

There are also more specific ways to account for the difficulty these students have participating in the world of ideas. Surely part of the problem can be seen as external to a student's innate competence as a concept maker, since one universal of basic writing is the students' conviction that while other people's lives provide the stuff out of which concepts are made, this is certainly not true of their own. Basic writers' relations to the world of verbal culture are often defined in such a way as to lead them to conclude that no relation is possible. To use a metaphor offered by one student of mine, ideas may be "stolen" from books or from teachers. It is foolish, then, to assume that they can be "offered" or "shared."

The responsibility of a pedagogy is to enable students to imagine the kind of relation between themselves and their world that allows them to turn their experience into "subject matter" and to define a relationship with that subject that makes creative thinking possible. This is not just a matter of a lesson in class or a pep talk, since whatever we say in class will be understood only in relation to our actual assignments, where we are, in effect, establishing the conditions of such a relationship. Let me describe one response to this problem by describing a sequence of assignments taken from our Basic Reading and Writing course.

The students write a series of papers that describe a change that has occurred in their lives in the last two or three years in order to draw conclusions about how change occurs in adolescence. These papers lead up to a longer autobiographical essay that asks them to draw some conclusions about change in general. At the same time, they are reading autobiographical accounts of children and young adults caught up in change—Margaret Mead in *Blackberry Winter,* Maya Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Holden Caufield in *Catcher in the Rye* and Huck in *Huckleberry Finn.*[12] The autobiographical essays are reproduced, bound together, and offered to the class as the next text in the series

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12. Our sequence of reading and writing assignments grew out of our reading of James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), especially chapter four.

of assigned readings. Students read the autobiographies in order to report, in writing, on what they see to be the significant patterns—common themes and experiences or contradictory themes and experiences—and to provide names or labels for those patterns. They do this in order to go on to speculate, in general, on the ways adolescents change and the kinds of changes that occur. The next set of assignments directs them to the first half of Gail Sheehy's *Passages,* where they see her involved in an identical process of inquiry, report, labeling and speculation. As writers, they are asked to go back to reconsider the autobiographies, this time using Sheehy's labels as well as their own. The last two books for the course are Edgar Friedenberg's *The Vanishing Adolescent* and Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa.*

The point of the sequence is to allow students to reconsider the positions they have achieved in their own study of adolescence by defining new positions in relation to the more formal representations of psychologists and anthropologists. But their own attempts to categorize and label provides the source of their understanding of Sheehy, Friedenberg, and Mead. The labels and categories of academic culture are not given prior to the students' attempts to make sense out of the subject in their own terms. As a consequence, the students are allowed not only an aggressive stance in relation to these ideas, but also, and this is the most important point, in relation to the intellectual activity which these ideas represent. Theories, in other words, are seen as things real people make in order to try and make sense out of the world, not as gifts from heaven. These assignments also provide occasion for students to consider the methods they used for going back to a book and rereading in preparation for writing, and to confront, through a consideration of their own papers, the question of presenting information through quotation and paraphrase.

Earlier in this paper I argued that basic writers are limited by the ways they imagine writers behave. It is also true, however, that they are limited by their assumptions about how thinkers behave. When we chart in class, whether through a student paper or some problem-solving exercise, the *ad hoc* heuristics that underlie a student's thinking, the most common heuristic is the heuristic of simplification. Basic writers, because they equate thought with order, profundity with maxims, often look for the means of reducing a subject to its simplest or most obvious terms. Ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty—those qualities that are most attractive to academics—are simply "wrong" in the minds of students whose primary goal is to produce controlled and safe essays.

As long as writing teachers' instruction represents thinking in terms of structures, and not process, the attitude that courts uncertainty or contradiction is unlikely to develop. Consider, for example, what one formula for paragraphing invites students to do. We tell them to begin by stating an idea, which means they will put down the first thing to come to mind, which, for any of us, is most likely to be a commonplace. Then we tell them to "restrict" that idea and to "support" it with some examples, so that writing "about" the idea precludes any chance to test or probe that idea. If a piece of contradictory evidence worms its way in, or if a student changes his mind half way through, he has, as my students never fail to remind each other, made a "mistake," since the contradictory movement—the one place where something might be said to happen—destroys the "unity" and "coherence" of the paragraph. This image of coherence invites students to be stupid, and that invitation is confirmed whenever we praise an empty paragraph for being well developed.

At the University of Pittsburgh, courses are designed, then, to enable students to see their own writing from various perspectives: as an experience, as a task, as a way of knowing. The last perspective we need to provide for basic writers is a way of analyzing their writing for error. Since our courses are designed to invite students to take risks, to try to do and say things they cannot immediately do and say, we are inviting them to make mistakes. To cover their papers with red circles would be a betrayal of this trust, and yet it would be irresponsible to act as though error didn't matter. Since each set of assignments makes a distinction between first drafts, revisions, and editing, we have the opportunity to provide a context where focus on error can be meaningful, where it can be seen in relation to other ways of talking about writing.

We make no reference to error or to editing at all for the first third of the term. We've found that certain errors will disappear and others will become less frequent as students simply practice writing and become more limber and fluent. In addition, we want to establish firmly a way of talking about and valuing writing as something other than the production of correct sentences, since a recognition of what writing can be and the ways one can be serious about writing can provide the incentive to spend the time it takes to make writing correct.

We introduce editing by tacking a third stage onto writing and re-writing, a time set aside to re-read final drafts in order to circle mistakes and then, if possible, make corrections. We have found, from this, that one of the most difficult tasks we face is teaching students to

spot errors in their writing, and this difficulty is not necessarily due to an inability to distinguish between "correct" and "incorrect" forms.[13] Consider, for example, the student who wrote the following:

> This insight explain why adulthood mean that much as it dose to me because I think it alway influence me to change and my outlook on certain thing like my point-of-view I have one day and it might change the next week on the same issue. My exprience took place in my high school and the reason was out side of the school but I will show you the connection. Let me tell you about the situation first of all what happen was that I got suspense from school. For thing that I fell was out of my control sometime but it taught me alot about respondability of a growing man. The school suspense me for being late ten time. I had accumate ten dementic and had to bring my mother to school to talk to a conselor.

When this student read the passage out loud, he automatically filled in the missing words, corrected *every* incorrect verb by speaking the correct form, and added S's where they were missing from plurals. He also gave the correct phonetic represenation of "accumate" (accumulate) and "dementic" (demerit). And he made all these corrections as a reader even though in most cases he could not, at least without a great deal of coaching, see the discrepancy between the words he read and the actual black and white marks on the page. The issue with this student is not so much one of competence but of fluency with the extremely complicated process of transcription.

The fact, then, that students overlook errors while editing is not necessarily due to carelessness or a lack of understanding of standard forms. In most cases, we've found the difficulty lies in the trouble basic writers have objectifying their language and seeing it as marks on a page rather than perceiving it as the sound of a voice or a train of ideas. Students "see" correct forms when they proofread because they read in terms of their own grammatical competence. Clearly there is a class of error, most often errors of syntax, that some students cannot see because they lack some basic conceptual understanding, such as an understanding of the boundaries of the sentence. But there is another class of error that

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13. For a full discussion of this problem and some suggested exercises see: Patricia Laurence, "Error's Endless Train: Why Students Don't Perceive Errors," *Journal of Basic Writing,* 1 (Spring, 1975), 23-43.

students have great trouble spotting which makes it impossible to generalize that basic writers fail to see errors because the errors represent ignorance in the first place.

We teach editing by having students edit their own papers and those of their colleagues. We also do sentence by sentence editing of papers as a group, where the students are directed to both look for patterns of error, in order to draw conclusions about the kinds of errors and sources of errors, and to speculate in general on editing as a strategy. This allows instructors the occasion to offer the standard advice about reading out loud and reading from bottom to top. Students do all their editing in red, with errors both circled and corrected on a separate sheet, so that the instructors can work with individual students to chart and document the patterns that emerge. This allows the instructors to identify the students who can manage editing on their own, or with only a minimum of coaching, and those who will require close individual supervision in order to cope with both the errors that they have the resources to correct but cannot find, and those errors that they cannot find and cannot correct. We have found that no matter how similar the kinds of errors students make, a diagnosis of those errors leads us to sources so bound to individual problems and individual styles as to make general instruction virtually impossible, with the exception of instruction in a generally unknown piece of punctuation like the semicolon.

By giving students typed copies of their papers to work with, by highlighting groups of three lines and indicating the number of errors these lines contain, by reading passages out loud and having students read their writing out loud, we can determine which errors lie beyond a student's immediate competence, and we have found that we can both increase a student's ability to spot errors and develop those reflexes that allow him to make decisions about correct forms. It has become commonplace to note that such decisions can be made independently of "knowledge about" language, without, that is, knowledge of school book grammar. Once students learn to spot errors on the page, which is a matter of learning to see their language as a language, a significant percentage of students we work with have the resources to correct a significant percentage of the errors themselves.[14] We encourage students to trust their own "sense" of correctness and to test that "sense" against

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14. This is an impression. I have no data on this at this time although we have begun research in this area.

the editing we do as a group. We want to assist, then, the natural process of testing and rule formation. In individual sessions with students, we remain as silent as possible, serving primarily to focus their attention on the page. Students chart their own errors looking for patterns and speculating on what the patterns mean in terms of their own specific activity as writers. We insist, however, that students provide their own names for the errors they observe, since it makes no pedagogical sense for them to work from our labels through to the phenomena they observe in their own writing, particularly if the goal of the instruction is to allow students to develop their own resources for correcting.

Finally, however, we are left with a core of students who make a set of errors that they cannot find and do not have the resources to correct. The difficulty here is finding a way to talk with students about their writing, since such talk will inevitably need to revert to grammatical terms and concepts. Here we have reached the point where there is information, "knowing about," students must have. Shaughnessy isolates four key grammatical concepts that teachers and students will need to share for such conversations to be possible: the concept of the sentence, of inflection, of tense, and of agreement.[15] In our Basic Reading and Writing course, the course where problems are such that this kind of instruction is often required, we use a series of sentence-combining exercises that run throughout the semester, so that we have an additional resource for talking to students about constitutents of syntax. Our instruction at this level, however, is based almost entirely on the sample exercises in *Errors and Expectations*.

BASIC READING AND WRITING

This 6-hour course was developed in response to a need to provide another mode of instruction for students with skills equivalent to the third, or bottom level of proficiency described by Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations*.[16] Students are identified for the course on the basis of a writing sample and the Nelson-Denny Reading test. Of the group

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15. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*, 128-159. Shaughnessy also makes a basic distinction between grammatically based errors and performance based errors.

16. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*, 2. This course was designed with the assistance of Professor Anthony Petrosky, University of Pittsburgh School of Education, and tested in a pilot study in fall term, 1977.

identified for the course, approximately the bottom 5% of the freshman class, the mean vocabulary score on the Nelson-Denny Reading test was 24.1 (the 8th percentile for grade 13) and the mean comprehension score was 18 (the 35th percentile), with the mean total score falling at the 29th percentile. No one scored above 40 on the vocabulary test or 27 on the test of comprehension, and scores went as low as 10 in vocabulary (with 10% at or below 15 and 24% at or below 20) and as low as 9 in comprehension (with 24% at or below 15).

These are students whom we found could read through an essay like those found in freshman readers but who seemed powerless to make any response to the reading. When they were done reading, they literally had nothing to say, and we came to define comprehension for our own purposes as the ability to follow an act of reading with a written response that was pertinent and coherent. We learned from a survey that they were also students, who had, by and large, never read a book. They had crammed for tests from textbooks, and had learned to strip-mine books for term papers, but most of them had never had the experience of working from cover to cover through books of their own choosing, of deciding what to read and paying consistent deliberate attention to a text.

In designing a course, we were seeking, then, to provide for students who were not being served by the existing Basic Writing courses. We decided that these needs would not be best served by an additional semester of writing instruction, since the additional time for writing offered by an extra 15 weeks is really no time at all given the extremely slow growth of writing abilities and the diminishing returns of back to back writing courses, where students are actually denied the opportunity to test new behavior against "real" writing situations or to allow these newly found skills to follow their own developmental sequence. We decided, rather, to argue for more concentrated instruction at the outset, where we could double the amount of writing and the time spent analyzing the activity of writing, and where we could include experience with, and analysis of, acts of reading.

The design of the course, in part, was motivated by my frustration with the existing reading instruction on campus. I had done some work with reading specialists and had grave reservations about the model of reading presented through instruction in reading skills. Such instruction relies primarily on exercises that take the paragraph as the basic unit of a reader's comprehension. In a reading "lab," students read paragraphs in order to answer questions on main ideas, vocabulary and inferences. Whether or not the paragraph is the key unit in reading comprehension,

and I doubt it is, comprehending a paragraph isolated in a workbook is so very different from comprehending a paragraph embedded in a whole text, and so very different from comprehending a whole text, as to make it virtually impossible for one to stand for the other. With the workbook approach, students can take a semester of reading instruction without, in effect, ever doing any reading, at least as reading means reading whole texts. And the overriding problem with the concept of a single, identifiable "main idea" that all readers will agree upon is that it denies readers their own transaction with a text, and it denies them the perception that reading is such a transaction, not a series of attempts to guess at meanings that belong to someone else. It does not involve a student in an active process of meaning-making, where meaning is determined by the individual reader, his purpose for reading and prior understanding of the subject. In fact, the exercises used in reading skills instruction are set up as if these variables didn't exist, or as if they were just static, mere annoyances.

We also decided not to model our curriculum on the study skills approach to reading, which is, more or less, instruction in how to read a text book, and which becomes, given the ethos of such survival courses, instruction in how to avoid reading by learning to read only topic sentences or tables of contents. Our goal was to offer reading as a basic intellectual activity, a way of collecting and shaping information. As such, we were offering reading as an activity similar, if not identical, to writing. The skills we were seeking to develop were not skills intrinsic to "encoding" or "decoding;" that is, they were not basic or constituent skills, like word attack skills, vocabulary skills or the ability to recognize paragraph patterns.

We wanted to design a pedagogy to replace those that define reading as the accurate reception of information fixed in a text, and fixed at the level of the sentence or the paragraph, since that representation of reading reflects our students' mistaken sense of what it means to read. They see the inevitable confusion that comes with working through a whole text, at least one worth reading, as evidence that they have "gotten lost" or "missed something." They are primarily concerned that they can't remember everything they read. This, they feel, is what separates them from "good" readers. In place of this misrepresentation, this inability to imagine themselves as readers reading (for what reader doesn't forget?), we wanted to offer a model that allowed them to postpone their immediate need for certainty in order to read for the larger context that makes individual bits of information meaningful, or

worth remembering. We wanted to offer a model of comprehension that allowed students to work with whole texts and to see the ways in which reading requires that they re-assemble a text in their own terms by discovering patterns of significance that are as much statements about themselves as readers as they are statements about a text. This interaction between reader and text is the source of those meanings that transform the paraphrasable content of the text into some other form of meaning.

We were not concerned, then, with decoding, with questions about what a text said, but with what one could say about a text and with what could be said about any individual act of saying. Extended written responses were the only way of representing the kind of comprehension we were interested in teaching, and such written records were the only source of inquiry into the acts of comprehension our students could, at any moment, perform.

We reviewed the recent work in psycholinguistics and reading, work which defines comprehension in terms of the processing of syntax, where general fluency and comprehension can be developed through activities like sentence-combining. Some of the work in this area, like the work by Stotsky[17] and Sternglass,[18] is quite compelling and may be appropriate for students with problems different in kind from those we confronted in our students. We felt, in designing the course, that our concern should be with acts of comprehension beyond the sentence or the paragraph, and our bias towards larger units of discourse was justified by later findings from the research we did on the course. We administered a series of Cloze tests, which are tests of literal comprehension, of the ability to process syntax and predict meaning, and we found that all of our students, even with the tests at the beginning of the term, scored above the level that indicates adequate literal comprehension of texts whose readability was scaled at grade 13. We concluded that students' low reading speeds, their general failure to comprehend or give adequate response and the general difficulty they had with academic reading tasks must be attributed to something other than difficulty processing syntax.

17. Sandra L. Stotsky, "Sentence-Combining as a Curricular Activity: Its Effect on Written Language Development and Reading Comprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English,* 9(Spring, 1975), 30-71.

18. Marilyn S. Sternglass, "Composition Teacher as Reading Teacher," *College Composition and Communication,* 27 (December, 1976). See also, Marilyn S. Sternglass, "Developing Syntactic Fluency in the Reading Process," ERIC.

The writing assignments in the course were developed on the same principles as those for the Basic Writing course described earlier. There were two types of reading assignments, each defining a different context for reading. Students read regularly in class from books of their own choosing.[19] If, as is certainly the case, students learn to read complete texts by reading complete texts, and if our students have little or no experience with this, then a reading class ought to be a place where people read. And ours was—twice a week, for 30 and then 45 minutes we all, students and teachers, sat and read. Our primary goal was to help students develop the discipline and attention it takes to sit down and pay consistent, careful attention to a book. Many of the students in the classes I taught confessed that this experience was entirely new to them. By the amount of reading in these books that went on outside of class, and on the basis of conversations I've had with students since the course, there is reason to believe that some students discovered the habit of reading.

For this in-class reading, students declared an area to read in, something they had always wanted to have the time to pursue, and they went to the library or bookstore and prepared a list of books to read. After each reading session, students wrote in a journal they kept as a record of their reading. At first these entries were open. Students were asked to record whatever struck them as important in what they read. As the course developed, we asked for more formal representations of what they had read—summaries, comparisons with earlier reading, or speculation about where the book was going, and so on. We reviewed the journals each week and used them as the basis for conferences on individual problems.

There was also a core of seven assigned texts, all relating to the theme of "Identity and Change" which provided the subject for the course. The books represented a variety of modes—fiction, autobiography and analytical works written for a general academic audience.

We approached the reading in three ways. Initially we asked students to talk about their experience with a particular text and, in response to these discussions, to look for patterns in the experience that their colleagues reported. The primary goal was to define reading as a human activity, one that can be understood in intimate, personal terms rather

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19. For a description of "sustained silent reading" see: Charles Cooper and Tony Petrosky, "A Psycholinguistic View of the Fluent Reading Process," *Journal of Reading,* (December, 1976).

than in terms of mystery or maxims. By talking about where people got stuck and what they did, about the anxiety and frustration they felt, about what one can expect to remember and what any reader is sure to forget, we could also make specific points about successful reading— about dealing with unfamiliar words, for example, or dealing with the confusion that always comes with the beginning of a book. We were allowing students a way of imagining what reading is like in order to imagine themselves as readers.

We also asked students to analyze reading as a task, as something necessarily embodying a strategy, in order to have them draw conclusions about the strategies underlying and perhaps inhibiting their own behavior as readers, behavior they are quick to believe lies totally outside their control. We approach the analysis of reading strategy in two ways. Strategy is seen as the deliberate approach to a specific text and purpose for reading, so that a student could be prepared to talk, for example, about the best strategy for reading a textbook. But students' reading is also analyzed to reveal those predictable individual responses, strategic but not at the level of deliberate strategy, that characterize an individual's reading style. By enabling students to perceive the decisions they make while reading, we make other decisions possible. This kind of discussion of reading also provides the occasion for instructors to make specific points about pre-reading, re-reading, underlining and so on.

The bulk of the instruction in reading, however, comes with the writing that is assigned in response to the reading, and with the work students do during class in groups to prepare reports on what they've read. With few exceptions, the assignments require students to write about the books before there is any discussion in class. The students use writing, then, to locate a stance in relation to a book and to locate something to say. The discussion in class begins with these individual positions and considers them in relation to the text, to each other, and to the specific task set by the assignment.

The assignments, and they are all variations on a single assignment, define a heuristic for the reading process, a model of how a thoughtful reader responds to a book. We assume that a text becomes meaningful and acquires a structure, or a set of intentions, through a reader's own immediate needs (which includes his imagined purpose for reading) and prior experience with the subject (or what he defines as a "subject"), both of which determine patterns of significance in a text. The process of assigning significance is central to the version of reading we were teaching in our classes, since it is a way of demonstrating how one

connects with a book, how a book becomes meaningful through a personal rather than formulaic transaction.

If, after locating patterns of significance, students were to record what they "know" about a book, they would record summaries of sections that stand out for them as somehow important. They would, to use the jargon of tagmemics, have segmented the phenomena into manageable units (and, in analyzing their responses, we found that our students tended to see "particles" and "waves" rather than "fields"), but the representation would still be at the level of narrative. Our goal was to move students from narrative to some position from which they could conceptualize, from which they could see the information or patterns of information they have located as representative, as having meaning beyond any summary or report. In teaching reading, then, we are finally teaching that process of naming, of locating conceptual analogs, of discovering a language that can move the information in the book to the level of dialectic. Teaching reading, then, is teaching invention, that skill we defined as most "basic" to the development of these students as writers.

Because I did research on this part of the curriculum, I have evidence that it was successful, beyond my own and my students' enthusiasm for a course that allows people to read and write rather than be condemned to the drudgery of workbooks or textbooks. The pre- and post-tests of reading comprehension (the Nelson-Denny Reading Test) showed little change. This, however, ran counter to the instructor's impression of what happened to these students as readers. The reason for the lack of statistical evidence of change, we feel, is due to the nature of the available reading tests, tests that ask students to read paragraphs and identify main ideas. It can be argued that tests like these monitor students' ability to take such tests, not their ability as readers, since they don't pose real reading situations and since they are based on such a limited notion of comprehension itself.[20]

The pre- and post-tests of writing ability, however, showed very different results. Students taking the six hour course showed significant improvement on a standardized test of writing ability (*STEP*), a holistic assessment, and the Daly-Miller measure of writing anxiety. In every case, the Basic Reading and Writing students began the semester well

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20. James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner, *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 123-124.

behind students in the regular Basic Writing course, and in every case they ended the 15 weeks on almost an exact par with those students at the end of their 15 week course. So if the purpose of the concentrated course was to bring this special group to the level of the general population in a single term, that purpose was achieved.

DIAGNOSIS AND EVALUATION

It's hard to know how to describe the students who take our basic writing courses beyond saying that they are the students who take our courses. Students are screened for basic writing during summer orientation. They write an essay which is holistically scored and take the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (Forms C and D). The mean SAT verbal score for those taking Basic Writing last fall was 429, with scores ranging from 240 to 580. The mean SAT verbal score for those taking Basic Reading and Writing was 362, with scores ranging from 200 to 480.

Those of us working with basic writing programs ought to be concerned about our general inability to talk about basic writing beyond our own institutions, at least as basic writing is a phenomenon rather than a source. We know that we give tests and teach courses and we know that this is done at other schools, but we know little else since there is no generally accepted index for identifying basic writing. Perhaps the only way to compare one's students with those elsewhere, since there is a good reason to be suspicious of SAT scores or error counts or objective tests, is by sharing something like the essays that are used as models to prepare readers for holistic readings. I can briefly describe the writing that characterizes our "range-finders" by pointing to three features we have isolated in a study of orientation essays written by students whose instructors felt they were correctly advised into Basic Writing. The first feature is the type and frequency of error. Since our analysis was based on Mina Shaughnessy's taxonomy of error in *Errors and Expectations,* there is no need to provide any explanation of "type" except to say that it is possible to distinguish between "deep" errors and those that are characteristic of the writing of more fluent students.

The second feature we identified was coherence, coherence as evidence of relatedness between sentences and larger units of discourse, but coherence also as evidence of the ability to define a subject as a problem that can be addressed systematically. While reading the essays, we look for evidence that the writer imagines the act of writing as doing

something, no matter how conventional that "something" might be. We identify those students whose papers lack either type of coherence as basic writers.

The third characteristic feature presents the biggest problem to our readers since, at one remove, it seems to be a universal characteristic of student writing. We found, in our analysis of the writing of basic writers, that even when presented with an assignment that specifically called for it, these students were unable to draw general conclusions. If asked to describe a time when they made a decision and to draw some conclusions about decision-making, most writers could report an experience, but few could offer more in the way of a generalization than a single sentence ("Therefore decision making is difficult.") or a collection of maxims ("Experience is the best teacher." "Follow your conscience.").

When we contrasted these essays with those written by writers with higher holistic ratings, we found the successful writers were, in fact, often able to represent themselves as decision-makers as well as someone making a simple decision. They were able to see their experience as representative experience, and to extend the general discussion dialectically, so that they began to manipulate the terms they had used to re-name their experience (terms like "peer pressure," "responsibility," "deduction") in order to represent that experience as something other than what it was for them when they began writing. Where their papers never went beyond narrative, the narrative was shaped so that, in itself, it was clearly making some point that remained unarticulated. The basic writers, on the other hand, produced undifferentiated accounts of experience, in which the representation of the experience could be described as a random recollection of what happened ordered, at best, by chronology. We have many students taking Basic Writing, then, who are not "bound by error," as that phrase is illustrated by the writing of the students Shaughnessy studied.

One of the most difficult questions a program director faces is the question of what, exactly, a passing grade in a writing course represents. The university operates with an Algebra I/Algebra II paradigm—fifteen weeks of Algebra I and a test determine who goes on to Algebra II. Given the very real difficulty of measuring, or even defining, proficiency in writing, and given the irregular pace and nature of growth in writing for any group of students, there is no such thing as knowing exactly what any grade "means" in terms of actual writing ability. At the same time,

however, because enrollment in basic writing represents an institution's judgment that the student lacks skills necessary for full participation in the college curriculum, a passing grade in basic writing is expected to stand as certification that such skills have been acquired. The question we faced was how to reasonably determine that a passing grade in Basic Writing did indicate a specified level of proficiency without misrepresenting the limits of our ability to make judgments about writing ability. We finally settled on an end of term review for all Basic Writing students.

At the end of each semester, students in all Basic Writing sections are given two hours to write an in-class essay. The two hours are meant to provide ample time for preparing, revising and editing. Each essay is then evaluated by members of the complete composition staff who make only a pass/fail distinction. A ''pass'' on the exam means that a student has demonstrated the proficiency assumed of students in the opening weeks of our general composition courses. The models, or ''range-finders,'' we use to prepare readers for the reading were chosen by the staff after considering hundreds of student papers written during a trial examination program.

We also provide both students and instructors, however, with a general set of criteria that are the result of our attempt to summarize features that have distinguished passing from failing essays. In order to pass, students must be able to write a paper that

—is reasonably error free—''reasonableness'' makes allowances for commonly misspelled words, errors with fine points of punctuation or unobtrusive errors of punctuation, errors with ''who'' and ''whom''; ''reasonableness,'' that is, makes allowances for the kinds of errors most of us make and those instructors are generally willing to tolerate in freshman writing,

—is coherent—which means that what is said can be understood and understood as an attempt to address the assigned problem systematically,

—shows the ability to state general principles on the basis of specific evidence, and to develop a general discussion beyond a single sentence.

A failing score on the essay does *not* mean that a student fails the course. Holistic scoring, particularly of essays written under such

artificial conditions, is simply not reliable enough to allow us to make that kind of decision. When a student fails the essay review, a folder containing all his work for the term is reviewed by a committee of three staff members. If the work done in the last quarter of the term confirms the judgment made by the readers, the student is not given credit for the course. At the end of a semester of Basic Reading and Writing, on the other hand, students are either passed on to Basic Writing or passed into the general curriculum without restriction.