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DEVELOPING LITERACY THROUGH TRANSCRIPTION

A major problem in improving the reading and writing abilities of basic skills students enrolled in open admissions colleges is created by the students' poor skills as well as their negative feelings toward school. While many of these students may have succeeded in high school well enough to graduate, they are underprepared for college work (Troyka 254) and have often failed or almost failed before. How do basic writing instructors teach such students? More specifically, how do basic writing instructors teach developmental reading and basic writing—once more, but with success—to students with years of accumulated negative attitudes toward school?

The answers most often provided by writers of basic skills materials have involved a skills-oriented approach. We teach students to find the main ideas and to draw inferences from their reading; instructors teach them to develop topic sentences and to correct the grammar and the sentence structure of what writing they are asked to do. Often such an approach begins with well-intentioned reading selections; students are invited to read professionally written essays and then to write similar expository

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essays which, for the most part, only the teacher reads. While such an approach is clearly popular now in college developmental reading and writing courses, it is not the only approach. Nor is it an approach that deals with the complete student.

An alternative course, one more holistic, makes the students' writing the center of the course—the focus for both the reading and writing of the course. James Britton has said that all language grows out of the expressive, out of “language close to the self” (90). Such an approach emphasizes expressive language, though is not necessarily limited to it. This alternative course creates a legitimate writing and reading community for the students while at the same time recognizing how language ability tends to develop.

We wish to describe one holistic strategy for teaching reading and writing as well as two specific projects that have evolved from our work with college basic skills students at open admissions institutions. Our strategies differ substantively from those typically found in the skills approach; our strategies recognize in a much more concrete way the relationship between the students' background and the curriculum, and they recognize what often really is nothing less than the students' sense of isolation in the unfamiliar and unhappy environment of the college classroom. Heath found that educators must pay “attention to the kind and degree of socio-cultural integration that an individual brings to the academic setting” (32). Heath indicates, and we concur, that students who come from varying cultural traditions—as is the case with most basic skills students in open admissions colleges—require a curriculum that is sensitive to the students' backgrounds (34). The curricular strategies we discuss here adhere to such a standard.

Beginning with Oral Fluency

Deem has pointed out that one of the most vexing problems basic skills students face is an inability to transcribe their thoughts (360). These students leave gaps in their writing; that is, words are sometimes missing, sentences are jumbled, thoughts seem incoherent—even though the students are able to produce relatively coherent oral statements on the same topic.

Many basic skills students speak a nonstandard dialect which has led some authors to conclude (wrongly, as Hartwell has written; 101) that dialect interference causes the students to be poor writers. Rather, we agree with Moffett who says that the students' poor writing ability is merely reflective of their inability to transcribe their thoughts (278).

Shor notes that “in their native idiom, students have strong

speaking skills, so it is a greater resource to have composition evolve from their verbal talent” (131). Consequently, the most common-sensical approach to developing literacy in college remedial students would take advantage of the students’ oral fluency. These students must learn to transcribe in order to develop into successful writers. Moffett regards transcription—and its companion, copying—as a fundamental skill in writing, second only to handwriting. Transcription and copying shift “speech from an oral to a visual medium” (276).

Transcription, however, is not a generally recognized pedagogy for basic skills students. Even Moffett thinks there is a problem with transcription and copying in that “in neither case does the ‘writer’ create the content or necessarily understand it” (277); but Moffett assumes that transcription has to be taught through the thought and language of others, thus robbing the students of involvement in a creative process. He says that students who have spent “their school days copying, paraphrasing, and fitting content into given forms . . . have never had a chance to see themselves as authors composing . . . a creation of their own” (278).

However, we find no reason why transcription need be the total of any course. Instead it can be seen as a means to an end, as a means of capturing the students’ words and ideas in print so that they can begin to see themselves as writers, as composers of words and experiences. Transcription, perhaps because of its connection to speech, lends itself to expressive writing—but not only to expressive writing, as we discuss below.

Simple Transcription: A Missing Ability

Simple transcription is the matching of the student’s thoughts to the words that the student writes. With a tutor in the writing lab or with the instructor in his or her office, the student is asked to talk into a tape recorder on either a self-selected or an assigned topic. The student records for five minutes or longer and then attempts to transcribe the tape verbatim, omitting any false starts or hesitations. When the tape is transcribed, the instructor or tutor listens to it and corrects the transcription, returns it to the student for study and revision, and if many errors were made, asks the student to transcribe the tape again at a later meeting. Students who have severe writing problems may give their tapes to the instructor first, to be transcribed, so that the student can study the instructor’s transcription before attempting to transcribe the tape alone.

There is at least one possible variation on this. Shor has written of a program at Staten Island Community College where students in

a basic writing class are paired in order to dictate to one another. As Shor notes, one side benefit of this activity is that it “encourages peer relations. The students have to cooperate to get work done; the teacher does not monitor them” (131).

Not only does composition evolve from transcription, but reading improvement takes place in that the students must read aloud and edit what they have transcribed. In the reading of the transcription, Shor says, “the grammar in [the students’] speech will automatically correct errors made by the students’ writing hand” (133). Both Shor (133–135) and Hartwell (112) indicate that students tend to correct their writing errors as they read aloud through their compositions.

Project One: The Oral History

The transcription project most deliberately expressive is the oral history, three variations of which have been described by Deem and Engel, Kozol, and Lofty. In this project the students interview their instructor in class about his or her past educational experiences, using questions written by the class. The interview is recorded on tape. In our experience, students asked such questions as:

- Why did you decide to become a teacher?
- When you went to school did you ever think of quitting?
- What kinds of problems did you have in school?
- Did you have any problems at home when you were going to school?
- How are students different today than when you were in school?
- What’s the worst class (or type of student) that you ever taught?

Next, using variations (when possible) on the same questions the students asked, the instructor interviews each student privately and on tape in sessions that last approximately ten minutes. Sometimes, to save instructor time and to encourage more student interaction outside the classroom, we have also paired students to interview each other. In all interviews, the person interviewed is given permission to decline to answer any question.

When the interviews are completed, the instructor prepares students to transcribe either the interview they conducted or the interview of them by the instructor. The instructor presents brief lessons on problems that might develop during transcription, such as letter-sound mismatch or false starts or hesitations. We have found it helpful to transcribe parts of our own interviews to

demonstrate these problems and to offer possible solutions. For example, when Deem was asked if we had any unforgettable experiences as a teacher he replied:

Uh, I've been teaching since 1971 and probably every year has been one unforgettable experience. Um . . . my first year teaching, uh, the unforgettable experience happened at the end of the year when one of my students decided to . . . uh, he had some kind of bottle that he could squeeze . . . a plastic bottle that was filled with water; he decided he was going to squirt me in the face with the bottle. That was an unforgettable experience.

After pointing out the problems with transcribing speech verbatim, the instructor with the students' help refined the passage to a brief narrative paragraph.

Students are then asked to transcribe their own interviews, which oftentimes can be done in the writing lab. They are asked to begin to see their transcriptions as something akin to first drafts, as a collection of pieces to be fashioned into a coherent whole on paper, by addition and subtraction, elaboration, and modification.

Part of one student's transcription looked like this in its rough form:

What was your wildest adventure? I accidentally hit a teacher. *You hit a teacher?* It all started when I was talking to this girl through a classroom window, foolwing around knowing that student cannot be in the halls. Out of no were a teacher grabs my arm, but the way I move I hit him in the chess. Than he started calling me names and ever thing else started to get me mad. . . .

In revising, the student deleted all questions, corrected spelling and syntactic errors, and began to elaborate upon his oral account. Part of his early draft read:

One of my wildest adventures was when I accidentally hit a teacher. It all started when I was talking to this girl through a classroom window, fooling around knowing that students cannot be wandering the halls. Out of nowhere a teacher grabbed my arm, but the way I moved I hit him in the chest. As I stood there, he started calling me names. . . .

Through this project, the students learn to understand the differences between speaking and writing. They also begin to learn to edit their speech and in the process they improve their reading. And the final product—a typed student-edited collection of all the

interviews—serves to stimulate reading, discussion, and written reaction.

The class becomes a community by learning they are not completely unique or alone in their educational histories. For example, basic skills students generally remembered learning to read in school as a traumatic experience. One student remembered not wanting to read because he was shy. He wrote that his former teachers could not discover

if I could read or not because everytime my teacher would call on me I'd tell her I did not want to read. I did not like to read out loud, because what if I made a mistake, skip a paragraph, or came to a word I could not pronounce. I pictured myself each time my teachers would call on me and I saw myself being laughed at just like the others who made mistakes while reading. So I never read.

Another student recalled that in elementary school the students “had to line up against the wall and state the whole page word for word. If we didn't know it we all got clobbered.”

The topic, of course, for such a project, does not have to relate to education. Shor has used the theme of *work* as a basis for student composition with a similar technique (127–128), while Beegel has assigned students to interview writers—any writers, professional or amateur—about their writing projects (353–57). Similarly, our students have also interviewed neighbors or members of the profession that they wish to join. When prompted by reading assignments, our students have interviewed Vietnam veterans, pregnant teenagers, foster parents and children, and recent immigrants to the United States. The key, we think, is to encourage students to pursue their own interests.

The oral history can serve a number of important purposes other than improving reading and writing. First, it provides a homemade book for students who may, as Kozol suggests, be intimidated by the remote printed word (139). Second, the oral history demonstrates that books can be not only the work of others, but of themselves; books are attainable. Third, it can provide a basis for mutual understanding between students and teachers—and, equally important, among students. Finally, it encourages the students to become active in the learning process by being more motivated and self-directed.

Project Two: The Newsletter

A transcription project tending to the more traditionally

expository is the newsletter. The students are asked to interview people at the college based on information the students want to discover. Students often want more information about financial aid, careers, registration, book selling, and student activities. By assigning interviews—or preferably by asking students to select their own subjects for the interviews—the students may feel freer to seek out information they might otherwise never obtain.

After the interview, students transcribe their tape before developing the interviews into a newsletter article. As with the oral histories, the necessary short lessons are given, and when all accounts are written, students return to the people they interviewed to verify quotations and to ask any questions that may have arisen since the first interview.

The *Developmental Studies Newsletter* at Mohawk Valley Community College is one such effort; *The Missing Link* newsletter at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, is another. Students chose to interview numerous people on campus ranging from the college president to the bookstore manager; the students sought information and occasionally aired grievances about such things as poor food service and long registration lines. At both institutions, the students were told to address their articles to incoming basic skills students.

In one newsletter, a student interviewed the head of the food service and conducted a food test. Another provided information on dormitory and off-campus housing. Still another posed the rhetorical question “Enough Parking Space or Not?” Finally one student who interviewed an instructor wrote an article entitled “All of You Non-Readers, Slow Readers Who Like Myself Point Blank Don’t Like Reading,” in which she described the instructor and the ways he sought to help students improve their reading.

The end result of this approach is that the students have a purpose for their writing—which engenders a stronger purpose for their reading. Since students are creating published documents of their written work, the motivation to produce their best writing and to read the writing of their peers is increased.

Moving On

Transcription activities are one means to give such basic skills students better opportunities to improve their writing and reading abilities. Well-chosen reading material can easily supplement the projects and foster the students’ interest in exploring topics further. For example, students who write an oral history of work experiences could read Studs Terkel’s *Working*. Other books that

lend themselves to such an approach are Keith Walker's *A Piece of My Heart*, an oral history of women who served during the Vietnam War; and Anne Campbell's *The Girls in the Gang*, in part an oral history of some urban female gang members.

From oral histories, students can move on to popular novels, autobiographies, and other nonfiction. Students who have done the educational oral history could read *Mary* by Mary Mebane, an autobiography which demonstrates a young girl's persistence in achieving her educational goal; Virginia Axline's *Dibs in Search of Self*, a nonfiction account of an emotionally disturbed young boy's educational progress; or Robert Sam Anson's *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*, which delineates the problems many minority students face in choosing to improve their futures through education while leaving behind their nonacademic peer group.

By combining thematically developed reading (two or three books) with an oral history project, an instructor can help students develop more typically expository compositions after the oral history project is completed. Assignments can move from the expressive to the expository, or to the persuasive. Students might, for example, be encouraged to see patterns and themes in the experiences within the anthologies; the interviews themselves can provide the content for further writing.

Through such transcription activities, students can improve their writing and reading abilities by creating a written product in their classroom community. Transcription is only one way to improve these students' abilities; it is, however, important to begin with this first step, a step that is often missing in the instruction of basic skills students.

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