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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

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Volume 8, Number 1

Intellectual Development  
and the Place of Narrative in  
"Basic" and Freshman Composition  
**Kathleen G. Dixon**

"Misreading" Students' Journals for  
Their Views of Self and Society  
**Linda C. Stanley**

The Other Side of the Looking Glass  
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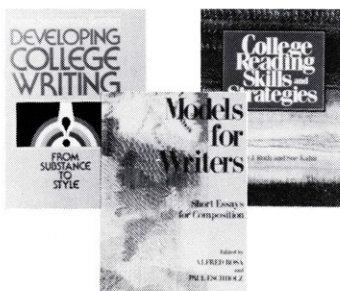
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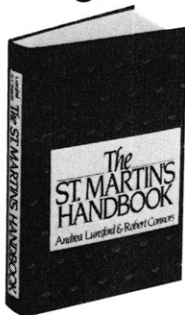


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# JOURNAL OF BASIC WRITING

VOLUME 8

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## C O N T E N T S

- |                   |    |  |
|-------------------|----|--|
|                   | 1  | <b>Editors' Column</b>   |
| KATHLEEN G. DIXON | 3  | <b>Intellectual Development<br/>and the Place of Narrative in<br/>"Basic" and Freshman<br/>Composition</b> |
| LINDA C. STANLEY  | 21 | <b>"Misreading" Students'<br/>Journals for Their Views of<br/>Self and Society</b>                         |
| CARLOS YORIO      | 32 | <b>The Other Side of the<br/>Looking Glass</b>   |
| GEORGE OTTE       | 46 | <b>The Deference Due the<br/>Oracle: Computerized Text<br/>Analysis in a Basic Writing<br/>Class</b>       |
| CHRISTOPHER GOULD | 57 | <b>Teaching Literature to Basic<br/>Writers</b>  |
|                   | 67 | <b>News and Announcements</b>  |

## CALL FOR ARTICLES

We welcome manuscripts of 10–20 pages on topics related to basic writing, broadly interpreted.

Manuscripts will be refereed anonymously. We require four copies of a manuscript. To assure impartial review, give author information and a biographical note for publication on the cover page only. One copy of each manuscript not accepted for publication will be returned to the author, if we receive sufficient stamps (no meter strips) clipped to a self-addressed envelope. We require the new MLA style (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 1984). For further guidance, send a stamped letter-size, self-addressed envelope for our one-page style sheet.

*All manuscripts must focus clearly on basic writing and must add substantively to the existing literature.* We seek manuscripts that are original, stimulating, well-grounded in theory, and clearly related to practice. Work that reiterates what is known or work previously published will not be considered.

We invite authors to write about matters such as the social, psychological, and cultural implications of literacy; rhetoric; discourse theory; cognitive theory; grammar; linguistics, including text analysis, error descriptions, and cohesion studies; English as a second language; and assessment and evaluation. We publish observational studies as well as theoretical discussions on relationships between basic writing and reading, or the study of literature, or speech, or listening; cross-disciplinary insights for basic writing from psychology, sociology, anthropology, journalism, biology, or art; the uses and misuses of technology for basic writing; and the like.

The term “basic writer” is used with wide diversity today, sometimes referring to a student from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse, and sometimes referring to a student whose academic writing is fluent but otherwise deficient. To help readers, therefore, authors should describe clearly the student population which they are discussing.

We particularly encourage a *variety* of manuscripts: speculative discussions which venture fresh interpretations; essays which draw heavily on student writing as supportive evidence for new observations; research reports, written in nontechnical language, which offer observations previously unknown or unsubstantiated; collaborative writings which provocatively debate more than one side of a central controversy; and teaching logs which trace the development of original insights.

Starting with the 1986 issue, a “Mina P. Shaughnessy Writing Award” will be given to the author of the best *JBW* article every four issues (two years). The prize is \$500.00, courtesy of an anonymous donor. The winner, to be selected by a jury of three scholars/teachers not on our editorial board, will be announced in our pages and elsewhere.



## EDITORS' COLUMN

As we wrote to members of the Editorial Board last summer, we feel honored to have been selected as coeditors of *JBW* and approach the task with humility. Fortunately, Lynn Troyka has agreed to remain on the board and give us the benefit of her experience and wisdom. We also benefit greatly from the continuity provided by many of the individuals on the editorial board as well as our Associate and Managing Editor, Ruth Davis, and our Associate Editor, Marilyn Maiz.

Under our editorship, *JBW* will continue to seek and publish provocative articles on theoretical and practical issues, research findings, reports on basic writing and testing programs across the whole range of institutional settings, and descriptions of in-service and degree programs for the preparation of writing teachers. We will continue Lynn Troyka's admirable policy of opening the journal to diverse approaches and methodologies.

With the aim of making *JBW* accessible to a growing community of readers and submitters, we have invited a number of distinguished teachers and scholars to join our Editorial Board: Brenda Greene (Medgar Evers, CUNY); Muriel Harris (Purdue University); Elaine O. Lees (Carlow Hill College, PA); George Otte (Baruch College, CUNY); John Scarry (Hostos College, CUNY); and Steven Tribus (Board of Education, New York City).

The goal of all our efforts is to earn the continued loyalty of our subscribers. We also hope that the friends of *JBW* will help to further strengthen the *Journal* by encouraging colleagues to subscribe and submit manuscripts for consideration.

In future columns we will suggest some new directions we wish to pursue, but for now we will introduce the articles that appear in this issue: Kathleen Dixon questions the applicability of various models of intellectual development, including those of Piaget, Vygotsky, Riegel, and Irigaray, in the light of her students' abiding interest in writing narrative, autobiography, and fiction.

Carlos Yorio argues for the necessity, especially in ESL classes, for teachers to listen to the perceived frustrations, weaknesses, and needs of students and make “principled compromises,” rather than remain pedagogically dogmatic, regardless of one’s teaching strategies.

Linda Stanley has her students write throughout the term in a variety of journal formats: “free,” “focused,” and “epistemic,” to find language to study themselves and life around them. Drawing on the research of Pounds and Bellah, Stanley finds a shift in her students’ writing, from the “language of individualism” rooted in Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman, towards a “language of tradition and community,” typified by Jonathan Winthrop and Thomas Jefferson.

George Otte reports on the successful results of using computerized text analysis in a class of the most seriously underprepared basic writers. Using several programs that “read” writing for errors, quantifying their kind and number in percentages and in error-to-word ratio, Otte finds that students can discover a pattern to their errors and achieve significant error reduction in their writing.

Finally, Christopher Gould surveys recent scholarship concerning the uses of literature in basic writing classrooms, classifying articles on the subject appearing since 1974, and calling for greater ethnographic research into the patterns of literacy among various groups of basic writers.

If there is a theme emerging in this issue, it is the respect the authors show for students and their writing, and the intellectual challenges they present.

**Bill Bernhardt and Peter Miller**

Kathleen G. Dixon

# INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE PLACE OF NARRATIVE IN “BASIC” AND FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

To readers of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, it may seem that with Myra Kogen's "The Conventions of Expository Writing," Janice Hays' "Models of Intellectual Development," and finally Martinez and Martinez's "Reconsidering Cognition and the Basic Writer," enough has been said on the subject. But the last word has not been said and probably will not be for some time to come. The subject of intellectual development is one of great complexity; moreover, the stakes in the debate are high. Our valuation of our students' minds is an act that circumscribes the possibilities for student-teacher relationships—and many other relationships, both inside and outside of the classroom. It limits the possibilities of what we all can do with our minds. Limits there will always be, for adults as well as for children, for teachers as well as for "basic" and freshman writers. Part of our job as teachers of writing, it seems to me, is to probe at boundaries, alongside our students, and that is perhaps a different thing from providing them with an "intellectual rigor" of the sort that Hays and others advise.

---

*Kathleen G. Dixon is a candidate for the Ph.D. in English and Education at the University of Michigan. Before teaching composition for the UM English Department and the English Composition Board, she taught mainly at small colleges in the West. Currently, she is studying the relationships that developed between herself and her students during weekly writing conferences in a Tutorial Writing course.*

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Before we try to determine which model of intellectual development we might use for teaching our students or even whether we should try at all to assess systematically their “cognitive maturity,” I would suggest a prior critical exercise, that of considering more closely the idea of intellectual development. As we do so, we are inevitably drawn into a project of self-definition and definition of “the other”—dangerous territory, according to the feminist theorist Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. The “difficult relation to the other” (361)—in any country, and between any two people: that is both the problem and the exciting possibility that confronts us as social beings. But throughout the centuries, those of us from supposedly “developed” parts of the world, and from the governing classes of our own society, have not been particularly adept or honorable at managing this challenge. “A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman” Irigaray says of Freud’s theory of femininity (27). Under this patriarchally imposed definition, woman as woman ceases to exist. Do our students, especially freshmen and “basic” writers, exist only as the negatives of ourselves, their teachers? Reflections of ourselves, but lesser, incompletely developed?

Under most developmental schema, we look almost exclusively at what *we* can do that *they* cannot. They can write narratively and descriptively, it is said, but not “in discourse that is hierarchically structured and divorced from concrete reality”; they cannot produce “balanced and carefully reasoned papers” (Hays, 23). They think dualistically (“with rigid adherence to absolutes”) or relativistically, not with “Committed Relativism” as we purportedly do (15). They have “difficulty applying contextual considerations to [their] writing decisions” (15) and do not have sufficient “sensitivity to their readers’ perspectives” (21).

Might we have difficulty doing some things that they do with ease? That question is never asked, because the differences cited above are situated within developmental schema, generally those of William Perry, whose work in turn derives from Piaget. Although Perry’s work features research on Harvard undergraduates of the 1960s and might seem a more natural focus for a discussion that concerns college writers, I have chosen Piaget’s work as a representation of developmentalism because I believe it to be mythically and conceptually richer than, as well as prior to, Perry’s. In any case, Perry’s description of the move from “Dualism” to “Committed Relativism” seems an extension of Piaget’s concept of the “egocentrism” of the child and his later gradual accommodation to the perspectives of others.

The kind of linear development we see in both Piaget’s and

Perry's model puts our students behind and beneath us: we have already passed through the stages of development they still find themselves within, thus, we can do everything that they can do, and more. The child is only the father of the man in the very limited sense that Piaget states: "If the child partly explains the adult, it can also be said that each period of his development partly explains the periods that follow" (1969, 3). Development for Piaget refers both to an individual's psychological changes and to changes in the history of epistemology. In both cases, the later stages are to be preferred to the earlier: "Epistemology is the theory of valid knowledge, and, even if this knowledge is always a process rather than a state, this process is in essence the change from a lesser to a greater validity" (1972, 6). Piaget is fascinated with child psychology finally because of its relationship to the grandest of human conceptions, such as Kant's and Einstein's notions of time and space (1972, 2, 10, and *passim*). Piaget's theory of development reflects a particular kind of intellectualist bias, and carries nothing of Wordsworth's sense of loss at the passing of childhood.

But how exactly are differences in writing understood to reflect developmental models? We can see in Hays' words some strong links to Piaget's notions of cognitive development in the children he observed. He claimed to have seen a profoundly egocentric infant whose movements and sensations built mental schema that eventually allowed the child to make use of semiotic (linguistic) and symbolic (imagistic) functions. Piaget's story of development is one of gradual transformation of, and liberation from, an immediate material preoccupation, until, during adolescence, the person succeeds in "disconnecting" thought from objects (1969, 132) and enters a world of pure relations and classifications, exemplified by symbolic logic. Before this last "formal operations" stage, the child is capable only of "concrete operations."

But what if we were to read Piaget mythically, as Irigaray would, asking: what myth of the self does Piaget build in his description of the development of the child? As I read him, Piaget's is a myth of evolutionary development and individual effort. The individual infant begins life as an "organism [that] is never passive, but presents spontaneous and global activities whose form is rhythmic" (1969, 6). This rhythm might correspond to that of the sea, and sea animals (Piaget's dissertation—Neuchatel, 1918—was about molluscs). In *Psychology of the Child*, he actually compares the rhythm to the development of "the locomotive reflexes of the batrachians" (batrachians are amphibians). So, the infant begins life much as humankind is presumed to have begun in popular readings of evolution: a climb up from the oozy sludge of the primordial

seabed—which, as Irigaray would no doubt note, is reminiscent of the womb. Among other things, then, this is a story of origins. But it is the climbing, above all, that must interest us. The climb is an individual effort (the child scarcely seems to have a mother or father) that begins as “sensori-motor” activities, but progresses ever more “validly” to mental operations. At the final stage of development, the adult has overcome the hurdles of “disequilibrium” and has settled into a state of “relative equilibrium,” able now to separate sensation from intellect and to declare their relative value, the “concrete” from the “formal,” able to contemplate “pure relations” as exemplified by symbolic logic or algebra.

We should not be surprised to hear Platonic echoes in a work of high scientific repute. The fuller the description of the system, the better we can read the mythic strain. Piaget is a theorizing biologist, not (like so many social scientists) a mechanist, and he gives us a myth worth examining. In it, we see intellectual self-reliance, and an intelligence that must separate itself from mother and mother earth by reappropriating the early connections—rhythmic movements that respond to the seawaves, then becomes reflexes, then build to mental schema which eventually “liberate” him from his origin. He retains a fascination with that origin, and harnesses and directs that fascination so that origin can be explained and used for upward mobility, as it were.

Reading Piaget mythically can give us insight into why it is that we feel so strongly about students who write in narrative or who seem “lodged” in the concrete. It may help explain why we often find it at least faintly embarrassing to argue for personal narrative before our colleagues in the sciences, and why we are so eager to join with them in writing across-the-curriculum programs without requiring of them a reciprocal interest in narrative—personal, literary, or otherwise. It is possible, after all, to see narrative as core to many if not all academic disciplines. Reports of experiments might be seen as stories scientists tell themselves or, at least, as the result of such stories. Clifford Geertz’s notion of “blurred genres” applies not only to genres in the humanities. When teachers and theorists of composition rushed from “the pedagogy of personal style” (Bizzell, 53) toward “academic prose,” what were we rushing to, what from, and why? Most of us can produce answers that seem to make good pedagogical sense, but I would urge the adoption of answers that respond to some larger ethical questions currently being raised by many critics of the Western intellectual tradition.

How *do* we relate to the animal, the earthy, the concrete, or, to put it in Irigarayan feminist terms, the motherly? As a culture we have difficulty relating to such an “other,” except perhaps in the

idealizations of the Romantics, which only make the separation more acute. "Simple," "homely," "closer to the earth," women, children, and Third World peoples (correspondent perhaps to Wordsworth's peasants) are the objects of Romantic idealization and adulation. Simultaneously and by means of exactly the same descriptors, they are also objects of neoclassical and scientific denigration. Even Vygotsky, who corrected for Piaget's individualist bias, suggested that the Russian peasants he and Luria studied did not practice higher order thinking. A couple of decades after Vygotsky and Luria's study, A. B. Lord found that certain Eastern European peasants could do something we Western academics cannot, i.e., create on the spot long, complicated epic poems, reminiscent of Homer's.

Why must human difference, otherness (or "alterity" as literary critics are now fond of saying) be figured along these poles of adulation or denigration? Is the "other," as certain Lacanian psychoanalytic critics tell us, that which the dominant culture fears and represses? Does the "other" represent, deep in the recesses of memory, the meaningless, engulfing sensuality of the sea/womb? Is the fear of the "other" the fear of a loss of the differentiation of self, as it is in Irigaray's view, that gives it a hard, compact unity and allows it an economical straightforward projection into the future? Is that future a Piagetian future, away from origin and "other" and the "disequilibrium" that the "other" causes, a future of endless self-relation—though now a disinterested rather than an egocentric activity—through the manipulation of purely mental entities? "This final fundamental decentering, which occurs at the end of childhood, prepares for adolescence, whose principal characteristic is a similar liberation from the concrete in favor of interest oriented toward the non-present and the future" (130). However disciplined we might consider these mental operations to be, governed as they are by a systematic logic, we must remember that they offer the solace of predictability; the problems they present can be solved privately, without threat to one's sense of self, without recourse to an "other" who talks back.

To say then, as Hays does, that "basic" or freshman writers often ground their writing in the "concrete, material world" is perhaps to say more than might have been intended. On the literal level, the implication is that these students have not yet fully reached the formal operations stage. On the mythic level, a two-way critique is required, aimed at both our students and ourselves and situated within a larger culture of domination within which we both are sometimes implicated, sometimes made victim. Our problem at

present is that we hardly know, at times, which is which, and how we may proceed in an ethical way as educators and students.

If we step out of the mythic realm for awhile, some things do seem clear. One obvious consequence of Hays' and others' use of Piaget in composition theory (often, as I have said, via Perry) is that our students are figured as children rather than as adults. If we adopt developmentalism at all, we need to consider more closely these portrayals of childhood intelligence. Donaldson found children able to decenter and reason in the concrete-operational stage far earlier than did Piaget. Her critique does more than suggest a shifting of age boundaries for the stages; it causes one to wonder both about the premises under which Piaget researched and the methods he used. Can the purely cognitive ever be divorced from the affective and social, or, as phenomenologists would say, the experiential? In theory, Piaget himself thought not. But theory was in fact all that Piaget cared for. He wanted to further his understanding of universalizable forms of knowledge, not understand the fullest experience of children. Donaldson found that the children she worked with could perform tasks Piaget's "subjects" failed, when those tasks were better explained to them in terms that made sense to them in their world. Just what "their world" is we cannot know with finality, but phenomenological ethnographies about children's lives are now being published that evoke, in me at least, a sense of strangeness and wonder that alternates with the feeling that I do, at some level, understand their experiences. Valerie Polakow's article featuring interviews with children about how they learned to read is especially interesting to me as a writing teacher. What children can tell us about how to teach is not inconsequential.

Long before Donaldson, Vygotsky delivered a critique of Piaget that has achieved belated recognition among students of intellectual development. In his view, infants *begin* life as social beings. The development is not from the egocentered to the social, but from the social to a more interiorized individual consciousness. The phenomenon Piaget termed "egocentric speech"—a child's talking aloud to itself when playing or working alone—Vygotsky saw as the predecessor of inner speech, the silent, completely internal voice of problem-solving we adults experience throughout most of our waking hours. If anyone felt a remove from an audience, in Vygotsky's developmental model, it would more likely be the adult. Thus, if our students truly are more like children than adults, they would certainly be no less likely than we to lack "sensitivity to their reader's perspectives," as Hays says of freshman writers.

Others in the field of composition studies make arguments



similar to Hays'; Linda Flower does so on the authority of both Piaget and Vygotsky. In her highly influential essay "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing" (originally published in *College English* in 1978, but citations here are to the 1981 reprint in Tate's anthology), Flower concludes that anyone (including adults) facing "cognitively demanding" tasks while attempting to write might lapse back into a kind of inner speech mode to produce what she terms "writer-based prose," since it communicates primarily to the writer herself. Such prose exhibits the highly elided characteristics of inner speech as described by Vygotsky, but also takes the form of the writer's "discovery process," which Flower thinks would be chronological narrative ("First I did this, then that"). It conspicuously lacks the kind of hierarchical ordering we writing teachers expect in analytical thinking and writing. Though the "tedious misdirection" of such prose might be produced by any of us in moments of cognitive stress—thus Flower claims her model is not developmental—it is hard not to notice that the article is written for the benefit of teachers of "basic" and freshman writers. If only we composition teachers can teach such writers that their writer-based prose drafts represent "underprocessed" thought and that the desirable reader-based prose is attainable through revision, Flower believes the problem can be solved. But before solving the problem, I suggest that we ask why one group of people (basic and freshman writers) would accept what is obviously an inferior product ("underprocessed"!), while another group (composition teachers, university professors, professionals outside the university) would not. Are these presumably younger writers "egocentric" and unable to decenter sufficiently to fully imagine an audience? If so, Vygotsky cannot be cited as support. Also, we should examine the characterizing of "discovery" and "narrative." Even if narrative is the first linguistic form one's ideas might take, why should it be evaluated as "underprocessed"? Is it "underprocessed" *because* it takes a narrative form, or for some other reason?

Questions about how the mind works as well as about the function of narrative are currently under debate. Social constructivists, who often cite Vygotsky, offer what seem to me better myths of intellectual development than does Piaget. Borrowing from social constructivism, we might form a different answer to one of the questions above: Why do "basic" and freshman writers accept prose of the sort that we writing teachers would reject? It may be that younger writers inhabit such different social worlds than their teachers that they are forced to learn quite different rules of discourse when they speak and write in college. That this is not a

problem of intellectual development would be clear to any teacher who tried to imagine how poorly he or she might fare linguistically among her or his students' peers, how much of an egghead or a phoney he or she might appear, despite her or his best efforts at fitting in. Yet, as I have already mentioned, Vygotsky's concern with the development of "scientific thinking" in schoolchildren and its link to literacy led him and Luria to suggest that higher-order thinking was only available to the literate adult. All of our students are literate in Vygotsky's sense of the term, we need not be concerned with that. But we should continue to interrogate representatives of developmental schema which privilege one kind of thinking or language use above another, particularly when it is "ours" that is better, "theirs" that is "underprocessed," "simple," or worse.

I do not believe that the interrogative stance I am advocating will necessarily leave us bereft of standards of evaluation, or clueless as to how to teach writing. I am suggesting that the teaching of writing might be a means of exploring different ways of thinking and writing, and that one important inroad might be an investigation of the uses of narrative. We might begin by remembering Hays' words: "Left to their own devices, the [dualistic students] feel most comfortable with narrative or descriptive writing—not because there is anything intrinsically dualistic about those modes but because they are anchored in the material, concrete world as organized by either space or time. (I am of course excluding higher-level description of abstract entities.) And in fact many freshman writers can produce good narrative and descriptive writing. It is when they move into discourse that is hierarchically structured and divorced from concrete reality that they run into difficulties writing balanced and carefully reasoned papers" (23).

We have already discussed egocentrism and found that wanting as an explanation for the production of "writer-based prose." We have considered some implications of an evolutionary myth that establishes and even celebrates a separation of "the material, concrete world" from the abstract. We may question whether the material is less valuable than the abstract and whether the two can be so easily separated. We may certainly question whether narrative is representative of "concrete" as opposed to abstract thinking. In all our questioning, it seems that we might be aided by consulting our students. Their preference for narrative might not always derive from an inability to write in other modes. When I asked an introductory composition class to write an "interesting" expository essay, one bright student quipped, "That's a contradiction in terms, isn't it?"

Last year I taught not freshman or "basic" writers, but mostly juniors and seniors in an upper-division writing course in an elite

university. About half were English majors. Some chose the class because they liked to write and needed another course in their schedules, others because they had been frustrated to greater or lesser degrees by professors' comments on their papers. They had received the general impression that they should improve their writing, but had little notion of how to go about doing that. I invited the students to write in any mode and on any topic that interested them, sometimes assigning projects tailored to a student's individual needs or preferences. Although most made a variety of choices throughout the course of the term, the overwhelming favorite was narrative. Many began with autobiography and moved to a fiction-writing close to their personal experiences; some ended in self-conscious attempts to move into fiction genres they had previously only read or seen performed. They wrote stories about the mysteries of the human psyche; the causes of love and violence; the powers of dreams, ESP, and meditation. Some wrote humorous pieces that chronicled the adventures of protagonists like themselves, and their friends. Far more often than I had expected, their stories questioned the values of their middle-class culture, a university life that demands intense competition from its students, and the professional occupations to which many were about to graduate.

Some might question whether the students chose narrative because it was "easier" than other modes and therefore more likely to get them higher grades. I do not, because I saw, through many intensive conferences, how hard they worked, how much they cared about what they had written, and how delighted they were to receive my critical attention. I began to realize that many of them had not chosen a course in creative writing because they had little interest in belles lettres or in being held to standards associated with "high" literature, though very few objected to my probing questions in conference. The standards were built by student and teacher together.

I wonder about their choices, especially about the movement from autobiography to fiction. Did fiction serve as a tool to allow them to move beyond the confines of their own experiences? To experiment with the different forms that language can shape? If so, is it an alternative mode of exploration to that of so-called dispassionate analysis? Since most of the students did write what Britton would term "transactional" pieces as well, their competence in the discourse preferred by the university was demonstrated. Yet few seemed enchanted by its possibilities. Most seemed to think that "the real world" may require it of them in some form, and that

persuaded a few to practice nonnarrative modes, but their hearts were not in them.

Perhaps we all ought to be alarmed by my experiment. The course was entitled “Intermediate Expository Writing.” Even if the students wrote what they wished, and worked hard on their revisions, was the university achieving its goals, which, though not made explicit, might be similar to Hays’: the production of “discourse that is hierarchically structured and divorced from concrete reality . . . balanced and carefully reasoned”? The best answer I can give at present is, I do not know. All I know is that I want my students to think and write well and to leave my class wanting to write more. When I try to consider how narrative may contribute to that goal, I think first of Britton’s belief that “expressive” writing (within which much of the narrative we have been discussing would fall) represents not only our earliest childish attempts at writing, but underlies the other later-achieved modes. The fact that narrative is prior would not necessarily imply that it is simpler or lesser in the sense that the concrete-operational cognitive stage is “less valid” than the formal operations stage in Piaget’s estimation. And no matter how we value a child’s early narratives, we ought not forget that the production of narrative does change, maturing and developing—yes, I think we can use those words!—over time.

Harold Rosen, one of Britton’s colleagues, decries the denigration of the story simply because it is something everybody—even children—can do. “You will not need reminding that in our society common property is suspect. What everyone possesses is scarcely worth possessing” (25). But we may be too quick to claim others’ “property” as our own. Some of my students’ stories seemed so strange to me! Yet even when I was not initially among them, there were always some genuine appreciators in the classroom who could often persuasively argue a story’s value. Some stories were irresistible to us all. Labov’s description of the stories told him by young inner-city Black men comes to mind:

Many of the narratives cited here rise to a very high level of competence; when they are quoted in the exact words of the speaker, they will command the total attention of an audience in a remarkable way, creating a deep and attentive silence that is found in academic or political discussion. (Rosen, 10)

So much for the claim that “basic” and freshman writers “have difficulty applying contextual considerations to [their] writing decisions” (Hays, 15) and lack “sensitivity to their readers’ perspectives” (Hays, 21)—if Labov’s informants are to be judged

dualistic, and if context and audience are concepts applicable to oral as well as written discourse.

The best expository writer in my class researched well and organized his ideas “in discourse that [was] hierarchically structured and divorced from concrete reality”; his arguments were “balanced and carefully reasoned.” But he could not, as Elbow urges, “breathe experience into words” (314). Composition teachers nearly always find common ground in complaining about the sad state of analytical prose in the social and natural sciences. Somehow, though, the failures of those writers do not count as much as those of our story-writing students, perhaps all the more now that writing-across-the-curriculum has claimed basic writing as part of its territory. Mike Rose’s 1983 essay, “Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal” called for less personal narrative and more “academic” writing in basic writing classrooms. David Schwalm, among others, heeded Rose’s call. He argued that “in writing, as in diving, there are degrees of difficulty,” first invoking the principle that there is some kind of hierarchical, programmatic model against which we can and should “diagnose” our students’ writing problems, and second, claiming that that model places some traditional version of “academic writing” at the top of its hierarchy. As expected, Schwalm wants to move students “from narrating and describing to solving problems,” “from informal to formal contexts and audiences,” “from narrower to broader sociocultural awareness,” “from concrete to abstract topics,” and “from experienced-based to data-based discourse” (636). But as all good cross-curricular programs must emphasize, abstractions mean nothing when divorced from experience, though it is true enough that abstractions divorced from experience can be used as dehumanizing tools. We might well wish to applaud the good sense of many students who turn away from some of the abstract reasoning promoted at the university, even if those students do not always give us balanced and carefully reasoned arguments for doing so. On the other hand, the stories themselves may constitute such arguments—if only we and our students could learn how to read them.

All abstractions and generalizations are, at however great a remove, rooted in a tissue of experience and every tale invites judgements and reasoning, and enfolded in its particularities are seductive invitations to penetrate its secrets, to lure us into values. . . . The resolute insistence on narrative in education in defiance of other priorities is then at the very

heart of the attempt to keep meaning itself at the centre of language education. (Rosen 12, 26)

Whether learning to read student stories more critically would help us to bridge the celebrated split between science and fiction, the expository/analytical/argumentative and the personal/experiential/expressive is debatable. For Jerome Bruner, science and formal logic belong to one mode of thought, stories to another: they are “fundamentally different” though “complementary” (12). Yet even in Bruner’s estimation both scientific and ordinary language are “forms of world making”—i.e., they constitute the stories we tell ourselves to explain the world (48). “The most that I can claim,” he says about his essay entitled “Two Modes of Thought,” “is that, as with the stereoscope, depth is better achieved by looking from two points at once” (10). But in order to achieve stereoscopic vision, Bruner finds himself correcting for bias, concentrating “almost entirely on the less understood of the pair: on narrative” (15).

We may not know exactly how these two modes of thought (and presumably two modes of discourse) work together or can be taught together, or even if narrative and analytical thinking are so separate from one another. A colleague of mine who teaches at an inner-city college told me his students’ belief in astrology indicated a lack of critical thinking. One of my “basic” writing students, who hailed from a similar inner-city environment, recently offered a rejoinder to an Army recruitment advertisement which said, “You may be flying one of these [airplanes]—if you’re cut out for it.” “Just think,” my student wrote, “if you’re not cut out for it, you may be washing that airplane instead of flying it.” Although they are not included in his rough draft for this “analytical” essay (he figured that anything personal would be unwelcome), there are doubtless many stories lurking within this critical retort. One that he told me in conference originated from a cousin who had witnessed two recruits receive harsh treatment in a Marines’ boot camp, then later discovered they had committed suicide together. Even so, my student knew others who had come out O.K.; thus, he concluded, “if you can take the pressure, it could be worth it.” What I often seem to do in conferences is tap a narrative root, listening for the stories that explain confusion and lacunae in their rough drafts. The relation of experience to knowledge and authority is crucial, as is the relation of narrative to analysis. These relations are not reducible to stages or steps in cognitive development or “critical thinking.” If there is some sort of hierarchy, I do not know what it would be, unless it were political.

The same issues arise when we consider argumentative writing,

which is supposed to require the taking on of others' perspectives in a way that narrative apparently does not. However, when Hays writes: "I should add that I suspect the particular adversative audience situation given subjects in our research study was too difficult for dualistic thinkers and that they would do better with an audience more like a group of peers—perhaps teenagers with a history of drunk driving" (24), is the issue really that an "adversative audience" makes writing "too difficult"? I suppose a peer audience would correspond to Schwalm's "informal" audience; perhaps "dualistic" thinking (often referred to as dogmatic) corresponds to Schwalm's "narrower sociocultural awareness." But why should we academics think we are the only "formal audience" that counts? And why is our "sociocultural awareness" "broader" than that of others? Bernstein's working-class English schoolboys and Heath's "Roadville" children come from backgrounds where the authorized discourse is bound by rules far different from those rules which the university uses and respects; their thought and language may seem dogmatic and provincial to us but, so far, we have not thought much about how ours strikes them.

Similarly, what are we to make of the kind of dogmatism one hears among liberationists within academia? I am thinking right now of a feminist literary critic speaking about a Hemingway story at the 1988 4Cs: "If I am honest, I have to say that there is only one correct reading—mine." I can recall no audible gasps from the audience. Dogmatic assertions serve a function both within academia and without. Black-power advocates of the mid- and late-sixties deliberately chose a dogmatic and confrontational rhetoric. Even suburban young people of today might have reasons for taking what we would call dogmatic stands, bolstering their own shaky sense of adult self-confidence by reinvoking their parents' truisms or by making the equally staunch pronouncements of independence. Breaking away from, or acquiring for oneself, authority of whatever sort may be very difficult, but I do not think we want to call such difficulty cognitive, or even linguistic, in the way that Schwalm means it, for if we do, how do we describe some of our own colleagues, or the parents of the children in Bernstein's and Heath's studies? Are they stuck in some stage of lower cognitive or linguistic development too? If so, whose "adult" development are we describing? That of Perry's Harvard graduates only, or of mainstream university graduates generally? Figures of ourselves, or of the leaders of the dominant culture?

With researchers like Hays we are clearly far from the invidious deficit developmental model of the 1960s which described inner-city Black children as "cut down at the very trunk of

academic aptitude” (Bereiter and Englemann, 39). As Martinez and Martinez make clear, developmental psychology has come a long way. Bruner is an eminent example: “Human culture simply provides ways of development among the many that are made possible by our plastic genetic inheritance. . . . To say, then, that a theory of development is “culture free” is to make not a wrong claim, but an absurd one” (135). Perhaps now we need to expand our notion of difference and critique our own more subtle positions of hegemony. More than likely, the change from dualism to relativism that Perry saw is not so much a cognitive progression as a movement toward greater socialization into a particular academic culture, a culture which is not monolithic, though it may seem so in Rose’s, Schwalm’s, and others’ representations, and which ought not to be immune from criticism any more than our students’ writing and, by implication, their cultural backgrounds should be.

When Peter Elbow and others say they are writing first for themselves, rather than an audience, we do not accuse them of writing writer-based prose. The “self” that they are writing for is a self socialized within an academic community, a self that shares many values with its audience. Some of our students are building an academic self but most, I think, are probably not. Most would prefer a different audience with values closer to theirs. One of the many questions that faces us is whether we can ever be that audience and how, if we can, we can be of aid to our students.

Listening to what our students say about their preference for narrative may help us help them and simultaneously teach us more about human differences and development, intellectual and otherwise. Are stories interesting because they are generally about people? Are my students so successful at writing narratives that reflect upon the writer’s past or upon fiction that follows a character’s development because they enjoy changes in perspectives, contrary to what they are supposed to enjoy as “dualists”? Does most academic writing, by contrast, seem static, assertive, absolute—reports of hard facts and impenetrable theories? Surely our students do not see, as we do, how ideas change with time and through debate and how they are reflective of scholars’ personalities and interests. They might see these things if we invited them to share more actively in our scholarship, as some composition teachers are now doing. But they do have a right to pursue their own interests, to choose differently than we. It would be better for us all if they could do so without being labelled as somehow intellectually lacking.

For the question persists: if we are not nudging our students beyond some developmental stage (like dualism), what can we do?



How *can* we understand development? I find students usually welcome challenge when it does not undercut their self-esteem and when they themselves are invited to challenge us and one another. If we must think of learning as development, let us at least remove it from the Piagetian-Perry stage model. I would argue that Klaus Riegel's theory of human development suggests some possibilities. Hays cites Riegel but does not mention his sharp critique of Piaget's formal operations stages:

Piaget's theory describes thought in its alienation from its creative, dialectic basis. It represents a prototype reflecting the goals of our higher educational system which, in turn, are reflecting the nonartistic and noncreative aspects in the intellectual history of western man. (1973, 363)

Riegel prefers what he calls modes of "dialectical operations" which correspond to the modes Piaget describes in his stages. But for Riegel, such modes are not necessarily hierarchically related.

Persons might reach dialectic maturity without ever having passed through the period of formal operations or even through that of concrete operations. This provision also introduces intra-individual variation. The skills and competence in one area of concern, for instance in the sciences, might be of the type of formal dialectic operations; those in a second area, for instance in everyday business transactions, might be of the type of concrete dialectic operations; those in a third area, for instance in artistic activities, might be of the type of preoperational dialectic intelligence; finally, those of intimate personal interactions might be of the sensory-motor and therefore of the original dialectic type. (1973, 365-366)

Riegel bases his developmental model in a later essay (1976) on a series of dialogic encounters which guarantee change in every person's life until the moment of death. What I like about Riegel's dialogic notion of development is that reciprocity is assumed. Riegel argues that "an analysis that not only searches for answers but also for the questions includes at a minimum two individuals, both operating interactively over time and thus growing and developing together, for example, a mother and her child" (689). Again, "But development neither lies in the individual alone nor in the social group but in the dialectical interactions of both" (694).

Riegel seems to suggest that change, or development of some kind, will occur regardless of anyone's plan to teach or learn. However, we ought not to believe that such "development" will always be positive in the way that, say, the biological development

of our bodies in adolescence is a positive step toward reproductive adulthood. Our students may be changed through their relationships with us such that they decide to reject certain avenues of learning entirely, as I believe may now often be the case. We may be changed by our associations with them, such that we take our new knowledge and invest it in descriptions of them that make a healthy dialogical relationship impossible or that create an “asymmetry” that can only be corrected under pressure of vast social change (see Riegel’s description of liberation movement development—1976, 694).

Vast social change may in fact be called for, though there is only so much that we can do within our classrooms even if we assent to that. We can, however, question our own assumptions about those people whose difference confronts us every Monday morning. What we stand to lose is the comfortable belief in our own superiority and in the superiority of certain types of knowledge and discourse that we, as conservators of the Western intellectual tradition, have long privileged but perhaps with too little scrutiny. We may have to consider whether reading an E. B. White or a Lewis Thomas essay is a “better” way to spend one’s time than watching Oprah Winfrey or “The Twilight Zone” or reading a Stephen King novel—discourse genres which my students say they drew upon last year in their writing. Acceptance of our students’ differing interests and backgrounds is not a prescription for intellectual sloth; indeed, it may make possible new challenges, ones that will arise out of the variety of thinking and writing that takes place both within and outside of academia. The prospect is not an easy one; we cannot harken back uncritically to those advocating the “personal style.” We may draw sustenance (again, not uncritically) from the “mother” of basic writing, Mina Shaughnessy, who, while calling for more research in developmentalism, took ironic note of a reciprocal need.

But I have created a fourth stage in my developmental scheme, which I am calling *Diving In* in order to suggest that the teacher who has come this far must now make a decision that demands professional courage—the decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves. . . . (68)

We will need to inquire more thoroughly than ever before into the resources of narrative, as well as into the richness of our students’ individual talents and experiences. Respect for the dialogic partner’s otherness may leave us searching “for answers but also for

the questions.” Recalling both Riegel and Irigaray, might we say that wonder about the (m)other is the basis of all knowledge?

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Linda C. Stanley

## “MISREADING” STUDENTS’ JOURNALS FOR THEIR VIEWS OF SELF AND SOCIETY

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and his team of social scientists report the results of interviews they conducted with 200 middle-class Americans in order to determine what sense they made of their individual and collective lives. They asked such questions as “How ought we to live?” “How do we think about how to live?” “Who are we, as Americans?” and “What is our character?” They wanted to know “what resources Americans have for making sense of their lives, how they think about themselves and their society, and how their ideas relate to their actions (Bellah et al. vi–viii).” They conclude:

While we focus on what people say, we are acutely aware that they often live in ways they cannot put into words. It is particularly here, in the tension between how we live and what our culture allows us to say, that we have found both some of our richest insights into the dilemmas our society faces and hope for the reappropriation of a common language in which those dilemmas can be discussed. (vii)

While reading *Habits of the Heart*, I wondered what responses my students would make to Bellah’s questions. Would their language

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*Linda C. Stanley is director of the English Department writing program at Queensborough Community College, CUNY. She is also director of the Queens Borough Institute of Writing and Critical Thinking, which includes writing-across-the-curriculum programs at Queensborough and in the Queens high schools. She is coediting a volume for the New Directions series of Jossey-Bass on writing-across-the-curriculum programs at community colleges.*

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reveal a disparity between their lives and what they say about them, as the language of Bellah's subjects had? Because I assign a daily journal to students in my Freshman Composition class, I decided to encourage them to use their journals to explore their perceptions of self and society. I have my students write seven days a week all semester: twice a week, they write focused assignments for my class; two other days, they freewrite on another course they are taking; and the remaining three days they freewrite on subjects of their own choosing. For the two focused assignments they would write for my class, I would assign questions similar to Bellah's.

Before progressing very far with my experiment, I attended several sessions at the 1988 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in St. Louis on the interplay between social belief and language and was struck by the similarities between the premises of Bellah and colleagues and those of the poststructuralists, particularly Derrida. Both groups believe that language is, as Terry Eagleton says, a "much less stable affair than the classical structuralists had considered" (129), for the language with which we express our beliefs, indeed our beliefs themselves, often must give way in the face of experience that contradicts them. Both suggest that our language, as Eagleton expresses it, "may 'show' us something about the nature of meaning and significance which it is not able to formulate as a proposition" (134). And both are seeking new common languages with which we can verbalize the deepest aspects of our individual and communal lives in order to enrich ourselves and our society.<sup>1</sup>

In their state of flux, student journals epitomize the poststructuralist notion of the text in the perpetual state of becoming. Edward White, in an article in *College Composition and Communication* entitled "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing," proposes that what good teachers do when they read their students' work is deconstruct it. He says:

Once we accept the necessity of 'misreading,' as the post-structuralists use the term, we tend to be less sure of the objectivity of our reading and more ready to grant to the student possible intentions or insights not yet present on the page. . . . As teachers of writing, we seek in the texts our students produce that sense of original vision, that unique perception of new combinations of experience and ideas that Derrida tends to call 'différance.' (191)

While Wayne Pounds, one of the social rhetoricians who spoke in St. Louis, thinks intellectuals must create the new language that he and Bellah call for,<sup>2</sup> and Bellah is concerned with the utterances

of the middle class, I would analyze the language of 18- to 23-year-old City University of New York community college freshmen neither educated intellectuals nor, for the most part, members of the economic middle class. My purpose, now more sharply defined, was both to “misread” (deconstruct) their journals in an attempt to learn what I could of their struggle to make sense of their lives and to encourage them to find language to express their experiences so that their language and their reality could more nearly coincide. What I discovered were some interesting oppositions, contradictions, and rich uses of language.

In addition to the free and focused journal entries that I had been assigning, I decided also to assign at the end of the semester entries that would encourage students to once again formulate their beliefs about self and society. In these latter entries, they would use what they had written in their journals to formulate these beliefs, rather than, as in their focused writing, to write “off the top of their heads.” They would be developing what Kenneth Dowst has called an “epistemic” use of language: they would use their own language as expressed in their free and focused entries to “translate raw percepts into a coherent experience and transmute discrete experiences into more abstract sorts of knowledge” (69). In the poststructuralists’ view, they would deconstruct their journals by locating those points at which discrete experiences (freewritings) and raw percepts (focused writings) contradicted each other or “undermine(d) each other in the process of textual meaning” (Eagleton 132). Hopefully, the experience of misreading their journals would help them in the end to search for a new language with which to embrace the disparities.

In analyzing their journal writings after the semester was over, I discovered that the majority of my students, when asked their views in focused entries, believe that they are individualists and that society is composed of individuals who believe in mutual sharing and responsibility. In comparing these focused writings with their freewriting and their focused and free assignments with the epistemic assignments, I asked myself these questions:

1. What do students say about individualism? To what extent do their daily thoughts and actions, as evidenced in their free journal entries, support their views? Does their faith in individualism appear to sustain them?
2. What do they say about society? What relationships do they have to society? How supportive do they find these relationships?
3. What do students who feel rewarded by their lives and their interactions with others say about them? What language do they use?

Below I include excerpts from the journals of seven students and the answers I think the entries suggest to my questions. First, to introduce the students and in the order in which their journal writings will appear: George is a 23-year-old Hispanic student who appears very mature and sophisticated; Michelle is a 20-year-old student who is on a student visa from Trinidad; she is of Indian descent. Earline is a Black 18-year-old from a middle class Queens family. A veteran, Amil is part Black and part White and wears dreadlocks. Jack is an 18-year-old all-American boy in appearance and interests, and so is Scott, except that Scott, who is about 20, has been a cocaine addict. Diana was born in Yugoslavia, but her family emigrated to the United States when she was three; she is a glamorous, blonde 18-year-old.

First, on the question of individualism, here are George, Michelle, Earline, and Amil. George, the 23-year-old Hispanic, says in his epistemic entry:

I think as far as I am concerned, I tend to be more of an individual. I've always stuck with which I thought was right, even if I was criticized by my friends, my family, and even strangers. I guess it's why I've always been a loner for most of my life. As I wrote in one of my journal entries, 'I've always been alone even when I was with someone.' I guess I feel like that because I've gotten used to it. It has become a part of my life, my character, and it's something I gain strength from.

George indicates that his actions, as described in his free entries, support his claim of strength:

There was one instance I recall writing in my journal where I was faced with a dilemma, cutting a long-time friendship because of this person's attitude toward my personal life and my family's economic situation. I remember as I was writing it, I realized how stupid I was to have let it go on so far and decided he was really not a friend.

Michelle from Trinidad also describes herself as an individual:

I have noticed that I investigate many situations and try to figure out the reasons for many of my actions, and I believe this is an independent attitude. I realise that I try to get my personal opinion and not let another person's opinion influence my own. It is very difficult to get an opinion that is entirely your own; regardless of the situation, there is almost always another factor that contributes to our reactions, feelings, thoughts.



In her epistemic writings, Michelle supports her effort to be independent:

I saw some of my independence in my April 29 journal entry in which I discussed some of the pressures that have evolved due to my different culture and morals. I could see the fight within myself to be myself even though it meant varying from the crowd. At this point in time, I was pressured to go out with a guy with whom I was not interested. I saw my independence reflected in the way I decided to wait until I was ready to have an affair and not when society thought I was ready.

Earline, a young Black girl, also calls herself an individual:

From reviewing my journal, I reflect a very independent image. I want people to know me for myself and not label me as Mr. and Mrs. Greene's daughter. I don't follow trends—no, wait, I do, but when it's first born I tend to have hatred for this trend. As it dies down and becomes old, it starts to appeal to me. . . . I just do what I feel. I've always been known to 'swim' for myself. I don't follow behind anyone. To me it shows insecurity.

Earline then reveals doubts about the value of her independence:

I don't know, maybe I'm a little one-sided; everyone needs something and someone to believe in, to feel needed and wanted with their peers.

While Earline's free entries seem to substantiate her claim to individualism, she is obviously having difficulty reconciling the claims of self with the need for community.

Amil, the veteran of mixed racial parentage, also writes of his independence:

There were many times I sat alone in this school deliberately excluding myself from others. To me I wanted to be alone, with no distraction from others. I think better that way. Society in this school puts rigid guidelines of what is cool, and what is not. To me, I would rather be myself: a dreamer.

Like Earline, Amil realizes that his experience often belies his beliefs:

Even trying to alienate myself from society, I find myself being conscious of my appearance, the way I talk, and the way I present myself. In one of my journal entries, I was sitting in the cafeteria, and I wrote this down: 'I sit here by

the window staring at the blue sky. Friendship warms the air around me, but I am still cold. There is laughter in the air, but I stay silent'.

As for my second set of questions, What do my students say about society? What relationships do they have to others? How much benefit do they derive? Jack, who most resembles the fabled all-American boy, writes:

I am very conscious of others in society. I know what's going on with family members and friends. I am definitely not an individualist, only on some occasions.

Jack immediately belies his belief in community by continuing:

The content of all my journals is really about me. Sometimes a person or two would pop up in an entry. Like the time I had a fight because of a girl. . . . Almost all my entries are really about me and me keeping records of myself.

Diana, the golden Yugoslav, writes:

People should not be inconsiderate towards each other; one ought to behave towards another in the same fashion that one desires people to treat them.

She almost immediately adds:

I would consider my attitudes and behavior toward other people to be somewhat of a sadistic nature. I continuously wrote of my cruel manner towards my family, and my totally indifferent attitude towards it. I wrote of my boyfriends and the horrible ways in which I have treated them. The fact that really disturbs me is that I actually found pleasure in behaving in this unpleasant fashion.

Diana's diary supports her harsh judgment of herself in her relations to others. Of her family left behind in Yugoslavia, she says:

All through the time that I've been gone, I never do forget their faces. They were all and still are very close to my heart, especially my grandma and now that I have gotten to know her better my heart is sick with grief for the difficult life that she has always had. Now I feel sad that I couldn't have been nicer to them this summer. I cannot help being a horrible person.

Diana's conclusion about herself in one entry indicates the little satisfaction she gets from her independence or her relationship with others:

I don't know what's wrong with me anymore. I am so unenthusiastic about everything. Everything and everyone is a bore to me. I don't show any zest or anything else for that matter. It is as though I do not have any feelings about anything. I am just drained of emotion.

To Scott, the former addict, society lies to the individual:

Society tells me that I should not feel hurt, that it's no big deal, that my feelings aren't valid.

He is concerned that society has taught him to lie also:

Sometimes when I write, I feel afraid to put myself on paper. I feel conscious of society and I 'color' whatever I write. I don't exactly lie but I don't tell the truth either. I just leave some things out. 'I asked this girl to dance. She said no. She didn't deserve me anyway.' In reality I felt rejected but for some reason when I wrote it, I hid my feelings.

He concludes:

Most of the time I reflect a self that is always conscious of others. That's how society is. Everything is very ideal. Everyone wants to be either normal or some sort of rebel. It's hard to live up to these roles. We become different on the outside. If we masquerade long enough we lose ourself and become someone or something else.

Although Scott apparently feels alienated from himself and society because of what he sees as society's condoning of dishonesty, he feels he has reached out and made an effort to make others honest. In one journal entry written after he shared an essay on his drug addiction, he writes:

The class read my paper today and a lot of people related to it. I think it hit home and made a lot of people get honest.

He concludes:

By being honest, I set an example for society. If enough people respect my honesty and they get honest and two of their friends get honest and two of their friends get honest

....

While what is revealed about George's and Michelle's lives seems to corroborate their statements about themselves, the experiences of the other students seem to contradict what they say. What in their use of language can help explain the contradiction? It

is apparent that Earline, Amil, Jack, Diana, and Scott all speak primarily of themselves, even when talking about society, with overtones unlike those in the utterances of George and Michelle.

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* found egocentrism a characteristic of the language of most of their subjects. In fact, both they and Pounds call the first language of Americans the language of individualism. From its roots in the utilitarian language of Benjamin Franklin and the expressive language of Walt Whitman, Bellah says the language of individualism today is more nearly a managerial and therapeutic language. In the journals of Earline, Amil, Jack, Diana, and Scott we can hear the language of therapy, which Bellah and colleagues find “bereft of resonances that can fully describe the moral values that give individual and collective life meaning” (138).

Bellah posits a second common language, a language of community, founded on the biblical and republican languages of the 17th and 18th centuries and typified by the utterances of John Winthrop and Thomas Jefferson. They believe that by drawing on these moral and civic languages in our national discourse, we can help ourselves out of our impoverished national condition, an impoverishment that many of my students demonstrate. They do not advocate a return to traditional forms, which “would be to return to intolerable discrimination and oppression. The question, then, is whether the older civic and biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights” (144).

What are the features of this second language? Bellah describes it as a “language of tradition and commitment in communities of memory” (152–155). The community of memory necessary for the rebirth of this language, according to Bellah, must include long-term commitments that have helped articulate the self, virtues passed on and modeled, and a belief that solidarity based on responsibility is part of the good life (161–162). In the language in which George and Michelle talk about their relationship to society, the characteristic patterns of moral reasoning of this second language emerge.

George echoes Bellah’s statement that “The rewarding private life is one of the preconditions for a healthy public life” (163):

I think the role of an individual in a society is to be the best person he can be, both spiritually and productively. He or she should have a sense of accomplishment and a thirst for greatness in whatever is important to them.

I think once you achieve your own happiness and satisfaction, then and only then will you be a productive member of society. I think it’s very easy to understand: if

every individual in a society was the best person he or she can be then we can all be influenced by each other and thus making a stronger and more unified society.

Michelle's journal exemplifies the commitment to solidarity based on responsibility as part of the good life (that Bellah ascribes to the necessary second language):

Society is made up of individuals who must work together to keep the society together. The fewer the number of individuals who contribute to society, the weaker the society becomes. Apart from personal and family situations, there is a responsibility of the individual to his society. Even though this may not be a law, the individual should realize that it is he who makes the society. He should face life as a challenge; and making society a better place should be his goal. If man does not help society, society cannot help itself. Without society, man cannot exist. . . .

Change usually comes from the young, and I suspect that the "new" language that Bellah, Pounds, and all Americans, even if inchoately, are seeking will come not from intellectuals or from older, middle-class Americans but from the young—our students. Because George and Michelle are not native-born Americans, it is also possible that, as has so often been the case in our history, this new language will come from immigrants, flush with an unfettered, unblemished American dream. The journal can provide students with an opportunity to work toward this new language by encouraging them to write of their lives without self-consciousness. By asking students to misread their journals, instructors can assist them to confront the oppositions with which we all live and perhaps to work toward a moral language that will begin to dissolve them. Perhaps some students, like George and Michelle, will reveal the original vision to which Derrida and Bellah believe the use of language can give rise.

I want to end with some of Michelle's free journal entries because in both the delight and despair with which she has confronted America, I believe we can see the value for her of her interplay with others. As she herself wrote in her epistemic entry:

Journals are a way of discussing these factors without quite becoming aware of it. After rereading journal entries, we can see the influence and our interaction with society.

In her entry on not completing an assignment for my class, I think we also can see a keen moral mind at work. And in her

expression of her sheer joy in living, we encounter the originality of vision that Derrida calls “différance” and that Bellah and colleagues hope the American second languages of civic and moral responsibility can still evoke for a bereft society:

When these people my own age came by, there I was playing with a bunch of little kids. After they all went, I felt a little relaxed; they all knew, so what the hell. I continued playing until Phillip threw me on the dirt. . . . All in all I had a good time. You see, back home I always played with kids and they loved it. ‘Michelle always made the game more fun’ they would say. I play with babies, five-year olds, teenagers, any age, and I feel comfortable too. Being here prohibits me from doing all I did at home. How I miss home.

Since I came to New York I had the opportunity to see a variety of races and the interaction of these races. Coming from the West Indies I am considered black by some and East Indian by others since my ancestors are from India. I am very distraught by the interaction of blacks and whites. . . .

Irresponsible and like a kid trying to avoid doing his homework, that’s how I felt today in English class. Professor Stanley asked us if we read the work she had allotted for us; no one did. . . . She’s right, of course, we should have done the work. It’s just that I had been so busy that I had very little time. No, that’s not true. If I found time to do all the other things I did, then I should have had the time to do my assignments. We always seem to make excuses for everything we do. People should learn to accept when they are wrong.

The weather was actually in the 70s . . . I went off to the children’s playground; in my bag I had books, a blanket, and an apple. I went to the benches and sat there just to relax. That’s all I was going to do, relax in the sun. I took out my novel to read, but I didn’t read much since I was caught by the movement of all the toddlers around me playing. They were at their age of discovery. Here they were fascinated by the control they had over themselves and the things they could do. I realized that there was nothing more beautiful than seeing little kids play.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The several sessions at the 1988 Conference on College Composition

and Communication in St. Louis that were based on or referred to poststructuralism sent me back to Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* for a refresher. I draw on only one Conference presentation here: Wayne Pounds' "The Shape of Social Rhetoric," in which he discussed the need for a third language, in addition to the languages of individualism and poststructuralism, a language "capable of struggling for legitimacy against the language of individualism." For Pounds, this language would draw on socialist theory, not on Bellah's republican and biblical languages. In fact, he explicitly takes issue with Bellah and colleagues for what he perceives to be an emptiness in their concept of community.

<sup>2</sup> See above.

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Carlos Yorio

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LOOKING GLASS<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, there was Alice, who having stepped through the looking glass, encountered all kinds of adventures and wonderful revelations about the world she lived in and which she was only able to experience because she was a child, eager, wide-eyed, and open-minded. At some point, “She came upon a large flower-bed, with a border of daisies and a willow-tree growing in the middle.

“‘Oh, Tiger-Lily’ said Alice, addressing herself to one that was waving gracefully about in the wind, ‘I wish you could talk!’

“‘We *can* talk!’ said the Tiger-Lily, ‘when there is anybody worth talking to.’

“Alice was so astonished that she couldn’t speak for a minute: it quite seemed to take her breath away. At length, as the Tiger-Lily only went on waving about, she spoke again, in a timid voice—almost a whisper. ‘And can *all* the flowers talk?’

“‘As well as you can, said the Tiger-Lily. ‘And a great deal louder’” (Carroll, 1960, 138–139).

In the section that follows, Alice discovers that flowers can not only talk but, in fact, express definite opinions about her looks and manners and about each others’ attitudes, personalities, and behavior. The flowers are articulate, opinionated, passionate, and

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*Carlos Yorio is Professor of Linguistics at Lehman College, CUNY and The City University of New York Graduate Center; he also directs the ESL Program at Lehman College. He has published extensively in the areas of second language acquisition and second language teaching.*

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**Editors’ Note:** With deep regret, we wish to announce that Carlos Yorio died on January 23, 1989 after a short illness. This article now stands as one memorial to an esteemed and respected colleague.

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surprisingly vulnerable. They do not always agree with each other but they have a clear sense of community. This little walk through the garden, on the other side of the looking glass, turns out to be quite an eye-opener for Alice, a true learning experience.

In this paper, I will suggest that we, as classroom teachers and program designers, need to take Alice's magical step. Our students, like Alice's flowers, *can* talk; they have opinions about what we do and what we make them do. Like Alice's flowers, our students will not always agree with each other and may not always be right or even sensible. But, I will argue, they cannot be ignored. Native language, culture, social behavior, and previous experiences both in educational and noneducational settings have shaped them as people and as learners. They are not a tabula rasa. The students' existing learning strategies may or may not be adequate or appropriate for the task of second-language learning, but they are a reality. At some level, we all know this. And yet, over and over again, my own students and those of other colleagues amaze me with comments, questions, and complaints which clearly show that some of them, at least, do not agree with what we are doing and feel a terrible sense of frustration in classes where techniques are used which they consider a waste of time.

One point needs to be made clear. I will not argue for doing whatever our students want. But I will try to show that much of our students' frustration and unhappiness is a result of their rejection of techniques that we use in class and which they perceive to be useless. I will suggest that we listen to our students, that we try to find out what they think and how they feel and, above all, that we make them understand why we do what we do. I will also suggest techniques for accomplishing this so that we can maintain a harmonious affective climate in the classroom while we introduce our students to new teaching techniques and learning strategies. Although most of the comments and examples in this paper refer to adult students in second-language classes, the general principles clearly have wider application.

Although there isn't much specific research in the area of student opinions about teaching methods and techniques and the correlation of those opinions with the students' success or failure, research shows two issues that are clear: 1) Students have definite, strong opinions; 2) Students' opinions are based on previous and current experiences and clearly have a bearing on the way in which they see their learning and our teaching. Several studies deserve mention. Beatty and Chan (1984) studied and compared the perception of needs by Chinese students who were preparing to leave for the United States, and Chinese students who had been in

the United States for six months. The differences they found between the two groups are interesting and show that students are not necessarily “correct” in their perception. The “experienced” students showed much more awareness of the real, everyday needs of graduate students in the United States (writing research proposals, personal resumes, participating in seminars, and negotiating personally with the university bureaucracy). These skills do not appear to be crucial in Chinese universities and, in consequence, were not perceived as valuable by students in Beijing. Our experience seems to shape our perception of need in addition to developing our learning strategies through exposure and practice. What this means is that the experiences that students bring with them are important in their learning and should, in consequence, also be important in our teaching. This is particularly true in second-language classes where we deal with students of varied social and cultural backgrounds and where what we do as teachers might be socially and/or culturally alien to the students.

Many years ago, when I was at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, we always got complaints from our students about our program because, in their eyes, we did not emphasize vocabulary in our classes—which was by and large true. They perceived vocabulary to be their major problem in reading (Yorio, 1971) and in scoring acceptable levels on the Michigan Proficiency Test, which was a university entrance requirement. As part of a program of institutional research, Jack Upshur and I studied over 300 Michigan tests and we found that some of our students were right and some were wrong in what they perceived as their greatest language need. The Japanese-speaking students, at all levels of proficiency, scored significantly lower in vocabulary than they did in grammar. However, for the Spanish speakers, the reverse was consistently true—their grammar scores were always lower than their vocabulary scores. Contrary to the general perception, then, vocabulary was not everybody’s main problem.

In a recent paper (Yorio, 1986), I advocated that we should view language learners as consumers and that, with a marketing approach in mind, we survey, formally or informally, the students’ perceived needs, opinions, and views of the product or service that we offer—language teaching. My fairly extensive survey noted significant differences among proficiency levels and language background groups. Let me cite a few points: First, students do have opinions. In the more than 17,000 questions answered by all 711 subjects, the “I don’t know” alternative was chosen *less than two percent* of the time. Interestingly, and these data were not included in the 1986 paper, the thirty-three teachers (of the 711 students) who also

responded to the survey, chose the “I don’t know” answer *over four percent* of the time. When you ask teachers and their students their opinions on various methods and techniques and you get clearer, stronger responses from the students, you obviously have consumers whose concerns you cannot ignore.

Here is another piece of comparative data from the same study. When asked whether memorizing vocabulary lists was “very important, useful, or unimportant,” almost 60% of the teachers said it was *unimportant* and only 2 (out of 33) thought that it was *important*. The students’ responses show exactly the reverse picture: 60% of the students chose the most positive answer (important) whereas 8% chose the most negative answer (unimportant). If we look at language background tabulations, the picture is even more dramatic: 65% of the Chinese and 71% of the Japanese thought that memorizing vocabulary lists was “very important.” Talk about the other side of the looking glass. Although classroom research has given us many insights, researchers never tell us what José thinks of rewriting yet another draft of his composition, what Kumiko feels about a peer reading her composition and openly criticizing it, what frustration Mohammed experiences when he is told that “we are not here to learn grammar but writing,” nor are we here “to learn vocabulary but reading.” These real questions about real students can only be investigated by these students’ teachers. Teachers must become researchers and, like researchers, need to approach the task objectively and with an open mind.

Writing is an area in which there have been radical changes in teaching and the conflict between student expectations and faculty practices is particularly acute. Although Zamel (1987) thinks that classroom practices have not, by and large, changed much as a result of recent developments in process-oriented studies of writing, I think that it is fair to say that in many classrooms, and this is certainly true of my school, the activities with which students engage in composition classes are very different from ten years ago. Brainstorming, freewriting, journal writing, systematic peer reaction, extensive revising, and the ways in which we approach, for example, the teaching of grammar and organization today vary greatly from past practices. It should be clear at this point that I am making broad generalizations. Some classes have changed radically while others have not changed at all, and most classes probably fall somewhere in the middle. Although I realize that some of the statements that I will attribute to “teachers” cannot be attributed to *all* teachers, they are, nevertheless, statements that I have heard some ESL teachers make and are being used here for the sake of the argument.

At Lehman College, my own institution, we have five levels of ESL. The highest level, 005, prepares students for the Writing Assessment Test of The City University of New York, a 50-minute essay required of all CUNY students, which is read and rated by two, or in the case of disagreement, three readers trained in holistic evaluation. Having passed this test, students can enroll in regular English composition classes and become totally mainstreamed into the College. All sections of this level are taught by instructors aware of current writing theory and teaching practices and familiar with the urban student population that we have. Despite our increasing success over the past three years, there are some students who are not happy with what is going on in those classes. In addition to the five hours of actual class each week, students are encouraged to work at the ESL Resource Center where there are tutors available and where they can do various kinds of self-study programs, particularly grammar and editing.

In order to find the source of the students' unhappiness, I thought that I would do a survey or questionnaire to see what their opinions were. After trying unsuccessfully to formulate a questionnaire that wasn't too "leading," I decided that I would start by asking students to engage in a little role reversal. I asked all 005 instructors to give students the following in-class composition, and I asked them not to hold a discussion in advance: "If you were an ESL writing teacher at Lehman, what kind of course would you design? What kinds of materials would you use and what kinds of activities would you and your students engage in?"

It seemed to me that by trying an "open" composition, I would get a fairly good idea of what was on the students' minds, what they thought was important and why.

I collected 165 compositions varying in length from one page to several pages. Some were well-argued essays, others mere listings of important points. After reading two dozen or so compositions it became clear to me that certain themes were apparent and that it was possible to isolate "issues," ranging from relatively general methodological ideas to very specific classroom techniques. In order for something to qualify as an "issue" it had to be clear that the student thought it was important for writing and that he/she would incorporate it into his/her teaching. Using color coding and labeling, the entire corpus was read over and over again, always working with two or at the most three "issues" at a time. When this analysis was done, a frequency analysis was performed to see which issues had been mentioned most often.

Table I (see Appendix) shows that three issues rank above all others: reading, grammar, and intensive writing practice. The

highest frequency (58%) was for reading (the importance of reading for writing and the necessity of having a good reading program alongside the writing program); the second highest frequency (48%) was for the teaching of grammar (students who mention grammar describe, in no uncertain terms, how lack of grammatical accuracy is holding them back). The third most often mentioned issue (45%) is “frequency of practice,” particularly in class, simulating the conditions of the test the students will have to pass. There were 14 other issues mentioned ranging from peer group work to the analysis of model compositions. Most of the issues were mentioned by fewer than 20% of the respondents.

What does this global, cross-sectional view tell us about the ways in which the students in this study see the teaching of ESL writing and how close is the students’ vision to what actually goes on in their classrooms? This is not easy to answer from the analysis of these compositions because the students’ views appear so “scattered.” With the exception of a reading program (which we have) and a grammar program (which we do not have at this level), there appear to be no other “burning” issues (and even these were mentioned by only half of the students!). What about those activities which are *pivotal* to the way in which we teach writing today, activities which all of our students have been exposed to or have had experience with? Group and peer-group work was mentioned by only one-third of the students (34%), clear feedback (one of the students’ most frequent informal complaints) was mentioned by 27%, individual conferences with the teachers by 17%, homework (which they must do every single day) also 17%, rewriting (which they do with almost every piece of writing they produce, except journals) 10%, tutorials (an activity in which they are encouraged to participate and in which most of them spend one or two hours a week) 9%, and journal or diary writing (which students are familiar with although only some of the 005 instructors require) also 9%.

Why are these activities, which we do most often in class and encourage our students to do, *not* among the activities they would use if they were writing teachers? In relation to the task required of the students in this study, we can only guess at the reasons: they may simply have forgotten to mention them; they may not have had enough time and if they had been given more time to write their compositions they might have mentioned them. There is, however, another possible explanation: students do not think these activities are useful despite the fact that their teachers make them do them day after day.

I was troubled by this. In an attempt to get a clearer picture by “forcing the students’ hand,” I designed a task that provided

students with *all* the alternatives. I made up a randomized list of the seventeen issues that the students themselves had mentioned. Actually, there were two lists with the items in reverse order which were randomly administered to all 005 students. The instructions asked students to rate the 17 issues from (1)—not important at all—to (5)—very important—in relation to the teaching of writing. They were also given an “I don’t know” choice. I did not expect, and did not get, any correlations between the rank orders of the two tasks. In tasks of this sort, students tend to respond “very positively” (Yorio, 1986). For that reason, I did not expect a large percentage of low ratings for any of the variables; that is why I only looked at percentages of *high* ratings. Since students tend to rate “positively” rather than “negatively,” it is the high ratings that are better indicators of what they think. The openness of the composition task, in contrast to the rating task, evokes a more “personal” or affective response. I was particularly struck by difference in the rank of the variable about the affective rapport with the instructor—4 in the composition task and 14 in the rating task. Even more remarkable is the difference in the rating for the importance of a reading program—1 in the composition task and 15 in the rating task! Table II (see Appendix) shows that intensity of practice, clear correction and feedback, and grammar instruction (the only stable variable) were given the highest rating by 94, 86, and 85 percent of the students respectively. In this second task, the rewriting of compositions, tutorials, and homework fared better than in the composition task, receiving the highest rating of 5 from about two-thirds of the students (about 70%). At the very bottom of the list are “discussion and group work” and “keeping journals or diaries.”

The data generated by both of these tasks is confusing and they are very difficult if not impossible to compare to each other. Perhaps the most interesting questions are raised by the students’ negative responses to classroom practices that most instructors would rate extremely positively. In the composition task, for example, why is it that 90% of the students *failed to mention* homework and the rewriting of compositions as important when they are the two most pervasive tasks they all have to engage in their real classes? Why is it that working in small groups, *the* single most common classroom technique of the 1970s and 1980s in language classrooms, fares so poorly in both tasks, being considered “important” by less than half of the students? These are significant findings for the teachers of these students because it means that *half* of the students in any given class do not consider what they do relevant, or at the very least, are not convinced that it is doing them any good.

But that is the cross-sectional view. Classroom teachers also

need to know what individual students think. If we look at what individual students said, we find a similar picture of contradiction, misunderstanding, and frustration. Here are two students *from the same class*:

*Student 1:*

My teachers believe that getting a class to break into groups helps them to improve their vocabulary, spelling and grammar. How can the teacher believe that getting students into groups can help to improve their vocabulary, spelling and grammar when all of the students are in the same boat and there is no land around them? Students with the same problem cannot help others, when they are not sure themselves what the answer is. How can other students believe what their mates are saying when they are not sure of the knowledge of their mates? Group consulting is a big waste of time!

*Student 2:*

The way I would help students with their writing problems is by making students work in groups. I feel that students tend to talk more about a subject when they are in groups than in the normal regular class. When students are in groups they express themselves better. They are also more talkative.

Here are two students in the same class with apparently opposing views: Student 1 feels that the group contributes to his/her insecurity whereas Student 2 finds security and support among his/her peers. Notice, however, that these students are *not* talking about the same thing. Student 1 talks about vocabulary and grammar; Student 2 talks about discussing ideas. The problem here is that when these students engage in group work, they are not seeking the same kind of help, they are not working toward the same goal. They are, in consequence, likely to be frustrated by the experience.

The following two students, like the previous ones, are also in the same class:

*Student 3:*

If I was an ESL teacher, I would be very strict. I spent ten years in \_\_\_\_\_ school (in my country) and I say school over there is very hard. Teachers over there are very strict and because of that students have to study. Therefore, if I was a teacher I would bring similar rules of teaching. By being strict, I would probably make students do their homework.

*Student 4:*

If a teacher is too strict, then you just might scare the student into dropping the class in just a week. Try to put yourself as a student and if you see a strict teacher you would think twice about taking the course again. If there is a teacher like yourself who is easy-going, understanding and is not too serious, then you make the atmosphere comfortable for the student to breathe.

Once again, we have two students in the same class who see the world differently. Student 4 calls the teacher “easy-going, understanding” and seems to think that that is what a teacher should be like. Student 3, on the other hand, thinks that teachers should be “strict” and is, subtly but unequivocally, criticizing the teacher for *not* creating an atmosphere that, in his/her view, is conducive to learning.

The following opinions, from students in various classes, are interesting because they show how profound the differences can be between what they think is valuable and what the program or the teachers consider valuable:

*Student 5:*

Many ESL teachers just base their teaching on writing lessons forgetting all about grammar, which is the biggest problem for many ESL students. Therefore, I would focus my teaching more on grammar and then go ahead with writing. Also, I would assign my students two books: one for grammar and the other for writing improvement and would divide the class time in two lessons, grammar and writing.

*Student 6:*

I will also give them in each class ten vocabulary words. This will increase their vocabulary which is one of the biggest problems in ESL students. To be sure that they learn the vocabulary words, I will give a quizz every one or two weeks.

*Student 7:*

Every morning I would also use the method of writing verbs and vocabulary words on the board with definitions and pronunciation . . . After that the next day students would be tested on those verbs and vocabulary words, giving of course the definition or using it in a correct sentence.



*Student 8:*

I'll find compositions or essays that are well-written and share them with the class. Then, they'll get essays with several mistakes so they could find the mistakes and understand the proper way to do an essay. I'll explain every mistake and explain the proper way to do them.

It is clear that these students (5, 6, 7, and 8) are keenly aware of their *language* difficulties (vocabulary, grammatical errors, etc.) and feel that these must be dealt with by using direct, overt techniques (error explanation and correction, vocabulary lists and quizzes, etc.) Some of the teachers may feel, more or less strongly, that those techniques are inappropriate or ineffective and that they do indeed teach vocabulary when they read and discuss reading, or brainstorm in preparation for writing, and that they do deal with grammatical problems when they discuss the various drafts of a composition and certainly when they do final editing. The problem here is that our students do not see it that way. We give them the forest and they need to see the trees! We must find ways to make our teaching strategies more "accessible" to our learners either through discussion or through "principled compromise" or both. But we cannot ignore the fact that unless we bridge those gaps, frustration and helplessness will continue to hinder learning.

Research in the area of second-language-learning strategies by O'Malley, Rubin, Bialystok, Chamot, Oxford, Wenden, and others has clearly shown that we cannot assume that second language input is taken in or can be taken in by all our students in the same way (Oxford, 1986). Although taxonomies and inventories have been devised and tests have been designed for the classification and identification of learner strategies, it is unrealistic to expect that classroom teachers will be able to use them in order to implement individualized pedagogical plans. As is the case with the notion of eclecticism in language teaching, the learning strategy literature should help the classroom teacher understand in much more than an affective sense, that students are *not* all the same and should not be treated and taught as if they were.

As we have seen, much of the students' frustration is the result of either misinformation or lack of information concerning the techniques that teachers use in class. When these techniques "suit" their learning strategies, there is no conflict, although unfamiliarity with the techniques might require some minor adjustments. When these techniques do *not* suit them, however, much more training will be required in order to get the student to accept the technique and profit from its use. The use of small peer-group discussions is a

good example of this. As we saw above (Student 1), some students feel very uncomfortable with this technique because they feel that the other students in the group do not know any more than they do and have, in consequence, nothing to offer them. These students are looking for “answers” in a technique that, in the teaching of writing at least, is best for raising “questions” or, at its most supportive, for offering suggestions. Unless these students understand the purpose of the group discussions and the kinds of contributions that peers can make, this technique will not only seem a waste of time, but also *add* to the students’ insecurity. As teachers, we must not forget that a technique that we take for granted, is not necessarily taken for granted by the students. They may never have been exposed to it or, if they have, they may never have felt comfortable with it.

Every time that we introduce a technique in a class, particularly at the beginning of the term, it is essential that we discuss it with the students. This is particularly true of a technique that we feel is important and that we intend to use on a regular basis. We should first describe the technique and ask students if they have had any experience with it, what they think, what they think the goals, the difficulties, and the advantages are, etc. After students have had a chance to actually experience the technique, go back and see how they feel, what questions or suggestions they have, etc. They should do this orally, in a class discussion, and they should later write about it. These informal written reactions are often very telling. Students who did not voice their opinions in class can be more candid in writing.

This kind of “learner training” takes time but, in my view, it is time well spent. Getting a student to profit from the strategies that you are using is beneficial affectively and pedagogically; it makes the students more comfortable and less frustrated and it helps them develop new learning strategies.

After this initial stage, during which students are introduced to a teaching strategy and have a chance to experience it and react to it, we must monitor the use of the strategy to see if, in fact, it is being used correctly, or is being “subverted” by lack of understanding or acceptance. We must not simply think that because we “talked about it,” a strategy will readily become part of the students’ repertoire. Like any other kind of training, strategy development takes time and practice. W. Powel and C. Taylor (personal communication) talk about “transitioning” students, slowly “unfolding” new strategies in a subtle, yet continuous plan of instruction and persuasion.

It seems to me that in the teaching of writing certain techniques which we consider important for the students’ development as

writers have to be introduced, discussed, and given an opportunity to become part of the students' repertoire. Brainstorming, writing a first draft and rewriting other drafts later, incorporating other people's suggestions, learning to read objectively and critically what we have written, etc., are all strategies that we are going to have to develop in our students. It is unlikely that many of our students already have them, or understand them and can use them profitably.

The notion of principled compromise can make us more eclectic by opening up classes to more varied techniques and by offering more options for the students.

Beyond the calm surface of every ESL program there is a certain amount of frustration. I am certain that if we were all willing to step through our own looking glass, we would find similar pictures. Alice's visit to the garden of Live Flowers was not an easy one. It was hard to find the way and much of what she learned was fascinating but disconcerting. We should all take the magical step. It is an experience that we owe our students and ourselves.

## Appendix

**Table I (Composition Task)**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Frequency of Mention %</b>
1.	A good reading program	58
2.	Grammar Instruction	48
3.	Intensive practice	45.4
4.	Affective rapport with instructor	36
5.	Work in groups	34.5
6.	Vocabulary instruction	30
7.	Work on "content"	28.4
8.	Clear correction and feedback	27
9.	Oral work/pronunciation/conversation	19.3
10.	Clear assessment of student needs	17.5
11.	Individual interviews with instructor	17.5
12.	Homework	17
13.	Work on organization of ideas	14
14.	Rewriting of compositions	10.3
15.	Tutorials (and self-study)	9.7
16.	Writing of journals/diaries	9.7
17.	Analysis of good models	6.6

**Table II (Rating Task)**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Frequency of highest rating %</b>
1.	Intensive practice	94
2.	Clear correction and feedback	86
3.	Grammar instruction	84.5
4.	Work on organization of ideas	82
5.	Analysis of good models	77
6.	Work on "content"	75
7.*	Clear assessment of student needs	73
8.*	Re-writing of compositions	73
9.*	Tutorials	73
10.	Homework	72.4
11.	Oral practice/pronunciation/conversation	70.3
12.	Vocabulary instruction	70
13.	Individual interviews with the instructor	64
14.	Affective rapport with the instructor	63
15.	A good reading program	62
16.	Work in groups	45
17.	Writing of journals/diaries	32

\*Equal ranking

### **Note**

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George Otte

## THE DEFERENCE DUE THE ORACLE: COMPUTERIZED TEXT ANALYSIS IN A BASIC WRITING CLASS

In an article titled "Monsters and Mentors: Computer Applications for Humanistic Education," Helen J. Schwartz recounts the story of Balaam, a Canaanite prophet who, despite God's warning, was riding to Balak, King of Moab, to curse the Israelites. On the road there appeared an angel, unseen by Balaam, but not by his ass, who turned from the way three times until at last Balaam's eyes were opened: he saw the Angel and gave up his journey. ". . . Just as it was Balaam, not his ass, who was responsible for his decision," writes Schwartz, ". . . so must writers proceed from [computerized] text analysis to the human hammering out of meaning. . . . Balaam's ass is still an ass" (142).

These things are indeed a parable, though my story is one in which Balaam's ass is sometimes mistaken for Balaam and sometimes for the Angel of the Lord. That may sound flippant, but it's actually a matter of some gravity: students' deference in the face of "what the computer says" (whether or not the computer is really doing the talking) is as important and consequential as the use of the computer itself. In fact, the great problem I find myself confronted with in trying to tell this story is not knowing which to

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*George Otte, formerly writing director at the University of Tulsa, is currently director of writing programs at Baruch College, CUNY. His present research is focused on writing contexts, especially writing in the academic setting. Publications include a collection of classic, contextualized arguments titled *Casts of Thought*, coedited with Linda Palumbo and forthcoming from Macmillan.*

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emphasize more—computerized text analysis or the students' response to it—or, for that matter, how to separate them.

In any case, my story needs a bit of background first. Last year I used computerized text analysis in a section of English 0100 at Baruch College of The City University of New York (CUNY). English 0100 is a course for students who, upon taking the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (or WAT), receive combined scores of two or four out of a possible twelve. What does this assessment mean in plain, generally comprehensible terms? Well, here (from the official pamphlet on the WAT) is the score-level description for the higher-scoring students who were placed in 0100:

The essay begins with a response to the topic but does not develop that response. Ideas are repeated frequently, or are presented randomly, or both. The writer uses informal language frequently and does little more than record conversational speech. Words are often misused, and vocabulary is limited. Syntax is often tangled and is not sufficiently stable to ensure reasonable clarity of expression. Errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling occur often.

That's a fair description of most of the writing samples that call for placement in 0100, but a few of my students did worse on the WAT, turning in a performance that had to be rated at the lowest of six possible scoring levels:

The essay suffers from general incoherence and has no discernible pattern of organization. It displays a high frequency of error in the regular features of standard written English. Lapses in punctuation, spelling, and grammar often frustrate the reader.

Students performing at the level *above* the two levels just described are what we call "high-fails": they still fall short, but not drastically short, of minimum writing competence as it is defined throughout City University. At Baruch, we find that a semester in English 0150, the course above 0100, is enough to bring more than half of these students up to snuff; the rest repeat that course. But the "low-fails" placed in 0100 know they have at least two semesters of developmental instruction—and an exit exam at the end of each semester (which they know that only about half the students pass)—before they can enter the credit-bearing composition courses. With attrition being one response to the prospect of this long, hard haul, most of the students assessed as this marginal at the outset of their college careers do not complete the composition sequence, much less earn college degrees.

It is not at all surprising that 0100 students are a demoralized, embittered lot. Nor is it surprising that these students who have been judged and found wanting, focus some of their bitterness on the assessment instrument, the WAT, and particularly on the time constraint. (A student has only 50 minutes to complete the WAT essay.) What did surprise me, in an air-clearing session we had at the beginning of the semester, was how much bitterness was focused on the teachers the students had had heretofore; even after they seemed to achieve some modicum of catharsis and I talked for awhile about what I call the you-can-lead-a-horse-to-water factor, it was evident that they felt more sinned against than sinning, the detritus of a system that did not work, at least in their cases. A clear corollary of this was that I stood before them as another teacher whose methods would be unavailing—all the more so because they had reached that age and stage where, not just in their minds, but in the minds of many teachers, the game is up as far as reading and writing goes (a despairing line of thought Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* has sanctioned in its way (130, for instance). Measuring the challenge before me, I decided the great issue in English 0100 was really less the students' lack of writing competence than their lack of hope. Writing had ceased to be (and had perhaps never been) an act of communication for them, a process of putting thoughts on paper; instead, it was an onerous chore the object of which was to avoid making mistakes (or what they had learned to consider mistakes). This is to say that writing was not just a distasteful chore for them, it was one they were convinced they could not do, at least not well. Changing this conception of writing required not so much focusing on errors as bringing them into focus, putting them in perspective. My experience with basic writers has confirmed what Mina Shaughnessy said some time ago: "as long as the so-called mechanical processes involved in writing are themselves highly conscious or even labored, the writer is not likely to have easy access to his thoughts" (14). Too worried about what might go wrong within the bounds of the sentence to see the shape of the discourse as an evolving whole, these 0100 students needed to be assured, at the very least, that they were worrying about the right things (and at the right time in the composing process).

This is where computerized text analysis came in—not as a panacea but as an extra resource for someone who needed all the help he could get. Most text analysis programs apply some readability formula and evaluate texts on the basis of lexical sophistication, syntactical maturity, and so on. I needed something more basic; fortunately, our ESL supervisor, Gerard Dalgish, had created it: a program called Error Extractor that could "read" texts



that had been coded for errors, count the errors and kinds of errors, and indicate the incidence of kinds of errors in terms of percentages. In conjunction with this, I used a subprogram of the Macroworks program called the Analyst, which gave me a concordance and a word and character count for each text. Since Error Extractor could count sentences as well as errors, the results of the two programs could give me average sentence length, average word length, a repetition factor (indicating, as a percentage, the proportion of words in the text used more than once), and an error-to-word ratio. This last emerged as the single most important figure for me and for the students—the bottom line, as it were. Whereas figures like sentence length and word length said very little to my students or to me (there just didn't seem to be that much significant variation), that error-to-word ratio (simply the number of errors set over the number of words and reduced to a comprehensible fraction) seemed to say what needed saying most: "Check out that denominator: on average, that's how many words you let your readers get through before confronting them with a major mistake."

Coming up with the figures—and that especially important figure in particular—was really quite simple. Students would produce a text either in class or at home and turn it in to me. I would give it an extended general comment focusing on matters such as organization and development, but my marginal comments would focus exclusively on errors, which I would flag rather than edit. (By "flag," I mean that I would do no more than identify the general type of the error and the general proximity.) Once the papers were returned to the students, it was their responsibility to create, as a computer file, the text exactly as it was when it had been turned in to me. This done, they were to duplicate the file and correct it, cued by my marginalia. (Only once, the first time, did we use class time for this part of the process.) Later, I called up the files, copied them, created my own coded files to run through Error Extractor, and ran the students' files through the word-counting Analyst program. (All of this took twenty to thirty minutes per student.) Error Extractor printed the sentences with their coded errors and gave a tabulated list of the errors. The Analyst gave a word count at the end of an alphabetized concordance. I created my own record of the results, including the crucial error-to-word ratio, and turned over all the material to the students. (See the Appendix for an example of such tabulations.)

Logistics, in short, presented no real difficulty. Pedagogical issues were another matter. For one thing, I have been bandying about the word *error*, which is on any right-minded, composition teacher's list of words to use warily. I should say that I did not and

do not use the word unadvisedly; I spent quite a bit of time clarifying and contextualizing the word in class. Perhaps the most important means to this end was working with the students through the survey results published in Maxine Hairston's "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage." As Hairston's survey demonstrated, not all departures from the conventions of Standard American English bother folks, and I promised the students that I would point out genuinely distracting departures, not mere matters of preference.

Such procedural differences notwithstanding, the goals I wanted to help my students work toward were precisely those defined by Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations*: to discover a pattern to their errors and, once that had happened, to achieve, not perfection, but significant error reduction. I also wanted to communicate a sense of where editing for errors belonged in the writing process—as well as a distinction between editing and revising—and this is one reason why I had the students create duplicates of the word-processed "originals" before doing any correcting. (Another reason, of course, was that this helped to prevent new errors from creeping in as they would have if the students had done full-blown revisions rather than editing jobs.)

In reporting on the extent to which these ends were indeed achieved by computerized means, I want to be wary of generalizing too much from specific cases, especially because the temptation is so great. I need to tell you (and so remind myself) that I am talking about one teacher's experience with fourteen students, not about the uses and results of computerized text analyses in the abstract.

In the first two weeks of the semester, I had the students do one in-class WAT simulation and one out-of-class essay. The originals were word processed and duplicate files were corrected on the basis of my error-flagging. I then did text analyses of both the original and corrected versions. My expectation, largely realized, was that I would thereby find out about classwide as well as individualized patterns of error, about differences between in-class and out-of-class writing, and about patterns of error recognition and remediability as well as patterns of error.

This does not mean that there were not a host of surprises. The biggest surprise was that, for nearly half of the class, the incidence of errors was higher for the out-of-class writing than for the in-class—this despite the fact that I had given them a week to complete the out-of-class assignment and only 50 minutes to complete the in-class, WAT-like essay. Not much can be concluded from this. I saw little evidence of hypercorrection, and one student

volunteered that he had spent only 20 minutes total on the out-of-class essay. I resolved thereafter to suppose that I could draw conclusions about the effect of writing conditions only if those writing conditions were observed and controlled by me.

Conclusions about patterns of error recognition and remediability drawn from comparing original and corrected versions were also chastening as well as edifying. It soon became apparent that a reduction of errors in the neighborhood of 50% had to be deemed a significant reduction, even cause for rejoicing, and three students managed to increase the number of words-per-error by only one or two the first time around despite the flagging I had done. (When it came to editing the duplicate files, hypercorrection was indeed a problem—perhaps precisely because of my flagging. Students who couldn't find the mistake I had spotted sometimes resolved to fix something, anything in that line whether it needed fixing or not.)

As for the patterns of errors themselves, I cannot stress too much the number of home truths these confirmed. With two exceptions, misspellings accounted for the highest number of errors, with punctuation problems coming in a distant second. These were just the two most dramatic indications of a still more general pattern: a high frequency of a kind of error, as well as difficulty in spotting it and rectifying it, was most likely when there was no correlation to the student's competence as a speaker, when it was strictly a matter of the conventions of *written* English (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and so on). Even and especially for students at this level, lack of familiarity with the printed word, not linguistic competence, seemed to be the real problem, and so I resolved to make reading a major focus of the course. Finally, individual patterns of error seemed more significant than those that could be treated on a classwide basis. In some cases, groups of students shared a particular pattern. (Speakers of certain dialects, for example, had more trouble with verb inflection than others.) In other cases, a pattern was unique to a particular student. (One student, for instance, used upper casing for emphasis, so that her writing looked rather like William Blake's, if only in this respect.)

Bartholomae has stressed that one of the virtues of error analysis is that, "rather than impose an inappropriate or even misleading syllabus on a learner, we can plan instruction to assist a writer's internal syllabus" (258), and the computerized text analyses did indeed have profound implications for the way the course was taught. For one thing, since patterns and incidence of errors had suggested that lack of familiarity with the printed word was an issue, some emphasis on reading in this basic writing course seemed called for. I'm a chronic bringer-in of photocopied articles

and things-on-hand, but some reading I had done on the interrelation of reading and writing skills (Horning, Tricomi, Smith) suggested that the students should also do all the “outside” reading they could; the research of Stephen Krashen in particular suggested that this needed to be self-motivated, truly interested reading (some Catch-22), so I told the students that, as long as they committed to doing at least an hour of outside reading a week (and kept a journal that, when I reviewed it, suggested they were actually doing that much), they could read anything that got past an editor. (For better or worse, everything from Marvel Comics to Harlequin Romances became grist to that mill.)

I confess that I was aware, much more than the students were, of the limitations of the method. I had no established norms to refer to—hence the importance of the error-to-word ratio as the bottom line. I couldn’t say much about where the students were, beyond noting that making one distracting error every six words on average meant making too many errors. Nor could I say much about where the students needed to be, just that an error-to-word ratio of 1-to-12 was twice as good as one of 1-to-6. I’m inclined to think my ignorance worked to my advantage. Lacking norms as points of reference, I invited the students to set their own goals in error reduction. Everyone of them knew that a single error type accounted for at least a third of the errors, and no one doubted that his or her incidence of errors was too high, so each student gave special attention to at least one kind of error, and no one set a goal less ambitious than 50% error reduction. Not all such goals were met, though I was less disappointed with that than I was concerned about the self-enclosed nature of the endeavor. Happily, the results within that circumscribed context were impressive by other standards. All but three of the fourteen students passed the exit exam, which included a team-graded written component as well as an objectively scored component. The average pass rate for 0100 is 50%.

But all this is, in a sense, only half the story. I have yet to tell the students’ side, and there the results were at once most impressive and most difficult to measure, bearing chiefly as they do on the affective dimension of this exercise in developmental instruction, particularly on what might be called the deification of the computer and the relegation of the instructor’s role to that of Hermes, message-bearer, to that great god Zeus.

When it came time to communicate the results of the text analyses to the students, I had the class do an exercise so that I could meet with individual students about the results. Repeatedly, I was asked such questions as, “What does the computer mean by a

question mark?" And I soon gave up replying, "By a question mark I mean to indicate that one or more words have been left out," saying instead, "A question mark indicates an omission." In the students' minds, the computer produced the sacred text; I was only an interpreter.

I had good reason not to usurp the authority the computer had in the students' minds: we had a fine division of labor between us. When we worked on errors in class, I even developed a habit of noting what the computer had "said" about the incidence of a particular kind of error in the students' writing. So what if this was sleight of hardware—a case of Balaam being led by his ass? It got things done. And in those many matters the computer did not pronounce upon (paragraph coherence, for example), I acquired authority by default. We worked as a team, the computer and I. I supposed it helped that I occasionally reminded the students that down the road apiece their writing would again be subjected to the vagaries of human judgment.

I confess, though, that the computer was much more successful at motivating the students than I. In addition to essays and exercises, I had the students do reading, freewriting, and vocabulary journals. These were done and submitted in desultory fashion. But the students went to the computer lab (you'll pardon the expression) religiously. Instructional modules treating certain error patterns were worked through, and over half the class did corrected versions of the corrected versions or created entirely new files and asked me if I would "run them through the computer"—as if that was all it took. I once found a note in my box: "Dear Prof. Otte: I have a new file named Maserati on my diskette. Could you see what the computer says about it?" On another occasion, a student asked me if I would have the computer "proofread" a letter of application she was about to send off. At such times, feeling haunted by the ghost in the machine, I needed to remind myself that this above-and-beyond-the-call engagement on the students' part was a blessing, if not unmixed, and I had the spell the computer had cast to thank for it.

The uses of computers in developmental writing are various, ranging from workbook-on-the-screen to sophisticated interactive programs, but computers tend to be used least for what they have always done best: tabulating and quantifying. I hope I have said enough to suggest that there is much to be gained, particularly from the developmental students' perspective, in such use. As is not always the case with the use of computers in developmental instruction, this was one time that, in the eyes of the students, the initially radiant promise of a high-tech approach never seemed to dim.

## Appendix

### One Student's Tabulations for the Original and Corrected Versions of the 1st WAT Simulation and the 1st Outside Writing Assignment

**WAT 1 14 Sentences; 18.5 Words per Sentence 259 Total & 136 Unique Words (Repetition Factor: 53%) Characters per Word: 4.4; 36 Errors (11 Different Types) Error/Word Ratio: 1/7**

Type	Number	Percentage
# (Number)	2	5%
SP (SPelling)	10	29%
A (Article)	2	5%
C (Capitalization)	14	41%
I (Idiom)	2	5%
GS (Garbled Syntax)	1	2%
PUNC (PUNcTuation)	1	2%
WC (Word Choice)	1	2%
R-O (Run-On)	1	2%
VT (Verb Tense)	1	2%
? (Omission)	1	2%
11	36	100%

**WAT 1-C 14 Sentences; 18.4 Words per Sentence 257 Total & 131 Unique Words (Repetition Factor: 51%) Characters per Word: 4.4; 19 Errors (10 Different Types) Error/Word Ratio: 1/13.5**

Type	Number	Percentage
A	1	5%
SP	6	33%
C	5	27%
#	1	5%
GS	1	5%
S-V (Subject-Verb)	1	5%
I	1	5%
R-O	1	5%
VT	1	5%
?	1	5%
10	19	100%

### Appendix (continued)

**OWA 1 17 Sentences; 13.2 Words per Sentence 224 Total & 127 Unique Words (Repetition Factor: 57%) Characters per word: 4.2; 11 Errors (6 Different Types) Error/Word Ratio: 1/20**

Type	Number	Percentage
SP	2	11%
IS (Incomplete Sentence)	3	27%
GS	1	9%
PUNC	3	27%
?	1	9%
S-V	1	9%
6	11	100%

**OWA 1-C 16 Sentences; 14.1 Words per Sentence 225 Total & 127 Unique Words (Repetition Factor: 56%) Characters per Word: 4.4; 7 Errors (5 Different Types) Error/Word Ratio: 1/32**

Type	Number	Percentage
SP	1	14%
IS	2	28%
PUNC	1	14%
?	1	14%
C	2	28%
5	7	100%

\* Note: the Error Extractor program rounds off percentages so their total is not always exactly 100.

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Christopher Gould

## TEACHING LITERATURE TO BASIC WRITERS

In 1974, the College English Association called for curricular reforms designed to adapt the study of literature to the aptitudes and interests of “a new and unprecedentedly diverse student body . . . whose cultural and ethnic background would at an earlier time have precluded their attending college” (Foulke and Hartman 468–69).

In one sense, the CEA resolution arrived at a propitious moment in the history of English study. A few months after its adoption, the *Journal of Basic Writing* commenced publication—a development signaling agreement upon a term to describe a certain kind of nontraditional college student and the desire to establish a body of scholarship devoted to teaching such students. The decade between 1975 and 1985 also brought talk about “bridging the gap” between composition and literature by placing the two on an equal footing in college English departments.

On the other hand, 1975 also saw the beginnings of an ongoing assault on remedial education, partly in reaction to a period of activism that had brought, among other things, open admissions, the CCCC statement on Students’ Right to Their Own Language, and the MLA presidency of Louis Kampf. The political climate of the 1980s has, in fact, impeded the idealistic agenda of the CEA resolution, while confining basic writing instruction to what Mike Rose has

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*Christopher Gould is Director of Composition at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He also codirects the Cape Fear Writing Project. He has published numerous articles including those in College Composition and Communication, College English, and the Journal of Basic Writing.*

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called “the conceptual basements of English departments” (“Remedial” 126).

Rose’s indictment is validated by two recent studies (Trimmer, and Gould and Heyda) that show how basic writing courses continue to operate out of a narrowly instrumental conception of literacy—one long since discredited at more advanced levels of English study. According to the author of one of these studies, the single greatest obstacle to incorporating research into the pedagogy of basic writing has been “zealous teachers” committed to a regimen of grammar drills, workbook exercises, and minimum competency testing (Trimmer 7). Furthermore, a survey of recent scholarship shows that teachers who might be inclined to use literature in their basic writing classes will find very few published resources to guide and support their efforts. In their 1984 bibliographic essay on basic writing, Hull and Bartholomae list a variety of instructional resources “so wide and numerous as to require as many omissions . . . as inclusions” (284) but name only Ponsot and Deen as scholars who connect literature and basic writing. Andrea Lunsford, in her recent update of Mina Shaughnessy’s bibliographic essay on basic writing, detects a trend toward “reuniting the arts of speaking, writing, reading, and thinking” (224) but cites only E. D. Hirsch and Robert Scholes as theorists concerned specifically with the place of literary texts in writing instruction.

My own bibliographic survey<sup>1</sup>, which addresses more directly the use of literature in basic writing instruction, reports:

1. An ERIC search (using the descriptors, “Basic Writers,” “Developmental Studies Programs,” “Remedial Instruction,” and “Basic Skills” in conjunction with “Literature Appreciation” and “Literary Criticism”) yields only four titles.<sup>2</sup>
2. No major publisher markets a literature anthology tailored to the basic writer, and only four of the dozens of developmental readers published between 1984 and 1986 contain even a few literature selections.
3. In the twelve years following 1974, there were but 42 articles relating literature and basic writing published in *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. This amounts to fewer than one article per journal per year.

Forty-two articles may sound like a lot. However, the theoretical foundations of these articles are inconsistent, even contradictory, and this impedes any effort to articulate a stable rationale for using

literature in basic writing courses. Furthermore, as I hope to show, most of these articles reflect philosophical assumptions likely to trouble many *JBW* readers.

Basically, the 42 articles fall into three categories based on theoretical orientation.

### **Basic-Skills, Folk Wisdom, and Cultural Literacy**

Twenty-one titles fall under this classification. Though disparate in other respects, each of these articles reflects the familiar assumption that inexperienced writers benefit from “exposure to good literature.”

At one end of the spectrum are a few articles that recommend the teaching of punctuation and usage through passages extracted from literary classics. Two writers apply more sophisticated methods of sentence combining and error analysis to excerpts from literary texts. Others argue that literature is a more effective vehicle than expository prose for teaching literal comprehension (i.e., retention and recall of specific facts—what Bartholomae and Petrosky have called “information retrieval”). These articles share a conservative skill-and-drill vision of basic writing instruction. The use of literary readings is incidental—not really bound up in pedagogical theory.

By far the greatest number of articles (11) make a plea for assigning a specific work of literature usually considered too complex for basic writers (e.g., *Dubliners*, *Benito Cereno*, “A Hunger Artist”). While the motivation behind these articles is laudable, their authors do not articulate a theoretical rationale, offering only impressionistic evidence that basic writers enjoy the work in question and make impressive gains after studying it. It may be tempting to conclude, as one author (Fenstermaker) claims, that students who cannot read expository prose proficiently can learn to grapple with a complex intellectual issue when that issue is dramatized in literature (e.g., alienation in Hemingway). But without any better account of how and why this might happen, the only explanation for improvement is tied up in the folk wisdom of English study—specifically, the belief that reading the output of a creative genius enhances the performance of inexperienced writers. Since disproof of this belief has been a prominent feature of the critique of Current-Traditional rhetoric initiated by Young and pursued by many others, it should not be necessary to dwell on the shortcomings of this large subcategory of articles.

The most theoretically sophisticated articles that fall under this category are those that pursue E. D. Hirsch’s argument about cultural literacy. But in this case, although a theory has been

carefully articulated, there is, as yet, no praxis: we have yet to see a book or article explaining how basic writers might be led to cultural literacy.

### **Cognitive Development**

The ten pieces that fall under this heading can be placed in two subcategories. First are three articles that pursue developmental theories of language acquisition, adopting the line of Thomas Farrell, who argues that “individuals . . . recapitulate the history of the race with respect to the development of the communicative arts, moving from narrative to rhetoric to logic” (50). These articles recommend initial emphasis of literature from the oral tradition. Though intellectually vigorous, Farrell’s views, which involve broader issues of language and literacy (specifically, whether or not standard usage can and should be taught), have aroused bitter controversy, with Farrell himself accused of ethnocentrism. (For a recapitulation of the debate between Farrell and his critics—biased, of course, in his favor—see Farrell’s “A Defense”; for a critique of Farrell’s views, see Bizzell, “Arguing.”) Regardless of the validity of such accusations, Farrell’s convictions remain a minority view, unlikely to engender any professional consensus about literature and basic writers.

A more mainstream adaptation of developmental psychology is pursued in another seven articles. Typical of these is Robert Bergstrom’s argument that students who fail to “understand” literature “are applying [Piaget’s] ‘concrete operational’ schemes to a problem . . . which demands . . . formal operational thinking” (746). Bergstrom concludes that the basic writing teacher needs to design a developmental sequence of reading assignments to help students acquire “the mental tools which will enable them to assimilate” literature (748). Instructors attracted to this approach are likely to accept the notion that basic writers are cognitively immature—an increasingly problematic assumption, for reasons that Myra Kogen and Mike Rose (“Narrowing”) have set forth persuasively. But even granting for a moment the validity of that assumption, it is interesting to note that scholars like Bergstrom have made little application of pertinent British and Australian research linking the development of reading and writing proficiencies in children.

A brief look at some of that research is instructive. On the one hand, Britton quotes Susanne Langer to show that literary response demands a “break with the reader’s actual environment”—a break that allows the young reader to move toward the detached,

cognitively mature role of “spectator,” and away from the childlike, “egocentric” role of “participant” (48). (It is exactly the reluctance of basic writers to adopt such a stance that has led to the diagnosis that they are cognitively immature—unable to “decenter.”) Literary response, Britton continues, asks the reader not to “APPLY [her] value systems,” but instead, acting as spectator, to “GENERATE AND REFINE the system itself” (51). Britton concludes that “poetic discourse [i.e., literature] is the form that most fully meets the demands associated with the role of spectator—demands that are met . . . by MAKING something with language rather than DOING something with it” (53).

The detachment of spectatorship is, of course, the intellectual stance privileged by academic communities. Likewise, the implied diminution of pragmatic concerns (“making something with language rather than doing something with it”) appeals to the residual aestheticism found in many English departments, including some that house basic writing courses. However, while suspension of values and pragmatic concerns may enrich the responses to literature of younger readers, it is a stance difficult for many basic writers, particularly those who are older nontraditional students, to assume.

On the other hand, radical critics of English education (e.g., Berlin, Ohmann, Roemer) raise another kind of objection to this manner of response, finding in it unexamined biases of liberal academic culture. Among those biases is the privileging of such attitudes as skepticism, moral relativism, and aestheticism—attitudes valorized by middle-class elites. (Many teachers of basic writing, on the margins of academic life, are themselves uncomfortable with this intellectual stance.) In short, it can be argued that theories of cognitive development carry the hidden agenda of leading basic writers toward an intellectual stance alien to the values and experiences of most working people and minorities. Putting aside the dubious morality of such an endeavor, teachers of basic reading and writing must still face serious doubts about the prognosis for success.

## **Reader Response**

Of the 11 articles that fall into this category, four adopt an apolitical stance. That is to say the authors of these articles present reader-response techniques as a method of coaxing basic writers into the academic “discourse community,” but they do not examine power relationships that inhibit the free exchange of ideas—the ideal of academic discussion. For example, no one is likely to argue

that a lesbian feminist reading of a poem or short story will always be accorded the same respect as any other kind of reading or that the student who engages in such a reading is completely free to advance it on an equal footing with every other member of her class. Furthermore, blending into academic culture involves more than simply acquiring a particular dialect and conforming to a certain type of etiquette. As Patricia Bizzell explains:

[W]e can no longer see dialects or discourse conventions as mere conveyances of thoughts generated prior to their embodiment in language. Rather, dialect and discourse generate thoughts, constitute world view. ("What Happens" 297)

Whenever we talk about supplanting one world view with another, we need to confront the prospect of ethnocentrism, if not cultural aggression.

The remaining seven articles, on the other hand, pursue the reasoning set forth by Nicholas Coles and Susan V. Wall, who explain the rationale for their basic writing course in the following terms:

[T]he tendency of "outer-directed" pedagogies so far has been to over-emphasize what it is that students must learn in order to become members of our community. The focus of metaphors such as "initiation" and "assimilation" is on what must change in our students, how they must become other than they are in order to accommodate our discourse. We feel the need to focus also on those motives and abilities that grow from our students' histories. (299)

Courses built on such a premise do not ignore the conventions of academic discourse; instead, they view these conventions as cultural artifacts, inevitably laden with their own biases and historical baggage. The pedagogy, as Bartholomae and Petrosky explain it, is represented by "the motive to 'counterfactuality,' the motive to alter those artifacts, to reject their apparent inevitability" through assignments that allow basic writers "to reimagine and reapproximate the classroom materials, the terms and structures that make those materials available for thought and discussion, and the situation that places them outside of the mainstream work of the academy" (8).

Literature is an important component of the basic writing courses described by Coles and Wall, and Bartholomae and Petrosky for two reasons. First, it provides basic writers the opportunity to respond holistically to a difficult text, thus offering an alternative to

the analytical procedures of workbook exercises, which construe literacy as a linear sequence of constituent skills (Bartholomae and Petrosky 12–13). Second, literature offers basic writers relief from one of the most alienating of academic tasks: reading for literal comprehension and recall of specific facts—“information retrieval.”

These ideas offer a seminal theory to support the use of literature in basic writing courses. There are, however, obstacles that impede implementation. For one thing, we need further ethnographic research into patterns of literacy among various groups of basic writers, including ethnic minorities and working-class teenagers and adults. For example, Shirley Brice Heath has shown that most working-class Blacks have little if any conception of private recreational reading. Heath concludes:

The meaning of whatever is read is interpreted jointly and socially: “What does it mean?” becomes “What does it say about me, or someone or something I know, and what do I do?” But such meaning is not built individually . . . because the community members share their experience to build interpretive bridges from print to practice. (232)

To view this conditioned manner of response as cognitively immature is ethnocentric, and a curriculum based on such views is likely to be simplistic and ineffectual. Therefore, we need further research into the practical applications of literacy among working-class Americans—the kind of investigation that Richard Hoggart undertook thirty years ago in Great Britain. Recognizing this need, Patricia Bizzell (“What Happens”) has called for a study of basic writers similar to William Perry’s survey of Harvard undergraduates: “a series of interviews to tell us how they mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture” (300). As Bartholomae and Petrosky point out:

[R]eading . . . is partly a matter of bringing forward an agenda that belongs not to the student or the text but to conventional structures of reading that the student is approximating . . . [some of which are] derived from the church or from the home or from any of the cultures outside our classrooms. (21)

On a more encouraging note, our profession has begun, at last, to recognize the achievement of scholars outside the academic mainstream—scholars who recognize and confront the political implications of mass literacy. Paulo Freire is a good case in point. As more of his work is translated into English, Freire’s name appears more frequently in composition journals, academic conferences, and other places where basic writing is discussed. Recently,

Freire's work has reached a wider audience through the publication of an anthology of Freirean approaches, edited by Ira Shor. Also, arguments in favor of opening the literary canon (advanced most recently by Armstrong, among others, in the MLA's *Profession 88*) are getting a better hearing than they were getting even five years ago.

Nevertheless, strong opposition impedes the implementation of more ambitious goals for developmental education. Critics of basic studies programs believe that features of a traditional liberal arts curriculum, including the study of literature, are infeasible, inappropriate, and possibly elitist encroachments on an inherently pragmatic enterprise. These critics continue to influence the allocation of resources. A state legislator from Wyoming, for example, recently condemned remedial programs as a waste of public money. Underprepared students ought to attend vocational school, the legislator declared, adding, "There are lots of things they can do. They can be secretaries or mechanics" (qtd. in Jaschik). Few teachers of basic writing would adopt so callous a view or argue it so crassly. However, if we accept uncritically the prevalent assumption that basic writers "don't need" literature or if we expect them to read and respond to it entirely on our terms, we risk depriving our students of one of the culturally enfranchising benefits of a college education.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> That essay, "Literature in the Basic Writing Course: A Bibliographic Survey," is more in the nature of a listing and classification of published scholarship and textbooks, rather than a critical appraisal. For the purposes of offering such an appraisal, I have employed a somewhat different taxonomy here.

<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, an ERIC search is only as good as the key words, or descriptors, employed by the searcher. I chose these particular descriptors on the advice of an ERIC staff member recommended to me by Lynn Troyka. If *JBW* readers can suggest any terms we may have overlooked, I'd be grateful for their suggestions.

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## NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

**The Conference on Basic Writing**, a special interest group of CCCC, publishes the CBW *Newsletter*, edited by Peter Dow Adams and Carolyn Kirkpatrick. The *Newsletter*, which is sent free to CBW members, contains reviews of recent articles in a variety of journals, reports on conferences of interest to basic writing teachers, news notes, and a "Bulletin Board" with calls for papers and conference dates. Membership in the Conference on Basic Writing is \$5 for one year, \$9 for two years, and \$12 for three years. For further information write to Peter Dow Adams, Essex Community College, Baltimore County, MD 21237.

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**The Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators** will hold its **Tenth Annual Summer Training Institute** on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, July 1-27. The 1989 program will focus on learning styles and their implications for instruction, developmental evaluation, academic intervention and counseling techniques, management of programs and classes, as well as the use of computers for management, data collection, and instruction. Contact Elaini Bingham, Director, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (704) 262-3057.

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*The Journal of Developmental Education* is published as a forum for educators concerned with the practice, theory, research, and news of the postsecondary developmental and remedial education community. *The Journal* has initiated an annual "Author's Award," the first winner of which will be announced at the NADE annual conference in 1989.

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**The Third Basic Writing Conference** has issued a call for papers to be presented Saturday, September 30, 1989 at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Abstracts for proposed sessions should be limited to two pages and, if a panel, should include names and titles of panel members. Possible topics include writing and reading labs, speaking/reading/writing, research, ESL, and special education. Presentations about secondary Basic Writing are also sought. Send abstracts by May 5, 1989, to Sally Fitzgerald, Director, Center for Academic Development, UM-St. Louis, 8001 Natural Bridge, St. Louis, MO 63121.

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ANNOUNCEMENT/CALL FOR PROPOSALS: **The Sixth Annual Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference** will be held November 3, 4, and 5, 1989 at Youngstown State University, Youngstown, OH. The conference theme is "Partnerships: Teaching, Learning, Growing." The keynote speaker will be Dr. Jay Jacoby, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Proposals for sessions/demonstrations/workshops/panel discussions (75-minute) or single presentations (20-minute) exploring the conference theme, are **due by May 15, 1989**. Please submit 3 copies of a one- to two-page summary of your presentation, indicating your target audience. Please indicate the type of presentation you propose (single or full session) and the names of participants, the titles of their sections, and their institutions if you are proposing a full session. Proposals to: Sherri Zander, Director, Writing Center, Department of English, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, OH 44555.

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