

Hephzibah Roskelly, editor

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST: TEN YEARS IN A BASIC WRITING PROGRAM

Like all evolutionary structures, the Writing Clinic or Writing Center, as it is now less medically named, traces its changes physically. It remains in the basement of the Humanities Building at the University of Louisville, where nine-year-old flood stains on one wall warn the staff that water covers paper. But much has altered. Individual carrels, constructed ten years ago as frontier outposts of composition teaching—one tutor to three “tutees”—now serve as offices for instructors. The orange dividing wall transported across campus section by section has disappeared as students now work in real four-walled classrooms in other parts of the building. Still, the orange wall was a tangible, if unaesthetic, sign of progress: basic writers as students, not tutees. Over the years the staff brought in tables and chairs to accommodate the small group work we came to value. We added filing cabinets to hold the accumulating essays, exams, and evaluations that helped us assess students’ placement and progress. Recollecting our experience as directors of the basic writing program, we find the physical alterations in the Clinic reflect changing notions in the profession about the function and form of basic writing programs within the university. This essay, written by the first seven directors of basic writing at Louisville, colleagues, and friends now dispersed across the United States, traces the evolution of one program that survived.

The program at the University of Louisville began—like Mina Shaughnessy’s at The City College of The City University of New York—as a response to the burgeoning group of students, traditionally excluded from college, who were taking advantage of new open admissions policies. As Shaughnessy describes them, these students were caught in

Hephzibah Roskelly, assistant professor of English at University of Massachusetts-Boston, teaches courses in composition and rhetorical theory. She and Kate Ronald are working on a book on dichotomies in the teaching of composition.

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1988

an educational Catch 22: persuaded that they could never learn to read and write and admonished to learn to do both. The paradox for basic writing students survives ten years after Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* and translates into academic politics, as universities simultaneously encourage access for the poor, the disadvantaged, the minorities, and work to maintain the standards of "higher education." In "The Language of Exclusion: Basic Writing Instruction at the University," (*College English* 47 (1985): 341-359) Mike Rose explores five notions about writing instruction at the university that limit understanding and deepen this paradox:

Writing ability is judged in terms of the presence of error and can thus be quantified. Writing is a skill or a tool rather than a discipline. A number of our students lack this skill and must be remediated. In fact, some percentage of our students are, for all intents and purposes, illiterate. Our remedial efforts, while currently necessary, can be phased out once the literacy crisis is solved in other segments of the educational system. (341)

Rose shows how these ideas about writing keep writing instruction "on the periphery of the curriculum," (341) both essential and chronically threatened in the institution. Had he known us personally, Rose could not have described more pointedly the forces at work on the basic writing program at the University of Louisville. Since its beginning in 1976, the program has been defining and redefining its mission, embroiled in the struggle to help all comers succeed in academic life while assuring a level of achievement satisfactory to members of the academic community.

The conflict presented by the basic writing program in our institution and, as Rose suggests, in many universities creates a paradox for teachers and directors of programs as well as for the students they serve. Directors of basic writing programs are typically given great responsibility for programs but little power to implement their ideas since the directors are seldom tenurable academic staff. Each director at The University of Louisville, in fact, has been at once both graduate student and administrator, consequently assuming a strangely subordinate-but-equal role in administrative politics. As directors, we argued and negotiated first for continuance, later for resources and autonomy, with tenured faculty from other departments, with teachers of our courses, and with directors of our dissertations.

Our task was complicated by terminology. The term "remedial," often used by university administrators to describe the function of basic writing programs, defines not so much the students such programs serve as the fundamental tension that exists between basic writing and the university. As Rose points out, "remedial" signals a belief in the transience of the basic writing class; that sooner or later with enough training, everyone gets "remediated," and the problem and the program disappear. This belief continues to prevent basic writing programs from being clearly articulated and integrated into the college curriculum. Like many basic writing programs, we inherited too many terms to describe the classes

we taught and our purpose in teaching them. Our courses were “developmental” or “fundamental” or “preparatory,” and we “remediated,” “retained,” “certified.” We had to convince others to see our courses as something more than temporary holding tanks for composition-program rejects and our students as something more than participants in a community of failure.

The directors whose reflections appear here have searched for ways to change perceptions about basic writing and to resolve the paradoxes we faced in the institution. Our roles as students helped us. Our work in literary theory and in rhetoric and composition shaped our practice as teachers and administrators, and we brought new ways of thinking to our testing programs, our course materials, our workshops with instructors. When the Clinic began, the words “process” and “heuristic” had not even acquired buzz-word respectability. “Reader-response” and “pre-writing” were merely hyphenated words. But we learned fast, and because we were in the classroom ourselves, we applied theory immediately, teaching one another as we taught the students. Each new director learned to build on the ideas of the previous director, and the group of teachers and learners came to expect experimentation as well as continuity, as we tried to make political reality, learning theory, and classroom practice come together.

Shaughnessy taught the profession how to view the basic writing class as a real community separated from the academic community; our work at the University of Louisville over the past ten years has been to locate paths along which those two communities can converge. The reflections that follow tell personal stories about the paths taken by one basic writing program. They also reveal fragments of an evolutionary past that we share with the profession at large. Pieced together, they produce an interesting, if not clearly categorized, skeleton that reminds us of what we’ve learned and why we keep exploring.

1976-1977

When the tall ships sailed into Boston Harbor in the summer of 1976, political cynic though I was, I had a tear in my eye. The fireworks and general hoopla set off for the nation’s bicentennial seemed wonderfully appropriate. To me they were an outward and national sign of my inward and personal celebration. I had successfully completed a Ph.D. program in Renaissance literature, and I had secured gainful employment for the coming year.

Joe Comprone, just hired by the University of Louisville to build a program in composition, had given me the job of constructing its foundation. I was to be in charge of basic writing and Director of the still-to-be-created Writing Clinic. My years as a teaching assistant had coincided with the entry of the nontraditional student into the university, and my experience with these students convinced me that the process approach had to inform the teaching of basic writing. To my mind grammar study, usage drills, and sentence exercises impersonally marked by an authoritative teacher were out; and writing, writing, and more writing

personally attended to by a sympathetic tutor were in. Sympathy, however, didn't prevent us from counting errors and handing out fill-in-the-blanks assignment sheets. In the absence of experience and guidelines, we taught the way we thought we remembered learning. Still, I knew these students needed to write. None of us had ever tried to put the process theory into practice, but now I was to have the opportunity and the means to do just that.

To be no longer a teaching assistant was a professional elevation, but one requiring, paradoxically, a physical descent. I would leave the third floor graduate student office (its appellation, the Bull Pen, indicated its nature as an academic warm-up area, not the quality of conversation therein) for the basement, and rooms being vacated by the University Archives. I could not have been more pleased. I did notice that announcing that I had been advanced to the basement caused a peculiar smile on some faces, and from time to time I caught part of a phrase that suggested something about my not knowing which way was up. I had by this time seen an Escher etching or two and knew that in matters of perspective, well, it was perspective that mattered. And I was certain that as far as my profession was concerned, the basement was a step in the right direction.

It probably helped, too, that I had no negative associations regarding basements. For me, basements always called to mind a story my grandmother told me when I was a child about my father's boyhood. I have no idea if the events actually happened or if my grandmother were making up the tale to amuse me. I value it now for its prophetic properties. Anyway, it seems that when he was eight or nine, my father came home one day with his knickers filthy. He was told to deposit his clothes in the hallway and make himself presentable to sit on the front porch; he did this every afternoon from 3 until 5 o'clock to await his father's Arrival Home from the Office. My grandmother, picking up my daddy's knickers from the hall floor, heard a noise in the basement, went to the basement door and said sternly, "What are you doing down there without any pants on?" After a silence, a rather stunned voice replied, "Ma'am, I'm fully clothed and I'm down here reading your meter."

The meter reader's answer pretty accurately describes my year as Director of the Writing Clinic. I spent my time trying to convince those on the other floors that those of us in the basement were fully clothed and performing a necessary and appropriate service. To a charming person of advanced years touring parts of the University as a member of an external advisory (fund-raising) commission, I explained that no, we were not dealing with the sort of student the visitor's son had brought home from Hotchkiss years before who had said *pin* when he meant *pen*. I doubt my explanation penetrated. Later, ushered by me onto the elevator, the visitor turned to the sole Black among the group of students already on it and said, "Three, please." To a meeting of the Greater Louisville Council of Teachers of English, I demonstrated with charts and numbers that our students came from every high school in the city, not only *some* schools.

On that first day the Clinic opened, students and tutors carted chairs and tables from the hall and arranged them in groups of four, three students to one tutor, with changing clientele every hour. The students wrote paragraphs, the tutors read them, corrected mistakes, and encouraged rewriting. Of course we knew very little of the implications of writing process theory in 1976. Our diagnostic tests from that era show our nod to invention with all of three lines for the students' "pre-writing," and a space for the topic sentence following naturally. Our assignments were the old narrow find-a-thesis, support-with-details kind: "Blind dates," "Furniture," or "Some Things Never Change." Why we thought then that basic writing students could write only paragraphs escapes me now. Our evaluation forms also remain a mystery to me today: one category allows for a student having "exceptional" capitalization. We focused then on "diction," "singulars/plurals," "verb forms," and our attention to content was likely to be limited to "organization and logic." But the concentrated attention that the tutoring format allowed led us to question these categories of response more and more, as we came to see that our students had something important to say, with or without "control" over verb forms.

Now the tall ships have come to New York to pay their respects to the Lady of the Harbor, and a decade has passed since I looked around a room devoid of everything but a table, some folding chairs, and a group of people—eager, willing, intelligent, courageous, and, above all, creative people—a staff of any director's dreams. How I had the fortune to find them I do not know. I do know that it was they, not I, that made the Writing Clinic work that first year. My great accomplishment was hiring them and getting out of their way. Come to think of it, I did do just what some said I would—went down there and laid an egg. It was a beginning. And like many stories that start *ab ovo*, this one evolves into something quite fine.

—Sue Lorch
University of South Carolina-Aiken

1977-1979

We don't often have the opportunity to live through an event that is at the same time literally true and metaphorically compelling. Such an event, however, marked the tone of my two years as Writing Clinic Director. It came on a day that seemed deceptively typical: that morning, at precisely 7:45 A.M., I strode down the stairway of the Humanities Building to the hallway leading to my basement office, opened the corridor door, and stepped forthrightly into a foot of cold standing water. With water lapping at my ankles, I looked at the key ring in my hand, given to me by friends as a totem for my job. On its fob in bold clear lettering were the words, "Captain's Office: U.S.S. Titanic."

Of course, once the Clinic staff arrived, we began to see the humor of the situation. It took the better part of two days to remove the standing water, for the entire basement of the building was under the floodline (from an undetected break in the main waterline). And for several days

thereafter, even with the help of huge dehumidifiers, all of us walked around looking like Little Orphan Annie with hair curled by humidity fit for a rain forest. But we survived in good spirits, for—whatever else it meant—traveling by steerage on the Titanic in our basement habitat had forged us as a staff into a cohesive group. We liked, respected, and helped each other weather not only this event, but also some metaphorical floods which promised to be as monumental as our literal ones.

As a writing clinic in its second and third years, we were clearly being scrutinized to determine if we could meet the demands placed on us. For in those two years, we faced a tremendous growth in numbers of students using the Clinic (as many as 600 students a day at our peak) and in kinds of services we were asked to create for various university populations. Large numbers of students and small numbers at the bottom line challenged us to define our limits and provide the answer to the question the Department seemed to ask us insistently: “Just what kind of service *can* you provide the university community?” Through teamwork and the dedication of a truly extraordinary staff, we were able to develop several successful programs which tried to answer the question. Without the benefit of prototypes to guide us, we developed, with the Education Department, the writing component of an entrance examination for student teachers. In 1977, there were as yet no statewide models or mandates, so we produced one of the first such testing programs in the state. In conjunction with the University reading specialist and a licensed psychometrist, we participated in testing programs for students with learning disabilities, and we designed individual reading/writing tutorial programs for them. We also worked with General Electric, a major employer in the Louisville area, to create a college-credit composition course for middle-level managers. All these programs drew on our creativity as teachers, our theoretical knowledge of composing, our expertise as practitioners of our craft, and our flexibility as a unit in the larger university. They were also great fun to develop.

In addition, of course, we maintained our work with English 100, now a course for the “developmental” student and we continued to offer supplementary tutoring to students throughout the composition sequence. The increased numbers of students who had placed in English 100 via ACT scores of below 16 and a large group of “traditional” 101 students sent to us by their frustrated freshman composition teachers made the English Department increasingly skeptical of tutoring as a pedagogical strategy; not only were there too few tutors, they were too expensive. Pressured by the English Department to cut the “remediating” budget, we had to change the pure tutoring format. Students now attended a “lecture” one day a week and met with tutors for two other sessions. Our approaches were still traditional—lectures on topic sentences, the modes of process analysis, comparison/contrast, and even exercises on vocabulary and spelling. We tried anything. But we began to focus more on “prewriting” techniques and on helping students care about what they had to say. We paid more attention to how students tackled our assignments. Rhetorical concerns with audience, purpose, and voice dominated more and more of our talk. Assignments changed to page-

length pieces that invited students to “develop by example,” and the assignments often included readings as models or cases to guide response.

These facets, the mainstays of our Clinic life, were sometimes the source of agonized soul-searching. (I remember Rose who, after three semesters in English 100, dropped out of school to go home and sit on her front porch; Pete, who continued to rewrite the accident that had left him paralyzed; Ricky, who signed up for English 100 six semesters straight, but came to class only once during that time.) More often we were surrounded with evidence of our positive effect on students and the University (I remember when Maury brought his first English 101 “A” paper to the Clinic to show us). Students were in college, doing well in their courses, who probably wouldn’t have been there if we hadn’t been in the Writing Clinic.

—Liz Bell

University of South Carolina-Aiken

1979-1981

A wave of theory hit the Writing Clinic in the fall of 1979. Not the practical sort myself, I jumped into theories of rhetoric and reading, convinced that theory might indeed inform writing practice. Imbued with a sense of social responsibility about students who reached the university without the one tool traditionally deemed the key to academic success, I found it ludicrous, on one hand, to imagine students who used “be” as a finite verb succeeding in a traditional university, but criminal on the other to bar the university’s door to those who had not been challenged or even encouraged to write. If the staff thought some of my theories high-falutin, we did usually agree that intelligence was not measured in length of T-units or by mastery of Standard American English.

Some of the new orthodoxy made sense to all of us: error-counting belittled students, embittered teachers, and produced no results. Students wrote about experiences they’d been led to believe were insignificant; we tried to teach how writers made significance. We experimented with the theories: creating contexts in which students might win by writing, seeking purpose that might motivate, responding to encourage communication.

Audience and context dominated our teaching during those years. I was the first director to duplicate articles from *College English* or *CCC* for the staff, and Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor’s “An Audience Response Model for Writing” (*College English* 41 (1979): 247-279) became our theoretical base. The focus of assignments changed from narrowing and developing a topic sentence, or following a particular pattern of exposition, to responses to rhetorical contexts. We wrote many of these scenarios: “You work on an assembly line in a factory. . . .” “You are moving out of your apartment and your landlord refuses to return your damage deposit.” At the same time, our evaluation of student work changed from marking mistakes to holistic evaluation, based on the students’ effectiveness in achieving a purpose and persuading an audience.

We stopped spending time on what the students' writing didn't have and concentrated on its strengths. We no longer required paragraph-only responses; students decided for themselves what the topic required. And reflecting the new facilitative composition theory, our "lectures" became "workshops," led by tutors who were no longer paid by the hour, but hired as half-time and quarter-time instructors.

I inherited a staff of part-timers and graduate students. No one considered them professional—or even trained—though they were admired for their "patience to work with *those* students." They were considered the bottom rung of English Department hangers-on, women mostly, relegated to the basement. But in that basement, they cooked up a revolution. I might have fueled it a bit, with my theories, and suggested—in academic writing, research, and experimentation—ways to make the influence felt, but the spirit of revolution grew there in the Humanities Building basement as it had in basement programs around the country whenever teachers confronted the results of a failing educational system.

Looking back, I don't measure our success by the curriculum we structured and coordinated, the publications (our own and our students') we sponsored, by the team teaching, the revised tests, the theoretical bull sessions, by group grading, holistic scoring, context-based writing assignments, or even by the attitudes we changed in each other, in our students, and in the English Department. I measure it by three events during those two years that we turned to our advantage (really quite accidentally): the mimeograph machine acquisition, the payless September, and the 1980 NCAA basketball title.

1. The English Department gave us a mimeo machine and a scanner which made mimeo masters from typed or printed copy. (We needed a copier, but this combo was cheaper.) We mastered the technology—every one of us. We got pretty professional at layout and artwork as we published *The Writing Clinic Rag*, a periodical to which students contributed their writing (which we published unedited) and teachers their best writing assignments. The machine was *never* quiet. We went around with ink-blackened fingers and proved once again that print can fuel a revolution.

2. That English Department part-timers are sorely used—underpaid, overworked outcasts from the tenure system—is well understood by *JBW* readers. It is also understood that programs like ours feed on part-timers. So when, that first September of our revolution, everyone got paid but the part-timers, we got angry enough to write an official letter of protest to the University president. Our protest made the English Department uncomfortable (even those who supported us) and pressured the University to cough up checks pretty quickly. Hardly a major victory, it nonetheless set a tone that has characterized the Writing Clinic's demand to be considered professional.

3. We learned to be sports fans in the Clinic—we cared about students and they cared about sports—and in the process we developed new attitudes toward student athletes, whose discipline we tried to harness, and whose defeats we mourned and whose victories we celebrated. Especially that March night in 1980 when *we* won the NCAA basketball title. The

University of Louisville had a Cinderella team that year—one star and a handful of talented underclassmen, most of whom were, or had been, students in the Clinic. That event crystallized a most significant lesson that I hesitate to trivialize by naming, but which has to do with recognizing the whole human in the nontraditional student: the minorities, the underprivileged, the older students, the athletes. It's easy when you theorize about helping people to see only what they don't have. A championship team allowed us to share a bit of what they did.

Perhaps we were too serious about what we did. But revolutionaries have to take a stand.

—Susan Helgeson
TCS Software—Houston, Texas

1981-1982

Cockroaches. The basement of the Humanities Building, newly named the Writing Center during my year as Director, was infested. I lived with them summer and winter, entering in the dark of the morning to the rushing of the reversed engines on a 727 landing at Standiford Field, leaving after sunset smelling the soybeans roast at the Ralston Purina plant, never seeing the sun. Basic writing work has been that way wherever I have been, an industrial scene in a David Lynch film. There were roaches, there were teachers, there were students, and there was learning. Cockroaches don't learn. They were still in the basement when I left. Nonetheless, I presided over efforts at learning how to be an efficient Writing Center, with the main thrusts to improve our testing and to become more cost-effective.

With larger and larger numbers of students, a new division for underprepared students being developed, and continuing budget crises, assessment was a major focus of our work that year. We needed to improve testing methods because students scoring lower than 16 on the verbal section of the ACT would no longer be placed automatically in Basic Writing but would write an essay which would determine their placement. To improve testing, and our methods for assessing competence, we developed a sentence-combining exercise as a diagnostic tool, word counts which could be used to place students or change placements once students had entered the English 100 (Basic Writing) class. We never implemented it, however, since we fairly quickly realized the statistics could not tell teachers as much about a student's problems as a cursory glance at the placement exam essay we held on file. We began to work on improving essay topics and directions instead.

The series of new testing assignments we developed during the year remained context-based but they were evaluated for sentence length and complexity as well as for their attention to the demands of audience and purpose. Through this process we discovered the practical limit for length on a contextual assignment (about half a page), we found some interesting cultural biases (inner city students not driving and therefore not knowing the names of the interstates in town), and we recognized that using related contexts for similar assignments quickly bored the students. These

discoveries actually helped us write some good assignments, and we reduced our placement error rate to less than five percent, a statistic we derived in part from looking at failures in English 101 classes. The new assignments we were writing led to our compiling our own textbook, a choice book, which preserved all that the teachers had created as hand-outs over the years.

Cost-effectiveness went hand in hand with our new emphasis on assessment, both obvious means of quantifying and documenting our work in the Center. To economize, we began team-teaching, a format which kept student/teacher ratios to 7/1, reduced cost per student, and gave the teachers a slight raise. It was a good idea to try, and it achieved its goals, but it was trouble to schedule and created more work for the teachers. After its trial year, team-teaching gave way to other formats. But the tutorial setting was gone for good, and with it the 101 students who needed extra help. Basic Writing took its place beside other composition courses in regular classrooms, a separate, no longer drop-in, program.

The success of the testing program and the team-teaching program is really thirty individual success stories. The teachers worked out the details of everything I introduced, forming and shaping through feedback one to another, and implementing the final product as their own. I played the same role toward their ideas. Without this symbiotic relationship, we never would have done the testing work or the Clinic textbook, and team-teaching would have been an unqualified disaster.

I can't argue that students always felt part of the symbiosis. With the new emphasis on accountability, we encountered some unique problems. We decided to abandon the practice of allowing a student who had failed English 100 twice to go on to the English 101, and we learned the painful task of holding up a student's progress at the University because he or she had not achieved the level our testing program was demonstrating to be meaningful. But we also learned how warmly rewarding it was to pass a student we thought would never master the course.

Much learning took place in the Writing Center. Seventy percent of the students passed on the first attempt at English 100. Nearly one hundred percent passed on the second try. Two four-time repeaters learned to write that year. Even the student who got caught trying to cheat on the placement exam, and so escape the course, applied himself and passed on the first try.

It was a good year, I think, for all of the learners in the Writing Center. It was not a good year for the cockroaches. Some of us ganged up on them in the restrooms. But in any Lynch film against the smoky background, someone succeeds, someone fails, someone dies. It was good that our successes were teachers and students, our failures were so minor, and our casualties were limited to the roaches.

—Forrest Houlette
Ball State University

1982-1984

I worked in this revolution, amidst the cockroaches, from the beginning. Sue Lorch called me one night in August of 1976 to offer me a job tutoring in the Writing Clinic. It was around 11:00 P.M. on the night before the Clinic first opened its doors, and she was desperate. Luckily, so was I. I reported for work the next morning. And I got hooked early—first on the students, then on the staff, and finally, on rhetorical theory and composition studies. I was just beginning my dissertation on expressive discourse, six years later, when I applied for the Director's position.

But I almost didn't take the job when it was offered in the summer of 1982. All the rules had changed. During that summer, the English Department, worried about costs, virtually turned the basic writing program over to a newly created Preparatory Division. The Prep Division would have "budgetary" control, the English Department "curricular" and "staffing" control. Trouble was, the Prep Division didn't have much of a budget that summer, and the Directorship, always a full-time position with a full-time salary, now became a teaching assistantship at one-third the already meager pay. But I was addicted to the program for good by now, and had some ideas about using expressive writing in our classes, so I accepted the job, only dimly aware that along with the decrease in salary would come a tremendous increase in responsibility and politicking.

I was the first Director to serve the two masters of Department and Division. The change required a sort of schizophrenic rethinking of roles and mission, for me and the teachers, many of whom had been around nearly as long as I had. I reported to everybody, it seemed—the Director of Composition, the Chair of English, the Director and staff of the Prep Division and anyone else who felt even mildly threatened by the altered status of the Clinic. Many did. Naturally, the English Department and the Prep Division didn't always agree on how the Clinic should be run, who should be hired, how students should be tested. And the staff, the students, and I were caught in the middle. It took the first year for us to adjust to new ways of reporting students' progress, the new politics of our various supervisors, and the new status of our students. The students now were not only Arts and Science students "making up for lost time," but students in an entirely new division of the university. The whole game had changed. The students now would have to complete a certain number of hours in the Division with a certain GPA to be considered for admission to Arts and Sciences.

Our responsibilities, therefore, increased. Passing a student from English 099 (the new number for our old course that now told everyone this was not "college work") had always meant that we thought the student was ready for English 101 no more, no less. Now we were part of English. Now, a passing grade in English 099 translated into a recommendation that the student was ready for *all* of the Arts and Sciences curriculum. As a result, the students quickly became more labeled, more

desperate, and more tested. One of the trickiest battles I had to fight was to retain the responsibility for certifying students' competence. Even though the Clinic was ostensibly under its curricular control, Arts and Sciences wanted yet another standard test of our students' readiness for "college"—their college. The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills became my worst enemy. I finally convinced all the masters that our curriculum, our assignments and exams (which increasingly reflected actual writing processes like drafting and revising), and our teachers' judgments were more reliable than standardized tests. But it was close.

Teachers' roles changed in those years as well. The Preparatory Division, anxious to take its place in the academic community as an equal power, was eager to pay basic writing teachers the same rate as any other part-time teacher in the university. Thus, I was able to stop the mandatory team-teaching format, and the staff was generally relieved. The majority of the staff now moved into classrooms alone, some for the first time. The sudden autonomy changed the mood of the Clinic. Before now, almost all of our teaching had been public; we sat with our students at tables no more than two feet apart, or we listened to the teaching going on behind the orange wall that divided tutoring from workshop groups. Now we came back from classrooms to sit at the tables and talk, rather than overhear.

Reading became more a part of the Clinic's pedagogy as we became certifiers of students' readiness for college curriculum. Assignments and midterm and final exams asked students to read something, usually from the popular press, demonstrate that they understood its message, and write a personal response to it. My research into expressive discourse led me to encourage instructors to help students slow down their reading by writing about developing guesses about meaning and connections to their experiences. Final exams became week-long exercises, carefully set up and prepared for, with topics given in advance and strategies worked on in class. And I changed the procedure by which the placement exam was read. Instead of begging for volunteers and grabbing readers out of the halls to be paid one dollar per essay, I set up a team of seven or eight regular readers. The teachers collaborated to design the placement exam, the scoring guide, and to test the test in their classes. The new restrictions and responsibilities, therefore, led to some exciting possibilities for change to bring the Clinic more in line with what was then current in composition studies.

When I look back on my two years as Director, I think I am most proud of our creating and pushing through channels a new course in the Clinic—English 098. Since the beginning, there had always been a group of students who could not get through English 099, Basic Writing, in one semester. They worked diligently, showed significant improvement, began to feel more in control of writing contexts, and then we teachers turned around and said, "Yes, you have done a wonderful job trying, but still you get an F." The political climate in the Prep Division allowed us to propose English 098, a lower-level course designed for these students.

The English Department probably wouldn't have funded it, or been sure "those students" belonged in the academy in the first place, but, by this time, the Prep Division had money and its Director was listening. The course began in the fall of 1983, staffed by six of our best teachers and designed to integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The success rate remains high, as does the morale of these students. They move smoothly and confidently to English 099, the "door" to the university.

In these two years, the political tension made us stop and think. We became more vocal advocates for the students and for ourselves as professionals. We talked more realistically about our qualifications, the students' dilemmas, our approaches to the bureaucracy, and applications of the theory we were studying. The Prep Division took us seriously and we got hooked on widening our influence beyond the English Department. Oh, and I got a raise during my second year.

—Kate Ronald
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

1984-1985

Orwell's year ironically was a calm political time in the basement. The Preparatory Division and the English Department had struck a kind of balance, with the Division controlling a stabilized budget and the Department retaining control over curriculum. In this climate of detente, the Clinic Director's role expanded; because neither side knew or had much contact with the other except through me, I became mediator and public relations officer, explaining English Department policies to Division staff and Division decisions to faculty members. But because neither side could claim full control over the Writing Center, this quiet political year became the year of Being Left Alone; the director made hiring decisions and revised programs with little intervention or advice from either boss.

Like most of my predecessors, I was working on my dissertation when I became Director of the Clinic, and the curricular changes I instituted were a direct result of my own dissertation focus on the reclaiming of the imagination, as Ann Berthoff has called it, and the importance of reading in that enterprise. Of course, researchers had long since acknowledged the intimate connection between reading and writing. But the basic writing textbooks slumped on the tops of our filing cabinets and still used by some instructors persisted in two distressing assumptions that kept teachers and students from making the connection: since the basic writers can't read, don't let them; if they read at all, make it short, simple, and "relevant." I wanted to make sure we resisted the temptation to condescend to our students' reading capabilities by denying them access to "challenging" literature. I remember the suspicion that greeted me on the day I introduced to instructors two groups of assignments that I had tried out in my English 098 class. The assignments centered on *King Lear* and a Kate Chopin short story. We examined responses from my group of unskilled writers, finding a surprising amount of interpretive skill, if not mastery over form, among the essays.

Our classes read a lot that year as we developed a growing belief in the notion that approach to texts rather than the texts themselves made the difference, that the act of interpreting literature could be made to mirror the act of composing in writing. Students learned to trust their responses to the texts they read, and their teachers learned that in encouraging trust among students we were giving them a kind of control. Reader response as empowerment. I still believe that, three years beyond my dissertation and Wolfgang Iser.

Berthoff's work on composing and the imagination and our success with using literature in classroom assignments led me to change the topics for the required midterm and final exams. Several volunteers grouped around the typewriter on a few quiet afternoons to write our own mini-series of exam assignments. The assignments were very short narratives illustrating some cliché like "you never miss the water till the well runs dry" or "all's well that ends well" with instructions to explain how the story fit the cliché and an invitation to use personal experience to help with the explanation. These little vignettes were more than just fun to write; they let us test our theories as well as our imaginations. Their style helped students respond conversationally, from their own experience and from the text, in class discussions and short writing assignments preceding the exam. Exam responses blended these types of support and detail naturally. Berthoff calls this process knowing your knowledge, and it seemed crucial for this group of students to recognize that they came with knowledge as well as got it in the classroom.

Theories about the imagination and the connection between reading and writing were all very well for a dissertation writer whose job it was to make sense of such ideas. But as Director of the program, I had to look for ways to share these ideas with a staff whose part-time status mandated other professional lives. If the diversity of the teaching community is a strength in basic writing, it's also paradoxically its weakness. Shared contexts can't be assumed, and opportunities for sharing are limited by those traditional limiters: money and status. Casting about for a solution, I realized that the exams required of all Preparatory Division students could become occasions for the testing and certifying of not only our students' progress, but our own. So I began staffwide holistic grading sessions that brought all twenty-one of us together to evaluate the performance of lots of students (each instructor typically read eighty or so exams), and to reflect on our own teaching methods and attitudes about writing competence. As we discussed samples, we'd discover what we had emphasized in preparing students and we'd locate stylistic and syntactic markers that separated failing from passing responses. I think, I hope, that we saw ourselves as a community of researchers as well as teachers.

During my year, with the Preparatory Division and the English Department in perilous equilibrium, it became clear that we would have to find new ways to retain cohesiveness. We were no longer the isolated group of "basement professionals." The English Department sent more graduate students from "upstairs" to teach, more faculty to talk. The Preparatory Division sent for our course syllabi and our instructors' vitae.

The role of the Center grew broader as more and more “outsiders,” students in regular programs and businesses in the area, began to call for advice and consultation. As a relative newcomer to basic writing classes, I helped accelerate the change of role and of image. But amidst all the changes that began to give us greater visibility and even status, the basement community kept me from forgetting some of the wisdom from the first days, a wisdom that began with belief in possibilities.

—Hephzibah Roskelly
University of Massachusetts-Boston

1985-1987

If Susan’s term as Director was shaped by her interest in composition theory, Kate’s by political exigency, and Hepsie’s by her commitment to imagination, mine was driven by the conviction that defining and teaching good writing is necessarily approached as a collaborative enterprise. Influenced by the work of Ann Berthoff, Kenneth Bruffee, and Paulo Freire, I believe that to teach well we need to investigate our knowledge, question our own authority. This is particularly important in a changing program, and reviewing the history of this program makes it clear that change is, to borrow a cliché, the only constant.

One of Susan’s legacies was my interest in writing evaluation, sparked when she asked me in 1979 to investigate something called “primary trait scoring.” Being of a political bent, I came to see evaluation as a crucial issue in composition instruction. At the beginning, our students were placed by their ACT scores and given a “diagnostic” in the first class meeting. Realizing that an objective test score was a poor indicator of writing proficiency, Susan had in 1980 instituted placement testing in student orientation sessions. Like virtually all our operations, it was shaped by budget; we could only afford to test so many students, so an ACT English score of 15, which would yield about that many, became our upper limit. Every year thereafter we sought to refine our topic-writing, our test-giving, and our essay-scoring procedures, looking for ways to get tired, frightened, and often hungry almost-freshmen to produce writing that would show us what they might do in a composition course. I profited handsomely from my investment in that process, and by the time I became Director, I was writing a dissertation on evaluative reading.

I continued the practice of grading midterm and final essays in a single sitting by a holistic procedure, but provided less and less in the way of scoring guides, using the first hour of each session instead to provoke discussion of several difficult essays and thereby trying to develop a definition of “satisfactory response” that we could all subscribe to, at least in part. In my second year, uncomfortable with the limitations imposed on both writers and readers by using an impromptu essay as an exit examination, I worked with the staff to devise and implement an evaluation system based on portfolios of finished work.

But what ties all this together, what I tried to make explicit in the hope that it would sustain itself, is the communal nature of our program’s development. I will likely be the last Director who can look back to the

early years and see how we created “Basic Writing” out of whole cloth, relying on native wit and daily inspiration to keep our students from sinking while we developed concepts to account for what we saw on their papers and methods to help them learn to do the writing college would require of them. We learned to collaborate because nobody knew what to do and everybody had to do it. So we learned to listen over our shoulders and talk to each other between classes, to scavenge each other’s handouts and listen up when someone said, “I was reading such-and-such over the weekend.”

Finding out about others who were working with and theorizing about unskilled writers enabled us to put our work in context, to see that what we were doing was a task shared by teachers in other places, and that the problems we were encountering, not nearly so mundane as our better-paid colleagues imagined, in fact raised questions about the very nature of literacy and education. We learned to what a large extent “good writing” is a social construct reflecting the community in which it is defined.

Seven years’ work here convinced me that this is an ideal situation in which to learn to teach, a place where Authority carries little weight but where peers listen to each other. So when I became Director, I set about making more explicit what I thought we had learned. I tried to assure that the learning was shared by the whole staff, those who had joined us lately as well as those who had been with us since the beginning. Assuming that it was not my responsibility to make all the decisions, but to point out what decisions needed to be made and to take the lead in negotiations, I tried to draw people together and keep them talking about teaching. We had formal meetings on set topics such as reading in the writing class, responding to student work, and grading, and some of us profited richly from participating in conferences away from Louisville. But the best tool, the most useful and pleasant, continues to be informal consultation, what one Authority has termed “sitting around Kaffee-Klatsching in the Clinic.” By involving small groups of people in conversation about the problem at hand, I was able, sometimes, both to find out their thinking and inform them of mine. The give-and-take of these informal sessions continues, in my view, to be the backbone of the program, what makes us work.

In an increasingly conservative political climate, it is both more difficult and more essential to keep us all—administrators, fellow teachers, students, myself—reminded that easy answers will not do. Pressures for accountability increase even as understanding of complexity decreases. The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills always lurks in the shadows. Only a program whose members can say clearly why they do what they do and contemplate doing it differently can, or deserves to, survive.

—Wanda Martin
University of New Mexico

Conclusion

Ten years later we're still not sure how we convinced a department, an administration, students, and teachers to support and extend the function of the Writing Center. We do know we counted on students to make our case to administrators that basic writing was worth the money; and we counted on one another to reinforce theories and practices we were learning. Looking back we find that the pedagogical—and political—strategies which worked were those that took advantage of the community we had around us. The ideas that didn't last—sentence combining, grammar exercises, our textbook—were theories imposed without consideration of our own context in a mistaken belief that models could be made of processes. The history of this writing program, and maybe the history of many writing programs, is a story of recognition: nurturing what works, abandoning what doesn't, changing what we see by changing how we see.

Consequently after ten years, we writing teachers—the seven of us who share their experiences here and the profession as a whole—are still looking for the paths that converge, the places where students participate in the community of academic writers by bringing what they already know to bear on what they need to know. The prospects are, as they always have been, both daunting and exhilarating. “Remedial education” is studied and restudied, while the institution, chronically forgetful of the past, struggles to set the limits of higher education by creating new admission standards that will exclude some who would have benefited from basic writing programs. At the same time, faculty members across the university, troubled by the inability of graduates to write effectively, are beginning to investigate how they can integrate writing into their courses. Now new general education programs are developing which, if they're successful, will bring writing to the heart of every student's curriculum.

So, the Writing Clinic becomes the Writing Center, and the Writing Center, in turn, decenters, offering new services in new places as the notion of writing as a skill too basic for the university gives way to a concept of writing as a discipline vital to the academic life. The next Director at the University of Louisville will run a program increasingly different from the one which originated prior to the flood in a basement room vacated by University Archives. But what does not change, despite wave after wave of theory and practice, is the determination to help every student learn to write for college, as best we know how.