

LITERACYSCAPE:
THE HISTORY, POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF BASIC WRITING

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2005

UMI Number: 3187455

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This Manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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By

Tim McCormack

Advisor: Sondra Perl

Perhaps nowhere else in American society is the ideology, theory and politics of language literacy so emphatically revealed than in the hopeful and daunting attempt by Basic Writing students to leap-frog their way over the real socio-cultural, linguistic and/or politically constructed remedial barriers and into the mainstream of college life. This dissertation documents and analyzes a Basic Writing classroom at the City College of the City University of New York in the final year that the college offered Basic Writing to matriculated students. This project details the lived experience of a single Basic Writing course and the lives of the students and instructor who meet there, as they attempt to create all sorts of texts under all kinds of internal and external impulses, restraints, demands and distractions. In separate chapters that use distinct methodologies, this dissertation uncovers the history of the debate over Basic Writing and its connection to admissions at the university, provides full-length classroom narratives and commentary, offers close readings of informal and formal student texts, and critiques the impact of testing on the nature and practice of the writing course. These data and analysis chapters lead to a final chapter that “talks up” from the classroom to the theories and politics of language learning and literacy debates, which too often present Basic Writing in simplistic, universalized and static terms.

My claim is that the Basic Writing classroom space needs to be represented in all of its complicated, messy and uneven practice, before we can theorize it and generalize from it, before we can create meaningful and useful pedagogical, curricular or administrative reform, and certainly before we should instigate large-scale change at the institutional level that greatly influences the lives of tens of thousands of students.

Acknowledgements

There is a 500 page limit to keep this dissertation inside one volume, and as you can see, I am pushing on that barrier. So, these acknowledgements will be brief—a good thing too because if I had unlimited room, I would go on-and-on, as the number of thoughtful souls who helped me during the years is truly impossible to register in number or kind.

My gratitude goes out to Graduate Center faculty members Steve Kruger and Barbara Bowen who encouraged me to apply, to Ira Shor, for pleading my case to the admissions committee, to Bill Kelly, for not pushing me to the door during my early floundering, and to Scott Westrem, my faculty mentor, who is, for me and so many others, the true students' champion.

A special thank you to my committee members George Otte, whose attention to text and knowledge of the discipline is unparalleled, and to Michelle Fine, whose energy and sense of justice I can only aspire to and whose thoughtful insights were crucial to the particular nature of this work.

For Sondra Perl, who inspires me with her own writing and life perseverance: you never gave up on me; you always knew when to nudge me along; and you provided a way to think about teaching and writing that made this project so much more successful than it would have been otherwise. I will actually miss the late night reading sessions in the den with dogs at our feet and your commune whirring all around us. Thank you.

A special shout out to my Graduate Center colleagues: Erin Henriksen, Sam Cohen, James King, Clarence Roberson and all the rest of the geek squad, who helped with the learning, living and loving along the way. To my writing group, Mark McBeth, Wendy Ryden, Leo Parascondola, and Carl Withaus: I couldn't keep pace with you front runners, but I made it across the line nonetheless. Leo...next! And a double thanks to Mark for the shared

office space and good laughs at CCNY. How's your window view these days? Call me when you make provost.

To my New Hyde Park friends and St. Bonaventure friends and my "met you here or there friends:" you carried my bills, pushed me on and kept me laughing; you are my life-long allies and buds; and I am indebted and grateful. I only hope I give as much as I receive. To Joe and Winnie McCormack, Robert and Maria McCormack and Ned and Portia McCormack: it's like having extra bothers and sisters! To Bruce Calby and Andrew Capaccio now I can say yes when you call with an offer; thanks for being persistent.

To my family: Eileen, John, Marykate, Sean and Neil Francis; Meg, Steve, Sydney, Timothy, Sarah and Mei Singer, John McCormack, Mike McCormack, Kevin McCormack and Patti Brennan; and John and Eileen McCormack, Sr.: thanks for always believing it would happen someday and knowing when not to ask.

To the wee littles, Teigue Francis and Ingrid Carolyn who make even the worst writing day a great blustery day!

And to my wife Maria, who had to put up with me in all my G-R-U-M-P-Y moments, who came to my aid at the darkest hours and whose stability and support I had to lean on so much during these years. You inspire me and help me in more ways than you know. Let's celebrate now, at least for a week, and then it's your turn.

No finer words: It is done.

Description is revelation. It is neither
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives
Intenser than any actual life could be.

Wallace Stevens

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	1
Chapter 1.....	29
Chapter 2.....	106
Chapter 3.....	179
Chapter 4.....	270
Chapter 5.....	349
Chapter 6.....	425
Epilogue.....	466
Appendix.....	474
Works Referenced.....	487



Photo 1: © Susan May Tell/Rex USA (left) Photo 2: © Helayne Seidman (right)

“Ask the teachers—for a change. They’re on the front lines. Forget the bureaucrats and politicians and statisticians. Ask the teachers. They know the daily drama of the classroom, a drama beyond measurement.”

Frank McCourt

“I submit that, as a field, we simply don’t get down and do enough primary research.”

Russel K. Durst

PROLOGUE

Public meetings of the City University of New York Board of Trustees are held at its headquarters on the upper east side of Manhattan. The boardroom, located on the first floor, is not elaborate, perhaps the size of a small banquet hall that could seat forty for a sit-down wedding. A ghostly yellow haze from the fluorescent lighting overpowers the room, since heavy velvet curtains drape the floor-to-ceiling windows, which face out onto a narrow alley.

On days when the university’s Board gathers to hear public comment about its agenda items, the Board members sit at a room-length conference table facing the audience members who are seated in seven tight rows, perhaps twenty across. A fabulously fat velvet rope, complete with shiny brass stanchions, separates the Board from the public.

At most public meetings, barely a baseball team’s worth of attendees hold positions in the audience. They sit patiently, like drivers at the motor vehicle bureau: when an item is called, someone rises, moves to the podium and microphone set up behind the velvet rope and speaks directly to whatever ranking hierarchy of CUNY has come to listen. Established rules dictate that each speaker receives three minutes to address a chosen topic and is allowed

to leave behind any written material he or she wants the Board to consider. The CUNY executives can respond and ask questions of each speaker. On days when the crowd is small, the chairperson of the meeting allows some latitude on the three-minute rule.

In early spring of 1998, for the special public meetings held to discuss a resolution to end remedial courses in reading, writing and math at CUNY's senior colleges, the three-minute rule was precisely enforced, however. For all three sessions, every seat in the room was taken, others stood three-deep in the back, with as many as fifty more lining the wall of the building outside, hoping for the chance to enter. Inside, each speaker received a 30-seconds-left bell warning before being unceremoniously cut off --even in mid-sentence-- by the chair of the meeting. In response, speakers finished off their allotted minutes by pleading for more time, while simultaneously speeding up the delivery of their remarks, sometimes to the point of incoherent rage. A few speakers stopped only when threatened with forced-removal by security guards.

Each session featured a mixture of professors, students, alumni, activists, politicians and community leaders, who made their way to the podium, almost exclusively to deride the Board for considering a measure they suggested would deny access to deserving students, and hinder the school's ability to fulfill its ultimate mandate to educate *all* of the citizenry of New York. The three meetings were alternately accusatory, solemn, bitter and raucous—some speakers whipping the crowd into a frenzy with their accusations. Members of the Board and other CUNY executives (not all of them attended all of the meetings, and not all of them stayed for the entire sessions which lasted well into the evening hours) showed amazing patience and steadfastness as speaker after speaker delivered three-minute fusillades, often bristling with passionate, sometimes screeching, rhetoric.

At the start of the final, May 18 meeting, playwrights Wendy Wasserstein, David Henry Hwang and Tony Kushner spoke, Kushner reading a statement from Arthur Miller before giving his own thoughts about the crucial need for open access. Hwang then spoke poetically of education as the “golden door” for his father, who arrived from China knowing little English. After each playwright, some members of the audience stood and cheered, while the Board members or their representatives fidgeted and looked down at the table. Following the playwrights, a stream of politicians and public figures who were given preferential speaking slots took their turns: city counsel members, a New York State congressman, and an 80-year-old black preacher who railed against the proposal with all the pulpit oratory he could muster from his stooped, lanky frame.

For the next three hours, the speakers continued, a seemingly endless staccato stream; a frenzied vitriol followed by a cloying plea. Faculty members talked of their students, their classrooms and their curriculum. Some read resolutions from their faculty senates. Sociology and education researchers quoted from broad qualitative and quantitative studies about education, and the beneficial ramifications (financial, social and societal) for minorities and the poor of attending college. Writing teachers, some of whom had just arrived from teaching courses, talked about what they had experienced in the classroom, and the strides that students can make in literacy during a semester in a remedial course on a college campus. And there were the students: graduates with CUNY degrees and successful jobs, current students who had gained access through remediation and were now holding worthy grade point averages; high school students meekly worrying out loud that their path to success was being closed off. Community activists rounded out the group, delivering righteous references to open doors and the river of humanity, championing civil rights and

American freedoms and pointing to the grand role access to CUNY had played in soothing the volatile boil of the New York City melting pot. In the front row of the audience, members of the media took it all in, occasionally rising to intercept a speaker and pull them aside for an interview.

But it all seemed so rushed, so ad hoc, so scatter shot. To an objective ear (not mine) what the speakers presented was not an influential body of research data. The speakers provided a haphazard and complex collection of anecdotes, life stories and snippets of ideas about how students learn, and of how crucial college education was in determining life success. This was not the kind of report-like data, nor the proper form of data that the Board of Trustees was used to considering. It was narrative and expository evidence. It was not “chartable,” and it could not be reduced to the simplicity of pass/fail test scores or trends in graduation rates.

In the end, the verbal onslaught, which lasted well into the evening on all three occasions, was a linguistic exercise in one-way discourse. Board members, or their sit-ins, had no questions for the speakers; they stared down at the table mostly, some making minimal notes, and others struggling to stay awake. It seemed to border on outright sado-masochism as they absorbed blow after blow of ridicule, disdain and outrage, rarely even raising their eyes in acknowledgement. The presentations were last-ditch efforts to persuade board members who already had entrenched beliefs about the successfulness of remediation and the future of CUNY. At three-minute intervals, the chairperson of the meeting simply cut off whoever was speaking and asked for the new speaker, often stumbling to read his or her name from a typed list.

A month earlier, at the second of the three sessions I was one of the speakers. I was in my fifth year as an adjunct teacher of writing at three of CUNY's senior college campuses. I was a nobody in any listing of college hierarchy, but I wanted my say in front of the Board because remediation and the teaching of writing was the one thing I was sure I knew something about. I used my three minutes (cut from a 20-page long, hastily written critique) to disparage the Board for "not doing its homework." By not reading the reports it had commissioned over the years showing that its entrance exams lacked evidence of validity, and that English as a Second Language students and students of color were at a distinct disadvantage on the writing and reading exams, the Board was about to make a colossal blunder, I claimed (Otheguy; Pereira, Cobb and Makoulis). Taking away access by eliminating remediation at the senior colleges, based on a one-time, impromptu, timed essay-exam was not sound educational practice, I argued, because the test which was used to determine who was college-level literate was a poor predictor of student success in college. As the bell rang, indicating my 30-second warning, I dropped copies of the CUNY-commissioned reports that had studied the entrance tests' effect on minority students into the cardboard box set up to collect any written materials that the public wanted the Board to consider before making its decision. The reports made a thud when they hit the bottom of the deep-walled box, a sound that echoed over the microphone. I asked the board again to "do its homework" before making this decision. Some in the partisan crowd applauded me as they had the other speakers. I walked from the podium proud as a peacock, turning my back on the Board in triumph.

In retrospect, the correct bird metaphor would be head in the sand. How silly to think that my three-minute diatribe really carried any weight. I had no authority in this context of

high-level administrative debate, and by the board's criteria, the research I was using was woefully weak. The reports I dropped in the box were faculty research projects that concerned a select group of students, who had long since departed the university through the front or back door. They were also complicated documents, filled with complex analyses of student performance that conflicted with generally held beliefs about the CUNY student body, the importance of testing, academic standards and how students learn language. Put simply, they were not persuasive or useful documents for this audience.

Contradicting my meek voice and my complex, small-sample outdated reports, the board members had access to tens-of-thousands of recent test scores on the university's entrance exams and enrollment figures showing the rise in remedial courses, and statistics on graduation rates, all of which could be turned into charts and graphs and timelines quantifying, with wonderful simplicity, the mass-failure of student performance. And these easy-read visual aids matched exactly the seemingly logical tenets they already held about the quality of public education and the ability of the CUNY students in particular. In short, the easily compiled data was simple confirmation of a literacy crisis. Throughout the history of education in the United States, *today's* students are declared as different (less prepared, less talented, less literate) than those of the past, and the cause is that *today's* colleges have gone soft on educational standards, allowing too many students in and too many out. To raise *today's* standards, something needs to be done, the argument concludes, and that usually means less access.

I used those reports because, in the pressure of the moment, they were all I had. Though I had taught for five years I had never been given access to classroom-based research about remediation. I had never seen any local studies of remedial success. Despite its 30-

year existence, there were few formal, accessible, cohesive studies of remediation, even fewer current ones, and no university-wide studies of the classroom practice of Basic Writing at CUNY at all. Though many “frontliners” from CUNY’s remediation programs (teachers, students and writing program administrators) showed up at the hearings, what we brought to defend our positions was minimal: just-created statistical studies, an impressive group of personal-experience-based editorials and plenty of passionate appeal. Without well-designed, ongoing, exhaustive research from the Basic Writing classroom, it was easy for the Board to look to the failing test scores in support of the seemingly logical and ever-present critiques of general education in the research university. With their system-wide statistics on the number of remedial students who graduate in four years, the number who repeat remedial courses, the number who take remedial courses at all, it was easy for critics to put forth their mantras: Basic Writing is social promotion; Basic Writing is not rigorous college-level work; Basic Writing students are lazy, low achievers in an endless revolving door of classes; Basic Writing students bring down the quality of education for higher level students; and the entire Basic Writing project is a failed educational enterprise facilitated by instructors looking to save their own jobs.

Not surprisingly, the future of remediation at CUNY was drastically altered a month after the last of the three public comment sessions, when the board voted to eliminate remediation from the senior colleges at CUNY. This decision, I contend, was based on political, not educational or research-based grounds. The debate over remediation at the senior colleges was another instance, as detailed in Chapter 2 in this dissertation, in which the public, political and media voice swamped the too-little-too-late claims of “inside the classroom” educators. It resulted in an educational transformation at the 200,000-student

university, which would influence tens-of-thousands of students during the coming years, yet it was a decision made without specific classroom-based research, program evaluation or even long-range student outcomes assessment.

It occurred to me, as I watched the debate play itself out, ending with the May 1998 vote in favor of ending remediation at the senior colleges, how infrequently classrooms had even been discussed by the Board members or in the media articles that were appearing almost daily in the city's major newspapers. In the area of particular importance to me, writing, I could not recall a single detailed discussion of how students learn to write, or of what classroom methods were currently being used, or of which writing programs at CUNY were succeeding and which faltering and why. Indeed, most of the aggressors in the debate had never attended a single remedial writing classroom, nor had they taught a class of any kind, but they argued – confidently – for wholesale changes to the existing programs.¹

As described by Mike Rose near the end of his autoethnography/institutional critique of general education, *Lives on the Boundary*, public and political debate about education in general and writing programs in particular is largely “loose and unrigorous talk” filled with hearsay, long-held myths and broad-stroke ideology (199). In the case of remediation at CUNY in the 1990s, critics decried the undeserving students passing their way through a low-standard remedial program that lowered the educational standards for everyone else – the same accusations which had been leveled since the very first debate over the literacy of CUNY students in the last decades of the 1800's (see Chapter 2). When learning to write was mentioned, debaters often relied on claims about the golden age of CUNY when, they surmised, all entering students were soon-to-be graduated success stories. Personal remembrances of their own educational experience or anecdotes about people they knew and

how they learned to write were also a mainstay of these discussions. One prototypical commentary by Heather Mac Donald in the *New York Post* declares: “Forty years ago, it would have been inconceivable for a college freshmen to show up on registration day and announce, Oh, and by the way, you’ll have to teach me to read and write” (“How to Save CUNY”). A sample *New York Times* editorial in favor of ending remediation at CUNY (written by a CUNY Graduate Center faculty member in History) relied on memories of his own experience in the California State system in the 1960s, where being forced to go to a community college and take “bonehead English” was a punishment for failing to “shape up” in high school (Diggins). One of the Board members, who had attended CUNY after arriving from Puerto Rico, referred to his own experience as being different from today’s immigrant students because today’s immigrant students do not come from a culture of education (Putnam).

Of course, the focus on unproven accusations of low standards and personal memory of their own schooling experiences, mixed with declarations that today’s CUNY students were unlike the students of the past are not unusual in public debates over student preparedness, especially where issues of literacy are concerned. Simultaneous to the debate over remediation at CUNY, the public debate over bilingual education in Oakland, California high schools had also received national attention, reaching a crescendo with the statewide proposition to end bilingual education. As Abigail Trillin surmises in an editorial for the *New York Times* about the California public debate, when learning English is the topic, everyone has a story they believe is indicative of how the whole system should run. “What seems most important to many of them [those against bilingual education] is how their cousin, next-door neighbor or grandmother learned English without the help of any bilingual

education program.” Trillin suggests that too often, and most often when it concerns writing, the public influences educational policy – and classroom practice – through uncritical, anecdotal evidence, which overrides attempts by teachers and program administrators to justify their practices. Because of its commonness (we all learned to write), its connection to national identity (not learning English is unpatriotic) and the economic importance we tie to it (if you don’t know how to write Standard English, no one will hire you), everyone, it seems, has something to say about English and writing in school. As Richard Ohmaan discusses in “Our Vanishing Literacy,” declarations of student illiteracy are periodic events in our national history, often fueled by a set of test scores that the media declares are indicative of a loss of student literacy. Delivered in alarmist tones, the sudden falling literacy standards of students represent a crisis in education, and/or labor and/or the future of American values.² In the minds of employers, social critics, educators, parents—and Americans--no subject is discussed with “more angst than perceptions of student literacy and language,” (Gleason and Soliday, Executive Summary, ii).

In “A Personal Essay on Freshmen English,” Sharon Crowley documents a perfect example of how public and media backlash accompanies any discussion of writing classrooms. In a widely publicized incident at the University of Texas, which also points out how the members of the faculty outside of English participate in the running commentary on writing at any university, Crowley details the institutional and media uproar over the decision by a group of senior composition faculty to change the standard curriculum for the required writing course.

...[F]aculty outside the English department as well as members of the press
felt quite comfortable in defining what sort of course required English ought

to be. People who literally had no professional or financial stake in the design of the course, and who had only the faintest academic interest in it, felt entitled to criticize a syllabus developed by the teachers and scholars put in charge of it by the university, teachers and scholars who are professionally identified with composition studies. It is as though the curriculum of Freshman English is owned by the community at large (230).

Crowley does admit that the public's interest may result from the fact that taxpayers contribute to the school's budget, but she ruminates, "I cannot imagine the press or community creating such a fuss over a new syllabus in Chem 101 or even in introductory sociology or religious studies" (230). Writing courses, she concludes, are like Western Civilization courses; both are sites for the "transference of cultural capital," and therefore they provoke a great deal of emotion and ownership from just about everyone (231). To be American means to write American, it seems. Or as Anne Ruggles Gere claims, "Writing may not occupy the same sphere as apple pie and motherhood, but it has a central place in American values" ("Public Opinion..." 263).

With such powerful feelings attached to it, it would be difficult, under any circumstances for Composition faculty to take control over any debate about the pedagogy, curriculum, or very existence of their courses. But the ability of Composition faculty to enter such a debate is further hampered by the lack of current, ongoing, specific research data on writing classrooms that can document what happens in writing classrooms in a language and style that those outside the discipline can appreciate and understand. Though CUNY writing professors can speak impressively and with persuasion about their students, their classrooms, their curriculum and

pedagogy, and the writing programs where their classes are offered, they do so without being able to point to ongoing quantitative or qualitative studies of remediation, or longitudinal studies of remedial programs at CUNY, or more focused studies at their particular campus, or in their particular classrooms. As a 1998 report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington states, “there has been little careful research into the effectiveness of remedial education, even though it has existed since the founding days of Harvard in the 17th century” (qtd in Arenson, “Study Calls Remedial Classes Good Investment”). At CUNY, the “local” classroom-based research about student writers that exists (i.e. Sternglass, *Time to Know Them*) seemed, at best, to lurk in the unspoken background as simply not enough evidence from too singular and too biased a source to overturn the largely unfavorable, pre-conceived beliefs about student literacy and the CUNY Basic Writing programs – beliefs held by the Board, echoed in the press and consequently believed by a good portion of the general public (see Chapter 2).

Although Basic Writing is a discipline where teacher narratives and accounts of classroom practice have been part of standard research practice, the research has been too infrequent and too inaccessible to influence the political debate (see discussion of Sternglass later in this Prologue and in Chapter 1). It was this lack of specific detailed evidence of remedial writing classrooms, which first motivated me to set my sights squarely on the classroom for this dissertation. As composition faculty at CUNY, if we could not show what we believed about writing, writing classrooms and the teaching of writing in a dramatic, accessible, well supported, and formal way, then who could believe us when we made our passionate claims to hold onto remediation? I came to believe that by concentrating on developing classroom data, we may be able to move the highly politicized debate about student literacy beyond the simple accusations and ungrounded idealistic hearsay arguments of the public domain and toward what composition researchers Glynda Hull

and Mike Rose call for in a study that focuses on the cognitive processes of a single remedial writer: “a deeper and richer representation of literacy instruction for under-prepared students...” (244). In other words, by focusing on the classroom where remediation takes place, we can better assert our authority and expertise in the ongoing debate over the usefulness of remedial courses in writing.

In addition to this political motivation, serious personal questioning also provoked my dissertation. In fact, the political firestorm over CUNY’s role in remedial education was in many ways the personal catalyst for this project. As the criticism of remediation reached a crescendo in the media, it felt like a direct attack on what I was doing in my own writing classrooms. I questioned if I was participating in a remedial “enterprise” that was wasting public funds in an impossible and costly, failed-attempt to “raise up” the hopeless cases. As some of the remedial critics proclaimed, I questioned if I was the overzealous, out-of-touch, 1960s influenced teacher who provided unlimited second chances to unworthy, unproductive students who didn’t belong in college. Did I fight against the remedial resolution because, as one editorial in the *New York Times* put it, “Many faculty members at CUNY also oppose the idea [of the end of remediation at senior colleges] because their warm liberal hearts tell them that the campus can solve social problems by addressing the needs of the economically deprived” (Diggins)? Or as Heather MacDonald suggests in “Downward Mobility, the Failure of Open Admissions at City University,” as a teacher of remedial writing who was willing to pass students in my course even though they had failed a one-time, university-wide writing exam, was I nothing more than a writing-cheerleader who fears lowering student personal esteem by giving low grades?

My participation in the long campaign to save remediation at CUNY set off some doubts in my own mind about my role as a writing teacher in the university, my pedagogical stance in the classroom, and my understanding of how writers learn to write. With the onslaught of viewpoints contrary to my own, it was difficult to hold onto and profess what I thought I understood about the role of writing in the university and the best ways to teach writing to the largely minority and immigrant students of City College, where I was currently a graduate student adjunct instructor. I had strong beliefs based on years of classroom work, but I did not have the critical, thorough data to support what I had come to accept – and “preach” – about the teaching of writing. I felt compelled to look to the classroom, to primary research, to assuage my own doubts and confirm my own understanding of the writing classroom and my role in it.

At CUNY, the consequence of the general public’s ownership of the literacy debate in the late 1990s was that almost universally, the proponents of the remedial resolution, and even some of those who argued against it, seemed to simplify the act of literacy to a few simple principles. These included: students need only to practice writing more to reach a higher writing level; to improve writing, students need to work on the daily writing of academic themes with an emphasis on clear and correct prose; all academic writing is the same kind of writing; a one-time exam can determine, with utter surety, if a student is college literate; and writing is not a college-level discipline (like Chemistry or History) but a skills-based service course where any student who applies herself can succeed. In short, those who were critiquing the remediation policy at CUNY, including the CUNY Board members in charge of deciding its future, believed most of the “common knowledge” about writing and writing instruction, “knowledge” that scholars in Rhetoric and Composition had been trying to upend during the discipline’s thirty-year history.

The simplistic discussions and public domain knowledge of writing instruction sounded very familiar to me, perhaps because I had once believed most of these principles myself. As a newly minted graduate-student writing instructor with a Master's degree in fiction, I was hired to teach composition at a four-year CUNY school, though I was virtually untrained in the teaching of writing. Like some of the CUNY Board members in the debate over remediation in 1998, when I was hired, my motivation may have been just, but my understanding was lacking.³ I had a deep interest in improving the writing abilities – and consequently, the lives – of a group of students; I had a strong faith that education was integral to personal success and a crucial element of viable democracy; I had years of experience as a *student* in classrooms and thought I knew how I had learned to write; I assumed that all students learned to write by practicing set linear steps; I had no understanding of the difference between first and second language learners; and I had only vague ideas about what the students were lacking and what a writing course could do to help them, based mostly on my own un-interrogated memories of how I had learned to write. In other words, at the start of my career as a writing teacher, I was utterly unprepared to guide a group of students through the complex and slow process of becoming versatile, confident, experienced writers able to traverse the gap between home and school discourses and use writing as a tool to learn in all subject areas across the disciplines at the college level. It was my feeling in the spring of 1998 that the debate over remedial writing (and as discussed in Chapter 2, the debate over remediation was largely a debate over writing standards) was being held by Board members and administrators who knew as little about writing and the writing classroom as I did when I started teaching writing. Just as I had been given the authority to run two writing classrooms and dramatically affect the lives of 40 precariously

situated entry-level students – with disastrous results – the Board members were about to redefine the entire remedial enterprise using the same scant knowledge and effect the lives of tens-of-thousands of students.

But I am speaking retrospectively. At the time of the debate over remediation at CUNY, I was still fairly new to teaching, and I would read things in the newspapers that caused me a great degree of pause. In an editorial for the *New York Times*, James Traub writes that CUNY professors have “...an acute awareness... that higher education provides social mobility even when it doesn’t provide education.” Traub then asks – seemingly to me directly – “Would you deny a student access to the good life because he or she can’t construe a paragraph or write one” (Traub, “Faint Praise...”). I have felt this pressure. Though I would not pass a student who could not construe or write a paragraph, I have been torn about passing a hard-working remedial student who made some strong strides during the semester, but who was still struggling to completely construe or write a whole essay. This decision became more difficult if my failing grade carried the additional burden of being the final strike, forcing the student out of college. But, in passing such a student, allowing him to enter the lower division courses, enabling him to reach sixty credits even if he had not passed the university’s writing exam (a separate requirement from my course), was I contributing to a college-level literacy crisis at CUNY? Participating in this debate over remediation forced me to consider these questions not abstractly, or theoretically, but practically and personally.

Not unimportantly, during my years as an adjunct, it was hard to find a single colleague who thought remediation at CUNY was functioning as well as it should, that it was an exemplary program, that it had lived up to its idealistic vision. At most, a colleague would report about a particular “pocket of brilliance,” a small space within a larger

dysfunctional program, where amazing things were happening, where talented students were working hard within a creative and challenging program structure. Perhaps more often, my fellow adjuncts and full-time writing teachers would hint that students manage to grow and succeed at writing almost in spite of the remedial classes we run for them. The most important thing remediation offered to students was time. Given the year or two to succeed, the students' personal drive and outright desperation often enabled them to overcome our school's uneven performance.

Many colleagues rightfully claimed that lack of funding was the true limitation to the effectiveness of remediation. But still, most admitted that there were other problems too: having overstuffed classrooms with enrollment numbers far too high to reach individual students effectively; having students who knew so little English that they could not even talk in class; having students who seemed uninterested, unmotivated and/or focused only on vocational or professional careers; feeling the frustration of teaching students so unprepared not just linguistically (particularly in terms of American Academic English writing skills), but academically and socially (in terms of what it means to be a student in college); failing to improve as teachers because of the lack of faculty status and faculty development accorded the majority of writing teachers; adjusting to constantly changing program structures and the revolving door of adjunct faculty hires; and realizing the grand farce that any major strides can be made within the fifteen weeks of a standard college course. At best, you could only get a faculty member to say, "Well, it's the best we have and it's better than no access at all." So for many of us fighting against the resolution to end remediation, we weren't all that pleased with what we were trying to save, and instead were motivated by a fear of what would be implemented in its place. We believed that any access, even access to less than

stellar remedial education, was better than narrowing student access to overcrowded and under-funded community colleges.

Equally as important as influencing the outside the classroom debates over writing, the time and energy invested by teachers into formalizing classroom-based knowledge is an essential part of any teacher's analytical and reflective process of teaching well (Perl and Wilson). In particular, writing teachers benefit from research projects because they close the gap between the teaching of writing and the writing itself, "whether your work sees the light of public print or not (Bishop, *Ethnographic Writing Research* 182). Writing teachers should write. And writing teachers who teach research should write research. As Bishop reminds us in the opening to her self-reflective essay collection, *Teaching Lives*, "...[As Composition teachers, we] can construct and compose ourselves across our teaching years through narrative, comparison, analysis, reflection, and action" (1). The last word in the string is the most crucial: writing research leads to an active, reflective, emerging practice in the classroom. Classroom research is how teachers take action.

The third impetus for deciding to tackle this contentious issue through classroom-based study came from my understanding of the current state of the discipline of composition studies. Part of the reason we fail to let what we know about classrooms to direct the way we think about teaching and learning writing is because we do not value our own experiential knowledge base. Our lack of confidence in studying and presenting our experience as our strongest knowledge base, leads us to "theorize" ourselves into discipline-defined theory camps as cognitivists, expressivists, cultural theorists, critical pedagogues... even though we know that actual classroom practice never evolves so predictably and cleanly. Perhaps, the cohesiveness of theory offers comfort and control over the reality of the second-by-second interactions that make up classroom

life. Certainly, general, overriding theories of how students learn to read and write, and how writing classrooms should “behave,” make it much easier to write and think within the discourse of composition – it becomes so much easier to argue “strongly for” or “strongly against.” But, as we all know, living classrooms fail to be directed by static, comprehensive theories; no matter how much teachers desire them, students and classrooms resist neat categorization and programmed schema. In any given semester, each class has a number of improbable situations or “independent” students to unhinge “what works.”

Though we, rightfully, look to language and education theorists to help make sense of what we are experiencing in the classroom and, perhaps, to help us develop thoughtful, guiding principles for our teaching lives, it is a mistake to privilege classroom theory, while avoiding the more difficult task of listening to our practice and the practice of others as a way to truly understand how classrooms work, how students learn and how writing teachers teach. David Bleich makes this case succinctly, at the opening of his essay, “Ethnography and the Study of Literacy: Prospects for Socially Generous Research.” Composition teachers far outnumber composition theorists, “but the theorists have more power and prestige” (176). In the discipline of sociology, John Van Maanen describes the consequences of looking to theory first this way:

Sociologists have developed a status hierarchy and division of labor where the top rungs are occupied by social theorists who build broad conceptual models for others to test and modify in humble social settings. These models are supposed to predict and explain patterns of thought and action across cultural domains. But fieldworkers have trouble coming up with patterns in their own quite delimited cultural domains, and when they do, these patterns appear quite unique and specific

to a setting. So fieldworkers represent, at best, marginal contributors to a discipline interested in grander matters. ...[A]s a rule status flows toward the theorists of the field, not toward the workers of the field (21).

Theory, Van Maanen suggests, has achieved hierarchical status, flowing its ideas downward to the practitioners. In Van Maanen's case, the fieldworkers are researchers looking to "prove-out" ideas and principles within localized "foreign" cultures. For composition research, the field workers could be classroom researchers observing someone else's classroom (a foreign culture indeed), or even teacher-researchers looking at their own classrooms with a second set of researcher eyes. In either case, similar to the studies of localized culture Van Maanen describes, as a teacher-researcher begins work in a classroom, it becomes quickly apparent that classroom life does not follow the prescribed, neat-and-clean lines of projected theory. Yet we have come to lean on theory as the first line of understanding in composition. We are willing to act-out theory in our classrooms, and are too hesitant to use our classroom experience to develop theory (Ede).

Stephen North remarks on how little classroom knowledge is valued. "...[M]uch of what, especially teachers, and to a lesser extent writers, have claimed to know about writing has been ignored, discounted, or ridiculed – so that despite their overwhelming majority, they have been effectively disenfranchised as knowledge makers in their own field" (3; also see Schubert). We don't trust what we experience; we don't talk about classrooms as if what we say matters; and ultimately, we fail to plan and carry out enough significant research projects based on our direct and ongoing work with students. As Cathy Fleischer describes in *Composing Teacher Research*,

“[t]eacher’s knowledge has too often been relegated to the world of lore, and this world is seen as inhospitable to and intolerant of activities that support legitimate research and theory building”(13). Or, as Marguerite Helmers suggests with her text *Writing Students*, an analysis of common testimonial stories about the writing classroom, as a discipline, we too often fail to interrogate how we represent what goes on behind the closed classroom door. We rely on meta-narratives and rhetorical shorthand to fill in for the actualities of classroom life. We prefer to leave classroom experience as uninterrogated conversation.⁴

So a third impetus for focusing on primary research in the classroom was to encourage primary research of writing classrooms (our own and others) as the baseline for discussions of how classrooms work rather than as a foil for theory. In an argument that Ruth Ray makes in *The Practice of Theory*, theory needs to be constructed with the “full participation of teachers” (23). Research should not be an ad-hoc enterprise conducted by professional scholars in our midst. We need to consider teaching and teacher research as crucial and continual forms of theorizing (24). As part of the knowledge-making community in the discipline of composition, teachers need to treat their classroom experiences as meaningful data to be interrogated and analyzed, and also validated and formalized (Miller, J.L.).

In *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*, Lisa Ede underscores that writing teachers in higher education need to always be conscious of the politics of writing instruction within the academy. At the institutional level of program and policy debate, and certainly in the public discourse about literacy, the lack of formal research on actual lived experiences of the classroom results in a distant and generalized understanding of how writing classrooms work and how students learn to write and learn to write better. Public and institutional discussions about college composition in particular are simplified into reductive meta-narratives

or outright literacy myths that *predict* student, teacher and classroom practices, rather than account for the reality of classroom life. In highly emotional and contentious political debates over writing courses at the department, college and university levels, classroom-based knowledge is often marginalized; voices from the classroom are classified (and besmirched) as hearsay, solipsism, or uncritical teacher memories, or even dismissed as unimportant chit-chat (North, Bleich, Gleason, Murphy, Phelps). This enables a universalizing discourse of reductive and often misshapen or misapplied theory that simplifies the act of literacy and the interactions of the classroom into a choreographed, reproducible set of teacher actions that supposedly guarantee specific results.⁵ Our failure as teacher/researchers to spend more time investigating, interpreting and rendering our classrooms in local, thoughtful and demanding studies that reach a population beyond our discipline is certainly linked to the marginalization of the discipline of Basic Writing within the hierarchy of the university. A lack of accessible research helps those outside of our discipline to define the discipline, the work we do and our roles in the university structure. Thus, our own lack of validation of teacher practice has direct specific consequences on our teaching lives and on the way classrooms work. For example, in “The Politics of Composition research: The Conspiracy Against Experience,” Thomas Newkirk discusses how “denial of the practitioner’s experience,” puts teachers in a position to see themselves as unable to judge their students’ overall progress, which creates the window for the existence of outside assessments for writing classes.

“Written” from the outside in, writing classrooms are often presented as unified, stable and predictable curricular and pedagogic events, as if all students and all writing courses were veritable clones of each other. Underpinning this line of thinking is the simple idea that writing classrooms are places where, in a quite linear and cumulative way, the teacher transforms

“students without college skills” into “students with college skills” during the course of a single semester. In the case of remedial writing, such progress is often “demonstrated” by the students having failed a test at the start of a semester and having passed it at the end, often by the slightest increment in scores (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 6).⁶ This view reinforces the notion that a Basic Writing classroom at a particular institution (indeed, even throughout vastly different institutions) is a standardized experience which can be replicated for all students by any teacher, resulting in a batch of students who exit at some sort of common, certifiable literacy level that qualifies them for college.

There are countless examples of debates over student literacy where major educational transformations occurred while classroom practice and teacher knowledge was virtually ignored, but, perhaps, the most well known in recent years was the overturning of the bilingual education programs in the Oakland school district, which I mentioned earlier. Largely as a result of a publicity campaign started by billionaire Ron Unz, public sentiment swelled against bilingual education. There was no classroom data presented to show the lack of success of the bilingual program, but the practitioners in Oakland had little data in support of their program either. Responding to the overturning of the Oakland resolution on African American English or Black English vernacular, Gerald Graff suggested that the problem with the public debate about education is that what goes on in the classroom is hidden from public view and so “ignorance, misinformation and paranoia flourish among the general public outside.” He warned that, “Educators must acknowledge a growing and *legitimate* public concern over education and take initiatives to explain themselves better, or face ill-informed tinkering by politicians and voters” (as qtd in Bronner B11, emphasis added). With this study, I am taking heed of Graff’s challenge. It is my belief that generalizations, conjecture

and outright predictions made by sometimes well-meaning but ultimately uninformed non-educators cause institutions to make broad curricular and programmatic changes in a whiplash of panaceas, swinging from one contradictory idea to the next in an attempt to “benefit” all classrooms and all students, without having to account for actual classroom practice or individual student learning. An avalanche of classroom-based research can stand in the face of such attempts at constant, wholesale, outsider manipulation. As Newkirk’s treatise states at the end of “The Politics of Writing Research”:

In telling their tale, teachers need to recognize that the source of their authority comes from the intimate knowledge of the classroom and the students, from intuitions honed by making thousands of judgments and observations of student work. It does not come through deference to expert opinion or through suppressing intuitive resources in favor of more distanced—and more academically respectable—means of observation. The opportunity will be lost if teachers fail to recognize the source of their strength and instead adopt the values of the hierarchical systems that have silenced them in the past (133).

With a consistent stream of studies by practitioners to underscore the complex task of writing instruction, and the inadequacy of prescribing extreme, one-size-fits-all solutions, we will be less vulnerable to the cyclical vanishing literacy critique and the subsequent program overhauls that follow the declaration of a crisis (Ohmaan, “Our Vanishing Literacy”).

This dissertation project was fueled by these three overlapping desires: a personal quest to interrogate my own beliefs about remedial writing practice; a more public desire to bring the

writing classroom into the open, so it could be part of the debate over its own future: and a concerted attempt to talk about the classroom in a serious and vital way to other compositionists, as a way of raising the profile and acceptance of classroom-based research and teacher-narrated stories—to give the composition practitioner a voice in front of, rather than in response to the composition theorist. To accomplish these goals, I knew I needed to lift the classroom out of the mystifying shadows and present it, front and center, in all its glorious wonder and downright disaster. An ethnography of the lived experiences of the classroom could help me understand my own teaching in a less theoretical and more pragmatic way. And I also believed that if my ethnography was well-researched and well-told, I could influence the decision-making apparatus that had made such a crucial programmatic change in remediation with so little investigation into classroom practice. By bringing the writing classroom to life, I could help counter the hearsay, innuendo and un-interrogated personal memories that too often over-simplified the debate over remediation at CUNY. As Linda Ray Pratt has intoned, “Amid a national debate about the structure and purpose of higher education...professors have seldom emerged as among the most influential voices” (35).

A Note on Working Conditions

A critical influence on the methodology, data collection and outcome of this study is/was the working conditions under which the study took place. As I discuss elsewhere in this dissertation, during the time of the researching/writing of this study I was an adjunct at City College, teaching two or three courses, and also fulfilling an administrative role as coordinator of a pre-college program. In addition, the teacher of the course that provides the data for this study

was a full-time graduate student and adjunct, who was working as a web site developer from 15-20 hours a week to make ends meet.

As has been well documented in the field, the working lives of adjuncts (lack of employment benefits and services, lack of adequate office space and access to communication equipment, limits on material resources such as internet and library resources and photocopying privileges) has a profound influence on the way in which they work (Horner; Scott; Miller; Soliday, *Politics*; and Bosquet, Scott and Parascondola). These same limitations apply to the attempt to conduct research with limited resources. As Bruce Horner details in *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, although those on the margins of the scholarly academic research community “face material obstacles to their participation in scholarly practices and communities,” non-discursive requirements pose far more serious restrictions to entering the discourse [of research and scholarship]” (223-5).⁷

The influence of working conditions on the direction and outcome of this classroom case study was also apparent. The difficulties created by my own and the instructor’s adjunct schedules limited our meeting times, and reduced the amount of effort she could put into the research in such areas as her teaching journal. In addition, lack of access to photocopying and the minimal institutional support limited the amount and kind of data I was able to collect. Simply put, it was impossible to photocopy all of the student work for the semester, or to record everything that was going on during the class sessions. In the latter case, I would change my position in the room throughout the semester to get a variety of voices on tape that I could then transcribe verbatim. In other cases, I used my own notes to reconstruct student and instructor commentary. In addition, my attention to the data and the time I had to interview students decreased as the semester progressed and my own workload for my courses increased. As a result

my representation of the earlier course material is more thorough and insightful because I was able to devote more time to preparing for the class sessions (reviewing course materials and reading student work for example) and writing up my post-class notes more thoroughly.

In completing this project, I ignored the explicit advice of Maralyn Sternglass, who after declaring the crucial need for more classroom and student centered research, points out the time commitment needed for researching and writing complex literacy studies. She ends: “Clearly, this is not a project to be recommended for a non-tenured faculty member or perhaps even one waiting for promotion” (300). The stated concern of this prologue, that writing teachers need to do more primary research, remains at odds with the hiring status of writing faculty in the university. Basic Writing teachers remain, largely, a non-tenured bunch, and as long as this is the case, then writing at the public university will not receive the research attention it deserves.

¹ James Traub was the one exception here, having attended a number of remedial writing courses at City College while completing his study.

² For two treatments of the “alarmist tone” of the periodic media portrayals of the U.S. in literacy crisis, see the pieces by John Trimbur and Ann Ruggles Gere in *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, edited by Bullock, Trimbur and Schuster.

³ As discussed in Chapter 2, the connection between literacy and admittance standards is a crucial factor here. Not everyone participating in the debate over remediation had the just interests of the students in mind.

⁴ Every so often a longtime classroom teacher writes a retrospective tell-all about classroom life. I am thinking of John Taylor Gatto’s text *Dumbing Us Down*, which details the complexity and incompetencies of a lifetime of work in NYC public school classrooms. But I am not referencing, or even discounting this genre of “outcry retrospective” from veteran educators. I am just suggesting that it is an insufficient way of evaluating practice and instituting change from a faculty perspective. Classroom research by teachers in their own classrooms or in the classrooms of their colleagues should be an ongoing, formalized and structured part of all educators’ careers.

⁵ As detailed at the end of Chapter 2, some theorists believed the critique of CUNY remediation was a political ploy with ulterior motives: conservative politicians and “think-tankers” used the

media to create a literacy crisis hype, and hid their racism and "classism" behind a call for necessary—seemingly laudatory—higher academic standards, when in fact they just wanted to limit enrollment, cut money from CUNY's budget, and "freeze-out" minority students from the American Dream. As Mary Soliday writes near the end of her historical critique of remediation as politics, "The literacy crisis involved a struggle over material goods, but critics of CUNY shifted the debate from the economic to the cultural realms" (120). The basis of this shift was the ability of just a few writers to manipulate the story and create media frenzy, by repeating just a few well-defined, simple mantras: low graduation rates, grade inflation etc., without having to account for the more complex reality.

⁶ CUNY's writing exam in the Fall of 1999 was called the Writing Assessment Test (WAT) and is described elsewhere in this study. Scored on a scale of 1-12, six was failing and eight was passing. (No score of seven could be issued.) The overwhelming majority of scores for all test takers were either six or eight. In my seven years teaching remedial writing, perhaps close to 200 students passed through my classroom, only one student who had failed the test with a six received a score of higher than eight after retesting.

⁷ A list Horner attributes to A. Suresh Canagarajah includes access to photocopying, computers and telephones as well as 'peaceful working conditions', which support the creation and production of valuable research.

“As I give them [research subjects] life on the page, I freeze them into time and space, depositing black words on a white paper backdrop for a reader none of us knows.”

Bonnie Sunstein

“Culture on the Page”

“...[N]o surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great scrap heap of abandoned projects than Method.”

Roland Barthes

The Rustle of Language

CHAPTER 1

Literacyscape: Defining a Methodological Space in Response

To the Theory, Politics and Myth of Basic Writing

For first-year college students, the waning season of autumn is the waxing season of optimism. In New York City, where close to half of the high school freshmen class does not graduate four years later, a college freshman who grabs a seat in the city’s massive City University of New York (CUNY) system, is marking her survival and reaching for a toehold on the shores of higher expectations.¹ Since its pre-Civil War beginnings, CUNY has been continuously lauded for providing a college opportunity to an ever-growing number of urban, low-income, and immigrant populations. During its illustrious history, often in concert and in equal measure with its praise, CUNY has been maligned for enrolling these very same students.

A quick look at CUNY's history seems to validate the praise, since, from an original class of 149 students, CUNY's enrollment grew on a steady pace for more than 120 years, through the mid-1960s. Then, influenced by the changing demographic makeup of the city, and triggered by a set of Black and Puerto Rican student protests, Mayor John Lindsey pushed the university administration to open the gates of public higher education to their widest berth ever, guaranteeing a classroom seat somewhere in CUNY for every city high school graduate. Within a decade after what became known as the Open Admissions policy was instituted, CUNY's total student enrollment approached and then surpassed the 200,000 mark.

Reacting to the post-Open Admissions influx of students, each of CUNY's colleges set up additional levels of pre-freshmen courses for some of the admitted students, those who were deemed not ready for college. Pre-freshmen classes were nothing new at City College, the CUNY system's oldest and most heralded school: in its first years, it offered a course of pre-college studies for those who did poorly on the entrance exam and even in the 1960s the school ran a Pre-Baccalaureate program that had close to 500 students enrolled (Soliday, *Politics...*).² However, the number of new students who were determined to need pre-freshmen courses increased exponentially after the declaration of Open Admissions, and its most prominent segment, the Basic Writing Program, expanded from a few hundred students to a few thousand in a decade, under the tutelage of its founder Mina Shaughnessy (Maher). As the numbers grew in the early 1980s, the Basic Writing Program at City College evolved into a sequence of three courses (and later an English as a Second Language track), and it has been a mass rite of passage for hopeful City College students each year since.

The influx of students considered less-than-prepared presented amazing new challenges for all faculty, especially since, while taking the required remedial courses, new students could

also enroll in some full-credit introductory courses in specific disciplines. However, it was the English Department, and its new cadre of Basic Writing faculty, who seemingly “took on” the task of immersing the new, “unprepared” students not only into academic language but academic life (Rich). In her seminal work *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, Shaughnessy presented the conflict that Open Admissions posed for the rapidly expanding Basic Writing faculty:

Just how we are finally going to reconcile the entitlements and capacities of these new students with our traditional ways of doing things in higher education is still not clear. As we move close to this goal, however, we will be improving the quality of college education for all students and moving deeper into the realizations of a democracy (294).

Shaughnessy correctly highlights how, in an Open Admissions environment at a public college located in the middle of a lower-class Harlem neighborhood, Basic Writing courses took on a role far larger than their intended purpose of improving students’ ability to handle writing assignments in academic English.³ For three decades, each semester and each summer session, City College students and instructors—and researchers—would land in a political and cultural maelstrom, where they would try to discern what it meant to be a college level writer amid an uneven and ever changing set of personal, educational and institutional circumstances.

Within this proving ground context, where students had to show they belonged as full-fledged members of the college academic community, the question of what exactly is supposed to happen in a Basic Writing course in terms of curriculum, learning and outcomes has been an

ongoing debate, both inside and outside the discipline. In its close to 30-year CUNY history, Basic Writing has remained an always- in-flux, wild country, with ever-changing mandates and requirements on its students, professors, curriculum, classroom culture and writing product assessment. Ultimately, as the portal of entry—and sometimes the door of exit—for such a large portion of its student population, the Basic Writing program became the flashpoint for the century-old, heated debate over who should be enrolled at CUNY and what they should learn while they are there.

As a result of the profound consequences tied to their outcomes, Basic Writing courses are sites of political, social, cultural, moral and educational conflict for teachers, students, English Departments and the colleges themselves. In an attempt to schematize the sources of linguistic conflict in the Basic Writing classroom, Patricia Bizzell surmises that arriving basic writers face “differences in dialects, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking” (296). In her article “The Art of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt describes a conflict beyond these linguistic and cognitive realms, proclaiming that remedial writing classrooms are a daily meeting ground for cultural, ethnic, religious, personal and academic confrontation (also see Tom Fox, “Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict”). On an even larger scale, the staffing and status issues for what some demeaned as purely skills-based courses for only partly matriculated students put the English Department itself in a space of conflict (Crowley; Susan Miller). Still higher up the chain, institutions looked to remedial writing classrooms as a kind of ante-chamber feeder system for the college; remedial matriculation status enabled the college to admit—at full tuition--students who fail to pass their admissions standards and offer them a combination of credit and non-credit work, while they attempt to qualify themselves for full admission (Soliday, *Politics of Remediation*). On an even grander scale, given CUNY’s idealized status as the “Harvard for the

Poor” and its functional status as a training ground for the city’s workforce, CUNY Basic Writing classrooms, in particular, have civic and economic pressures from politicians and the general public, who see college education as perhaps the most quintessential step on the ladder to the American Dream of economic stability.

In this latter regard, many national literacy and composition scholars offer well-supported arguments that remedial writing classrooms are pivotal sites for students to begin the journey to literacy, admission to the full college community – and to life’s full economic possibility (See: Brint and Karabel; Lavin and Hylegard; Bartholomae; Lu; Horner; and Berlin, *Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures...*). Yet, Basic Writing’s place as an important portal of entry to college has never been secure. For the students, seemingly at any time, the passage to full enrollment in college could be altered, often narrowed, and sometimes closed off entirely.⁴ In “A Personal Essay on Freshmen English,” Sharon Crowley uses a “border” metaphor to describe the role freshman composition plays within the university structure.⁵ Crowley suggests that given its positioning, the writing classroom becomes a “border checkpoint, the institutional site wherein students either provide proper identification or retreat to wherever they came from” (231). It is a metaphor that is perhaps even more applicable to Basic Writing, especially at City College, where remedial students have only one foot inside the campus gate, carrying their flagged registration information that prevents them from enrolling in the overwhelming majority of the course offerings. Basic Writing students await a life pivot that will send them up onto campus, and perhaps higher up to graduation and economic stability, or back down the slippery slope to the subway and a life of economic insecurity.

On the path to full matriculation there are obvious gates, like the WAT and the Basic Writing course itself, which some research shows are particularly precarious points for

certain groups of students (Otheguy; Pereira, Cobb and Makoulis). But there are less-obvious checkpoints that influence whether remedial writing students succeed, such as the instability of the adjunct labor market, lack of faculty development for writing teachers, the uneven nature of the course curriculum and pedagogy and the large class sizes for these courses. At City College, and elsewhere, the creation and development of a Basic Writing program was mandated to the English Department by the university administration and university tradition. Consequently, as teachers in this highly politicized space of remediation, English professors have been described as the unwitting gatekeepers for the university, institutional role players who act as border police, issuing or denying passports for student travel from vocational programs to academic programs, from high schools to colleges, from community colleges to senior colleges, and from the core curriculum to the upper division.

From this viewpoint, Basic Writing can be analyzed as a focused example of the well-documented role of schools as tracking systems, where students are maneuvered into certain educational neighborhoods.⁶ This process of stratification and border checkpoints and its links to “learning English” is detailed in Mike Rose’s autoethnography, *Lives on the Boundary*, documented at the high-school level by Michelle Fine, in her 1991 ethnographic study *Framing Dropouts*,⁷ and theorized at the college level by Ira Shor in *Culture Wars*. In almost all cases, tracking is explicitly tied to student literacy, and to literacy’s most-testable skill, writing ability. In his seminal article “The Cooling Out Function,” the sociologist Burton Clark describes how institutionalized practices of testing, placement, advising and limited attention help to phase certain students out of the school system. All the while, failing students are encouraged to believe that they had been given a real opportunity, but they had

caused their own demise through laziness and lack of skill. Clark singles out the sorting mechanism of remediation and language testing, which moves some students forward while limiting the progress of others, as a major component of the chilling of students' educational promise.

Clark's analysis seems to perfectly describe the crisis over student performance at CUNY in the mid-1990s, when, amid the latest wave of the national debate over academic standards (accentuated by national, regional and local battles over bilingual education, social promotion, grade inflation, and declining standardized test scores), the local, penetrating gaze pinpointed remedial classrooms, and the Basic Writing classroom in particular, as the obvious space where the city's public college standards could be interrogated. As had often occurred throughout its history, the scholastic worthiness, academic preparation and literacy level of CUNY students were catapulted into public debate, as if the issue had reached a sudden crisis (see Chapter 2). In the spring of 1998, responding to a push by the Mayor of New York City and the Governor of New York State, the Board of Trustees declared an end to remedial courses at the senior Colleges of CUNY, putting an end to Basic Writing at the college that provided the genesis for the nationwide Basic Writing movement, the college where Mina Shaughnessy created and developed the standard for the modern era of Basic Writing programs. For some, this decision marked the end of any semblance of a flirtation with the 30-year-old policy of open admissions, while for others, this decision was heralded as a new beginning, an appropriate response for a college that had devalued its diplomas and wasted its public resources attempting to educate the illiterate for too long. Like its creation in the mid-1970s, the major scaling back of remediation at CUNY in the late 1990s occurred in response to media-hyped, outside-the-classroom, political forces, not

because of a programmatic change based in faculty, administrative or research-driven evaluation and planning.

Amid this radical shift in the history of Basic Writing, the goal of my dissertation project thus became to go to the Basic Writing classroom and to reveal, in all its complexity, just what CUNY had decided to displace. When we ended remediation at the senior colleges, what did we end? I want to use the data of the classroom to show how the desired educational experiences and outcomes for remedial writing students are mitigated and/or enhanced by the current, local classroom life. By focusing in closely on classroom practice, I could ground the far-reaching remedial writing debate at CUNY in “lived experience;” I could “talk up” from the classroom to the broad theories of language instruction, and more particularly, to the large institutional belief-structures, classroom myth and political discourse that oversimplifies the act of written literacy and the classroom sites where it takes place.⁸

Too often the debate over the future of remediation at CUNY devolved into simple and misleading debates over pass/fail test scores or on-time graduation rates, focal points that had evolved from the crisp sound bites of politicians into mantras for the need for change.⁹ As I listened to the overarching, distant conversation it felt as if my teaching life, and the lives of the students in my courses were suddenly thrust into a political arena where we had no control. It was the same kind of epiphany that Mike Rose describes near the end *Lives on the Boundary*. After providing a close reading of his life as an administrator of educational programs, Rose announces:

What began troubling me about the policy documents and the crisis reports were that they focused too narrowly on test scores and tallies of error and other such measures. They lacked careful analysis of students’ histories, and

lacked, as well, analysis of the cognitive and social demands of the academic culture the students now faced. The work I was doing in the Tutorial Center, in the Writing Research Project, and in the Summer Program was guiding me toward a richer understanding of what it meant to be unprepared in the American Research University. (187).

Rose realized the direct consequences of the shallow representation of his programs, his teaching life and his students, and he looked to overturn those overly simple analyses by researching and writing a study that showed the world of college remediation as “messy and social and complex” (200). Similarly, by focusing on the Basic Writing classroom, its instructors, students and context, I could underscore that the life of the writing classroom and the failures and accomplishments of remedial writing students and teachers at CUNY could not be boiled down to a set of numbers, such as on-time graduation rates or pass-fail test score charts. It wasn’t pithy enough to be a mantra, but I wanted my project to show that “when human behavior is the data, a tolerance for [even an encouragement of] ambiguity, multiplicity, contradiction, and instability is essential” (Wolf 129). This is essentially the argument Linda Flower makes at the end of *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*. She writes: “But the large issue, I am convinced, is not how we observe but how we make our theory building more responsible to the evidence of observation, more open to the tests that disconfirm our assumptions or hopes, and more responsive to conditional and situated realities of learning” (294).

My contention is that the Basic Writing classroom space needs to be represented in all of its complicated practice, before we can theorize it and generalize it, before we can create meaningful and useful pedagogical, curricular or administrative reform, and certainly before we

should instigate large-scale change at the institutional level that will greatly influence the lives of tens-of-thousands of students.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Created in reaction to outside-the-classroom forces, Basic Writing courses at CUNY became the “living space” where impossibly high, often cross-purpose expectations would run aground in the face of classroom-based reality. Given the heated public debate over academic standards and admissions practices nationwide and at CUNY in the last two decades, it is no coincidence that the 1990s represents a high-water mark for research on remediation at CUNY from both inside and outside the university. At City College, three separate studies looked at, to some degree or other, the success or failure of the college’s remedial writing program: Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason, two Composition instructors from the CCNY English Department, conducted a three-year \$250,000 pilot project to study the effects of mainstreaming remedial students into the core curriculum; James Traub, a journalist by trade, researched and wrote his mainstream narrative tale, *City on the Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*; and Marilyn Sternglass, a longtime CCNY English professor, completed her six-year, longitudinal study which followed 53 students as they progressed toward their undergraduate degrees, research she later compiled in the text *Time to Know Them*. The three studies had dramatically different purposes: Soliday and Gleason were members of the English Department, who in requesting the funding for their project underscored the programmatic and educational limitations of the current structure of the writing sequence at CCNY; Traub was an outside-the-school (and the field) researcher, taking a journalistic look at a focused instance of the conflict between two of America’s most

cherished ideals, equal access and meritocratic advancement; and Sternglass, also a member of the English Department at CCNY, was taking on the role of the discipline-specific researcher very much writing to members of the composition community in an attempt to show how students learn to read and write over time and throughout their courses (though she had political purposes in mind as well). These three studies provide the research frame for my own study, and therefore deserve more thorough examination.

Mainstreaming Program

The Soliday and Gleason pilot program at CCNY “mainstreamed” high-level remedial writers into a two-semester Freshman Composition sequence.¹⁰ Financially supported by the Fund for Improvement in Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), the three-year project used a standardized curriculum and institutional supports such as peer tutoring and faculty development workshops to offer an alternative to the basic skills testing and tracking model in place since the change in admissions standards in 1970. The project’s final 31-page report provided quantitative and qualitative analysis in support of eliminating the distinction between some higher-level remedial students and their non-remedial counterparts.

To prove their point, Soliday and Gleason monitored grade point averages and credit accumulation of the participating students, completed an external reader’s review of student portfolios and completed numerous surveys and interviews of students and faculty in the pilot project. Three nationally recognized outside researchers reviewed the pilot program favorably,¹¹ and its results were reported in articles in *CCCs* and *College English*. It is often cited as a model for the practice of mainstreaming remedial writers, a practice taken up by some nationally known schools. Yet, once completed, the Soliday and Gleason research had no effect on remediation

policy at their home college, or within CUNY.¹² Though their report recommends an institutionalization of a mainstreaming program, when the funding ended, so did the project.

Traub/Sternglass Debate

Unlike the mainstreaming project and the Sternglass text I discuss below, James Traub's narrative, which stitches together a colorful, episodic mosaic of the academic, social and political climate at City College in the early 1990's, had a profound influence on the policy debate over remediation (see Chapter 2). Focusing more than a third of his text on remediation, he describes the classroom life of Basic Writing and ESL (English as a Second Language) courses; he provides journalistic tales from overwhelmed adjunct writing instructors given the task of helping diverse groups of students make impossible leaps in writing ability, cultural awareness and academic skills; and he tells brief stories of students whose optimistic life goals seem to be out of sync with their scholastic shortcomings.

In the end, he claims, though there are many instances of academic excellence in English, philosophy and engineering at CCNY, remedial students and classrooms are places of entitlement where students doing the bare minimum and learning next-to-nothing are promoted for just staying around. Revisiting remedial students after two semesters, he declares, "they were very much the same students I had met a year earlier" (323). The achieving students who impress him are presented as miracle students, who rise above their peers because of their own personal drive, and in spite of the roadblocks and limitations of the generalized education offered to them.

The final chapter title, "The Real City College," implies the crux of his argument. Traub envisions "an alternative City College, one in which excellence would be the rule rather than the shining exception" (343). Traub condemns remediation at City College as a useless enterprise that

drags down the academic excellence of the school, and he uses this claim to condemn the entire CUNY public education project. Though he is personally troubled by his findings, he concludes that remediation is a primary cause of how City College has let the ideal of access trump the necessity of educational merit.

During Traub's three-semester investigation into "testing the American dream at City College," Marilyn Sternglass' longitudinal research was also underway, and sometimes they interviewed each other, compared notes and sat in on the same student interviews. Both studies were comprehensive in different ways: Traub's narrative reads like a still-camera snap-shot of the whole school, while Sternglass' text is more of a slow-paced documentary film. Like time-lapse photography, Sternglass records student voices, provides excerpts from their written texts, details their course experiences and contextualizes their academic lives. She follows students' wandering intellectual trails as they veer off course, get dragged down by life circumstances, only to restart their academic careers and lurch forward, some of them all the way to graduation day.

In her research, Sternglass emphasizes the complete upheaval of social, cultural and learning habits that students undergo as they move from high school graduate to "passing" college student. Becoming aware of what it means to learn, an awareness that comes largely through writing, according to Sternglass, takes time and encouragement, and converting this new consciousness into working habits and eventually an undergraduate diploma takes years (up to six years for one of her case study subjects) and quite a few devastating failures (both personal and academic). "Students must not be judged on their early accomplishments (or lack of them) in the academic setting," but by the "life" improvement they make over the long haul as a result of their college experience, she observes (293). In the end, Sternglass poses a different reading for the "city on a hill" than Traub declares. Sternglass concludes: students' struggles and the public

college system that facilitates their eventual success should be “valued, encouraged and honored” (294). For Sternglass, the vicissitudes of public higher education are shown as triumphs for the students and for society. Access wins out.

Publishing her work three years after Traub, Sternglass gets to have the last word, and she uses it to her advantage, often referencing Traub and suggesting where he went wrong. In the middle of her study, Sternglass describes a psychology paper written by one of her study subjects (Ricardo) who began his career at CCNY in remediation. The paper analyzed the stigma the word “hysteria” carried when applied to women early in the twentieth century. Sternglass states, “Even Traub, who denigrated the value of remedial education at City College as being too costly and producing too little true intellectual development, would find it difficult to criticize the complex reasoning skills Ricardo had achieved” (237). As Sternglass offers her convincing evidence of the agonizingly slow pace at which her study subjects achieve the tiniest of intellectual gains, there is the sense that the entire time Traub’s voice is looming in the background: “At what cost to the school’s excellence?” it seems to ask.

It is this conflict of results that provided the impetus for my study. The Traub and Sternglass studies come together in a number of ways: when they detail the incredible determination of the students, underscoring their conflicting obligations to family, work and school; when they highlight the successes of CCNY and its students despite the lack of funding, excessive dependence on adjunct labor and a demoralizing, sometimes racist representation of their school in the media; and when they reveal the pockets of extraordinary scholarship at the campus, which often go unnoticed amid concerns with lower-achieving students. Ultimately, however, they disagree completely on the crux issue in my study: the role of remedial writing as an access point to the university system.

Triangulation

As they are different in their conclusions, Traub and Sternglass also provide contrasting research methodologies and writing styles. Traub's text is a first-person narration, written with the omnipotent, "objective" voice of the journalist. Historically thorough and well researched with primary and secondary sources concerning the history of CCNY, it is a travel narrative of a one-year passage through the campus of CCNY. *City on a Hill* is delivered with a storyteller's touch and a sincere, firm tone of voice; Traub manages the plot and pace and delivers intriguing characters with the craft of a novelist. His text is convincing because it is so good at presenting a cohesively tied together broad-stroke pastoral of CCNY: as narrator, he moves quickly from department to department, class to class, providing glimpses of dozens of students, instructors and administrators along the way, many of whom reappear throughout the story. *City on a Hill* reads like narrative documentary, as Traub covers the total of the campus well, enabling him to offer blanket statements about "many" students who "flail around helplessly and drop out" and remedial programs, which take up "precious energy and resources" that should be devoted to providing upper-level students with a higher level of educational excellence (viii).

While Traub offers the narrated, crafted tale of the whole of City College, Sternglass provides the more focused, dense study of an academic researcher. Her student case-study approach uses a telephoto lens to "see" student literacy in process, growing in small increments, throughout the disciplines, over many years' time.¹³ Sternglass is unwilling to gloss over anything in her student-subjects' lives. The pace is slow, almost tedious. The plot has the same high stakes as Traub's, but the telling lacks the climax moments. The text is less crafted and story-driven, and less "complete" or final.

Both studies have their limitations. In the Sternglass project, there is narrowness to the student case study approach; while we see the students clearly, it doesn't let us see the intricacies of the classroom environment. We are left wondering what influence the classroom had on the eventual success of these students: to what degree did they succeed on their own, and to what degree did they succeed because of the classroom pedagogy, curriculum and community of CCNY? Were these students exceptions to the rule, or a common occurrence throughout the college? In other words, should we generalize their experiences to help inform policies about the teaching of writing and its consequences at CCNY? This is exactly what Sternglass does in her final chapter where she presents implications of her study. Sternglass calls for more time and economic support for students who begin their college-level work in remediation. But, the small sampling in her study opens the Sternglass research to the exact avenue that Traub exploits: are these simply six miraculous survivors and/or students who deserve certificates in perseverance, but not college degrees? Can we extrapolate decisions for thousands based on data from just a few?

In Traub's text, while an initial reading proves quite powerful, once the layers of craft are stripped away, we are left wondering about his research methods and the seeming "objectivity" of his telling. Traub's voice is confident and his narrative flows unencumbered, and soon, all of his details seem to form into one sweeping stream. But on a closer reading a sense of distrust develops. Though he speaks with finality, his "story" lacks the intricate, conflicting details and raw edges of true human experience. He uses the journalistic voice of objectivity to create a sense of "Truth," overriding what is essentially a personal narrative of subjective experience. His conclusions are stitched so cleanly together that the reader cannot even find the seams. In the final analysis, Traub presents the conflict of City College as a dramatic clash of the great

American ideals of meritocracy and equality, and thus forces himself into a simple story of binary choice, rather than a complex tale of an institution where thousands of dissimilar students succeed and fail in all sorts of ways. He falls into the trap of binary thinking and seems driven by the need to justify his belief that excellence has been sacrificed for access.

Read in tandem, Traub and Sternglass provide opposing viewpoints about the embattled student life at City College in the early-to-mid-1990s, when the imaginary student literacy standard again became conflicted, political territory. Both studies provide only partial answers to the difficult questions of the role of remediation in student success at the college, but it is hard to base institutional policy change on the Sternglass or Traub studies alone because the remedial writing classrooms and the system that surrounds the classroom-enterprise are not fully presented. As the composition historian Bob Connors has written, “no one narrative [or in this case two narratives] can ever, or should ever, shut down the narrative enterprise” (“Dreams and Play” 234). Rather than provide a final say, the texts of Sternglass and Traub open up the possibility for further narratives. And, in that sense, my study is an attempt to extend and complicate the work of Sternglass and Traub.

Ethnographic researchers often talk of making an attempt to triangulate their data within a study: qualitative research should offer data in as many forms as possible from multiple source points, and thereby make results more encompassing and representative of life events, more ethically sound, and of course more valid. Similarly, when viewed side-by-side, multiple studies of the same or similar research sites can offer this triangulation effect in a larger context. Multiple studies using different methodologies and focusing on different aspects of a large educational issues can, ultimately, provide different readings that reinforce, contradict, and offer complexity to other findings (North, “The Death of Paradigm Hope...”). Such voluminous and

varied research is warranted when dramatic changes in educational policy are under consideration, such as the call for the end of remediation at the senior colleges of CUNY, which will influence the lives of tens of thousands of students. Since the remedial classroom is a "live-site" where race, class, gender, academic standards, student literacy, and the purpose of higher education, for example, are not abstract theorized concepts, but actual lived experiences, close study of the classroom enables me to reveal the simplistic inadequacy of the access vs. excellence binary to describe the remedial writing program at CCNY. When we look at lives closely, it becomes impossible to place them in a category of "either/or." Triangulated research-studies can help reveal that the decision to end remediation at CUNY was not a choice of "either/or," but a complex choice along a spectrum of possibilities. As we determine the role remedial writing should play within the debate over college access, we need these multiple viewpoints to ensure that our decisions are not hasty reactions to political whim.

With a thorough reading of Sternglass and Traub in mind, rather than move quickly through an entire institutional setting or focusing in on individual students, my "classroom case study" approach takes a middle ground, directing a "microscopic documentary lens" on the core structural unit of the Open Admissions policy: the remedial writing classroom. The instructor and students, the classroom's daily events and the work of literacy done there become the living, breathing specimen to be narrated and interpreted. The remedial classroom itself is the data to be analyzed as we consider its demise on the senior college campuses of CUNY.

My choice of design and methodology extends what Glenda Bissex describes as the benefit of shrinking the sites of research as a way of enhancing depth. Talking of case study sites, rather than individuals, Bissex suggests that they can be used as "exemplars" that can provide an understanding which can be applied across contexts. She states:

A case study I see as a reflective story of the unfolding, over time, of a series of events involving particular individuals. The persons studied are regarded as full human beings, having intentions and making meanings, not merely “behaving.” The researcher includes these intentions and meanings in the meaning she makes of the story and, as interpreter if not also actor, is herself a character in it (71).

As such, this study portrays the Basic Writing discourse community as particular to its place, participants and internal and external contexts. I wanted to read the classroom as an in-process, interactive text, to look deeply into “what happens when” writers and instructors meet in the charged political space of the remedial classroom during the course of a single semester (Bizzell, Nelson).¹⁴ My study is an attempt, as Edmund Husserl suggests, to go “back to the things themselves.” I reveal and analyze the complexities of lived classroom experiences: to provide what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling, ...meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt,” or what Max van Manen describes in *Researching Lived Experience* as a “...systematic attempt to uncover and describe...the internal meaning structures of lived experience” (10).

With the experiences of the students, the instructor and the researcher within the Basic Writing classroom, I convey, as completely as possible in a text-limited space, the complex unfolding of the life and outcomes of a remedial classroom, a particular discourse site that has a profound effect on the success and/or failure of particular student learning in the college. As studies by Jonathan Kozol and Shirley Brice Heath demonstrate, such site-specific research of discourse communities can provide the data to confirm, deny or transgress anecdotal, hypothetical, philosophical and theoretical positions about literacy, teaching and learning

communities. Since it is such a crucial and complex literacy site, when we consider the Basic Writing classroom we must describe “...the processes of intercultural contact and assimilation to new discourses as a far more complex social and intellectual effort...” (Soliday, *Politics...* 149). This project shows how the ideology, theory and politics of language literacy are revealed in the daily struggle of individual students to cross from a borderland state of limbo known as remedial writing to the “promised land” of full matriculation in college.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This dissertation chronicles and analyzes one of the last Basic Writing courses offered at City College, CUNY in the fall of 1999. The course, which had 22 students enrolled at the start, met three days per week (M/W/F), for a total of four classroom hours, in a windowless fifth-floor room of the North Academic Center. The instructor was a first-time college teacher and recently enrolled graduate student. I chose this particular class partly out of limited options, but also because it was representative of the English department’s ongoing practice of hiring graduate students to teach the writing classes in the department. Of the Basic Writing courses taught that semester, all but two were taught by adjunct faculty. From among the adjuncts, I approached six instructors and only one was willing to participate in the study.

Designed as a classroom case study, the project attempts to determine, as exactly as we can, what happened during those fifteen weeks (sixty hours total), when these students took a required course in writing as a consequence of failing a university-wide qualification essay exam in order to meet the minimal standard in literacy at CUNY.

With the design of the study my goal is to define a prominent space where the acts of college literacy take place. I call this design a “literacyscape,” because , the goal is to paint the

landscape of Basic Writing, to freeze frame it on a canvas , and thereby be able to see its intricacy clearly. My intention is to offer a massive representation of the Basic Writing classroom structures, participants and actions, and to bring into view the multiple ideologies and practicalities that collide inside this institutional space of literacy attainment. It is both a methodology that offers a way to define a space and one that admits its limitations, as literacyscapes are static representations of unstable progressive and ongoing events. The purpose here is not to suggest that one literacyscape can be generalized as representative of all literacy sites, or even all basic Writing classrooms. It is, rather a way to conceive of the multiple focused representations that are necessary to understand the sites of literacy (see Prologue).

To accomplish the necessary detail of this literacyscape approach, I use a variety of methodologies, each of which brings to the forefront particular structures of the Basic Writing classroom. Within the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I offer an historical context of the Basic Writing classroom (Chapter 2), a narrative and commentary of classroom discourse (Chapters 3), a close reading of the students writing in the course (Chapter 4) and a focused look at the influence of testing on the course (Chapter 5). In the final chapter, I use the data, commentary and analysis of the early chapters to discuss particular theoretical and political tension points about Basic Writing (Chapter 6). Though all of the work has a phenomenological underpinning, each chapter has its own methodological stance, which I thoroughly detail below. This multiple and overlapping methodology enables the researcher to provide a depth of field that a single methodology could not accomplish. In providing this “quadrangulated” view, I look into the space of writing remediation from a conflicted, multidimensional stance. I am not looking to tell a cohesive story, but rather to uncover the messy reality of the Basic Writing classroom. The

project fulfills what John Van Maanen calls for at the end of his treatise on Writing Ethnography: “We need more, not fewer, ways to tell culture” (140, also see David Bleich).

History and Context Methodology (Chapter 2)

Phenomenology underscores that research projects occur within the complex world of lived experience and recent work in ethnographic writing emphasizes taking an historical approach to set the current ethnographic moment in its context (Van Maanen 129). The work of phenomenological research in education acknowledges—even emphasizes—that all research takes place within the ragged, ad hoc realities of the everyday academic life, an uneven, in-flux collision of social, cultural, political and personal forces. As the composition historian Robert Connors argues in “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology,” while we think of research in history as a process of uncovering the past, such quests are anchored in “perceptions of the present day” (222). History, he claims, is almost always motivated by the “simple curiosity about how we got here” (223). Or as he says more specifically, researchers in composition are motivated by two general feelings:

- (1) Why are things around me as they are?
- (2) Why do I see and judge things around me as I do? (226; Also see Odell, “Planning Classroom Research” 129)

Thus, the advent of Basic Writing courses, a particular kind of pre-freshmen writing class created in response to Open Admissions, and their subsequent extinction at the senior college level 30 years later were not singular moments of sudden genesis, but dramatic, culminating instances of complex and continuous forces. Powerful economic, social, political, institutional and discipline-specific historical events set the climate for the Basic Writing course under consideration here,

and these pressures had direct and indirect influence on the pedagogy, curriculum and learning that took place within the course. It is impossible to consider the Basic Writing classroom without setting, what Susan Miller calls the “received ‘story’ of language instruction and the historical ‘plot’ that formed images” of education and literacy (2). This chapter is an attempt to avoid the mistake of what Carol Stabile calls “hegemonic amnesia” (108). It is crucial, she believes, to restore the “memories and histories and to promote understandings of the political interests guiding this amnesia” (109).

In this chapter I am following the lead of other Composition scholars, most recently Lisa Ede in *Situating Composition*, who have connected the very existence and continued conflicted state of writing classrooms to the larger structures that influence and maintain them (Susan Miller; Ohmaan, *Politics...*, and Soliday, *Politics...*). In the preface to *The Politics of Writing Instruction*, editors Richard Bullock, John Trimbur and Charles Schuster ask (in a virtual rhetorical sense), “Can the teaching of writing be divorced from the social, political, cultural, and economic?” (xvii). It is, therefore, crucial to situate this single classroom within the broader context of CUNY’s history, the history of the discipline of Composition, the history of remediation (and pre-freshmen courses) at CUNY, and the previous decade’s intense public scrutiny of CUNY academic standards in general, and its students’ writing ability in particular. Connors states,

...[A]lthough what we face as teachers and scholars everyday is always new, it is never completely new. Others have been here before, facing similar problems and choices. The story of their hopes, ideas, struggles, disappointments, and triumphs can tell us about our own stories (“Dreams and Play” 232).

Historicizing the late-1990s crisis moment in Basic Writing at CUNY reveals the long-contested space of writing classes and their role in admission and advancement of students at a public college. Stabile states, “A situation of nascent crisis is an opportunity to discern the hidden presuppositions of a traditional system and the mechanisms capable of perpetuating it when the prerequisites of its functioning are no longer completely fulfilled” (110). Ethnographic projects need to look to historical documentation as a way of setting the events in context rather than seeing them as isolated instances of crisis.¹⁵ Such historical analysis directly influences the design of the study, helping the researcher to understand what questions are important, and what current understandings are valid interpretations.

In this chapter, I look to the origins of the debate over student literacy in higher education, and at CUNY in particular, to uncover what Connors calls a problem-based history that chronicles earlier historical instances where the problem appears and tracks it through contemporary times (215). From the inception of The Free Academy to its present day multi-campus monolith, I look at crisis periods, where CUNY was accused of poor standards, and/or its students’ literacy questioned, and/or the taxpayer investment in a public university was considered wasteful. I am also focusing on the conflicted space the course in writing has held in the university structure as a required set of courses for its students to meet a college-level literacy standard. Through historical research I provide a better understanding of the following questions: Were current CUNY students significantly less skilled in written literacy than CUNY students from previous eras? What role had written literacy and writing classes played at CUNY during its history? How do written literacy standards connect to admission standards? Why was the public focus on CUNY student literacy so intense in the 1990s? Had there been previous debates over the literacy of

CUNY students, and if so, what could we learn from those debates? How was the current crisis at CUNY over remediation a reflection of and/or a reaction to the national literacy crisis of the 1990s? How accurate was the portrayal of CUNY student literacy in the media?

To present the history of this “present” and “local” story, I provide a phenomenological narrative of the pivotal moment in the public debate over remediation at CUNY, when the Board of Trustees decided to eliminate remediation at the senior college level. This narrative is my recognition of my phenomenological position within a research instance, which had direct implications on the historical questions I wanted to ask. Secondly, to place the current debate in its historical context, I accessed the extensive primary sources of the City College archives, to review course catalogs, school publications and the extensive media file on the college, dating back to the school’s founding as The Free Academy in the 1840s. I also looked to local and national media from the 1990s to trace the rising public debate over academic standards, particularly the focus on spoken and written standard- English as a pre-requisite for college enrollment. For the history of the discipline of composition, I review the pantheon of composition historians (Berlin, Crowley, Kitzhaber, Susan Miller), who have chronicled the birth of the first college-level literacy crisis at Harvard in the late 1800s and the subsequent creation of composition as a college-level discipline.

My goal in this chapter was not to tell a cohesive, chronological narrative but to highlight, over time, the reoccurrence of debates about CUNY enrollment and student literacy. This research emphasizes the ways in which the college writing classroom has been constructed by institutional, political, patriotic, economic and labor policies and practices in America.

Classroom Narrative Methodology (Chapter 3)

In many ways it was an all-rookies classroom. The instructor was a first-time college writing teacher and first-semester graduate student in the creative writing MA program at the college. The students, who received no college credit for the course, were largely first-time freshmen with a myriad of academic and literacy challenges in front of them (See Appendix A for student profiles). And, though I was a veteran adjunct teacher of writing at CUNY, and had done classroom research before, it was my first attempt at a full-length, classroom-based ethnographic research project in someone else's writing classroom.

In Chapter 3, I construct an in-depth classroom narrative that attempts to record the classroom culture of this Basic Writing course in as much depth as possible. From the 38 classes I attended, I selected five classes to develop into narratives that reveal the classroom activities in real time. Rather than selecting particular classroom moments, I wanted to show the evolution of the discourse of the whole class. I know of no study that attempts such a thorough classroom narrative. Traditionally, classroom ethnographies select out particular classroom moments for analysis, and then compile a series of these to represent classroom culture and discourse. An example of this methodology would be Chiseri-Strater's *Academic Literacies*. My narrative follows in the footsteps of the studies by Janet Emig, Sondra Perl, and Donald Graves, who provide full readings of individual student writers as they write, or Perl and Nancy Wilson who chronicle teacher lives in and out of the classroom in *Through Teachers Eyes*. Different from the Emig, Perl and Graves' studies, however, my work differs in that I cover the whole classroom, not individual students and their writing sessions, and my study is qualitative and phenomenological, rather than quantitative. Unlike Perl and Wilson, I am not conducting a

composite view of a teacher's classroom experience, but am focusing on a more moment-to-moment representation of classroom time, which attempts to capture multiple views of the classroom: the researcher's, the students' and the instructor's.

This thorough close-in look at classroom life enables me to investigate the following open-ended questions: What is the nature and essence of this place we call the Basic Writing classroom? Who are the people who meet there? What things take place? What is the role of the instructor in a remedial writing classroom? What does college-level academic literacy learning look like? How do student writers work on their writing inside and outside the classroom? What are the writing processes of remedial students? What are the connections between students' spoken and written discourse? What classroom factors – internal and external – influence student writers at work? What forces (student, instructor, institutional) impede student progress in the remedial writing classroom? How do remedial writers improve or fail to improve their oral and written literacy over the course of the semester?

Using the techniques of Geertz's "thick description," I used class time to take detailed notes of all activities in the classroom and to capture student-to-student, student-to-instructor and student-to-researcher dialogue. I varied my position throughout the room during the course of the semester and joined a student group for any group activities. I participated in the class only when asked to do so by the instructor or the students. In the latter case, I contributed any information the students specifically requested, but on many occasions declined to "read over" or edit their work. I used the classroom time when the students were writing, to reflect on my presence in the classroom, as required within a phenomenological methodology.

After each class session, I used my audiotapes and my field notes to construct detailed narratives of classroom events and the important moments before and after each class session. It

was my goal during these initial writing sessions to recapture the classroom as it had actually occurred, but also to locate myself within the narrative, in a phenomenological sense, to locate myself in the experiences of the data collection. (I discuss the methodological implications of this phenomenological ethnographic stance later in the chapter.)

Other data gathering for this chapter included formal interviews with the instructor for two hours every other week, as well as informal interviews before and after each class. I also requested that the instructor keep a classroom journal to record her impressions of the course and the research project. I collected all classroom materials (assignments, handouts) and had access to the instructor's attendance and grading records. I conducted formal interviews with the students, had them fill out pre- and mid-semester questionnaires, and I conducted a full-class interview at the end of the course. I engaged them in informal conversation before and after class and in other places on campus when we crossed paths. As the semester progressed and I gathered more of these materials, I began to interlace them into the classroom narratives to provide a fuller context of particular classroom moments.

For my own part, I kept an ongoing research journal and, on a few occasions, shared what I was writing with the students, and the instructor. I also read all the materials for the course and participated in the writing activities during class time.

As I discuss in different ways in the methodological rationale below, I should emphasize that writing was a key component to this research, especially concerning this chapter. I wrote constantly throughout the data collection process. Not only did I turn my field notes (in consort with the audio tapes) into narratives, but I also wrote about the larger pedagogical, curricular and educational issues that I came across during my data collection, and I wrote a great deal about my roles as a writing instructor and a participating activist attempting to convince the CUNY Board

of Trustees to alter its plans to scale back remediation at the senior college level. In addition, both through the research notebook and in separate documents, I reflected on the specifics of the research and my own feelings and understanding and analysis of the ongoing process of collecting data.

Student Writing Process and Products Methodology (Chapter 4)

In Chapter 2, I use the history of literacy crises to argue that the public debate over student literacy at CUNY at the end of the century was a misinformed one; a major change to the university's Basic Writing Program was driven by a political and media buzz over failing writing-test scores. Chapter 2 also provides the context for the classroom narratives presented in Chapter 3, which depicts the everyday life of the classroom in an attempt to encapsulate the complex, slow-moving series of class and group discussions that act as the main collaborative component of the writing lives of Basic Writing students. Such narratives substantiate how discourse between students and between students and the instructor evolve during the semester and help students develop the practices and processes that are essential to writers. The classroom narratives also reveal the multiple desires of the students and the instructor and how these expectations play out against and along with the often unstated or only marginally defined goals of the department, college and university.

However, what the history and narrative chapters do not reveal enough of are the actual written products of the students, the artifacts that mark the momentary culmination of student thinking on a particular topic. Though all testing scholars agree that no single test can accurately represent student ability, and that no single test should carry "in-or-out" consequences for students, nonetheless, written products from high-stakes exams remain the

main way student written literacy gets judged. In reaction to the all or nothing view of student writing, this chapter looks at students' written products throughout the semester, not to judge them as positivist indicators of success or failure, but to add another layer of analysis to the narrative descriptions in the previous chapters. Since the narratives provide the context for the assignments as well as the general background for the students, the texts can be analyzed not as stand alone documents but within their writing context and with the student writer fully present—not breaking the connection between writer and text but using that connection to help understand the text. By close reading the student work, I hope to offer a meaningful critique and explanation of student writing ability and practice that goes beyond standard evaluation practices for writing exams, which, in the case of CUNY, offer only a numbered score—usually just above or just below the pass/fail line—that tells us very little about student writing ability and the viability of the students' writing potential in college.

In constructing this chapter, I mirror the analysis strategy Tom Fox employs in an essay for *The Journal of Education*, “Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict,” where he provides a full student text from a Basic Writing course, “The Boy Who Saw the Light,” and then provides an authoritative, detailed reading as a way to help underscore his essay's claim that “the degree to which cultural conflicts and continuities can affect, and even define, Basic Writing students” (42). By explicating the student essay line-by-line at times, Fox convinces his readers--fellow writing teachers--that they should “help students explore the cultural conflicts and continuities that define their entrance into the university” (43). It is a purposeful reading of a single student text that supports his already held belief that composition practitioners should redefine their writing classroom in terms of cultural

conflict. “Primarily,” he concludes, “the task facing Basic Writing teachers is an interpretive one, seeking to understand the cultural forces that shape their students and understanding how their students are accommodating, resisting, or reproducing these forces, the same tasks facing the student” (48). He treats the student’s text no differently than a writer parsing and explaining a published novel, story or poem. He cites the writer’s words giving them validity and authority, and he reads into any evidence the essay offers to determine a meaning, or multiple meanings, for the text. Fox also reads the text by connecting it to what he knows of the writer and the context in which the text was written. In other words, Fox reads the text using the various lenses of literary theory, applying whatever he needs to in order to evolve a solid reading. In so doing, he follows the call of Linda Flower, Susan Miller and others, to read student texts as authentic, meaningful works, worthy of our full attention and analysis.

My goal in this chapter is to do the same. Like Fox, I choose student texts from the Basic Writing course with a set purpose in mind. But different than Fox, I was not out to prove a particular argument. I chose texts based on breadth (never using the same writer twice) and usefulness in explicating some of the issues that are raised by the history and narrative chapters of this dissertation. I did not choose based on the quality of the writing (neither exemplary or poor) but tried to represent a crosssection of the class. I chose complicated texts, that could offer multiple readings.

In presenting the historical context and classroom narrative chapters, it was my intention to bring the reader to the classroom with me, to see, hear and feel the experience of the classroom. Similarly, I want the reader to experience the reading of full Basic Writing texts, to see hear and feel the writing of the students. Therefore, as Fox did, in each case, I provide the full student text. Given that the reader of this dissertation already knows these

students well, providing complete texts fully rounds out the picture of whom the students are and what they try to accomplish in the course. There is a limitation here, of course. By analyzing whole texts, I reduce the number of texts I can present. The narrowness of the selections is somewhat abated by the thoroughness of the treatment of each text, but there is only a limited amount of generalizing we can do from such a small sampling.

Nevertheless, I think looking closely at select pieces of student writing enables us to answer some important questions about these writers and this particular Basic Writing classroom: What kinds of writing takes place in the Basic Writing course? How does context influence what students write? What does academic writing look like? Can a reader point to specific verifiable moments of written literacy? Do students make progress over the course of the semester? What do student written products tell us about the potential success of student writers at the college level? Can a close reading of student work provide insights into the limitations and success of the remedial writing classroom?

To answer these questions, I collected everything the students wrote in the course (both informal and formal writing) including practice versions of the university writing exam, with the exception of classroom writing sessions that were done in student notebooks. I then selected at least one sample for each kind of writing done in the classroom (journal writing, in-class writing, freewriting, informal reaction papers, process writing, drafts of formal papers, and final versions of formal papers), everyone from a different writer. For each piece, I offer the details of the assignment and use the biography of the writer and the written comments from the instructor to provide a context-laden reading, which uncovers layers of interpretation, rather than straightforward judgments of proficiency.

The goal of the chapter is not to answer the above questions, but to tell the story of this writing classroom a second time—through the written products—and from that story to reveal who the students are and how the Basic Writing classroom works.

Evaluation Methodology (Chapter 5)

For close to 30 years, a qualification exam determined which of the admitted CUNY students had to take Basic Writing. However, beyond its role as an instigator, the relationship between the exam and the course re has never been clear. For its part, the university did not maintain an explicit CUNY-wide policy to determine the relationship between the course and the test instrument in terms of curriculum or exit requirements. Each college was able to determine its own connections, or, as in the case of CCNY, to leave the degree of the connection up to the individual instructor. In the system in place in the late 1990s at CCNY, students could pass the Basic Writing II course without passing the exam, thus enabling them to take up to 60 credits of college-level classes, including the required Freshmen Composition course. The students' path toward the B.A. or B.S. degree was stopped at that point, however.

Despite the “grace period” offered by the college in terms of the deadline for passing the exam, the university-wide qualifying test still had a major influence on the Basic Writing program at CCNY. Each semester that a student took Basic Writing, they were sent an “invitation” to take the exam, and especially for first timers, the advantage of passing the test seemed greater than the advantages of doing well in the course: a passing score provided immediate full matriculation.

This chapter of my dissertation attempts to look closely at how the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) entered the classroom of the Basic Writing course. I am looking to further define the following questions: What role does outside-the-classroom testing play in

Basic Writing? How do the students envision the exam? What connections do the students make/fail to make between writing for the course and writing for the exam? How does the looming exam influence the instructor's pedagogical and curricular choices? How does the instructor of Basic Writing handle the conflicted space of a writing course where an outside assessment carries more weight than the course grade? In what ways do the literacy standards of the test and the course differ?

The methodology of this chapter is similar to chapter three, in that I offer classroom narrative and commentary. However, rather than offer full narratives of an entire class, I focus in on particular segments of discourse both inside and outside of class, where the students and the instructor discuss the writing test, and/or its relationship to the course writing. My goal here is to deliver a targeted, issue-oriented encapsulation of the ways in which the test influenced the “goings on” of the classroom and how the students and instructor dealt with the rhetorical power of an exam that delineates who progresses toward a degree and who is held in the borderland outside full matriculation.

Tension Point Analysis Methodology (Chapter 6)

In her ethnographic study *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students*, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater provides a composite of a college writing course, and then moves in close to tell the stories of two case study students from that course, Anna and Nick. Subsequently, she uses her last chapter to offer a more far-reaching and holistic look at the two students' “literacies” within the context of the academic community where their budding literacy takes place. It is a reflective and holistic chapter, where Chiseri-Strater underscores how student abilities, and her own understanding of the students'

“literacies” grew over the course of the project. She states: “I share what I now understand from watching Anna and Nick read, write, talk, and think in these disciplines, as well as what I feel about ‘being there’ with them” (141). She revisits the large forces that influenced the process of literacy that she details in her case studies, and she writes her way into new ways of seeing and understanding these forces in a local and national context, but all the while she is questioning her own role in this process of understanding, of seeing correctly.

Chiseri-Strater provides the methodological model for the sixth chapter of my dissertation. The research gathered in the preceding chapters provides a multi-dimensional framework from which to view the Basic Writing course and the role it plays in the hierarchical structure of the university. In this holistic analysis, I focus in on particular concrete issues—tension points—raised by the previous chapters. These issues can be broken into two related groups: questions about the way students become literate; and questions about the viability and purpose of Basic Writing. My analysis and reflections are an attempt to make sense of what I observed and what I have written in the previous chapters. I am attempting to validate and complicate the already existing ideas of theorists and critics of Basic Writing, as well as to initiate and underscore the new knowledge that this study uncovers. In Chapter 6, I answer these questions: What did I observe? What claims can I make about remediation and remedial students in this course and at CCNY? How do my observations and claims line up with those of other researchers? To what extent are my observations and claims meaningful, valid, generalizable? What limits my observations and claims? What flaws and biases are there in my observations and claims?

As Van Maanen emphasizes, the goal here is not a pronouncement, but a positioning. I discuss the classroom experience in “the modest, unassuming style of one struggling to

piece together something reasonably coherent out of displays of initial disorder, doubt and difficulty” (Van Maanen 75). This chapter is not a static, final deliberation on the worthiness of the public college remediation project. My intent was not even to justify or condemn CUNY’s decision to end remediation at the senior colleges. Instead, this chapter offers an honest, serious, experiential, personal representation and a deeply reflective, in-process evaluation of the decision to end remediation at CUNY. What a site-specific, personally reflected chapter offers is the opening of a space for contemplation for a more complex reading of the writing classroom and the role of remediation. I move from a binary reading where something must be “one thing or the other” to a “both/and” reading where the writing classroom is seen in all its complexity and contradiction (Collins 246). By admitting the researcher’s stance as personal, political, situated and fluid, the space is open for other studies to confirm, contradict or transgress the ideas presented here (see Epilogue).

PHENOMENOLOGY DEFINED

The methodological underpinning of this study is based in the philosophical and research theory of phenomenology. Phenomenology, suggests that the interaction of the self and the object of study creates an ongoing fluid relationship that can alter meaning. Experience alters sensory perception, which alters experience, and the closer in the experience, the greater the degree of alteration.¹⁶ In a philosophical sense, experience and perception exist in a continuous circle of influence. In providing an intense gaze on the experience of lived events in the remedial classroom, I draw meaning from the classroom, rather than applying meaning to it.

Phenomenological research studies do not presuppose specific, narrow, focal points prior to a study. Instead, phenomenological studies are open-ended; they do not look to prove

hypotheses, or answer specific research questions, but rather, these studies open a space for “seeking” what is there in lived experience. Phenomenological studies observe naturally occurring events in their existing social contexts, through the admittedly personalized lens of the researcher, in order to generate hypotheses rather than support a single hypothesis; a phenomenological researcher leaves on an open-ended odyssey rather than following a set itinerary with preset guidelines (Bissex; Macrorie; Ray; and Connors, “Dream and Play”). As Stephen North describes in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, ethnographic research in composition has “phenomenological roots” because it is a methodology driven by its reaction to positivist and experimental inquiry methods in the classroom, methods deemed unsatisfactory because they do not capture the natural environment of the classroom where variables can not be controlled, or even restrained to test for specific hypotheses (also see Fleischer 38 and Ray 52). By avoiding hypothesis seeking projects, phenomenological research is one way to avoid the creation of what Fine and others refer to as the master narrative project, which tries to “close contradictions” by providing an “articulate professional voice” to override data mayhem (“Working the Hyphen...”73). Avoiding a simplistic “defining of the problem” is the first step in preventing the colonizing discourse of ethnographic projects.

With its emphasis on a focused, complex look at lived events and self-reflection as a way of generating valid knowledge, phenomenology highlights the phenomena of experience first, before assuming or ascribing theory and ideology. Basing my study in phenomenology enables me to do what I discuss above as “talking up” from the classroom to theory. It is based in the idea that research and classroom practice should be “intertwined” (Fleischer 38). Max van Manen emphasizes this point by referring back to the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, and claiming that the seminal phenomenological phrase “back to the things themselves” means the

phenomenological attitude is mindful of the ease with which we tend to rely on a reconstructed logic in our professional endeavors. As philosophers, as educators and certainly as researchers, we tend to read theories into experience, placing a design over reality, rather than having the reality inform the design or having the experience dictate the theory (van Manen 45).

Phenomenological research invests its time into a careful, thorough and direct examination of localized experience as a way to inform theoretical understanding.

In *Composing Teacher Research: A Prosaic History*, Cathy Fleischer writes, “When we’ve started with the words and experiences of the participants in the research, our voices are not muffled by the strong and convincing voices of the experts we read. Our voices serve as the center, our experiences as the issues for the research” (226). She makes the case that teacher research should be evocative; that is, it should not try to answer a particular question, or prove a single theory, but rather evoke ideas, which emerge from local experiences. Later in this chapter, I contend that this experience-based methodology is crucial to the validity of classroom research.

The goal of phenomenological research is to make utterly sure that before making claims or judgments, before hypothesizing or theorizing, a researcher must make an attempt to fully understand the complete, lived experience of the “site” under study. The researcher must do everything he or she can to not prejudge the experience (Fleischer 225ff). In “Phenomenology and Educational Research,” Max Vandenberg states:

It is not a question of examining the logical characteristics that educational concepts may or may not already have, as if these concepts existed autonomously in a Platonic realm of ideas independently of someone’s having them in mind, but rather a matter of finding educational phenomena (or facts)

about which one will subsequently formulate a theory with concepts that in fact do have the requisite logical—and ontological—characteristics (187).

Phenomenological research offers a way to conduct classroom-based research by focusing the researcher not on proving a theory, or even developing a theory, but on describing and interpreting the existence of behaviors, interactions, reactions and consequences of site-specific experience. Van Manen states, “*Phenomenological questions are meaning questions*. They ask for the meaning and significance of certain phenomena” (23, his emphasis).

The design of this project, and the writing voice I use to present the data to the reader, enables me to explicitly reveal the role of the researcher in the data. The strength of phenomenological research is revealed in the ways that beliefs and ideas about classroom data are fractured and re-fractured by the research and writing experience. As such, my study is “caught up in the current reflexive, sometimes painful, always critical, and still evolving self-examination of the ethnographic enterprise” (Bruner 1). Phenomenology provided a way for me to insert myself as researcher into the text. Van Manen states, “the methodology of phenomenology is more a carefully cultivated thoughtfulness than a technique,” and that thoughtfulness occurs through a constant, “dialectical *re-engagement* with the humans (including the researcher) participating in the research” (131).

I state this phenomenological emphasis, because, as I state in the Prologue to this study, and as I discuss in the “Self Reflexivity” section below, although I tackled a decidedly personal problem with this research, a problem with which I was intimately involved over a long period of time, it was also my intent to not allow my previous experiences as a

classroom teacher of remedial writing, or as an activist for open access at CUNY, or my scholarly study in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, to determine the scope – and outcome – of this project. In other words, I needed to base my beliefs about the remedial writing classroom’s viability in thoughtful and considerate analysis of lived experience in order to reaffirm, deny or transgress my own previously uninterrogated beliefs.

To succeed in my endeavor, to look at the phenomena of the classroom for what it is, I use Husserl’s technique of bracketing: “one must take hold of the phenomenon and then place outside of it one’s knowledge about the phenomenon” (as qtd. in van Manen, 47; also see Gleason, 65).¹⁷ Despite the personal connection to the events of the classroom, the goal of my research was to limit all pre-conceived understandings, to avoid presupposing the meaning of the occurrences and/or narrowing the data and formulating opinion prematurely. Vandenberg states, “Rather than representing truth claims, which may always be premature, it means that the phenomenologist has to strive to attend to the essence of the phenomenon he is describing as it appears in the lived world” (201). So my research is open-ended and site-focused, and remained so as I followed the “felt sense” of where the events of the classroom took me (Gendlin). Educational research requires an anthropological orientation, because in its essence, education is about humans, and educational research must pay strict attention to “humanness” and the lived events (the phenomena) of the educational practice, in this case the classroom, where human events take place. Phenomenology is above all a human science (see Chapter 1 of van Manen). Vandenberg concludes:

The task of fundamental educational theory, consequently, is to describe all basic educational phenomena and to show how they are interrelated in the context of an integral human life. This means that fundamental educational theory is the anthropology of education... (211).

However, from the outset, any search, any investigation into lived experience can only be represented in symbolic form through the researcher's individual point of view and related through his/her language. It is a highly personal and sensitive understanding of the world (see "Positionality" below). In phenomenological research we work to experience things as they are, to see their true essence without bias or limitedness. However, any representation of the lived experience is presented as an interpretation, not a positivist objectification.

Phenomenology blurs or even demolishes "the subject-object distinction so central to traditional ethnography" (Van Maanen 34). Phenomenology makes it impossible to render observations as objective descriptions. In phenomenological research, we attempt to experience the essence of things, but recognize that the experience is a fluid, personal, localized essence. In phenomenological research, we admit the limitations of what John Van Maanen calls the realist tale, "an author proclaimed" narration of events in a "dispassionate, third person voice" which insists on the "omnipotence" of the narrator as the arbiter of meaning (45, 51). Van Maanen declares, instead, "This is a phenomenological war whoop declaring that there is no way of seeing, hearing, or representing the world of others that is absolutely, universally valid or correct" (35).

Perhaps North states the best description of this study's intent:

Ethnographic investigators go into a community, observe (by whatever variety of means) what happens there, and then produce an account – which they will try to verify or ground in a variety of ways – of what happened. The phenomena observed are gone, will not occur again, and therefore cannot be investigated again. What remains, then, is whatever the investigators have managed to turn into words (277).

As North highlights, ethnography rightfully understands the absurdity of attempting to provide an objective representation of a culture (a realist tale) because of the obviously fleeting nature of the culture's existence, and the ongoing nature of the researcher's and reader's interpretation (see the section titled "Writing Process" below). As Wendy Bishop describes in *Ethnographic Writing Research*, the particular culture under study is "convened" in a particular way based on the researcher's role in the culture and the participants' response to that researcher (3). In addition, in the case of classroom research, the course ends and can never be reconstituted, and in that way classroom research is very much site- and time-limited.¹⁸ Thirdly, since the process of interpretation of lived experience is ongoing, the researcher cannot even claim to represent lived experience as a set moment in time. Research is not a static accounting of events (Faigley 46). The researcher creates an interpretation and then interprets the lived experience a second time. As van Manen describes, once the experience is lived, as we represent it to others we are interpreting an interpretation, as one would discuss a work of art (27).

Thus, a phenomenological study is a focused and detailed description of reality as seen through a knowledgeable researcher's senses and then constructed into a fluid,

accessible, dialogic representation for the reader, which is admittedly transitory and unreplicable. The representation is then analyzed and theorized for its meaning and presented as a “moment in time” representation of a single research instance from which conclusions can be drawn. “As ethnographers, our job is not simply to pass on the disorderly complexity of culture, but also to try to hypothesize about the apparent consistencies, to lay out our best guesses, without hiding the contradictions and the instability’ (Wolf 129). The phenomenological researcher constructs a culture to be analyzed, but is at all times aware of her construction, and is willing to fit her construction alongside, instead of above, the constructions of others.

Ken Macrorie similarly suggests that a good researcher is the one who spends the majority of the research phase going “along with the drift” (58). Research, he says, should be a search, and a journey, rather than a pre-planned itinerary (also see van Manen, 43). It was my explicit intent, then, to gather as much data as possible for this study, not to pre-judge the data, and to allow the data to direct my understanding, rather than having my understanding “direct” the data – to make utterly sure that I was playing fairly. The consequences of the phenomenological basis of my project can be seen in a number of methodological concerns which I discuss below.

Teacher-Research Methodology

As has been well-documented, by assuming the complex dual role of teacher-researcher in our own classrooms we can investigate, substantiate and complicate our practice and theories of writing instruction, leading to a more complex discourse and, ultimately, better teaching, as well as gaining influence over public and political educational

discourse (Ray; Fleischer; Goswami and Stillman; Daiker and Morenberg). In laying out the framework for the benefits of classroom research, composition scholars either implicitly or explicitly point out that classroom-based research projects can be the catalyst for increased, localized, experiential dialogue between writing instructors. In separate pieces, Andrea Lunsford “The Case for Collaboration –in Theory, Research and Practice” and Ann Berthoff, “The Teacher as REsearcher” declare the importance of working with other instructors as way for both teachers to come to a new understanding about their teaching and their classrooms. Berthoff writes, “...real teachers in dialogue with one another can find directions for excellence as they work out their own theory” (29). Working inside another instructor’s classroom moves takes this “dialogue” to a more interactive, site specific, research level. Describing his own evolution of teacher research, Ken Kantor describes how the division between researcher and practitioner dissolves when the idea of collaboration is introduced. “I am exploring the value of collaborative research,” he says, “in which hierarchical power relationships are broken down, and co-researchers bring their own perspectives and strengths to bear on their studies, and build, where possible, a shared vision” (64).

In deciding to research another instructor’s classroom instead of my own, then, my goal was to extend these two crucial positions: teacher-as-researcher and teacher-to -teacher collaboration. In short, I did not want to work in isolation, but saw my role as collaborative with the other instructor, two writing teachers asking good questions and talking about what their different perspectives enabled each to see. In addition, as James Berlin suggests, “teachers have been deprived of the power to control their pedagogical activities” and classroom research promises teachers a role as agents “for effecting change” in their

classrooms (“The Teacher as Researcher...”3). Therefore, in this project, I lean heavily on the well-established methodology of teacher-research, while complicating the idea of such studies by following in the steps of Marilyn Sternglass and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and conducting my research outside of my own classroom. I did not see my role as a researcher as separated from my role as teacher. Kantor writes about these simultaneous, multiple roles, “Ultimately, I think all of us should define ourselves not as teachers or researchers but as *persons* who teach, read, write, discuss, and research (among other things), and learn from each other in the process of doing so” (66). While neither Kantor or Berlin suggest it explicitly, one teacher researching another teacher’s classroom in a collaborative study creates a fruitful dialectic where knowledge of teaching travels across classrooms as well as producing the study that is read by a separate group of teachers. Through teacher-research in each other’s classrooms, we assume a viewpoint of “knowledgeable distance.” We are situated in a place we cannot assume in relation to our own courses, students and pedagogy; we are “present” in the room, but not in the same way as the instructor. Such research has the potential to radically transform individual teaching practice through dialogue based on communal, though different, classroom experiences. Teacher-researchers working in collaboration show the diversity and complications of teaching writing and can empower us to take back the debate over our working space—the classroom. The composition theorist Ruth Ray states: “Collaboration among teacher-researchers creates not only an improved intellectual environment, but also a stronger political base” (69).

As explained in the prologue to this study, I had three intertwined motives for conducting this research: to offset the lack of local research data from the Basic Writing classroom at CUNY, in order to have the debate over literacy and admissions standards be

judged on classroom practice, rather than politics and personal remembrances; to underscore the need to “talk up” from the classroom to the ever-increasing theories Composition, with the intention of creating more of a practice and theory dialectic in Composition studies and practice; and to influence my own teaching. Ruth Ray concludes, “Teacher-research, then, is a movement both intellectual and political in its impetus...” (49).

Writing As Methodology

In traditional ethnographic research, writing is considered the second stage in the process, often called “writing it up.” Once the observations are completed, at some point the researcher decides to begin the steps of a standard ethnographic research report form, using some form of the traditional ethnographic rhetorical lineage (a.k.a. Literature Review, Methodology, Observation, Analysis, Conclusion). Though the standard ethnographic form has been exploded in recent years, most methodology texts still present the process of writing research in this traditional, bifurcated way, where the data are collected *and then* they are “written-up.”

Certainly, for all ethnographic researchers, some writing takes place during the collection of data; field notes, for example, are traditionally written during and immediately after the site observation or interview takes place. However, traditionally, the majority of the “real” writing is done after all the data is collected, organized and reviewed. The problem, according to phenomenological researcher Max van Manen is that “[I]n such a framework there is no place for thinking about research itself as a poetic textual (writing) practice” (125).¹⁹ Writing, in this context, is not a product, an end to a means, but is a large part of the means itself. The research and the writing are interactive. Bonnie Sunstein, a

classroom ethnographer, states: “The living context we have experienced as researchers must govern the shape of our written text” (193). With this in mind, the writing process for this dissertation differs substantially from the traditional method I describe above.

The research I have “constructed” follows a self-conscious writing process where substantial writing was done throughout the data collection phase. The writing for this project was not designed to simply record descriptions of the classroom and/or put down on paper my analysis of those descriptions after the data were collected. Just as my main intent was to be an observer and participant in the lived process of a Basic Writing classroom (with the realization that this is a self-conscious act), the writing of this document is an ongoing, emergent part of the process of the lived experience of research.

Phenomenology forces the researcher to look closely at the lived experience of the research, and the lived experience involves writing during every step of the experiential process. As is suggested by van Manen and Bishop, writing is a phenomenological act in itself, and it should not be separated from the project or task of research. “In phenomenological human science, writing does not merely enter the research process as a final step or stage.... ...[H]uman science research *is* a form of writing” (van Manen 111, his emphasis). Writing in this project was very much a present-tense act of creation.²⁰ My intent was to learn and uncover through writing what my experience in the classroom “is” and what my ideas about what went on in the classroom “are.” As Bonnie Sunstein describes, “The living context we have experienced as researchers must govern the shape of our written text” (193; also see Fleischer 169). This in-process form of writing, a forward-and-back form of writing, is full of “delayed certainties” (Bishop, *Ethnographic Writing*... 6). Rather than write from a “completed thought” point of view, I write from an evolving point of view.

The evidence of the phenomenological aspect of the writing for this research can be seen in all the chapters, but particularly in Chapters 3, where the classroom narratives evolved from field notes into written descriptions just after each class, into more crafted pieces with sections of my journal and the instructor's journal added in, and finally into fully crafted pieces where student descriptions and background information are supplied to enable the reader to understand the pieces. But throughout this process, editing and revision of my thinking about the issues presented do not glaze over what was presented previously. There is an evolution but it is not straightforward or linear.

A phenomenological research process suggests that research is constructed over time, involving an in-process and ongoing reflection that ends up in a static form on these pages, but is in no sense the final word about how I feel about the project and what it has taught me about remediation, literacy and students and teachers. I remarked earlier that the collecting of data in classroom studies has a finite duration because of the semester schedule for courses. Similarly, the writing-up of research has a finite end with the production of a bound text. However, the writing of this research never really ends; the thinking and reflection (writing) is ongoing as it influences how I think about teaching and writing even now. Of course, even when placed in a static text, phenomenological research remains fluid as it moves from writer to reader, and on into the ongoing dialogue of its practitioners.²¹

It should be understood that though I knew, even at this early stage, that my project would be one that followed a non-traditional ethnographic methodology, I was unaware of the extent to which the role of writing itself would play in my research. In other words, the development of the phenomenological aspects of my work occurred intuitively.²² As Max van Manen details, "To be able to do justice to the fullness and ambiguity of the experience of the lifeworld, writing may

turn into a complex process of rewriting (re-thinking, re-flecting, re-cognizing). ...This depthful writing can not be accomplished in one straightforward session” (131). Used, as much more than a recording tool, writing was an ongoing and crucial aspect of my methodology.

Methodology and Postmodernity

As emphasized above, the first methodological concern of any phenomenological researcher is that, at all points of the research, the researcher needs to be actively interrogating all methodological decisions, and, as a consequence of this interrogation, the researcher must make the reader explicitly aware of the methodological decisions and their consequences. As Fleischer states, “Because teacher-research is more than a method – is, in fact, a way of thinking about issues of power and representation and storytelling and much more – its very existence and development are dependent upon our understanding not only of the particular issue we are researching but also of the complexities of the research process itself” (4). Methodological decisions have powerful consequences for at least three specific concerns: the ethical treatment of the subjects of the study, the “truth-value” of the results and the readability of a particular study. As Michelle Fine and Lois Weis state in a 1996 article that reflects on their own methodological concerns in researching and writing urban ethnographies, “Methods are not passive strategies” (51). The methodological decisions a researcher makes have a profound influence on how the data of a study are presented and analyzed, how conclusions are drawn, and, ultimately, on how a study should be judged.

Though traditional ethnographic research followed a fairly uniform process, structure and style, the discipline has been radically transformed in recent years by a methodological upheaval, as postmodern, postcolonial and feminist critics from a number of social science

disciplines questioned the ethics and viability of ethnographic study (Clifford, Clifford and Marcus, Wolf, North, Fine and Weis).²³ The methodological critiques of traditional ethnography were powerful enough to shake the discipline down to its core. With his late 1980s declaration, Geertz provided one of the authoritative salvos of the debate over the ethics of representation in ethnography: “What is at hand is a pervasive nervousness about the whole business of claiming to explain enigmatical others on the grounds that you have gone about with them in their native habitat or combed the writings of those who have” (131). Perhaps most would agree that ethnographic methodological considerations have moved past the question of whether researchers have the right to do ethnography at all: Yes, a researcher has the right to experience a culture and to tell what he/she has experienced, or, as Wolf states simply, “I see no way to avoid this exercise of power” (11). However, the ethnographic research community remains tangled in all the seaweed that the 20-year methodological storm has splayed about the shore of the discipline.

In a mini-version of the whole postmodern dilemma, the researcher has to be conscious of, and be willing to constantly reevaluate his/her research and writing stance, while avoiding the paralysis that can come from too much “meta” thinking about methodology (Geertz 139). The overarching contention of all methodological concern comes down to the idea that one must be proactively aware that, like the rest of our actions in a postmodern world, methodology must swim around in the interconnectedness, power structure and fractured nature of our culture and society (Faigley 14; Wolf 13, Bruner 23). In distant phrasing, the dilemma is obvious: all methodological decisions are fraught with concerns for the fair treatment of the subjects of the research (ethical considerations); all methodological decisions have important consequences in terms of the worthiness, “truth-

value” and applicability of the results (reliability, validity and” usefulness” considerations); and methodology plays a powerful part in determining the readers’ accessibility, comprehension and enjoyment of the study (form and style considerations). It is crucial to emphasize that these three strands of methodological consideration are intricately related. As Composition researchers argue, it is impossible to separate form from function. The following hypothetical example illustrates the difficulty researchers face in terms of methodological choices in a postmodern world.

If traditional ethnography attempted to represent others in an objective, unilateral, third-person narrative, current researchers now choose a “representational position” along the self-other, objective-subjective spectrum. While based in the ethics of representation, such a choice is not only an ethical decision. Researchers may wish to avoid the ethical concerns of “othering” his/her research subjects, and decide to present large chunks of their research subjects’ interview transcripts verbatim. But such a decision will dramatically limit the amount and diversity of the data they are able to offer, as well as the amount of data analysis they can provide. In other words, a study may end up becoming nothing more than an interview transcript, limiting its “truth-value,” polyvocality and usefulness. In addition, if you can picture how such a study would read (full-page chunks of a single-spaced interview transcript, perhaps with small smatterings of narration in-between) the readability (accessibility, comprehension and enjoyment) of the piece would also be dramatically influenced by this seemingly purely ethics-based methodological decision. While researchers have an important ethical responsibility to the subjects of their studies (including themselves), they also have a necessary obligation to the validity and usefulness of their

results and to the readability, accessibility and resulting influence of their “creation” as well (see Sunstein 192).

In *Thrice Told Tale*, Margery Wolf takes up these concerns by presenting a segment of her Taiwan research in three distinct forms, as field notes, as a short story and as a narrative ethnography. In reading the three versions, the reader can see the advantages and disadvantages of each presentation. The fictional story, for example, may be the most “evocative” of the three pieces for most readers, but one could certainly question its truth-value (59). The field notes version may offer the smallest amount of “othering,” but presents the reader with some slow-moving terrain and would therefore limit the accessibility (and ultimately the usefulness) of the study. The narrative ethnography offers a flowing, cohesive account in an authoritative, omniscient voice and sometimes uses citation of other research to make seemingly inarguable analysis--all of which lends it an air of credibility that a close reading makes suspect. Simply put, it’s much too clean a presentation. In other words, none of the versions offers success in all three categories: an ethical stance, useful analysis, and readability.

Importantly, Wolf closes her text by discussing the implications of the methodological debate in terms of the “writerly” decisions a researcher has to make. In referring to the discussion among ethnographers about how to solve the methodological conundrums that have plagued the discipline in recent years, she states, “Their solutions to these problems, however, do not include better ways of doing fieldwork, but different (better?) ways of writing ethnographies” (136). Methodological solutions are not found in the fieldwork design of the study, she believes, but they are often solved in the writing design of the text and most often, during the writing of the text itself.

Finally, given the volume of methodological treatises written in the past thirty years, and the consequent fracturing of ethnography as a research methodology, and as evidenced by the length of this chapter, it is virtually impossible to write a comprehensive, coherent, methodological précis for a study like this one; a thorough treatment of all the postmodern, methodological considerations and their ramifications inherent in any ethnographic research project would consume the project before it even began. That is why it is my contention that to succeed, researchers need to write their studies in such a way that the methodological concerns of the study are presented to the reader for consideration, eliminating the hand wringing and hesitation over presenting valuable research to the academic and public community. It is, in the end, a solution that hands more of the authority of interpretation to the reader, while offering the reader all of the possible information by which to judge a particular text.

In other words, it is my firm belief that it is through the writing process, through the “doing” of ethnography, that researchers can most securely address the ethical, validity and usefulness considerations discussed below. In “The Death of Paradigm Hope...,” Stephen North suggests that composition research needs to move beyond its methodological questioning (what he sees as a guilt complex), and move toward the completion of more research that is useful to teachers. Perhaps a bit tritely, I am suggesting that as Composition researchers, we need to write ourselves out of the box, not write ourselves into a corner. Therefore, in the remainder of this chapter, I limit myself to the thorough presentation of two influential strains of research theory, and a more direct discussion of just a few, related methodological concerns, which are directly connected to my researcher/writer stance in this project.

Positionality

Making a methodological decision about what role I would play in this research came fairly easily, since my role in the university structure at the time I undertook this study made it virtually impossible to put any distance between myself and the classroom I was observing. As an adjunct instructor, who was teaching remedial writing at City College at the time of the study, I was in the same conflicted space as the instructor, dealing with a similar set of institutional and classroom-based issues. Though motivated by a public firestorm, and a political and administrative debate over the future of remediation, ultimately my project was about a single classroom and my presence in it, as a way of understanding my own teaching and my position in the university. I was seeking to answer questions about something I was participating in, creating in, succeeding in, and after the public debate over remediation, seriously questioning my role in. As Ken Macrorie suggests in his important essay “Research as Odyssey,” the idea of the research project is first and foremost personal. “I’m talking about,” he says, “looking for something that one needs to find out. ...[S]earching with curiosity, out of need. Doing something that makes a difference in the researcher’s life and the lives of others.” (54-5; also see Ray 82). Although I did not research my own classroom, I was living the life I was researching, and I designed the project with the intention of learning about the role of adjuncts in the teaching of Basic Writing and about my own teaching practices in the Basic Writing classroom.

All good researchers, Wendy Bishop suggests, follow the trail of what connects them to the world; research is a personal quest way before it is added to the public discussion (*Ethnographic Writing*... 17).²⁴ As a consequence, because researchers are the ones asking

the research questions, all research is personally situated. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater writes in her essay “Turning In Upon Ourselves”: “Researchers are positioned by age, gender, race, class, nationality, institutional affiliation, historical-personal circumstance, and intellectual predisposition” (115).²⁵ Researchers’ positionality influences both their viewpoint in relation to the subjects of the study (their ethical stance) and the position they choose within their own text (their writing stance). In support, Laurel Richardson rightfully discusses how inserting ourselves, the researchers, into the writing creates both philosophical (What does our research now mean and to whom?) and practical questions (How do we insert ourselves into our texts?).

The foundational ideas of feminist standpoint theory, as discussed by its original proponents, Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins and Dorothy Smith provide a framework to discuss the important implications of my positionality in the study. Originally developed as a counterweight to what they saw as limiting philosophical stances based in patriarchy and other hegemonic power structures, standpoint theory argues that individuals need to see themselves as members of common groups with similar experiences and challenges, in order to produce group knowledge, an encompassing awareness that is considered crucial for informed, political action (Collins 269-71). Standpoint theory suggests that an individual’s location within a particular hierarchical structure aligns the individual with other individuals within that same group, but not in a static sense. “Long standing views of group organization see groups as fixed, unchanging, and with clear cut boundaries,” Collins argues. “In contrast, the view advanced here retains historically constructed groups, but perceives these groups as being much more fluid” (246). Standpoint theory emphasizes that experience is neither

entirely individual, nor entirely common to a particular group designation (Black, female, Chinese, Muslim, remedial, immigrant, adjunct).

By extension, in terms of research methodology, where a researcher positions herself is a crucial component for what she will uncover from her study. A standpoint emphasizes the context-specific nature of experience, including the social-cultural position of the researcher. It carries with it a subset of research theory ideals that the construction of knowledge is influenced by the parameters of the research design and the location of the viewpoint of that researcher, and therefore a project designed within the dominant paradigm tends to not even develop appropriate questions to ask, let alone appropriate methodologies and data to answer them. Researchers need to avoid what Donna Haraway calls the “God trick” of representing others from an undeclared social, cultural and political location, while making “knowledge claims” with no room for doubt (as qtd in Harding 28).

Standpoint theory posits that because of the role dominant culture has in influencing what research gets done, and how that research is conducted, researchers need to recognize and accentuate their political position, and search for ways to provide viewpoints outside of the paradigms of the dominant culture. The alternative position of the researcher does not occur naturally. Hartsock writes:

...[A] standpoint is not generated unproblematically by simple existence in a particular social location. It is a product of systematic theoretical and practical work, and its achievement can never be predicted with any certainty.

The adoption of a standpoint may require a theoretical migration. There are

some positions from which a standpoint emerges easily; others from which a standpoint requires much more effort (237, also see 107).

In an unapologetic and virulent way, standpoint theory suggests that researchers need to consciously adopt a position that talks back to the dominant research positions and the dominant methodologies in order to uncover and speak back to the forces that construct social, cultural and political positions. As Harding puts it succinctly, Standpoint Theory “ambitiously intends to map the practices of power” (Harding 28).

The role of the researcher in the research has been pushed to the forefront because of theoretical and ethical debates over the right of the researcher to “write” a culture into existence. Bishop quotes Harry Wolford in this regard, who goes so far as to suggest that the culture of a particular group is not out there, just “waiting patiently to be discovered,” it is “literally *assigned*” by the ethnographer. Culture “...does not exist until someone acting in the role of ethnographer puts it there” (as qtd in Bishop, *Ethnographic Writing*... 3). As John Van Maanen says, so succinctly, and with such startling importance in his preface to *Tales from the Field*: “It [his ethnography] rests on the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of *one’s own experiences* in the world of these others. Ethnography is therefore highly particular and *hauntingly personal*” (preface, ix, emphasis added).

As standpoint theory would suggest, and as underscored by recent scholarship in the ethics of qualitative research, the context-specific and personal position of the researcher—the biased position—is not considered a flaw, but rather a benefit. As Hartsock relates, “[R]ather than getting rid of subjectivity, oppressed groups need to engage in the historical, political, and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects as well as objects of

history. We need to sort out who we really are and in the process dissolve this false “we” into its real multiplicity and variety” (240). As the researcher reveals his or her bias, the reader receives a more complex and vital representation of a particular situated subject (Geertz, Van Maanen, Bishop, “I-witnessing...”). Bishop writes, “Ethnographers admit – sometimes even celebrate – the subjective nature of their inquiry, and *ethnography* as a research label has come to represent a phenomenological attitude toward writing research, as writing researchers have adopted these methods in an attempt to contextualize their study” (*Ethnographic Writing*... 2, her emphasis).

Collins and Hartsock both suggest that establishing a non-dominant standpoint fosters the creation of new knowledge. As composition scholars have theorized and shown with primary research, there is a direct connection between writing and learning (Hull and Rose, Sternglass). We write not just to record what we know, but also to create new knowledge. Therefore the writing of ethnography cannot be about the recording of events as they occurred, but the presenting of events as they were lived and felt (see “writing as Methodology” section above). According to van Manen, it is in writing that we create more than a product text; in writing ethnography, the writer “produces himself or herself” (126). Ultimately, new knowledge adds complexity to the discourse. “[T]he development of situated knowledges can constitute alternatives: They open possibilities that may or may not be realized” (Hartsock 244). As the methodological orientation of phenomenology would suggest, research is grounded in experience; in as complete a way as possible, and it demands a fluid, emergent model of learning, part of an ongoing attempt at understanding.

The issue of positionality described here influences my study directly in the following specific ways.

In Chapter 2, I position the remedial writing classroom within its historical framework as a way to talk from a position of situated knowledge. This is a particular moment in a long history of remediation, that has conspired to place remedial writing and remedial writing instructors on the margins of the academy in almost every sense: writing is a marginalized sub-discipline within the English Department at City College, and at the time, Basic Writing was a marginalized sub-discipline even within the group of adjuncts who did most of the writing teaching. Similarly, the role of Basic Writing classes at CUNY is part of a long history of ways in which student writing ability is seen as an indication of their worthiness to attend college, and thus writing classes play a crucial role in the development of the student hierarchy in post-secondary education.

In Chapter 3, I attempt to reveal the similar experiences of the students by offering complete classroom narratives, which establish the classroom viewpoints of the students to be brought forward. In addition, the flow of the classroom narrative in Chapter 3 is interrupted by my “presence.” I do not act as an objective reporter by simply detailing moment-to-moment events. Instead, I insert my thinking experiences into the action of the text, questioning my own authoritative role as a researcher, and placing it alongside the role of the instructor, to establish a second standpoint that both conflates and conflicts with the hegemonic view of the classroom. I also use snippets from the instructor’s teaching journal to establish her standpoint within the events of the classroom.

In Chapter 4, I look closely at the written products and processes of the students as a way to avoid a study which classifies all remedial students, or even all remedial students of a particular type (Black American) as limited representations for an entire group. Writers are presented as

both members of particular demographic groups, and as individual writers with very specific character traits, language backgrounds and literacy abilities.

In Chapter 5, I use classroom narrative, the teacher journal, student writing and student interviews to reveal a complex view of the evaluation of student writing. This chapter is the most fractured in the dissertation and the lack of coherence serves to underscore the multiple positions that I relate.

In Chapter 6, I bring in the more traditional standpoint: the theoretical discussions of literacy and writing classrooms. Even here, I am working across theoretical boundaries and discipline boundaries to further fracture any sense of a cohesive, singular standpoint.

In all of these ways I avoid limiting the standpoint of the study to pre-conceived, traditional, hegemonic, singular author-voice roles. I treat the subjects of the study both as members of a group with similar characteristics, as well as examples of diversity with these groups. And finally, I privilege the standpoint of common experiential knowledge—the group knowledge we gained from living the experience of this classroom together. Emphasizing the subjective positioning of this research, I believe that formal research studies can establish situated knowledge about remedial education from multiple viewpoints and ultimately offer a more viable and valid way to evaluate and make changes to remediation.

Self-Reflexivity

The omnipotent voice of the traditional ethnographic narrative was upended long ago. In this study, the ethnographic authority has been fractured through the use of the particularly phenomenological idea of self-reflexivity (Hertz vii; Goodall 137; Chiseri-Strater, “Turning In...” 119; Bruner, 8). A self-reflexive study requires researcher/writers to *consciously and explicitly*

work at understanding and interpreting their relationship to the “object” of the study during the research and writing phases. In other words, researcher/writers can never rest with a set understanding of their relationship to the data or the analysis of the data. As Rosana Hertz defines it, in her introduction to *Reflexivity and Voice*, “To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment” (viii; also see Sunstein 190). Hertz calls reflexive ethnographers “situated actors” or “active participants in the process of meaning creation” (viii). While completing the study, the goal is to reveal “what we learn about the self” and in that revelation, help others to understand the lived experience, in this case, of the writing classroom (Chiseri-Strater, “Turning In...” 119).

In a variety of different ways, Barbara Gleason, Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Richard Murphy all assert that the key component of primary research is the self-reflection process of the researcher. Murphy in particular, helps us see, through extensive use of Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*, that all knowing, regardless of context or content, is personal, and that this emphasis on self-reflection does not need to be apologized for, nor is it in conflict with scientific/factual knowing (also see Grumet). Knowledge is never objectively transferred; it is always inscribed by the knower. Using teachers as examples, Murphy states: “In the complex moments of practice, teachers perform intricate acts of knowing, bringing to bear a whole host of ideas, plans, beliefs, expectations, and hopes. They coordinate all they know and believe for a particular purpose in a specific context” (81). Teachers are the same as researchers in this regard. We move among the experiences of our research with all of our knowledge and identity and we simultaneously apply what we know and are changed by what we experience. Self-reflexivity requires the researcher to observe and explain the ongoing process of revelation caused by the interaction with the research site. In other words, researchers are not static human beings at the

start of the study, nor are they able to maintain strict boundaries of knowledge and identity while they are involved in the study.

In her essay “Who Am I?” Shulamit Reinharz details the two components of this self-reflexivity, underscoring its fluidity. As researchers, “we both *bring* the self to the field and *create* the self in the field” (3 her emphasis). Our purpose and goals in studying a particular environment, and our fluid social-cultural positioning, are among the things we *bring* to the research context. And these are strong and powerful forces on the kind of research we do and on the way we will eventually convey that research to others. But, almost instantaneously, as we enter the field, it has an effect on us. Who we are, how we see, and what we think is transformed by the contact with the people, objects and ideas in the site under study, and the writing we do for the study. This is, I believe, especially true for teachers observing other teachers’ classrooms.

When we venture out from our own classroom contexts, we are leaving places, which have been firmly inscribed in our consciousness. No matter how unfamiliar they may feel at times, and no matter how different our “room” is from semester to semester, our classrooms are “home sites” where we are familiar with the rituals, content and general mood. Over time we become a bit less “present” in our own classrooms, doing things by feel rather than conscious decision-making, relying on what we have come to know as our particular flow. As such, we cannot help but be altered by the experience of sitting in another room, not in charge, watching someone else’s strategies unfold, someone else’s personae unveiled, someone else’s flow twist and turn. While the classroom’s standard constructs are there (voices, texts, intellectual tasks) the dynamic is entirely different. You simultaneously see your own classroom with new eyes, and, perhaps for the first time understand the idea of teaching – see it clearly, from outside yourself, as if in a movie that you are both in and watching. In consequence, whatever wholeness the

researcher-self had before entering the classroom is fractured as you join the fluid movement of a project that is not your own. As Reinharz emphasizes, the researcher-self is created as the project is created (also see Hastrup 7).

Since the claim is that it is impossible to separate the researcher from the research, making all ethnography subjective, it would be easy to suggest that the personal, situated-knowledge, reflective-research model argued for here, allows us to say nothing concrete about the data collected, to conclude nothing for certain. Cathy Fleischer phrases the question this way: “Can you have conclusions in a postmodern ethnography?” (63). It therefore needs to be emphasized that though the researcher’s subjectivity is admitted as a way of turning the project away from a unified, omniscient culture-creation exercise, it does not turn the project to the opposite extreme, a one-way-discourse pronouncement or a memoir of personal reaction, “oblivious to the politics of the world” (Bruner 23). As Edward Bruner describes in his essay introduction to *Anthropology as Literature*, the reintroduction of the researcher into the research does not mean that ethnographic projects become narcissistic exploits with no use or application outside of their own personal realm (6).

Though I interpret and guide the reader throughout, the goals were to have this project represent not a static, conclusive discourse on my part, but a fluid, multi-voiced dialectic, in other words to be part of an ongoing dialogue which interacts with all of the other voices in the study and other voices in the debate over remediation. My own internal voices are one set of key “speakers” in this study. Part of the goal of the study is to look closely at the evolution of those voices as I move from writing teacher to classroom researcher to advocate – and back again. In “Turning In Upon Ourselves,” Chiseri-Strater puts it this way: “[A] major goal of the research

process is self-reflexivity – what we learn about the self as a result of the study of the other” (119).

The self-reflexive tendency of my study is present throughout in my questioning of received knowledge. In Chapter 2, I provide my very present, quasi-activist role in the battle over remediation. In the classroom narrative (Chapter 3), I offer my own doubts and contradictory understanding in the form of class notes, and narrative commentary. In Chapter 4, I admit my own inability to read the student subjects’ work with the clarity and insight of the instructor and I show my own contradictory readings for student work.

There is a purposeful sense of incompleteness in such ethnographic work. In the end, this dissertation follows what Van Maanen describes as impressionistic tales. “We know that our analysis is not finished, only over. The magic of telling impressionistic tales is that they are always unfinished” (120). Seeming answers evolve into a whole new set of ever-complicating questions (Odell “”Planning Classroom Research” 129).

Polyvocality

It was a main intention of this study to make sure that voices beside my own were represented in this study. I needed to ensure that this was not just my take on a remedial classroom, but that the voices and interpretations of the instructor and students were prominent as well.

Ignoring the real-life voices of students enables us to develop unrealistic representations of classrooms that are uniform, simplistic, logical and chaos-free (Bishop “Students’ Stories...”). Instead, Bishop states at the start of her essay, “Student stories [and the instructor’s stories] often confound, correct, explode, or refine writing theorists’

constructs, researchers' findings, and teachers' assumptions" (197, also see Chiseri-Strater, "Turning In..." 120). As such, this project is polyvocal in its attempt to use all quantitative and qualitative means available to incorporate numerous voices (researcher, instructor, students) from different oral and written source points (classroom transcripts, formal interviews, informal conversation, questionnaires, journals, and low stakes and high stakes writing assignments). As Cathy Fleischer directs, the goal is not to represent a single voice (the researcher's), but "[f]or phenomenological researchers what counts is coming as close as possible to the point of view of those we are researching, recognizing the meaning-making potential of each individual" (37).

Decisions about voice have larger implications. It seems all ethnographic methodology texts are seeking a new ethnographic form, "a qualitative study where the author's voice and those of her respondents are situated more completely for the reader" (Hertz, vii; also see Goodall). Fleischer rightfully connects the current ethnographic trend toward polyvocal studies to ways that enable the researcher to explode the entire idea of genre and form. The research should not be molded to fit a particular writing form, but rather, the form should emerge out of the research and writing experience. We need to consider carefully the "textual staging of knowledge" dispersing speakers and fragmenting "univocal authority" (Lather, as quoted in Fleischer, 228).

In ethnographic research, writers now choose from among a diverse group of forms and voices, such as testimonials, narrative case studies, fractured narratives, dialogues, and hypertext to increase polyvocality. But even within these forms, writer-researchers often break ranks, mixing forms as they go to develop their own particular "vocal vision." In choosing a form, researcher-writers use structure, style, voice and a particular way of

intermingling data and analysis to maximize their vocal range. H. L. Goodall believes that this change in the voice and style of ethnographies “prizes the working out of dialectical tensions, dialogic vulnerability and a profound openness to differences” (14). As I discuss below in the section entitled “Dialogic Research and Praxis,” such concerns about polyvocality are ultimately concerned with making research studies part of an ongoing, fluid dialogue about the workings of classroom life, rather than having the final, authoritative say or offering static, controlling classroom parameters.

Accordingly, in Chapter 3, the narrative is often delivered in as close to real time as possible incorporates not only the “transcript” of student voices, but also my own field notes, insights from the instructor’s and students’ interviews, as well as supporting information from previous classes. I also include excerpts from student interviews and responses to short questionnaires throughout. Similarly, my use of the instructor’s teaching journal, and extensive interviews I conducted with her further support the polyvocal nature of this study.

I also fracture my own voice. Throughout the study, but especially in Chapter 3, I include my own thought process and evolving ideas about my experience inside the classroom. I use my journal notes and my post class reflections to question the received knowledge of the field notes. Including multi-faceted narration and non-narrator voices upsets the traditional, smooth, unified discourse provided by the authoritative narrative voice of a single researcher, and instead, offers a complex, even contradictory set of voices to narrate and interpret lived events.

Informing and Storytelling

All ethnographic texts face an inherent dilemma: how to document a complex reality within the limitations of language.²⁶ Bruner talks about the difficulties of representing a fluid world in a static text. “All ethnographers in the field find themselves in the middle of an ever-changing multi-media event, with everything happening simultaneously, in all sensory modes, and they try to reduce this complexity to conventionalized fixed writing” (13). Representing the world through ethnographic writing is a fundamentally tricky endeavor, complicated by both the desire to tell a good story, the need to inform the reader, and the absolute necessity of representing the data accurately and fairly.

In traditional ethnography, confident, all-knowing voices and objective narration were used to emphasize the authority of the researcher and the consequent trust the reader should place in the narration. Laurel Richardson describes how traditional ethnographers were encouraged to take on the omniscient voice of science. Likewise, Bruner suggests that the difficulty in rendering research is tied up in age-old philosophical divisions within the disciplines. “The problem is often phrased as a question about the extent to which the personal and the poetic should be inserted in the scientific and scholarly text, as if there were an opposition between the scientific and the humanistic, between the academic and the poetic, between the scholarly and the literary” (Bruner 2; also see Richardson: 519 and Turner 27). “Scientific ethnography” leads to two distinct problems as I see it. First, the writer is stylistically limited and therefore produces dull narration. Classroom ethnographer Bonnie Sunstein states the alternative: “As writers who study writers, we want to create engaging text, and we know the strategies to use” (193). Secondly, “scientific ethnography” leads us too quickly to an oversimplification of multidimensional forces and an overstatement of universal claims. As “scientific” writers, we are not able to show doubts

and contradictions in our data or analysis; consequently, we either cannot conclude because we have inconclusive data or we conclude adamantly because our single-instance data supports a particular analysis. The use of rhetorical and artistic writing devices enables the writer-researcher to render what Sunstein calls the “liminal tension” between knowing/stating something for sure and feeling like you cannot state it at all (178).²⁷ It leads to not only a more enticing story, but also a more detailed, and ultimately, more complex – and valid – view of the data.

It is my belief that attending to the rhetorical and artistic devices we use to render our data is one way to pay attention to what Michelle Fine describes as working the self-other hyphen or “unpacking notions of scientific neutrality, universal truths, and researcher dispassion” (71). Researcher-writers have to move beyond the set script that contributes to the long-standing colonizing discourse of ethnographic othering; through form and style considerations ethnographers can write new kinds of texts, which “resist, self consciously, acts of othering” (75). By concerning ourselves with the intricacies of their craft, ethnographers can better “reveal our partialities and pluralities” and resist the universalizing master narrative that sacrifices the “other” to sanctify the ideas of self (79).

Once the move is made away from writing “scientific ethnography,” however, researcher-writers have numerous options when they decide to offer the reader a more engaging text. As described earlier, in *A Thrice Told Tale*, Margery Wolf offers three ways to “tell” the same research, but her text only scratches the surface of the decisions the researcher-writer needs to make. Within the field notes, for example, the most straightforward of the three forms with which she plays, the writer needs to decide whether to use symbolic language, decide on a narrative point of view, choose a tone of voice, and make

ongoing decisions about vocabulary, sufficiency of information, and order, among others. The complexity of the decision-making increases exponentially as Wolf (as any researcher-writer) moves to more intricate and experimental ethnographic forms. The more intricate and groundbreaking the form, the more complex and multidimensional the decisions become.

Limiting myself just to studies done in educational settings, studies by Sternglass, Chiseri-Strater, Perl and Wilson, Bissex (*Seeing for Ourselves*), Fine (*Framing Dropouts*), Kozol (*Savage Inequalities*), and Shor (*When Students Have Power*) offer dramatically different ways to present primary research, not just in terms of the projects they designed, but in how they decided to deliver their tales. Each of these writers uses different aesthetic and rhetorical tools to tell a detailed, believable, moving story of students and teachers and the work they do; each plays with literary devices such as (and this is the short list) structure, point of view, tone of voice, symbolic language, tropes, pathos and humor to deliver information in a meaningful, entertaining way. Choices can be as obvious as the decision to create a cohesive narrative line (Perl and Wilson) or a fractured narrative that infuses analysis and description of events (Fine). But choices can also be quite subtle, such as the use of metaphor or a switch to first-person point of view. Shor declares that his back-row-of-the-classroom students have been “siberianized,” for example, choosing a descriptor that carries certain cultural and political weight. In what is largely a third-person reporting, Marilyn Sternglass occasionally moves into first person, as when she describes the letter-writing between her and a student she calls Jacob about his poetry writing (272). Does the switch to first person provide a more personal reading? All these moves are designed to better stimulate reader interest, to tell the tale in the most engaging way possible.

The research genre of literacy autoethnography offers an even more direct comparison of storytelling techniques because the initial tenet of such works is similar in all cases: to tell a literacy story using data from the author's own educational background. Placing texts like Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps* and Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self* side-by-side reveals drastic differences in structure, voice and style among the three writers, who are attempting very similar projects. All are academics from minority cultures, who attempt to understand how race, ethnicity and class played out in their own educational experiences, and all use the first-person narrative in some way. Yet, Rodriguez's "Middle-Class Pastoral" (his term), Villanueva's intertwining of "hip" story and cross-pollinated theory, and Gilyard's alternating chapters of memoir and analysis offer narrative styles and structural decisions that differ drastically. As always, these writers made their decisions to better deliver information, *and* to engage the reader. In terms of reader pleasure, some readers may find Villanueva's constant tangents into the deep water of educational and linguistic theory detract from his compelling, personal life story. Meanwhile, we can question data validity in Gilyard and Rodriguez as they recreate conversations from memory with implausible accuracy.

Though often perceived as a "documentary" experience where the writer merely records reality on the page, it is clear that writing research is, in its essence, a "performative" task, where the researcher-writer acts as initiator, designer and *creator* of a text-based reality (Hastrup; Sunstein; Fine, "Working the Hyphen"). In addition, the performance choices of an ethnographer are more than stylistic (art-based) and functional (text-based) decisions; they carry ethical accountability as well. "To write ethnographically requires layers of textual performance; with it we owe a rhetorical responsibility to our informants, ourselves and our

readers” (Sunstein 192). As a way to help researcher-writers understand the importance of their rhetorical and aesthetic choices, Marguerite Helmers dissects research done in literacy studies to show how literary devices can add – if only subliminally – to the meanings of ethnographic texts. She discusses how the feminization of composition discourse, the reliance on metaphors of illness, and an observational narrative style she terms “a laugh at the natives,” all provide constructed images of student writers that are at best unflattering and at worst severely damaging to both the view of the students, and the view of the composition profession. Instead, Sunstein suggests, we need to be aware that craft choices dramatically influence the meaning a reader takes from the text; we need to remind ourselves to treat “story *as* information” (183, her emphasis). Sunstein elaborates, “...[I]n our work as composition researchers we are reflexive participant-observers, insider-outsiders, writing about writers as they write in writing communities, and our art as writers affects the writing we study “187).

Though the data are in the research, the research is ultimately represented in the words on the page; the meaning (as well as the validity, importance, readability) of the research is tied to the rhetorical and aesthetic choices we make as researcher-writers.²⁸ We can frame the performative task of ethnographic writing with this question: What kinds of literary devices, rhetorical moves and structural staging can or should be used to tell the ethnographic story? Or, as Thomas Barone urges, should researchers use storytelling techniques to give their pieces a wider audience (Rothman)?

In attempting to present an aesthetically stylized text, an ethnographer can create a separate dilemma, however. Sunstein states the problem simply: “There is an assumption that if an ethnographic account is engaging, it cannot be

scientific”(192). Therefore, though the devices of fiction are used, the writer must make sure that they are used only in service to the reality of the data. The narrative is, as Annie Dillard says, “a conscious and willed artifice,” but in the case of ethnography, it is willed from data, not created or invented. (*Living By Fiction*). I take strong heed of Wolf’s warning:

[I]f the firm boundaries between fiction and ethnography are allowed to blur, we weaken the value of ethnographic research and gain little in exchange. We will have blurred the ethical assumptions of our craft, and our audience may come to wonder whether we have in any particular instance sacrificed a set of observations in order to preserve a mood or advance a plot – in other words, given precedence to form over content” (59-60)

While writers fail if they deliver a story that no one wants to read, researchers fail if they present a story that grips the reader with a false reality. The latter is the much graver offense.

It became obvious to me as I approached this project that I needed to make conscious decisions about what kind of writing I was ultimately going to do. How would I “present” my data or tell my story to deliver information and entice the reader to come along? In my research, I tell the story of the classroom as a living, breathing entity, and so I reveal this space in as close to actual time as possible, as a specific, localized, time-sensitive literacy site greatly influenced by history and context. I want the readers to see and feel the complicated process of literacy, its slow pace, its awkward moments, its tedium, failure and collapse, as

well as its moments of epiphany, success and celebration. I want to slow the world down enough for us to see – to live – the actual events of the classroom.

Throughout the tale, I attempt to live up to the bar that van Manen sets for phenomenological research: “The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (van Manen, 10). Similarly, Bruner describes an attempt to combine the “scientific” ethnographic self and the personal, poetic self in order to achieve a balance between delivering information and creating a text that brings the reader along (4). I follow what Sunstein suggests: the goal of the ethnographer is “presentation” rather than representation. Through rhetorical and craft choices, researcher-writers “present” an experience—their own—rather than attempting to represent another’s.

Ultimately, Wolf states the dual obligation of the researcher-writer, which is to provide valid information to an interested reader. “The better the observer, the more likely she is to catch her informant’s understanding of the meaning of their experiences; the better the writer, the more likely she is to be able to convey that meaning to an interested reader from another culture” (5).²⁹ Such a rendering places a faith in the reader to discern the ethnographic text as not something universal, but rather as a single study to be read alongside other studies and alongside the reader’s personal experience to produce a holistic understanding of the context and issues under consideration. Such shared responsibility relieves the researcher-writer from drawing universal conclusions, while simultaneously lessening the burden of restraint, and the holding-back of ideas and images, so as not to leave a particular, uncertain imprint on the reader.

¹ The most current assessment of the graduation rate can be found in a 2005 New York State report of statewide high school education, which found that 54.3 percent of city students graduated high school in four years, 13 percent less than the statewide number. Shockingly, this number represents the highest four-year graduation rate since 1986 (Yan). For a thorough study of New York City high school drop out rate, see Michelle Fine's *Framing Dropouts*, which details the institutional systems and cultural practices surrounding the dropout epidemic.

² See Jane Maher's biography of Mina Shaughnessy, which details the transition from the "Pre-bac" program to Shaughnessy's Basic Writing Program in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

³ Of course, even then this reductive statement of purpose for Basic Writing was highly contested.

⁴ In their study of college admissions, William Bowen and Derek Bok use a water metaphor, "the shape of the river" to describe the flow of students through the higher education conduit; the Basic Writing classroom represents the headwaters that feed the river of public education.

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the border metaphor, in relation to individuals floating between distinct and desirable cultural and language communities, see Gloria Anzaldúa's work.

⁶ Recent studies by Lavin and Hyllegard; Bowen and Bok; and Karen offer a critique of the American higher education system in this regard.

⁷ In her study *Framing Dropouts* Michelle Fine "*frames* a political story of urban dropouts from the vantage point of life inside and around a single urban high school..." (8). By inserting herself into the lived experience of the school, she reveals the inner workings of a system that coerces students into leaving the school once they reach a certain age, though they are entitled to remain. Fine's text points to the structures that allow this high student

dropout rate to appear quite natural--even to those participating in it (both the “droppers” and the “droppees”). In a Foucauldian analysis, she explicates the “institutional policies and practices that enable, obscure, and legitimate this mass exodus” (8).

⁸ Essential to this idea of “talking up” from the classroom is the concept of feminist standpoint theory, which suggests that knowledge needs to be situated in specific marginalized contexts and uncovered using methodologies that diverge from traditional dominant models of exploration. As Sandra Harding writes in “A Socially Relevant Philosophy of Science? Resources from Standpoint Theory’s Controversiality,” “Thus much of the early feminist research was understood to have ‘studied up,’ focusing its explanations on dominant social institutions and their ideologies, rather than to have ‘studied down,’ by trying to explain the lives of marginalized groups” (29). I explore the influence of standpoint theory on this project in the “positionality” section of this chapter.

⁹ Thorough examples of such mantras, such as “lack of on-time graduation” are provided in chapter 2.

¹⁰ CCNY requires only one semester of writing for incoming freshmen. At the time, of this study it also offered two remedial writing courses; Basic Writing 1 and 2, and three levels of English as a Second Language courses.

¹¹ Suzy Groden, Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Mathew Janger of the University of Michigan, and Keith Gilyard, Director of Writing Programs at Syracuse University and author of *Voices of the Self*.

¹² Though not publicly, some City College faculty questioned the validity of the study, while others dismissed the findings because of the set, theme-based curriculum, which analyzed popular culture.

¹³ For a smaller student case-study approach of remedial students, see Couhnihan.

¹⁴ The metaphor of the classroom as a text to be read comes from Jennie Nelson’s article in CCC, though she was using the metaphor in a different context: to discuss how students read classrooms to make decisions about how to participate in the events and assignments of the classroom. I am suggesting that instructors and education policymakers could benefit from the close reading of classrooms as text as a way to clarify what they assume occurs in classrooms.

¹⁵ I am certainly influenced here by Richard Ohmaan’s investigation of the reoccurrence of the American literacy crisis in his short essay “The Strange Case Of Our Vanishing Literacy.”

¹⁶ For a scientific treatment of phenomenology, see the recent article in *Nature Neuroscience*, by Carrasco et al, which describes how visual subjectivity is altered when subjects pay close

attention to appearance in a visual experiment. The psychological can effect the physiological, according to the authors.

¹⁷ For a thorough description of bracketing, see Vandenberg, 196-200.

¹⁸ For this reason, ethnographic studies cannot be “replicated” in the experimental research sense (Bishop 3).

¹⁹ In his text, van Manen makes extensive references to Roland Barthes *The Rustle of Language*, in which he suggests that if we trace the idea of research to its “epistemological condition,” its very nature is language. “For Barthes,” van Manen suggests, “research does not merely involve writing: research is the work of writing – writing is its very essence (126).

²⁰ Van Manen provides the emphasis to this point: “Writing *is* the method. And to ask what method is in human science is to ask for the nature of writing” (126).

²¹ I discuss this concept further in the final chapter of this dissertation when I discuss how classroom based research needs to move toward a model of dialogic *praxis*.

²² Phenomenology is being used here in Husserl's sense of an attempt to understand the multiplicity of the conscious experience of human discourse, and more importantly in Charles Sanders Peirce's sense of the science of discovery of the experience of the actual world, the complex, multiple relationships between a phenomenon and the consciousness or experience of that phenomenon.

²³ Composition scholars have extended the same postmodern, postcolonial and feminist critiques to composition research (Pratt, Faigley, Fleischer, Ray).

²⁴ In the introduction to *Something Old, Something New: College Writing Teachers and Classroom Change* Wendy Bishop describes how her impetus for her study of returning students who pursue Ph.D. degrees was motivated by her own pursuit of a Ph.D. as a returning student.

²⁵ As Raymond Williams argues near the end of “*Marxism and Literature*, all writers are “aligned;” that is, “it is literally inconceivable that practice can be separated from situation” (205).

²⁶ I see here another strong connection to Pragmatism and the attempt by Richard Rorty and others to reveal the limitations (Rorty uses the term *contingency*) of language, and the need for a new “vocabulary.” (See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*).

²⁷ Sunstein writes, “It is a liminal tension, a state, as anthropologist Victor Turner describes, of in-betweenness, ...the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning” (178).

²⁸ Throughout her article, Sunstein dissects a literacy study by Barbara Meyerhoff, entitled *Number Our Days*, describing how the author needed to incorporate “her performance as participant in the culture” as an important part of the story. “And yet as she [Meyerhoff] moves the performance toward the page, she must find the rhetorical and aesthetic principles which keep subjectivity in check” (182). In other words, Sunstein believes, and I concur, the writer’s craft is not just a way to enliven a text, but a way to present data more fairly and accurately.

²⁹ Sunstein quotes this same passage to indicate the balance between reporting information and performing a story to engage the reader (197).

“From the foundation of the college the study of the vernacular has always held a very important place in its curriculum. ...Hence, the Faculty is of the opinion that the number of compositions should be increased, and the students...be required to write at least six compositions every year.”

Report of the Faculty to the Board of Trustees
Of The College of the City Of New York
December 1, 1882

“We are already moving down a path toward dealing with the writing issue in a very, very real way.”

James Murphy
City University of New York Trustee
at Board of Trustees Meeting
January 25, 1999

CHAPTER 2

Literacy, Access and the Role of Public Rhetoric at a Public College:

An Historical and Political Primer

In 1999, on a dreary Monday afternoon during January intercession, the Board of Trustees for the City University of New York (CUNY) convened a special meeting at an unusual location: The Main Stage Theater at LaGuardia Community College. The meeting had been hastily arranged to conduct a historic vote on a resolution that would eliminate remedial course offerings for students entering the university’s eleven four-year colleges.¹ Under the glare of theater lights, it was the final act in an almost decade-long debate over the usefulness of remediation in preparing students for college-level work. Supporters of the resolution claimed it to be a monumental moment of optimism that would result in higher entrance standards for the more than 150-year-old university--a first step in restoring CUNY’s lost luster. But the critics charged that this act would mark the end of the grandest

democratic experiment in American educational history, another blow to Open Admissions access for deserving, underserved high school students.

As the 17 Board members promenaded onto the stage in singles or pairs, some raised a hand to their forehead to shield their eyes from the stage lights. They took their assigned seats behind the banquet tables neatly lined up in the shape of a “C,” with regal-red bunting billowing off the front. The audience also filed in, a mixture of professors, students, administrators, CUNY graduates, community activists and members of the press. I sat mid-auditorium, mid-row and I watched the same familiar faces file into their seats; over the course of the previous year, we had taken part in countless protests and marches against the proposal to end remediation, which was about to become a resolution. A few protesters wore graduation robes to mock the proceedings. Some held up hastily scrawled art-board signs with slogans like CUT TUITION NOT REMEDIATION or KEEP THE DOORS WIDE OPEN or the ubiquitous SAVE CUNY. At times they broke into soft song: “We shall overcome....” But most of the time the audience, which would grow to 350 in the 900-seat auditorium, fidgeted in their seats, waved to people they knew, and watched the video camera operators traipse about with their equipment, trying to find strategic locations to set up their tripods to record the event. We whispered to each other about what to expect from the meeting, and how the Board’s decision would ultimately affect our particular college or department. Almost everyone understood that the Board’s intention was a *fait accompli*: though they had passed the same resolution the previous spring, the Board had been forced into this theatrical do-over because the original vote was overturned in court, not on the merits of a well-constructed argument by its opponents, but on a technicality. The judge ruled that the Board held the original vote in a room too small to accommodate those who

wished to observe the due process. In addition, before the actual vote, the Board found the few who were let into the room to be too disruptive, so they cleared the room, had those who would not leave arrested and voted with no one, except the press, in the audience.² In doing so, the judge said, the Board was in violation of the “open meetings law” which ensures that the business of the public university’s Board be carried out in an open and public manner.

To fulfill the judge’s requirements this time, the Board arranged to hold the second vote in one of CUNY’s largest auditorium spaces, to accommodate anyone who wanted to come. But critics claimed that the Board was still trying to limit the onlookers, since they chose LaGuardia, in the “outer boroughs,” rather than an auditorium space at one of the four more accessible CUNY Manhattan campuses, and because they held the meeting between semesters when they knew students and many faculty would not be able to get the word out through the usual on-campus channels. In addition, everyone who did come had to walk through metal detectors where scissors and other sharp objects were confiscated, and once they entered, certain rows in the auditorium were cordoned off with fluorescent yellow barrier tape, thus keeping those that made it through the security screening from forming a single cohesive group. All these steps, the critics complained, were designed to limit any chance of the meeting being disrupted, and at the very least, created a hostile environment between the stage-dwellers and the audience members.

Anne Paolucci, the chairwoman of the Board, called the meeting to order and all the heads of the Board members swung toward her in unison. After calling out a warning to the audience not to repeat its disruptive behavior from the May meeting, she attempted to set a business-as-usual tone. The chairwoman introduced a series of ceremonial and administrative items: thanking a retiring CUNY official for his service, welcoming a new

college president, announcing faculty and student honors, scholarships and grants, and receiving an oral report from the interim chancellor. The crowd, continuing to filter in, shuffled in their seats, one protester calling out, “Get on with it already.” The chairwoman continued to move through the Board’s business. Within the previous month, a longstanding member of the CUNY community, and a former president of one of the CUNY colleges had passed away suddenly and at a relatively young age. Paolucci read a thoughtful resolution in honor of the deceased administrator, and then two or three Board members added their own personal thoughts to the record, including a heartfelt soliloquy by James Murphy, a former Board chairman. A second memorial resolution was introduced, offering condolences to Chairwoman Paolucci, whose husband Henry had also recently passed away. Both eulogies were heartfelt, yet the crowd was restless, and they continued to catcall for the Board to get to the issue at hand. Ad hoc chanting broke out: “The People United Will Never be Defeated!”

Prior to the meeting, rumors had spread that Murphy, who was against the move to end remediation, was going to propose a compromise resolution that would scale back the planned cuts to remediation. The reaction to the hearsay had been a mixture of hope and outrage, mostly the latter, as many felt that any compromise on the issue of complete access to all of the CUNY colleges was equivalent to surrendering the highest ideal of the university. At a moment when the crowd was mostly silent, Murphy took his table’s microphone in hand and began to speak. Murphy had debated CUNY policy on the board for close to two decades, and his words were deliberate, cordial, and at times passionate, and they echoed through the two-thirds empty auditorium, at least while the audience remained quiet enough to hear. He spoke about the implications of the resolution on the mission of

CUNY and the need to provide as much access as possible to the citizens of New York who depended on CUNY for any chance to improve their lives.³ Remedial classes, he said, were the entry point for many of these students whose dreams of a better life depended on attaining a four-year college degree. Speaking of some of City College's engineering and technology programs, he suggested that some of the university's best students would never "have graduated from these programs because they would not have been admitted," if remediation had not existed. To support his "Eleventh Hour Proposal," he unveiled a series of charts on an easel that faced the crowd which showed statistics on the 1997-98 pass rates for first-time freshmen on CUNY's three entrance exams in reading, writing and math. Close to ninety percent of senior-college bound students passed the reading and math skills tests, he reported, but the pass rate for writing was only 72 percent. The low writing scores reduced the pass rate for all three tests to 64.9 percent, he said. (Students who failed any of the three tests would be denied admission to the senior colleges under the new resolution.) "It is the writing that drags [the numbers] down. It is the writing that is the problem," he concluded.

Murphy went on to describe how a large percentage of the failures on the writing test could be traced not to a lack of academic ability, but to a large percentage of students in certain programs arriving at college with English as their second language. "Where we have a problem is in several colleges where there are large proportions of non-native-born individuals," he said. Perhaps misinterpreting Murphy's commentary as derogatory toward ESL students, the crowd erupted into the hoots and hollers normally reserved for the cheap-seats at a wrestling match. A new round of singing and chanting began and evolved into a loud chant of "No compromise. No compromise."

With each lull, Murphy started again, but the crowd increased its heckling. In long

syllables, the chairwoman called out for quiet. Murphy shifted in his seat, raised his voice and continued, his voice cracking. The charts revealed that the majority of students who only fail one of the three entrance exams fail the writing portion, and these are some of CUNY's best students, Murphy said. Allowing them into the senior colleges for one semester to complete a remedial course in writing and pass the test would benefit CUNY, he claimed. Such a move would maintain access for a large cohort of deserving students who simply needed to work a bit more on their writing. His face red as a tomato, Murphy shifted in his seat to face the crowd and pleaded with them to hear him out, but the booing and yelling intensified.

Three trustees followed Murphy, offering support for his amended resolution. Trustee Stone expressed concern for the English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Like Murphy, he believed that difficulties in English are expressed most dramatically in writing, but that this limitation did not prevent students from doing well in college. He summed up his views:

...[It is] a matter of statistics, a matter of anecdote, a matter of common sense, and my own personal experience in teaching foreign students who could not pass the writing test but who can achieve A's in the subject matters that I teach at a perfectly decent college. I believe that writing is the one skill that a student can lack at that stage of education, can need to catch up on, especially a foreign student for whom English is a second language, regardless of exactly how many years that student has been in the American education system, and that that student ought to be in a senior college.

As Stone spoke, some protesters carrying signs above their heads inched their way down from the last rows, which were separated by a wide aisle from the main section. CUNY security guards intervened, keeping them from moving down. Pushing and shoving and accusatory exchanges between the guards and the protesters mixed with the now continuous uproar from the rest of the crowd. Stone and other trustees continued to speak, but little could be heard over the din. Paolucci threatened to clear the room again, and to have those who were attempting to interrupt the proceedings arrested. She then called for a vote on the alternative resolution using a show of hands, and it went down to defeat (10-6). The Board then turned their attention to the original resolution, which had been passed by a vote of 9-6 back in May in the “too small” room at the Board’s headquarters.

Edith Everett, the trustee most against the proposed change offered a long commentary against the “remedial resolution,” suggesting that students were ill-prepared for college because of the poor condition of the city high schools they came from, and should not then be punished by being denied admission. She also spoke of success stories, the many students who had become celebrated graduates after beginning their careers as lowly remedial students. As objections to the resolution were raised, the crowd cheered until the chairwoman again yelled out for the auditorium to stay silent or she would have it cleared. Her threat was met with taunts from some in the audience, suggesting that they would like nothing more than to reenact the May meeting and perhaps gain another judge’s ruling in their favor. Despite the clamor, other Board members raised the issues of social promotion, on-time graduation rates, degree value, overcrowding in the community colleges, what a college degree is for, students’ personal responsibility to fulfill their own educational needs, and the gap between U.S. students’ educational standing and students from other countries.

Through the din of crowd noise, audience members could only hear every other word, as Trustee Rios connected the remediation issue more directly to CUNY's role as a public college, saying that the public needs to question its investment, and be aware of the "billions being wasted" in the name of poor standards. Trustee Pesile, a CUNY graduate and new to the Board, believed the vital issue for consideration was the connection between CUNY and the City of New York workforce:

As a businesswoman, who has had the opportunity to do well in two Fortune 100 firms, with a personal goal to see more of our graduates in front-office positions, and knowing full well that New York City is the engine that drives our State's economy, we need a *qualified home-grown work force* to serve as the fuel for that engine, and finally, as a taxpayer, what is the overall return to taxpayers to fund CUNY? Do we perpetuate policies or programs with questionable success; or do we alter them to foster excellence with a greater potential for better career paths for our graduates?

The crowd noise reached a crescendo. Some protesters moved toward the stage. One faculty member, from the campus where I was teaching at the time, refused to move when asked to do so by the security guards. He was forcibly removed from the auditorium, a security guard on each of his arms, and later arrested for disorderly conduct.

It was only a small portion of the audience – maybe thirty individuals – who created most of the uproar. The majority of us remained seated, trying to hear and wondering aloud what this moment in history meant. Perched on the front edge of my seat, my hands braced on the chair in front of me, I looked around the room and saw members of the CUNY

community that I knew from my different roles at the university (adjunct writing instructor, Ph.D. student at the CUNY Graduate Center, administrator of various summer programs). Why weren't more of us up and chanting? Were we frozen in indecision, apathy, compliance, complicity, professional reservation? Had we surrendered?

The whole carnival scene created a great deal of turmoil inside me. I was attending the meeting in many roles, and felt paralyzed, not knowing which role should dominate. As an adjunct professor of writing at three CUNY senior colleges during the past six years, the students that were to be excluded from the university were my students. I agreed with the faculty representative on the Board: I had seen students who lacked academic reading and writing skills on the way into college, rise up from remediation, conquer academic English and make it all the way to graduation day and on to successful careers and/or graduate school. I also understood the economic, social and cultural challenge my students faced when they came to college, and how "under-served" they had been by their high school experience to tackle critical thinking, reading and writing at the college level. So, there was certainly part of me that wanted to leap from my seat and join the protesters in storming the stage.

But I had witnessed the downside of CUNY's remedial programs as well. Too often, I had seen students who were so shell-shocked from previous writing experiences that they could not write more than a paragraph in an hour. I had been in the untenable position where a student who was showing some promise, but not enough to pass the course, faced expulsion if I failed him, and so I let him through the gates. I had seen students fulfill the stereotype of the lazy student, dazed and non-participatory in class, failing to hand in much writing, hoping that minimal physical attendance was enough to get passed. As an untrained adjunct

instructor who was also busy being a graduate student and a freelance writer, I had taught woefully poor courses committed countless acts of thoughtless pedagogy and stood, overwhelmed, before overcrowded, unproductive classrooms. I had seen – and experienced all too often – a virtually non-existent support structure where instructors had no access to photocopy machines or even a desk to hold a student conference. I had seen the downside of English Departments where writing was a second tier discipline, and teaching remediation was treated as the lowest rung of that second tier. Virtually every semester, I had watched the last-minute hiring of adjuncts to teach writing courses – I had sometimes been the person hired! Every semester there were new first-time teachers, with no faculty development or mentoring of any kind. I had seen writing teachers who never held conferences with students because they were not paid for office hours. I had listened to faculty who were teaching Basic Writing classes as large as 25 students gripe about class size—attrition rates were built into the course, we were told.

In these ways the assumption that Basic Writing was failing as a program was demonstrably true. If writing clear, correct academic prose was the goal of remediation, as the simple Board view claimed it should be (and this of course is debatable as the only worthy goal), then certainly a good number of writing classrooms were failing to meet this standard, and some of those students were being passed into the mainstream of the university without the ability to write at the college-level.

But how many? And what about the other group, “the other some” who had well-seasoned and innovative teachers, an inventive and challenging curriculum and the academic and logistical support necessary to do well? Each semester I taught Basic Writing, I had a handful of students who used the fifteen or thirty weeks of remedial writing to make amazing

strides in consciousness, creativity and performance – individuals who became thinking, writing students right before my very eyes. I had seen talented, thoughtful teachers with supportive, innovative departments who were doing incredible work to help students make huge strides in finding a writing voice, or thinking critically or, yes, even attaining a higher level of clear, correct, academic prose. There were also plenty of students who simply worked diligently enough to overcome the flawed system they had to work within.

Thus, from the viewpoint of a writing teacher in the CUNY system, I had seen enough evidence for both sides of the debate over CUNY's remedial programs. However, it never escaped my mind, that the whole debate over remediation at CUNY narrowed the options to an absurdly simplistic thumbs-up or thumbs-down resolution. As a scholar in Composition and Rhetoric, I understood the complex linguistic, political, cultural, pedagogical and identity issues posed by remediation, and I was appalled at the overly simplistic binary that the debate over remediation evolved into: either we have remediation at the senior colleges or we do not. On an intellectual, scholarly and theoretical level, I wanted to read these events systematically: remediation at CUNY was part of a much larger picture involving national literacy and poverty issues, as highlighted in the studies of Jonathan Kozol and the theoretical work of Susan Miller and Richard Ohmaan; the banning of remediation involved issues of racism and "classism," as detailed by Ira Shor and Gerald Graff; and the college-level writing classroom was a quintessential site of the interaction between language and power as presented in the autoethnographies of Viktor Villanueva and Keith Gilyard. By not having my voice heard, was I complicit in what I knew to be, at best, an oversimplification of a complex pedagogical and curricular issue, and at worst, a politically motivated – even racist – slashing of educational possibility for underrepresented

lower-class and minority students?

My teacher-role was further complicated by the ultimate reason that put me in the audience that day: my role as a researcher for this dissertation project. As a researcher, the debate over remediation presented me with the classic case of the observer/participant dilemma: was I there to observe—merely—or was it also my responsibility act? Is a researcher required to participate when his knowledge and beliefs are conflicted by his observations? As an activist who had participated in previous protests against the actions of this very same CUNY Board, I could not help but feel the pull toward action. I knew well the call for action research, where the researcher becomes not just a recorder of events, but a participant in the community under study—in this case a fighter against the oppression I was trying to document (Goswami and Stillman). But the action of an activist researcher is not as easy as flipping a switch. Short of storming the stage in a rage against injustice I was unprepared for participation.

The iconic ethnographer Clifford Geertz describes the best research projects as those where the researcher completely enters into the community under study, not to render a clear picture of a particular culture, but to render its diversity and complexity, its ongoing, fluid conflict; only such a researcher is able to see from multiple perspectives. He calls this research position *I-witnessing*, “a total immersion approach to ethnography” (77). On that late afternoon in January, I sat in my seat at LaGuardia Community College as a teacher, educational researcher, writer, activist, scholar of Rhetoric and Composition, taxpayer, democratic citizen of New York, and as a human being with deep concerns for the well being of all humans, but especially the poor and the maligned – those in need of a fighting chance. In a swirl of emotions, I now understood what Geertz meant when he suggested that true

research is like the “living [of] a multiplex life: sailing at once in several seas” (77). My head was drowning in contradictory and overlapping thoughts.

In the end, my decision to stay seated was based more in conforming to the behavior of my peers, then with any gut-wrenching decision. I was sitting next to a full professor in the sociology department at CUNY’s Graduate Center. I had taken his graduate course on race/ethnicity, gender and class issues in higher education, where we had read and discussed the role of higher education in a democratic society. Using texts like Burton Clarke’s “Cooling Out Function,” William Bowen and Derek Bok’s *The Shape of the River*, and Brint and Karabel’s *The Diverted Dream*, we theorized how subtle and not-so-subtle political maneuverings, social-cultural hierarchy and administrative benign neglect can unfairly stratify and track students and even usher them quietly out of the school system as “dropouts” who blame themselves for not taking advantage of their “given” opportunity (see Fine, *Framing Dropouts* and Shor, *Culture Wars...*).

Brint and Karabel’s work in particular seemed to resonate at this moment. In *The Diverted Dream*, they make the case that one of a college’s primary functions is to help idealistic democratic societies deal with the discrepancy between the promise of equal opportunity for all and the reality that there are only so many slots at the top; thus, all colleges play a role in the *management of ambition*” (7, their emphasis). I certainly felt that I was watching an actual instance of this, an attempt to “manage the ambition” of students who saw their college degrees as, perhaps, their only way to economic vitality. But if the full professor next to me, and the other thoughtful educators sitting throughout the audience were not willing to leave their seats to protest, then who was I to lead the charge? Where does the role of activist begin? Can activism and research coexist? Once you decide to be a

participant, it does not mean that you are forced into the role of acting on all impulses all the time—to falsely insert yourself at every turn for the sake of the research. As I slouched back in my seat furiously scribbling notes in my researcher role, I accepted that, at this particular juncture, I was there to bear witness only, to record the events of this pre-determined outcome. Still, in the back of my mind, and certainly in retrospect, I believe there was an inherent conflict in my position, which left me both powerless to act and dreadfully complicit by not acting.⁴

Meanwhile, as more and more of the trustees spoke in favor of the resolution, the noble dragon Murphy could see the outcome in sight – we all could – and he offered the audience a heartfelt and hopeful concession speech:

With great sorrow, with a heavy heart, I can see that the votes are not there to defeat this resolution, unfortunately. But I want to assure one and all that this is not the end game. The fight will continue. We may lose the battle but we are not going to lose the war. There are the courts, there is the Board of Regents, the Legislature, the court of public opinion, and the ballot box. We must continue to mobilize to save CUNY. But let me add something else. If this is not the end game from my perspective, I feel also that it is not the end game either for the proponents of this resolution, ... [whose] real aim is to eviscerate, emasculate, downsize, and marginalize City University. And it is all the more important that we continue to mobilize in support of The City University. This is not the last battle, but the war is going to continue. It is going to be a very tough one.

Murphy pushed the microphone away and leaned his lanky frame back in his seat like a losing general at a peace conference, seemingly shrunken right before our eyes.

In the end, each Board member was required to give a voice vote on the remediation resolution. The booing increased with each yes vote, and the resolution passed 10-to-5, a wider margin than the original vote in May (9-6). After a few more bits of official business, the meeting was called and the Board filed off the stage, pausing to chat with each other as they went. The audience filed out silently; all the righteous air of protest sucked out of them.

* * *

The remediation resolution passed by the CUNY Board of Trustees near the end of the twentieth century was only the latest skirmish in a century-old debate about the educational mission of a public university in the nation's largest urban center. From its inception in the mid-1800s, critics questioned the City College's necessity and viability, while supporters championed its historic mission to educate the poor and disenfranchised for their own betterment, and for the betterment of the city. Often referred to as the poor man's Harvard, the college's referential moniker indicates how much the college is soaked in, and clouded by, an idealized, comparative vision of what kind of academic institution it is supposed to be. As the first public college in the United States, the school's mission, so often stated with bombastic revelry, is to provide *excellence* in education, while also providing *access* to the citizens of New York City who might not otherwise have the chance to go to college. Though often threatened by economic crises, or political turmoil, for more than 150 years the entrances to CUNY have remained open, and, like floodgates in reverse, they draw in a steady stream of diverse students from the five boroughs of New York City, itself the

world's greatest collector of diaspora. Because of its historic mission and its inherently political position as a college founded to serve all the people of the city, every decision the university makes, whether architectural, administrative, economic or curricular, is saturated by the weight of its history. As James Traub writes near the beginning of his 1995 journalistic portrayal of the City College of New York (the original college in the university): "It's impossible, at City College, not to look back" (9).

The act authorizing the New York State Board of Education, which established The Free Academy (the original name for the college), passed the New York State Assembly on May 7, 1847. Twenty months later, on January 27, 1849, opening ceremonies were held and Robert Kelly, president of the New York Board of Education, set the day's tone by launching the challenging mission for the new "grand experiment" in education.

It (The Free Academy) will...take the children of the people, and send them out into life, endowed with such eminent advantages of education, that they will be a blessing to society... It (The Free Academy) will pick up, perhaps out of the very kennels of the city, many a gem of priceless value, and will polish it, and set it on high, that it may shed its luster upon the world. ...It (The Free Academy) will diffuse widely over society the blessings of knowledge, and will largely increase in the community the number of ripe scholars and highly educated men. (10)

Kelly's proclamation reveals the educational and societal space that the Free Academy hoped to occupy. He underscores the relationship between the university and the citizens of the city from which it would draw its enrollment: the students were to come from the city, discover the enlightenment of college learning, and then return to the city as esteemed and productive

graduates to spread their "luster upon the world." With his inflated, colonizing rhetoric, Kelly suggests that the helpless students will arrive at the doors of the academy from the city's neighborhoods, what he derisively calls the kennels, in a disparate and destitute state, almost as savages in need of dramatic civilization. He compares the students to objects (gems), and holds up education as the ultimate salvation, suggesting that learning will help polish them into better citizens for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the society. As they enter the newly emerging industrialized workforce, Kelly believes, the graduates will go forth from the college as missionaries, to spread the "blessings of knowledge." The result of the high-minded curriculum, he says later in the speech, will be seen "not merely...in the refinement and cultivation of the minds of the youth, but to be felt hereafter in the world, where they are to be men of action and influence" (15). He refers, of course, to their increased employment potential and their roles as future civic leaders. Kelly emphasizes the practical, economic benefit by adding, "...many of them (the students) are pursuing the study for the purpose of applying it to some useful vocation, and not as a mere matter of curious information, or a process of intellectual discipline" (15-6). From the time it opened its doors, the relationship between the college and the public that was asked to pay for it was portrayed as mutually beneficial. Those boys who came were to leave as better men in every sense: cultural, economic, civil, humanitarian and academic. The city, according to Kelly, would be all the better for such a new and prestigious rank of citizen.

We can presume that most of the 143 students in the original Free Academy class were in attendance for Kelly's speech that day. We can almost see them standing proudly beneath the lectern, allowing the speech's optimism to wash over them, sanctifying their potential. However, they were not the only students who had applied for the "blessings of

knowledge" that the Free Academy promised to provide in its covenant with the citizens of New York. There were 129 other students of New York City's common schools⁵ who had taken, but failed the entrance exam and were not admitted to the academy in that first year.⁶ Even for those students who did pass the entrance exam, Kelly's belief that these were "ripe scholars," ready to take on the rigors of academic life, seems overly self-assured. As detailed in the *Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of New York* (1854), shortly after opening, the initial curriculum design of the Free Academy added an "introductory year" for "sub-freshmen" students, who were considered unprepared for the first-year course load.⁷ In the early years of the college, so many students fell into this category of sub-freshman, or "unprepared," that an annex was built connecting the main building on 23rd Street to a separate building where "prep" classes were held. Under Alexander Webb, the second president of the college, the introductory sub-freshman year was expanded into a "College High School," later named for Townshend Harris, so that the whole college course occupied seven years. (Willis). When the campus moved uptown to 138th Street in the early 1900's, Townshend Harris Hall, one of the original five gothic structures on the new campus, housed the college's preparatory school.⁸

Kelly's speech was also optimistic in its portrayal of the grand number of graduates that the academy would "send forth." Graduation statistics for the new college showed that less than one-third of the students made it to graduation in the prescribed number of years, as detailed in the annual enrollment and graduation statistics given by the faculty to the Board of Education of the City of New York. At the first graduation, held on July 26, 1853, only 17 of the 143 students enrolled in 1849 graduated after the intended four years of study (*Twelfth Annual Report*).⁹ These trends would continue.

The Annual Report of the Faculty of the College of the City of New York to the Board of Trustees for the year ending June 30, 1882 shows that in the school year ending June 29, 1881 there were many more students in the lower division than the upper division (see Table 1). The same report also provides the number of students who left or were dismissed during the school year (see table 1), and predictably, we can see a steep drop-off of students during their initial years of study (*Forty First Annual Report*). The table shows that the sub-freshman program losing large numbers of students each year, with additional students leaving during the freshman and sophomore years of the fully matriculated college program.

Table 1: Enrolment and Dismissed Students The College of the City Of New York 1881

	Enrolled on Comencement Day	Dismissed During Academic Year
Seniors	47	2
Juniors	68	16
Sophomores	123	34
Freshmen	171	40
Sub-Freshmen*	473	119
Total	882	211

*Includes both college prep and or three-year course and one-year introductory course.
Source: *Forty-First Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of New York*.

Contrary to the rhetoric of the opening-day vision set out by Robert Kelly, the relationship between the public college and its city has never been quite so symbiotic either. Prior to the passing of the act authorizing the academy, and right through its first thirty years, editorials and letters to the editors of various New York newspapers questioned the purpose and cost of the new college.¹⁰ As early as 1877, newspaper articles bemoaned the investment of public funds in an institution that graduated only ten percent of its students. The public college “is needless, enormously expensive, and wrong in theory,” one editorial

from *The New York Sun* emphatically states, while suggesting that the college be abolished. Using enrollment figures from 1876 which show 512 students in the sub-freshman class and 50 students in the senior class, the editorial questions the college's retention rate, and estimating the cost per student as \$190 yearly, disparages the college for the "enormous...cost of keeping the machinery of an institution for the graduation of fifty students." Suggesting that the students who graduate come from families that could afford to send their sons and daughters elsewhere, the authorless editorial asks, "What reason is there for taxing the people so that these fifty boys may carry off degrees of Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Sciences, while the great mass of youth of the city must content themselves with a rudimentary education?"

The late 1800s brought a harsher round of editorial attacks when it was announced that the college wanted to open a larger, northern campus, in upper Manhattan. An article in the New York newspaper *The New York Sun* from 1894, titled "The Useless City College," argues against providing the college funding for the new campus by offering up long sections of a report made by The Committee on Education of the City Club. As quoted in the article, the report states, "[T]he college, as at present constituted, is a most costly institution and to a very large extent it fails to fulfill the purposes which it was designed to accomplish." The quoted sections go on to suggest that the prime real estate the college uses results in a large loss in tax revenue and that the costs of the "scientific apparatus" of the college and "its crop of high-priced professors" is too great a public expense. The report then turns to what it calls the "practical results" of the college: student records of attendance and graduation. It claims that the number of students who leave or are dismissed is so great that "the number who graduated on June 18, 1892 was fifty-seven, or only seven more than the officers of the

college itself. ...These table indicates how small a proportion of those who were originally enrolled readily avail themselves of the full benefits of the institution." Already the media was questioning students' effort and interest in making use of the "gift" of education being offered. The City Club Committee suggests a dual solution for the problem. The higher-end students, those in the junior and senior classes who have a serious interest in "the high lines of philosophy, science, language, literature or the classics" should attend Columbia for the "fullness of its education." By accepting these quality students, the report writers believe that "in place of the present College of the City of New York there should be established two institutions which might properly be called high schools," one in the current building, and the other, near 125th street, where "what is known as a high school education only should be supplied to the pupils." University-level studies were not for the masses, according to the report writers, in direct contradiction to the high-minded rhetorical ideals of the speech-givers at The Free Academy's opening day. And, furthermore, it suggests, public higher education was not equivalent to that offered at the private institution of Columbia, and therefore an education at the Free Academy was shortchanging its scholars.

The doubt presented in the media failed to contain the college's plans for expansion, however, and in 1903, the new site for the City College campus, high on a hill in "Northern Manhattan" was chosen as a symbol for its "transformative mission" (Traub 10). Imitating the proud, storied buildings of the European universities, and its erstwhile Ivy League brethren Yale and Harvard, five Gothic structures of native gray schist were built, complete with bright white terra cotta cornices and mischievous gargoyles representing the type of scholastic endeavor to be undertaken in each building: on the parapets of the gymnasium, gargoyles perch on outcrops and ledges launching projectiles or swinging from apparatuses;

the science building features mad chemists mixing liquids in beakers; and on the prep-school building studious gargoyles peer over books or grasp quill pens with an iron grip. Just after its completion, the CCNY alumni publication reviewed the new campus for its grandeur and its intended symbolism: “So now, from almost any vantage point in the upper part of the city, may be seen standing forth on St. Nicholas Terrace the grey and white masses of the new college buildings, which in their turn will invite the city lads for many years to come. [...] As we approach the buildings from either side, their proportions command our admiration.” (*City College Quarterly*, 86). The new campus, it seems, was an architectural representation of access and excellence, both a beacon to call students forth to its gates, and in all its splendor and “ivy-league” design, an announcement of the college’s intention to provide only the highest quality higher education.

In 1908 the buildings were christened with full pomp and circumstance: presidential decrees were read, Mark Twain spoke to black-robed guests in the cathedral-like Great Hall, and students transplanted ivy from the original City College building on the flatlands of 23rd Street. In his speech at the dedication, George B. McClellan, the mayor of New York, echoed the speeches Kelly had given more than fifty years before. McClellan called on the college to use the new buildings for “the greater glory of New York and for the uplifting of mankind.” In an address before the campus assembly and invited guests gathered in the Great Hall, John Huston Finley, the college president, emphatically answered the mayor’s challenge: “(A)ll who go down from this hill into the City, all who go down from this place of Transfiguration, into the City, shall go fitter men and better citizens.”

In their call-and-answer speeches, McClellan and Finley were reemphasizing the idea of educational knowledge offering a sort of secular transformation for the students. The college

metaphorically and literally rises above the city from which it “calls forth” its students for the blessings of education. The religious overtones of the speeches reference back to another century and John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” written during his passage to the new world on the *Arabella* in 1630. Winthrop provided the religious version of what became the secular rhetoric of transformation through education. The covenant of God with his people, Winthrop suggests, calls for them to work together as a community, to fulfill individual purposes for the benefit of all. For Winthrop, the colonies represented a chance for a new beginning, a chance to create a place of harmony, equality and selflessness where all in the community worked in common bond for the good of God, and for the good of God’s society. The unrestrained space of the new world was a place to form such a society. Winthrop goes on to infuse his utopian vision with a Godly purpose that all subsequent settlers can emulate:

...that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘the Lord make it like that of New England.’ For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill (9).

It is this image of the new society, a community, the city on a hill that all should emulate, which City College has consistently declared as its provenance.¹¹ Secular in name, but religious in its idealism, the service rhetoric is still imbedded in the image of the college today; James Traub uses the City on the Hill moniker as the title of his study of the college in 1995. As I will discuss in detail later in this chapter, this ideal of the public college as a place of social, cultural, economic, civil – even spiritual – transformation for its students plays a profound role in the argument over who has access to CUNY and on what that access should provide to its students.

* * *

Despite the high-minded vision for the new campus presented in the opening day speeches, the determination of who would have access to the educational opportunity offered behind the grand building facades of the new campus was determined as it had always been: prospective students from the city's preparatory schools had to take a qualifying entrance exam in nine subject areas (*Forty First Annual Report*). The test had a large literacy component, with four of the sections based in linguistic skill (Spelling, Reading, Writing and English Grammar). Many more failed than were admitted, and each year the "sub-freshman" divisions overflowed with "unprepared" students. The *Forty First Annual Report* of the faculty to the board of CUNY, also reveals that the tension over student preparedness was not only debated outside the college. The Board and the faculty were already arguing over admittance tests and student standards. Though the report has only three pages of discussion for all the issues of importance to the faculty, they take close to a page to chide the Board of Trustees about the "falling off of the sub-freshman class for the past two years" (327). According to the faculty, this problem was due to changes in how the entrance exam was graded, manipulations mandated by the Board of Trustees in June 1880 and 1881.

Though originally in charge of the entrance exam, the faculty complained that though the passing rate for the test was raised from 50 to 75 percent, the new method of grading enabled students who were qualified in knowledge-based categories to gain easy entrance to the college, without demonstrating ability in the learning based categories of logic and math. Thus, though the passing score was raised by the board's change in admission policy, the faculty felt the preparedness of the students had dropped. Then as now, the faculty argued

that they should have more control over who was admitted using what criteria. This early debate over admissions criteria was indicative of things to come: at various times throughout its history, the faculty and the board collided over who should determine the entrance requirements for the college.

Whether demanded by the board or the faculty, City College's use of language testing and the creation of writing courses as the primary methods for determining access to the college, was not an isolated or innovative decision. As has been well documented by Sharon Crowley, James Berlin, Robert Connors, Albert Kitzhaber, Donald Stewart, Richard Ohmann, Susan Miller and Mary Soliday (*Politics...*), by the late 1800s, virtually all colleges in the nation had instituted entrance testing, and had begun to require a writing sample as part of the exam.¹² Kitzhaber, Crowley and Ohmann in particular detail how the institutionalization of entrance exams, and then the Freshman Composition course at Harvard University in the last third of the 19th Century, a structural metamorphosis that almost all universities would follow, was the first step in the intertwining of literacy and admissions standards. As I go on to detail below, the debate over the written literacy level of entering CUNY students in the 1990s is not a recently developing phenomenon, but part of a longstanding historical, national conflict in higher education: testing entering students through a thematic essay, and using the outcome of that test to determine the need for writing classes for those students who did not do well on the exam has been a somewhat fluctuating, but always constant piece of the college-level admissions puzzle. A close reading of composition's more than 100 year history as a required writing course, originated in reaction to a perceived drop in student literacy standards, reveals a great deal of repeating story lines, which can be applied to the Basic Writing debates at CUNY in the last decade of the

twentieth century.

For instance, according to the separate readings of Connors, Crowley, Berlin and Kitzhaber, one of the main goals of the institution of the entrance test in writing at Harvard in the late 1800s was to force the preparatory schools to graduate students with more writing ability, so that university faculty would not have to take up time teaching literacy skills deemed unworthy of university level instruction.¹³ By having the secondary schools take care of “basic skills,” so the argument went, “the university could devote itself to higher instruction on the pattern of European institutions” (Kitzhaber 43, Also see Crowley 66). Harvard hoped that the institution of the exam would coerce preparatory schools into providing students with a thorough, generalist knowledge of the forms and structures of writing (and literature). Justification for raising the entrance standards at CUNY has often been tied to this same idea: to force the high schools to do a better job with the students who eventually apply to CUNY (“First Save the Senior Colleges,” “Remedial Education at CUNY”). Set a bar and the secondary schools will rise to meet it, so the logic goes. Historically, it doesn’t work out that way as Kitzhaber discusses about Harvard’s attempts in this regard:

What the [preparatory] schools really did, however, was concentrate on fitting their students to pass the Harvard examination rather than try to give a rounded course of training in English. The result was that great gaps existed in the students’ preparation; freshmen were usually able to write a passing paper on one of the works that they had crammed, but when it came to writing on other subjects, as they had to do once they were admitted to classes, they often were almost helpless (43).

Kitzhaber goes on to describe how the Harvard model spread to colleges and universities throughout the country, and how all of the “lower schools were obediently reorienting their English courses to meet college level entrance requirements, but were doing little more” (43). Once established as a single determinant for admission, the literacy test does indeed change the way secondary schools teach English, but it results in a refocusing of the curriculum on the specific testing instrument, presumably, not what the Harvard educators intended. Kitzhaber’s assessment compares—strikingly—to commentary about the purpose of instituting a change in remediation policy at CUNY in 1995. The hope was that by limiting remediation to one year, city high schools would understand the greater consequences of doing poorly, and revise their curriculum accordingly. However, there is no evidence that the CUNY policy change resulted in any focused curriculum revision in English at the high school level; the only consequence of the university’s first change to the remediation policy was for the high schools to offer the CUNY tests to their students earlier, sometimes in Junior year. Yet the critics of CUNY remediation policy offered the same argument for improving high schools when they argued for a further reduction to remedial courses at CUNY in 1998. In her editorial from the *New York Daily News*, “How to Save CUNY,” Heather Mac Donald argues that “the four flagship colleges—Brooklyn, City, Hunter and Queens—should require entering freshmen to have a full array of college preparatory courses in high school.”

Paradoxically, at Harvard, even though the “test prep” focus was instituted in the secondary schools, Kitzhaber reports, passing scores for entering freshmen at Harvard did not rise (44). When students continued to fail the test in extremely high numbers – yet they still had to be

admitted because the university needed to maintain a certain enrollment – Harvard created its Freshman Composition course, “English A,” by moving the required, sophomore-year rhetoric course to freshman year. Again the Harvard faculty and administration believed that if the preparatory schools understood that a lack of writing skill would directly influence their graduates’ chances of success early on at the university, they would naturally pay greater attention to the rudimentary writing skills that Harvard hoped all their entering freshmen would have already acquired (Kitzhaber 43). As Crowley states, Harvard believed “required Freshman English could be used as a club with which to bring instruction in preparatory schools in line with Harvard’s definition of good English” (72).¹⁴

The evolution of an entrance exam and a new course in writing at CUNY after a major change in admissions policy in 1969 followed a similar path to the self-declared Harvard literacy crisis of the late 1800s, though, in CUNY’s case, the test and the writing course(s) were instituted more simultaneously. Courses in writing and reading for underprepared students already existed at CUNY, but with the introduction of a new entrance exam creating a large cohort of students who had to be admitted but could not pass the test, individual colleges developed one, two or three levels of remedial courses, and a separate English as a Second Language track to help facilitate the passing of the exam and improve writing skills overall. There are no studies of how the CUNY assessment tests influenced the teaching of writing in city high schools. However, as the students continued to fail the entrance test in writing, the remedial course offerings expanded to meet the demand of the increasing number of “failing” students who were also matriculated students. City College for example, expanded its program to include three levels of writing remediation English 1, 2 and 3 (Soliday *Politics...* 96).

The similarities between the literacy crisis at Harvard, and the continual declaration

of a literacy crisis at CUNY do not end with the creation of a writing course however. As Kitzhaber details at Harvard, the popular press grabbed hold of the story of the illiteracy of “college-bound American boys,” focusing mainly on the lack of correctness of the English of the supposedly elite students and creating “a national concern” (46). The media uproar, and the lack of success for “English A” in improving student writing, along with the declaration by the faculty that its own students were illiterate resulted in the appointment of a task force of three faculty members to investigate the problem. Berlin reports, that the committee given the task of looking into English A had no “training or experience in the teaching of writing” (60). Kitzhaber suggests, they “had no real firsthand knowledge of what was involved” (47). The “Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric” published its findings in 1892, and, according to Kitzhaber, it “consisted mainly of complaints that have been heard periodically ever since, from college administrators and from many college teachers of English” (44).¹⁵ The committee suggested that having university faculty devote time to “imparting elementary instruction is obviously absurd” (as quoted in Kitzhaber, 44). The committee then concluded that the fault fell directly on the preparatory schools; more work on writing in the preparatory schools was the only solution, they declared. As we could predict with the backwards lens we are using, the committee’s specific recommendation was for Harvard to raise its entrance requirements in writing and other disciplines, so as to prevent the newly graduated “illiterate” from gaining access in the future, thus forcing--again they hoped--the preparatory students to meet higher standards of graduation before applying to the university. Kitzhaber surmises: “They [the report writers] used the secondary and preparatory schools as whipping-boys, asserting that the colleges had no responsibility in the matter at all. They assumed that the solution of the problem was simple and obvious...” and,

therefore, turned to tighter entrance exams—again--as a way to enforce a change in the secondary school curriculum (47).

Virtually the same script played out at CUNY during the crisis over remediation in the 1990s. After the swamp of media stories about the failures of remediation programs at CUNY, a Mayor's taskforce was appointed, headed by then vice chancellor of CUNY and former Yale president Benno Schmidt. The committee was to assess not just the university's admissions policies, but the direction and institutional structure of the entire university. What became known as the Schmidt report, concurred with the decision to eliminate remedial courses from the senior colleges, presenting the change as a way to encourage high schools to improve the quality of education they offered. A 1998 editorial for the *New York Times*, makes the age old claim about high school students and uses a quote from soon-to-be CUNY chancellor Mathew Goldstein, to support his point:

Excellence encourages excellence, just as mediocrity encourages more mediocrity. New York's high school students will respond to the incentive to take hard courses, as they've responded to the disincentive in the past. As Mathew Goldstein put it, 'Every time colleges lower the river, high school students have fewer reasons to learn how to swim'" (A17).

Like CUNY today, in its attempt to solve its self declared and media driven student literacy crisis, Harvard pointed its finger backward and then instituted new testing and course structures that it hoped would have profound influence on who applied to the university. The influence of Harvard led virtually all colleges to adopt similar changes to the writing curriculum and structure.¹⁶ Crowley presents Stanford University as one of the universities that followed the initiation of an entrance requirement in writing with the creation of a

freshman year writing course to “remedy the deficiencies discovered by the exam” (73). In addition to not solving the perceived lack of standards in the secondary schools, according to Crowley, the creation of Freshman Composition led to curricular and work-load debates. In the latter case, faculty complained about the amount of time it was taking to remediate student writing. And, partly as a consequence of this time issue, courses in writing became increasingly focused on error correction. After two years, Stanford gave up the freshman-writing course because the English professors responsible for teaching it felt overburdened with the endless amount of composition reading, Crowley reports (73). Instead, the university told the failing students that they had to pass the exam before they were allowed to graduate; any support and help they needed to pass the test, they were to arrange and pay for on their own (Crowley 74).¹⁷ At Harvard, the work involved in the newly created, required composition course, “English A” was immense, and increasingly political. As at Stanford, the Harvard English faculty who taught the course felt overburdened and much maligned for the failure of “English A” to “remediate” the student writers to the level the rest of the faculty desired. Berlin reports that at Harvard in the 1890s twenty composition instructors were responsible for close to 2,000 students (60). When the change in the freshman course did not produce the intended results, Connors suggests that it may have been because the class sizes were so large that little individual, meaningful instruction in writing took place (82).¹⁸ Freshman composition classes were usually lectures, sometimes with smaller breakout sessions. But as with instructors today, faculty continually complained about the amount of reading of student compositions they had to do if they were to assign the “daily theme.” Connors quotes the famous rhetorician Fred Newton Scott:

...I have read and re-read this year something over 3,000 essays, most of them

written by a class of 216 students.... That the instructor should somehow lay hold of the student as an individual is, for successful composition work, simply indispensable. [However] we hardly learn the names and faces of our hundreds of students before they break ranks and go their ways, and then we must resume our Sisyphean labors (qtd. in Connors, "Rhetoric... 83).

The complaints of overburdened faculty and the low-status of the writing teacher led to the structural and institutional changes that mirrored those at City College in the Open Admissions era. As mentioned above, City College followed a similar path in reacting to public outcries that its students were illiterate. Early on in the history of the college, they instituted a writing section in their entrance exam, and, promisingly, were concerned with how writing was being taught throughout the four-year upper-curriculum. In fact, besides their concerns about admission standards, in their 1882 report to the Board of Higher Education, the only other issue the faculty of the young institution raised was the importance of writing instruction. "From the foundation of the College the study of the vernacular has always held a very important place in its curriculum," the report says (*Forty-First...* 329). The faculty claimed that at the time, seniors and juniors were only writing two compositions per year, sophomores three and freshman four. These numbers were simply not adequate, the faculty believed, since "[p]ractice, all allow, is the chief means of acquiring mastery in the art of composition." The faculty wanted to raise the number of compositions to six per year for all students, but they too realized the intensive labor that would be needed to make such a change in writing requirements. The report states:

Of course these compositions should be carefully corrected by a competent

instructor, who should also from time to time verbally explain the correction thus made. As it takes at least half an hour to correct a composition thoroughly, and nearly as much more to explain verbally to the student the reasons for the corrections, it will require no less than eighteen hundred hours per annum to perform the work required by correction and explanation. Your Honorable Board will readily perceive that this extra amount of labor cannot be performed by the force of instructors at present employed. The faculty therefore feel justified in recommending that additional instructors be appointed for this most necessary work; and as your Honorable Board has always manifested a sincere desire to improve the course of study in the College, the Faculty are confident that this recommendation will meet with your approval (329-30).

The call for increased faculty hours seemed to fall on deaf ears however. As for Stanford and Harvard faculty, for the City College instructors, the work of composition and the labor issues it creates became a primary influence in the direction that introductory writing courses would take as they became institutionalized.¹⁹ To compensate for the overwhelming amount of compositions to be read and responded to, instructors began to focus increasingly on error correction, which took less time than a more considered student response.

Crowley suggests that Harvard's definition of "good English" was correct, clear prose attained through the writing and public critiquing of daily themes. Crowley describes the emphasis on correctness in the curriculum being used in Harvard's newly created course, and suggests that its main consequence was that no one wanted to teach the course – or take it. She records some of the Harvard instructors' responses to the students' writing and even provides one

student's complaint about the "English A" course, which also sounds strikingly familiar: "In an endeavor (and not a very successful one) to conform to certain rules, I have lost all originality – everything has a sort of labored rehashing, which makes whatever I have to say, dull and uninteresting" (qtd. in Crowley 75).

In addition, Robert Connors details in "Grammar in American College Composition: An Overview" and also in "The Rhetoric of Mechanical Correctness," that faculty responded to the criticism and the piles of papers to read by increasingly focusing on issues of error.²⁰ Kitzhaber also tells us that the committee at Harvard, in declaring its own students illiterate, based its assessment on the students' lack of "mechanical correctness" (47, also see Berlin 61)²¹. Crowley states how the faculty member most responsible for the creation of the test at Harvard, Adams Sherman Hill, considered mechanical correctness as one of the two most important factors in passing the writing theme (68). She quotes Hill discussing the students' themes: "utter ignorance of punctuation...grossly ungrammatical or profoundly obscure sentences; absolute illiteracy" (68). The students' need for basic skills in writing and the seemingly simple solution offered in "English A" was a retraining in grammar, punctuation and spelling. Connors concludes: "[A]fter 1885 or so, the very nature of the freshman writing course came to be defined by error avoidance rather than by any sort of genuine communicative success" (81). Before being allowed to participate in real communication about complex topics, students needed to master the rudimentary language skills. In a sense the skills-based Basic Writing curriculum was born. Connors states:

The most popular remedy prescribed for the cure of "illiteracy" was the collection of form-based mechanical lessons that came to be known as

“grammar.” College students could not write, the reasoning went, because their early grammar lessons had not “taken.” Thus the lessons needed to be repeated until the knowledge of parts of speech and rules would transform into the ability to write (“Grammar...” 124)

It wasn't long, according to Connors and Berlin before Harvard's inexperienced committee's two main proposals (increased reliance on the entrance testing in writing and a focus on correctness in writing courses) became the adopted principles for writing instruction throughout the U.S. Practical, rules-based rhetorics dominated the scene in English Composition, “haunting” the pedagogy and curriculum of the “required” writing course seemingly forever, and reinforcing the timed, one-shot entrance exam in writing as the primary gate placed across the pathway to college admission (Berlin 61). The influence of error-free writing as indicative of literacy has remained a key component of any debate over college student literacy, including the discussion of remedial student literacy at CUNY in the 1990s. “This is about bare-bones skill in reading comprehension, grammar and use of language” declares a 1997 editorial in the *New York Daily News* titled “*No Substitute for English.*” Mac Donald writes that the holistic grading process for the CUNY WAT is flawed because it ignores “grammar and spelling errors” and is therefore not “enforcing basic literacy” (“CUNY Slips and Falls.”) The editorial is accompanied by the ubiquitous number two pencil, an antiquated image for writing indicating the filling in bubbles on a grammar test answer key.

The template for the course of events following the declaration of a college literacy crisis seems to go like this: College administrators and faculty, either at the forefront or the

consequence of the declaration of a literacy crisis by the media and/or the university, investigate the literacy skills of their students and declare their student's writing ability (usually judged primarily by a written exam) to be inadequate. The fault for low student literacy skills is placed on the grade level beneath, originally preparatory schools, but later high schools (suggesting that basic skills need to be learned all at once and before a student can proceed to serious college-level work), and the college attempts to solve the problem through tightened entrance requirements, usually in the form of a new or "harder" one-time exam, or with stricter grading standards/exit requirements from the required course, or with an increase in emphasis on basic skills writing and reading course early in the college curriculum. In a groundbreaking article for *College English*, Min-Zhan Lu declares that Basic Writing as a culture that is "repeatedly swept by waves of new conservatism" (909). It is this recurring plot line that enables Mary Soliday to argue that a college literacy crisis is a reoccurring, manufactured claim that relies on the idea that students have suddenly changed, that they are different than the students who came before. Such logic suggests that "remediation is always new," even though it has been around for more than 150 years (*Politics*... 125). Similarly, such repetitions in the argument over college student literacy causes Richard Ohmann to declare "the decline of literacy" in the United States "is a fiction, if not a hoax. ...[T]he available facts simply do not reveal whether young Americans are less literate than their counterparts in 1930 or 1960" ("Our Vanishing..." 231).

Ultimately, the story of Harvard's literacy crisis and subsequent creation of an entrance exam in writing and a required course in writing for first semester freshmen is a repeating story line in CUNY history. The Harvard story and the CUNY story follow these same plot lines: overworked, low status writing faculty; the focus on mechanical correctness

in writing; the idea that students who cannot write correctly do not have the critical skills necessary to do college level work; the establishment of an entrance exam and a stand alone writing course; blaming the secondary schools for their failure to teach the basic skills that colleges do not have time to teach; and the use of remedial courses to manage enrollment needs of the college (a particular subject that I take up in detail in the next section); and, ultimately, the failure of the instituted course to alleviate the complaints about student literacy.

In a telling example of the parallel nature of the events of the late 1800s at Harvard, and the late 1900s at CUNY, Crowley details that when Harvard instituted a written “theme” as part of its entrance exam in 1873/4, and the passing rate was abysmal--only 14 students passed the exam for credit in 1879, and more than half of those who took it failed it outright--Harvard was left with a dilemma that sounds very familiar to anyone who worked at CUNY during the Open Admissions era: “...what to do about students who could not pass the entrance exam in English but who had to be admitted nonetheless” (67, also see Connors “Grammar...” 124).²²

* * *

Returning to the narrative of the history of City College, the debate over access to free public education for the poor of New York did not end with the successful completion of the grand “uptown” campus. The 1920s saw a new round of political and media question-raising, this time involving the city’s Board of Estimate, which refused to pay the faculty and staff in 1923. Some claimed this was an attempt by then New York City Mayor Hylan to “do away with the college” (“City College Replies to Hylan Attacks”). The 1930s arrived with

the Citizens' Budget Commission Chairman, Peter Grimm, declaring that the free college should be eliminated for all but the most elite students. As quoted in *The New York Sun*, he states:

His presence (the low-achieving student's) in the college not only does himself no good, but it is detrimental to the advancement of real students. Free college education should be continued only for those most likely to benefit from it. ...[T]he least fit will be weeded out and it will be possible to advance educational standards ("Would Abolish City Colleges").

Grimm's criticism may be entirely justified if the college was to be judged by its entrance standards and graduation rates, which were still abysmal. As Sherry Gorelick details in *City College and the Jewish Poor*, the entrance requirements in the early 1930s included a high school grade average in the 60 range and the College was still graduating only about 10 percent of its entering students. Of course preparatory classes for incoming students still played a role. A course in remedial English for students determined to be lacking in grammar and mechanics had been offered since 1927, according to the college *Bulletin* (Soliday 20).

Still, despite the decades of economic and political attacks questioning its entrance and graduation standards, as well as its economic status, City College combined with its 23rd Street offspring Baruch College and its east side campus Hunter College to become the City University of New York (CUNY), under the direction of the new Board of Higher Education (BHE). By the 1960s, CUNY was a multi-campus descendent in four boroughs, with tens of

thousands of students. Often referred to as the golden era of City College, from the 1930s-1960s, the college was able to raise its admission standards dramatically, but not because it was following Grimm's demand to cater to only the elite students, but because the demographics of New York produced a large cohort of mainly English speaking, sons of Jewish immigrants, who, because of anti-Semitism, were denied admission by other American colleges (Glazer). In a sense, over three decades, the college had a feeder population of students who they did not have to recruit, and so the college could become more selective while still increasing its enrollment. Even during the Golden Age, however, there were still claims of poorly prepared students and a lack of academic standards, and as usual the focus was on literacy. An article in the *New York Times* from 1963 declared that an internal CCNY study found 25 percent of the college's freshmen to be deficient in English. And, even with this influx of more talented and well-prepared students, the graduation rate did not rise exponentially (Gorelick). The college's preparatory school, still located in Townshend Harris Hall remained in business. Though an article in the *New York Times* from 1965 praised the college for edging out Berkeley in producing the most Ph.D.s in the nation, the same article presents Scholastic Aptitude scores for entering students at CCNY as "above the national average but not dazzling" (Boroff 106). Such evidence sits in contradiction to the long-established mythology of the golden era of City College, when, it is claimed, all the students were academic overachievers like Nathan Glazer, Alfred Kazin and Sydney Hook.

City College's Golden Era was a product of the demographics of immigration, rather than a planned out desire to change its admission and academic requirements. As Nathan Glazer writes in "The College and the City: Then and Now," in the mid-1960s, two events, one slowly coming to an end, and the other slowly building in intensity, conspired to change

the face of the college again. In the 1950s and 1960s, other U.S. colleges began to accept more Jewish students, siphoning off some of the best of CCNY's entering class. In addition, a 1965 immigration law turned the relative trickle of immigrants entering New York City into a new deluge. The newcomers landed in the poorer neighborhoods of New York and like their predecessors, they understood that the pathway to economic stability for their children began at the gates of the free college. Simultaneous to the arrival of the new immigrant wave, tensions were rising in the largely poor Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods, filled with graduates of city high schools who were denied access to the city's colleges for failing to meet the admissions standards. With falling enrollments, CCNY looked to this new cohort of students to help solve its enrollment problem. In 1965, the college had instituted a Pre-Baccalaureate program called College Discovery for low-income students who needed further preparation for college, and enrolled 109 students (Maher 89; also see Boroff). The program expanded each semester and was institutionalized and named SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) in 1966. By the time Mina Shaughnessy was hired to administer the writing part of the SEEK program in 1967, it had reached 600 students (Maher 90). But the SEEK program did not enroll enough students at City College to counteract the loss of the Jewish students. So, in the last two years of the 1960s, City College administrators were in the process of developing new admission criteria that would give greater access to less well-prepared students.²³ Already by 1965, the night session at City College had 13,000 students enrolled, many of whom were Black and Puerto Rican (Boroff).

Before the administration could put its new plans in place, students and wannabe students took matters into their own hands. On a rainy morning in the Spring of 1969, with the help of a

student alliance and a few faculty members, a group of 100 mostly Black and Latino students strode onto the downward sloping south campus of CCNY, locked the gates behind them and demanded that the college admit more non-white students (see Ackerman).²⁴ The pressure of the protests created a political reaction that reached the Mayor's Office, and the university administration was forced to act more quickly—and with greater latitude—than it had initially planned. The change in admissions policy created the largest student enrollment growth in the history of the 120-year-old college—all in just three months. Subsequently termed an Open Admissions policy, the new era of CUNY admissions arrived via Mayoral edict, rather than through a thoughtful, well-planned, programmatic decision based in faculty, administrative or research-driven evaluation and planning.²⁵

The following autumn, the student enrollment at CUNY would indeed be more representative of the demographic make-up of the city population, in terms of race and ethnicity – and class – accomplishing exactly what the new Open Admissions policy intended. University-wide, the resulting 1970 first-time freshman class topped out at close to 35,000 students. While the new policy did not call for senior colleges in the system to admit all city high school graduates (full Open Admissions), at City College, the high school grade borderline for entering students was reduced to an 80 average from 85. In addition, the size of the college's SEEK program for unprepared students from poverty backgrounds was increased dramatically, with 3,500 students enrolled in 1970, enabling hundreds to circumvent even the lowered threshold (Maher 114). As a result, the entering 1970 freshman class rose by 60 percent from the previous year (Heller).

The quickly implemented admission policies mitigated the immediate tensions, but created other problems. Space was so short that the 2,500-seat auditorium of the college's gothic superstructure Shepherd Hall was divided up into classrooms; off-campus apartment and

manufacturing buildings were rented and remodeled for more space; the new students filled all the seats in all the new rooms, and staked out the registrar's office looking for more. There were mass faculty and administrative hires in every department, but especially in the core curriculum areas where the large volume of new students would begin their higher education careers. More than forty full and part-time faculty members were hired in Basic Writing alone (Maher 101).

Five years before Open Admissions, the top students from the city high schools had already begun to reject the lore of CCNY and opt for the allure of scholarships to trendy out of town universities, David Boroff, a Brooklyn college alumnus writes in the *New York Times* in 1965. But from the first year of open admissions onward, critics from within and outside the university have argued that the school had lowered its standards and begun accepting students who did not belong in college (see Wagner; Heller). This intuitive belief was institutionally confirmed in the traditional way: through the use of standardized testing. Beginning in the mid-1970s, skills assessment tests (SKATs) in reading, writing and math would be used to separate entering freshmen into two tracks: the fully matriculated students and the restricted admission students. Despite the demographic and linguistic variety of the new students, all would-be freshmen who “failed” any of the placement exams had one thing in common: they had to take a remedial course in the failed content area, and until they passed the course and/or the test (the rules fluctuated) they were not fully matriculated.

As argued throughout this chapter, “split admission” was nothing new at CUNY. Dating back to the initial entering class of The Free Academy, the college's original name, admissions testing and “pre-college” classes had always been a general practice. It is true that changes to the admissions policy had never been so instantaneous and so drastic, and thus, the increased need for “pre-college” classes for accepted students had never been so

extraordinary. In setting up a “pre-” and “post-” Open Admissions dichotomy, however, I believe writers too often treat the pre-1970 era (the year the first Open Admission class enrolled) as a period of educational nirvana, a time when the general public fully supported the college effort to educate deserving, overachieving, lower-class students who, in turn, made a seamless, bump-free ride from high school through college (in four years) and back out to the city to spread their “luster upon the world” (Kelly 10). By overstating the myth of the utopian years, it becomes easy to present the post open admissions era as a comparative academic downgrade. The creation of the myth of the golden era enables the creation of the myth of CCNY’s demise.

Writing in *U.S. News and World Report*, in 1994, writer John Leo details what he calls the “university’s sad decline.” Referring to the university and City College in particular, he states that the college has “constantly lowered its standards,” and “abandoned its entrance requirements,” targeting the “bottom half of city high school classes for its students.” He declares that remedial education has “swallowed up” the regular college curriculum, marked by the disappearance of English Literature courses. And declares that the high cost of remediation “pushed academically prepared middle-class students out of the system and into other colleges.” But, perhaps his most direct attempt at substantiating the downfall of CUNY since Open Admissions involves the use of graduation statistics for 1980s CUNY freshmen, declaring that only 21.9 percent had graduated after five years,” suggesting a drop out rate of 64 percent. But no proof or sources are used to establish these accusations, and the graduation rate is not compared to other public colleges or to the “Golden Era” at CUNY.

Leo’s one page reduction of the political, enrollment and testing issues is typical of

the critique of Open Admissions where 1970 and beyond is presented as a radical shift – downward – in academic standards and student achievement at the entire university, as if all of CUNY’s colleges accepted any student with a high school degree. A *New York Daily News* editorial, “First Save the Senior Colleges” declares “these once-proud colleges have suffered immense damage since the 1969 political decision to fling open the doors and take all comers. And while the guarantee of entry to anyone with a high school diploma or a GED applies officially only to the six community colleges, a system of virtual nonstandards for the 11 senior colleges amounts to open admissions there too.” Eventually, such rhetoric then loses even its minor qualifiers. Heather Mac Donald, for example, declares that once Open Admissions arrived, the university would “admit any breathing human being with a record of occasional high school attendance” (“CUNY Could Be Great Again” 86). But as reviewed earlier, City College’s admission standards were never abandoned, nor did the college only focus on low-end students. As Jim Watts, a dean of humanities at CCNY, claims in an interview in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the college always had a range of students, both successful and struggling, like every other college? “[S]tudents could be classified as A,B,C,D, and F. Then and now,” Watts states, speaking of “pre-” and “post-” Open Admissions. “[T]hat we would take students with the highest academic deficiencies and transform them into middle class success stories – we never did that” (Healy A26; also see Traub 293). The “pre-” Open Admissions era had its share of students at the lower end of the preparedness spectrum, according to Watts, and they were not “transformed” into stellar students and sent off to middle class happiness with speed and ease as some writers portray.

Put frankly, there is a dearth of evidence in support of the claim that the pre-Open Admissions era had students who were, in total, immensely more qualified. The advent of

Open Admissions did mean an increase in the number of students who failed the newly established entrance exams, but since the school did not utilize the same entrance exams in the university's "Golden Era," it is hard to make comparisons between students from the three middle decades and those from the last three decades of the twentieth century. There have been no comparative studies of Grade Point Averages, average years to graduation, or alumni success between the two eras. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, many faculty members teaching during the start up of Open Admissions do chronicle a general concern for many of the new incoming students (Freeland; Gitlin; Gordon; Gorelick; Gross; Heller; Kriegel; and Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*). But perhaps, that concern can be traced to the increased volume of students, rather than to an overall lowering of student ability or performance for all CCNY students. In other words, with such a large increase in enrollment, there was bound to be many more students in the lower ability category, especially given the increase in SEEK program admission. But such a claim does not mean that the good students suddenly disappeared from CCNY. Certainly the continued growth and renown of its Engineering, sciences and Education departments seems to belie the claims that the college's academic standards had been decimated.

My point here is to emphasize that the dichotomy of pre-Open Admissions success at CCNY vs. post-Open Admissions failure is a falsely constructed binary that fails to take into account the longstanding, complex enrollment, education and curriculum issues at CUNY. As I have shown in this chapter, throughout its history, the college has been consistently criticized in the media and by various politicians as wasteful of tax dollars, neglectful in terms of the excellence of the education provided, and fruitless in terms of yielding high quality and numerous graduates (low graduation rates, worthless diplomas etc.). Thus, the

critical assessment of CUNY after Open Admissions was nothing new, and the appraisal of remediation as a floundering enterprise in the mid-1990s follows the same lines of public and media critique that have always hounded the college, in good times and bad.

For this study, the presentation of the 1930s to early 1960s as CUNY's "golden era" leads to two crucial misperceptions in regard to the advent of Open Admissions. First, writers often suggest that all of the City University became an open admissions college. Beginning with the freshman class of 1970, City College did lower its admission requirements (from about an 85 high school average to an 80 average, or a student had to be from the top half of the class instead of the top third) but at no time did it accept any student with simply a high school diploma (pure open admissions). Even the lowered admission standards of 1970 did not last long. For general admission, the bar established in 1969 was soon ratcheted upward, beginning with the New York City fiscal crisis in the mid 1970s, when, facing a budget crisis and needing to limit its enrollment in senior colleges, the Board of Higher Education (BHE, the precursor to the Board of Trustees) changed the admission standards at the senior colleges. Students now had to be in the top third of their high school graduating class. The community colleges in the CUNY system did follow a version of pure open admissions, though maintaining the split between the fully matriculated, and those students admitted on the condition that they enroll in mostly non-credit, full tuition remedial courses. In addition, the imposition of tuition at the previously "free academy" made the college inaccessible for some high school graduates, and therefore, put a further limit on "pure" Open Admissions.

But the real restriction on open admissions for the senior colleges came in the form of the new tests. New exams in reading, writing and math in the mid 1970s, as mandated by the

BHE, were instituted in 1976. The three-part test was originally designed as a certification exam, to determine if students had the core abilities to enter the upper division of coursework. Simultaneous to this function, however, the Skills Assessment Tests (SKATs), were also used as a placement exam to determine which remedial or freshman-level courses entering students should take. Eventually, the Writing Assessment Test (WAT), Reading Assessment Test (RAT) and Math Assessment Test (MAT) were linked to restrictions on course access, for supposedly fully matriculated students. Regardless of how well they were doing in their courses, students were prevented from taking certain classes if they could not pass the tests – even if they passed the remedial course that the “placement exam” had placed them into. It was the writing test that offered the students the most trouble. According to City Facts 1997-1998 put out by the CCNY Office of Institutional Research, for incoming CCNY freshmen, 59.7 percent fail the writing exam, while the rates of failure for reading (31.6 percent) and Math (9.7 percent) are significantly less (as qtd in Sigal, Hogan and Wallace). Thus writing became the crucial gatekeeper, holding students back from major course work. Failing the WAT placed a student in a second tier of the university, without the full access that Open Admissions seemed to promise.

Chroniclers of open admissions often suggest or imply a second misrepresentation: that the influx of lower-performing students with “language issues” led to the birth of remediation in writing and reading at the college – as if remediation were only thirty years old. The Leo article discussed above is certainly guilty of this analysis, declaring that in the mid 1960s the college created “the first affirmative action program for minority students, while never mentioning that at various times throughout its history CUNY and CCNY had utilized prefreshmen courses to offer students who needed more preparation a way into the

college. Heather Mac Donald implies the same fallacy in her editorial “How to Save CUNY” written for the *New York Post*. She suggests that all students who entered CUNY in the 1940s were college-level literate.

The suggestion that remediation had never existed prior to Open Admissions, enables the critics of CUNY to declare that the abolition of remediation will return the college to its golden glory years. This point is crucial to subsequent attempts to limit or abolish remediation as a way to raise standards, as if the institution of remediation were the cause of lowering standards in the first place – that the standards were lowered due to the institutionalization of remediation, not due to the change in enrollment policy. In *The Politics of Remediation*, Mary Soliday states, “Predictably, the call to abolish remediation gained strength from the ‘myth of transience’ —the belief that remediation had never existed before the ‘60s because it was the creation of a permissive decade that tolerated illiteracy” (123). Soliday underscores the underlying ideas behind the “myth of transience:” in blaming the creation of remediation on the liberal-minded, “anything goes,” “standards do not matter” decade of the 1960s, believers in the “myth of transience” turn writing instruction into a highly political issue, not a matter of educational or curricular discussion.²⁶

Examples of the “myth of transience” thinking appeared throughout the debates over remediation at CUNY in the 1990s. Heather MacDonald, writing for the *City Journal*, published by the conservative think tank The Manhattan Institute, states, “Forty years ago it would have been inconceivable for a college freshman to show up at registration day and announce ‘Oh, and by the way, you’ll also have to teach me to read and write’” (67). But in fact, City College offered sub-freshman work forty years ago, as did most colleges then, and now, and the remedial work focused largely on reading and writing. Similarly, in James

Traub's book-length narrative about City College, *City on the Hill*, he states, "Colleges that prided themselves on their unyielding standards *began to offer programs of remedial education*, and the principle that the college had a moral obligation to provide help to disadvantaged students took root" (my emphasis 47). CUNY, of course, was founded on the idea of giving disadvantaged students access, and the high-minded rhetoric of the opening-day vision of the college indicates that the roots of this ideal were firmly established long before 1969. However, through repetition, the "myth of transience" becomes established and repeated without qualification. In *The New York Times*, education reporter Karen Arenson states, "Virtually overnight, the college's new open admissions policy ...turned City College into a vastly different institution, with a student body that was increasingly nonwhite and foreign and in need of remedial classes to make up for the holes in their prior education" (A28, also see Healy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* A 25). Open Admissions did change the racial and ethnic make-up of the university, increasing the complexity of the academic and language issues the college faced from its students. And, of course, since Open Admissions dramatically increased the number of students, it also increased the number of poorly prepared students. But the idea that "post-" open Admission students represented a completely different set of unprepared students is quite simply overstated. As represented here, the "myth of transience" suggests that students who arrived at the college after Open Admissions were significantly different in terms of educational preparedness than the students of "pre-" Open Admissions, and that remediation was created by a coddling faculty to appease undeserving students who could not make it in college because they lacked the necessary literacy skills. As we shall see, this, in essence, is the heart of the debate over standards and remediation that carried through the decade of the 1990s. But, as this chapter

suggests, this claim and its backlash are not new. Though there are complicating social, cultural and language factors, the battle over who should be admitted to CUNY, and the level of education they should achieve was a localized version of an ongoing debate over student literacy held in many other contexts throughout higher education history and in simultaneous debates over bilingual education and social promotion throughout the country in the 1990s. Colleges have always used testing and remediation to stratify students, partly because of weakness in student preparation, but also to help satisfy the college's enrollment needs. As Kitzhaber documents in *Themes, Theories and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*, using English testing to stratify the student body was a national phenomenon throughout the 1900s (also see Traschel). Mike Rose extends this claim in *Lives on the Boundary*, making the connection between remediation and enrollment by declaring:

[C]ourses and programs that we could call remedial are older than fight songs and cheerleaders. Since the mid-1800s, American Colleges have been establishing various kinds of preparatory classes within their halls—it was and is, their way of maintaining enrollments while bringing their entering students up to curricular par (201).

As an example, Rose goes onto describe the growth of remedial programs in the 1970s not as a sudden literacy crisis among existing college-bound students, but as a consequence of the growth of higher education in the 1950s and 1960s; with the supply of traditional students no longer meeting the demand, universities began to recruit non-traditional populations to fill the seats (201). Like other universities, CUNY enlarged campus infrastructure to handle the influx of students in the mid-decades of the 1900s and they continued to expand as the Open Admissions policy was enacted, but mainly by opening additional community colleges.

The connection between the expansion and contraction of remedial programs and the enrollment needs of higher education is an argument that Mary Soliday fleshes out in *The Politics of Remediation*, which traces the use of this practice at City College basically from its inception. The creation and/or elimination of remediation has always been a crucial way a university reacts to a “literacy crisis.” Soliday details how sub-freshman work has always been used by the public comprehensive college as an ad hoc form of enrollment control, a way to admit students in times of low enrollment and limit admissions in times of enrollment abundance. Soliday makes her case, as I do, that entrance tests in writing and the creation of remedial writing and required composition courses ebb and flow according to “institutional need” rather than “student need.”²⁷ It is my claim, that restrictions on sub-freshmen work at CUNY in the 1990s was a direct response to particular political and media-driven outcries about illiteracy among public college students.

As highlighted earlier with the history of language testing at Harvard, the institution of a new testing policy for entering students at CUNY, which naturally included a short writing theme, soon provided ammunition for faculty, administrators, and certainly the popular press and politicians to declare incoming CUNY students illiterate, and then to go about looking for someone to blame, naturally turning their eyes toward the secondary schools.

In place virtually unchanged for 25 years, CUNY’s Writing Assessment Test required a 50-minute impromptu essay in response to a binary agree/disagree prompt concerning a current social-cultural issue, such as whether high school students would benefit from wearing uniforms (see Appendix B for a sample). Once instituted, the ramifications of the test outgrew its simple, internal, placement and certification purposes, and it became a way to

judge student literacy and college-level preparedness overall. With large numbers of students “failing” the “placement” exam, a CUNY literacy crisis was validated; and, it was declared by CUNY critics, these students – anyone who failed the remedial writing exam – were incapable of succeeding in college, even though the exam was designed to ascertain something completely different.

To summarize: remediation was not the unforeseen consequence of the university’s Open Admission policy, but a permanent feature of a university’s structure from the outset, a feature that naturally evolved, through the institution of the WAT, to respond to the influx of students in the 1970s and 1980s. The “remedial empire” as it has been derisively called, continued to grow, as enrollment in the 1980s and 1990s included an increasing number of immigrant students who arrived in the U.S. and then learned English, or who had some training in English in their native country, but not at the college-preparatory level. The university still had its share of well-prepared, native English-speaking students who moved right into Freshman Composition, as they always had, but the university had undergone a rapid campus construction effort in the late 1960s, adding campuses in Brooklyn (Medgar Evers College, founded in 1970) and Queens (York College founded in 1966) and expanding facilities elsewhere. Now the seats needed to be filled. Thus, in her account of the institutionalization of remedial writing work at CUNY, Soliday comes to the same conclusion as Crowley did in historicizing Harvard’s admission test results and institution of Freshman Composition one hundred years earlier: “the great paradox of American higher education is how to bolster enrollments but also maintain standards...” (Soliday, 41). The answer to the paradox for CUNY was to develop an internal device that stratifies the student body, creating a tiered structure where some students are fully matriculated and others

enrolled with limitations. From its inception, the WAT became the arbiter for this process of stratification, and it therefore evolved into an unintended marker of college-level literacy. As Theodore Gross, the chairman of the City College English Department in 1970 and responsible for expanding the role of remedial writing at the college, writes in his memoirs, “the problem of Open Admissions students that controlled all the others was a weak command of the language” (as qtd in Traub, 72). The question was not whether new students had the academic ability, but whether they had the academic writing ability to handle college level work. But once declared as failures of a “simple” writing test, CUNY remedial students were judged not as students with language work to do, but students who were incapable of handling college level thinking. The recent crises in the last decade over admission standards, at the City University of New York, are reiterations of the very same issues that have been under debate since the birth of the college: the individual benefit to student lives and the civic benefit of free (“affordable”) higher education is constantly in conflict with the political and public complaints about the level of excellence the public college offers—a standard judged first and foremost by the written literacy of its students.²⁸

Regardless of whether the WAT can be considered an effective determinant of college-level academic literacy, and/or predict college writing success or overall academic performance (and the test has never been validated for any of these purposes), since the WAT was not used during the “golden era,” it is unfair to suggest that students of that era arrived at the college with a greater degree of literacy than “post-” Open Admissions students. Nevertheless, the large increase in student enrollment, and the subsequent testing of the students in writing to judge them as not ready for Freshman Composition, led to a large increase in the number of remedial writing courses being offered, and to the declaration that

CUNY's students were not living up to previous academic standards. Regardless of its complex history, CUNY's WAT, created by composition faculty in the mid 1970s for a specific purpose, became the catalyst for the declaration of a literacy crisis at CUNY that has never completely abated.

Soliday, Crowley, Connors and Kitzhaber's analyses provide the historical context, as we look closely at the most recent declaration of a "literacy crisis" at CUNY in the early 1990s. The current "remediation crisis" is merely the latest in a cyclical public complaint that may have just as much to do with the larger institutional and societal issues illustrated here, than with a simple student deficiency model, which suggests that suddenly, a great majority of students who want to go to college have arrived at the doorstep lacking the basic skills to succeed. As we shall see, when we talk about the battle over remediation at CUNY in the 1990s, we are talking about a century-old issue that is much larger than a disagreement over the simple idea of whether an entering student can write "clear, correct prose." The battle over remediation in the 1990s was a contest over the very structure and purpose of the university. As Karen Arenson states in "How Open a Door," a News Analysis for *The New York Times*, "The nominal issue is how much remedial education the City University of New York should provide for students who arrive academically unprepared for college level work. But at the heart of the debate is an argument over remaking the university..." (B8).

* * *

The latest public inquisition of CUNY's academic standards and use of taxpayer dollars began in the early 1990s when both the city and state government in New York called for a

decrease in CUNY funding and a lowering of financial aid awards for students. The Board of Trustees responded by calling for an increase in CUNY tuition to cover the anticipated shortfall.²⁹ As part of the debate over this “triple hit,” CUNY’s academic standards were again put on trial in the popular press. The university was criticized for allowing too many students to enroll, allowing too many unqualified students to graduate, becoming a virtual college diploma factory line – an extension of the high school social promotion phenomenon, where degrees are handed out just for showing up.

The call for budget-cutting in the early 1990s and subsequent questioning of student literacy and academic quality at CUNY occurred during a national debate over standards. In California, bilingual education and affirmative action programs were being called into question. Here too the newspapers played a strong role. According to Geoffrey Pullman, writing in *Nature*, the media (including *The New York Times* and *The Economist*) fanned the fires of a public outcry against bilingual education by wrongly reporting that the Oakland California school district had declared African American English (AAE) to be “a language,” and that the out-of-control school district was intent on teaching AAE to children in classrooms instead of teaching English (321). Of course the Oakland resolution did not claim such status for AAE, nor did it suggest teaching it in the classroom, a strange accusation, since children arrive already speaking it. Pullman, a linguist, explains the complex workings of the AAE debate in Oakland, showing why so many in the popular press reported the story incorrectly, and how the media’s misreading influenced public sentiment against bilingual education. Pullman states, “Vying with each other to express their fury at AAE, columnists, both black and white, ignored the genuine issues of educational policy that had motivated the Oakland Board” (321). Eventually, the “feeding frenzy” in the press and the public outcry led the educators to back down and change their policy on bilingual

education, though the attack against it was misdirected and invalid. The Oakland story led to a politically funded publicity campaign, led by millionaire Ron Unz, to declare bilingual education a standard-less classroom strategy that overprotected students by allowing them to learn school subjects in their own language when they really needed to be immersed in English – standard academic English – before they were allowed to learn other subjects. Eventually Unz’s political campaign led to the end of bilingual education in the California school system (see Bronner, “Bilingual...”).³⁰

At the college level, the new literacy crisis was officially declared a national problem when the media began to report new data from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which indicated that college graduates lacked certain literacy skills, as Debra Viadero of *Education Week* reported. Quoting from the ETS report, she states, “The literacy levels of college graduates range from ‘a lot less than impressive’ to near alarming,” (9). Other publications picked up the story and chimed in their own localized versions of the literacy crisis, often with dramatic results.³¹

In this national climate, the debate over CUNY writing standards and public college viability took a new turn in New York with the release of a book-length study of City College by journalist James Traub. As described in Chapter 1, to complete his 1994 narrative *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College*, Traub spent a year visiting the campus, sitting in on classes and interviewing students, professors and administrators. Traub claims to have seen the underbelly, the boiler room and the backwaters of City College. This, he asserts, gives him the confidence and the credibility to tell the readers what City College is, and, he concludes, CCNY is mostly a failure. Most students benefit little from their flirtation with higher education, and the minority who do graduate are miraculous survivors, not the yield of a well-planned and -executed

course in liberal arts education. Spending money and time on the unprepared masses so a few of them can miraculously prevail allows us to advance “one cherished American ideal while threatening another,” he believes, referencing equality in the first instance, and meritocracy in the second (*preface*, vii).

Other writers picked up Traub’s main themes and as Traub did, they often focused their ire on writing teachers, writing classrooms and surface-level error in student writing. Writing for *The Public Interest* in 1995, Heather MacDonald, who would become one of CUNY’s harshest critics, criticized writing teachers’ pedagogy as the cause of the literacy crisis.

In the field of writing, today’s education is not just irrelevance [sic], it is positively detrimental to a student’s development. For years, composition teachers have absorbed the worst strains in both popular and academic culture. The result is an indigestible stew of 1960s liberationist zeal, 1970s deconstructivist nihilism, and 1980s multicultural proselytizing (“Why Johnny Can’t Write” 3).

MacDonald quotes from a student essay on the CUNY-wide Writing Assessment Test as proof of CUNY students’ lack of grammar skills, and criticizes college professors like City College’s Marilyn Sternglass for making excuses for students by championing their home discourse at the expense of correct, standard English. MacDonald concludes that the process pedagogy movement in composition, begun by liberal-minded 1960s professors, amounts to “drastically lowered expectations of student skills” (12).

Though it is impossible to draw direct cause-and-effect conclusions, the influence of Traub and MacDonald’s criticisms seems to have played a dramatic role in the CUNY literacy crisis of the 1990s. The local media extrapolated on their ideas in one-sided news stories and

scathing editorials. Here are a few brief examples:

- In February 1988, the *New York Daily News* declares the need to “save the senior colleges” from the decision to “fling open the doors and take all comers” (“First Save the Senior Colleges.”).
- The May 17, 1998 edition of the *New York Times* uses the front page to highlight the Governor’s and Mayor’s declaration of a plan to curb remediation because the university was no longer offering a true college education, while offering a critique of the Mayor’s comments only at the end of the article (Arenson, “Pataki-Giuliani…”).

The media stories of CUNY’s low standards and poorly-run remedial programs coalesced with the government’s intention to continue to slash CUNY’s budget. On June 26, 1995, amid staunch protest from faculty, students and graduates, the CUNY Board of Trustees curtailed the remedial program by limiting remediation to one year at the senior colleges, claiming, in part, that they could not afford to let students continue to enroll and fail remedial courses endlessly. *The New York Times* reported that the cuts in remediation would save about \$2 million from the \$17 million remediation budget (Jones A1).³²

The 1995 resolution to limit remediation at the senior colleges to one year was not the end of this latest round of public debate over college-level literacy and the spending of taxpayer dollars on what CUNY critics believed were undeserving students. With the new remediation policy implemented and higher tuition/lower student funding in place, a new standards crisis broke out in 1997. Again it focused on student literacy and writing tests, only this time it was about exiting students, not entering students. In a series of articles and editorials, *The New York Daily News* lambasted Hostos Community College, one of CUNY’s six community colleges, for

relaxing graduation requirements for some of its students, allowing them to attain diplomas without having passed the “required” writing certification exam (Saltonstall). The students, whose writing progress was complicated to varying degrees by "home language" and second language issues (up to seventy percent of the students at Hostos begin their college careers in English as a Second Language courses, the paper reported), were graduating in vocational degree programs from the Bronx school. In the end, only 11 of 226 students had passed a special writing test the Hostos faculty had devised to replace the CUNY-mandated Writing Assessment Test (WAT), which too many of the students had already failed, according to *The New York Daily News* (Buettner “Few at Hostos...”).

The WAT, though designed as a certification exam for students wishing to advance to the upper division course work at the senior colleges, and then adopted as an entrance placement exam in the late 1970s, was, by this time, used throughout CUNY to test a variety of cohorts for a multitude of purposes. These included: as an entrance qualification exam (denying students acceptance to the four-year college, and instead enrolling them in the two-year college on the same campus), as an exit exam from remediation, and as a qualifying exam (students had until sixty credits to pass the exam before moving on to the upper division). In other words, the WAT had evolved into a high-stakes exam with dramatic outcomes for students’ educational careers. Though they could take the test as often as they liked, at the community colleges, including Hostos, many students made it all the way to their graduation semester without having passed the exam.

Once the low scores on the placement test at Hostos were revealed in the press, Chancellor Ann Reynolds required the community college to reinstate the WAT as the exit criterion, denying the students their diplomas unless they passed. Eventually, the students

won the right to graduate in court, a decision *The New York Daily News* said was a victory for the students but a failure for CUNY, “a new low for higher education” (“Hostos Victory...”).

In the Hostos case, many of the tenets of the public college debate over student literacy are on display. For example, the media-driven rhetoric simplified the complex role of literacy in learning, suggesting that the mastery of writing involved issues of correct usage only. An editorial in *The New York Daily News* states that “This is about bare bones skill in reading comprehension, grammar and use of language” (“No Substitute for English” 42).³³ The rhetoric also connected “the failure” at Hostos to not just a problem for the students, but a problem for the city itself: wasting taxpayer money, and hurting the city by not graduating a qualified workforce. CUNY success was equated with “city benefit.” A staff editorial in *The New York Times* states, “...[T]he university’s historic goal of helping educate the next generation of skilled workers is no less vital than it was in the 1920s and 1930s. If that goal is not achieved, it is not just the students who will suffer. It is the whole city” (“Remedial Education at CUNY”). And, similarly, from Kasinitz’s article in *Dissent*, “Perhaps no university in this country plays so important a role for a major city, economically, but also symbolically” (441). As always, a student literacy crisis at CUNY was about so much more than academic standards, or individual students gaining degrees. From acculturation of immigrant populations to providing a talented workforce and producing working, taxpaying citizens, the city charges CUNY with an incredibly diverse and far-reaching mission.

The fallout from the Hostos debacle led to increased media attention about literacy standards at CUNY’s other colleges, especially “the flagship,” CCNY. Again, lagging literacy

standards, as suggested by an expanding remedial program, led to denigration of the entire undergraduate student population. Major publications inside and outside education circles accepted Traub's claim that City College had taken a dive in standards across the Board. In "CCNY's Fall From Grace," *The New York Daily News* reported that the college's glory days were in the past. "The once proud Harvard on the Hudson has produced eight Nobel Prize winners and titans of literature, politics and business. But it now stands for everything that CUNY's trustees despise" (Buettner 28). On the despised list, according to the article, which is sub-titled "City College in Crisis," are low graduation rates, low admission standards, too much remediation, too many degree programs ("academic sprawl") and an overriding pedagogical and curricular coddling of students. As the media chorus of disapproval built to a crisis point during the next three years, the fall of CCNY was declared as a factual event in two subsequent articles: "Can City College Regain Its Luster?" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Healy) and "Can Campus Adrift Reclaim Its Mastery?" in *The New York Times* (Arenson). The idea that CCNY had fallen was now a fact; the only question was whether it could raise itself up.³⁴ Since the media harped on remediation as the main cause of the college's dramatic and sudden failure, as Traub had described, the media and the politicians also focused on remediation as the place where a change needed to be made.

* * *

In the winter of 1998, the battle over remediation at CUNY headed toward its climax when a plan to extend the 1995 resolution and end remediation at the senior colleges entirely was proposed at a CUNY Board meeting. As described in the opening of this chapter, it would take a full year for the resolution to be enacted. Throughout the process, the direct involvement of the

Mayor and Governor in the admissions/remediation debate was fairly transparent. “Equally fervent was the reaction to the unusually direct intervention by the state and city’s top political figures in university admissions – usually a province of the governing Board of Trustees. Trustees said they were told the plan itself was drafted not by the Board or the administration but by aides to the Mayor and Governor” (Arenson, “Critics Fear..” B1). Meanwhile, the Mayor and other critics of CUNY used the media to offer unsubstantiated critiques of CUNY that resounded with the general public’s perception of the university as having less academic rigor than private schools. The critics claimed that the CUNY on-time graduation rate (by which they meant the traditional 4-years to a Bachelor’s degree) was too low, suggesting that too many students were either not graduating at all or taking too long to graduate. In somewhat of a contradiction, they also suggested that grade inflation at CUNY allowed too many students to move through the system and graduate, thus devaluing the CUNY diploma. CUNY was letting too many students in, the argument suggested, and consequently they were letting too many students out, making CUNY degrees largely worthless.

Faculty members and students reacted to the charges and the planned scale-back of remediation in hastily-arranged protests, public forums and on-campus demonstrations; faculty senates released statements of condemnation; and pickets of the CUNY Board offices became a weekly event. As described in the prologue to this study, over a two-month span, the Board held three public meetings to discuss the resolution and hundreds of people came to speak, mostly against the proposal. Faculty disputed the low “on-time” graduation claims, showing that less than half of the country’s graduates finish college in four years and that CUNY’s graduation rates were in line with the national average for public colleges; they detailed how complex the language and literacy issues are at CUNY, showing how students’ writing skills improve most

dramatically when students are enrolled in college courses at the same time they take remedial classes; they belied the politicians' claims that CUNY students were not doing college-level work by providing acceptance rates for CUNY students at graduate schools and offering evidence of CUNY graduates who were CEOs of major corporations; they offered statistics indicating that the overwhelming majority of colleges nationally offered remedial classes; and they reported on the success of recent CUNY graduates in white collar and professional jobs, overturning the idea that CUNY degrees had been rendered worthless because of social promotion, grade inflation and the increase in remedial students.³⁵ Yet the piles of evidence did not make it into the newspapers, nor did they seem to dent the resolved attitude of many of the Trustees, who had no time for or experience with the complex issues of remediation. While veteran composition instructors and composition program administrators could present theories of linguistic difference, oral and written literacy discrepancies, and show statistics that questioned the validity and reliability of timed, impromptu essay exams or present pedagogical and curricular comparisons, these nuanced arguments and complicated ideas were no competition for the mantra-like power of mayoral and gubernatorial sound bites delivered on TV and radio stations and in print. No defense at this late stage seemed able to counter the charges that CUNY's standards were low.

In retrospect, the debate over remediation had been lost weeks and months before in the media. The public hearings were merely a prolonged denouement – the tail end from a firestorm, a bit of dust whipped up after a gust of wind passes. The access the Mayor and the Governor had to the media trumped the quality of the teacher, researcher and student arguments. The mayor's two-paragraph disparagement of CUNY landed on page one of *The New York Times*: "Pataki-Giuliani Plan Would Curb CUNY Colleges' Remedial Work " (May 17, 1998), whereas five hours of testimony at the Board of Trustees public meeting on the remediation resolution ended

up on page B-8, fifty speakers given just four columns and two inches in the paper (Arenson, “3 Playwrights...”). In one case, student/faculty protest was relegated to the metro news brief section on May 28, 1998. Furthermore, a story on the racist implications of the Mayor’s plan was placed at the bottom of page B-6 on May 8, 1998. In that article, it is not until the last paragraph that the author quotes a study done by CUNY sociologist David Lavin, which states that “...ending remedial classes would have a devastating effect on minority enrollment.” He supports this statement with enrollment projections: 67 percent of African Americans, 70 percent of Latinos and 71 percent of Asian Americans would be excluded from senior colleges, if the new remedial policy were to be fully enforced. In an article in *The Public Interest*, Nathan Glazer states, “...City College and CUNY are far from the basket cases the media, the mayor and the institution’s critics describe. Much of the criticism directed against CUNY, including the recent criticism of [Mayor] Giuliani, is misguided and uninformed” (41). But Glazer’s critique went unreported in the mainstream press, as did the yelling into megaphones at protest rallies, three-minute speeches spoken at the public meetings of the Board of Trustees, lectures at teach-ins on many of the CUNY campuses, and presentations in front of the New York State Board of Regents, which had to approve the admissions policy change.

The role of the media – and the lack of a faculty voice – in the 1990s literacy crisis at CUNY can be seen most clearly when we compare the large influence of Traub’s *City on a Hill* and the public silence that greeted Marilyn Sternglass’ text *Time to Know Them*. It is more than anything else a publishing tale. *City on a Hill*, written by a journalist, was printed by international publishing giant Addison-Wesley in 1994 and was reviewed in major print outlets such as *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Observer*, *The Washington Post* and *The Nation* by the likes of A.M. Rosenthal, Glazer and Alfred Kazin. *The*

New York Times named it a “Notable Book of the Year.”

Simultaneous to Traub’s publication triumph, Sternglass completed her longitudinal research. Published by a local scholarly press, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, three years after Traub’s story reached the market, *Time to Know Them* documents – in painstaking detail – the slow, unsteady progress of student literacy throughout the disciplines. Sternglass interviewed students twice per year, reviewed all their written work, and conducted classroom observations before coming to the conclusion that “students with poor academic preparation have the potential to develop the critical reasoning processes... [for] academic writing if they are given the time” (296). Despite initial limitations in written literacy, her case study students were able to accumulate college credits in core and major courses, and as a result of this interaction with college level work, she contends, steadily improve their analytical, reasoning and critical thinking skills as well as their written literacy in academic English. For Sternglass, critics should not be concerned about where students started their college careers, but where they ended up. Open Admissions, she concluded, was not enough; access to education meant providing the support (financial, structural, educational and social) and time (often longer than the traditional four years) for students to develop college-level literacy and apply their skills well enough to earn a college degree.

Although *Time to Know Them* was reviewed favorably in academia, a co-recipient of the 18th Annual Mina P. Shaughnessy Award presented by the Modern Language Association and winner of the 1999 College Composition and Communication Outstanding Book Award, her research failed to generate much interest outside the world of composition teachers and writing program administrators. While one would not expect such a scholarly-research driven study to receive attention in the popular media, there were no reviews in any of the literary and political

publications where Traub's book had been singled out either. It had little resonance in the college-wide or university-wide discussion of student literacy: during the public hearings and board meetings concerning the change in remedial policy, *Time to Know Them* was never mentioned by CUNY board members or administrators; though discussed within her former department at CCNY (the book was published after her retirement from CUNY) the study led to no departmental or programmatic changes in the writing program. And even before the hardbound copies began to gather dust on departmental bookshelves, changes to the City College writing program were taking shape because of outside forces, with the creation of a college-wide exit exam from Freshman Composition and a university-wide writing certification exam to be given at sixty credits.

While the popular journalist, outsider Traub was writing an article questioning the role of remediation at CUNY for *The New York Times Magazine* and editorials on how to improve public higher education for its daily OP-ED page, Sternglass, the insider, and her complex message of how student literacy evolves over time faded from the debate.³⁶

Another instance of political and media influence working in tandem to shape CUNY's future in the mid to late 1990s involves CUNY's other main critic, Heather MacDonald, whose ideas "found their way into Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's policy agenda..." (Finn). As the Board of Trustees debated the remedial resolution, the mayor decided to go a step further in his analysis of how taxpayer money was being spent at CUNY. He assembled an advisory commission, headed by Benno Schmidt, the former president of Yale University, and including MacDonald as one of its key members. The task force produced a much ballyhooed document called "The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift: Report of the Mayor's Advisory Taskforce," also known as the Schmidt Report, released in the spring of 1999. The commission called for follow-

through on the remediation proposal as well as a restructuring of the entire university system, with many of the proposals that MacDonald had outlined in the press as key components of the report (see MacDonald, “CUNY Could Be Great Again” and “How to Save CUNY”). Many of the Schmidt report recommendations were subsequently included in CUNY’s Master Plan.³⁷

With the national literacy story still breaking, and the Traub book release to light the fire locally, the tabloid press jumped on the bandwagon, “unleashing dozens of snarling editorials over several months” (Hussey and Solomon 2). *The New York Post* even got to the point of putting quotation marks on the word *students* as a snide commentary on the achievement level and work habits of CUNY students. For its part, *The New York Daily News* suggested that the motto for Hostos Community College should be: “We’re Proud to Be Ignorant” (“Will Hostos Ever Learn”).

An article by Philip Kasinitz in the fall 1995 issue of *Dissent* indicates how important the media was to the anti-CUNY crusade. “Today, with the fiscal gun to its head, CUNY is attempting to reinvent itself, and the work of these critics is taken seriously by those who will reshape the university,” (Kasinitz 443). In particular, Kasinitz, and reporters from the New York weekly *The Village Voice* single out Traub and MacDonald, even suggesting that MacDonald had a direct influence on Mayor Giuliani’s state of the city address and subsequent call for the privatization of remediation at CUNY (Solomon and Hussey). *The Chronicle of Higher Education* suggests that it was *The New York Post* in combination with attacks by Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki that “branded City [College] and CUNY as inferior and adrift” (Healy A25).

The public discourse about remediation at CUNY is indicative of a larger issue in education reform and in public higher education policy in particular. By its very nature as a *public* university, CUNY is beholden not to its own academically researched data, but to the

power of public comment and political needs. The Mayor, the governor and the media had more say over the eventual decision to end remediation than the writing teachers, writing program administrators and composition scholars at CUNY. The highly political space of writing instruction, with its connection to enrollment and standards, as I demonstrate here, is largely a battle between entrenched public ideals about what an education should be, and should be for, and the seemingly always insufficient economic funding available for support of public higher education in any given era. In short, the remedial wars of the late 1990s in CUNY are merely the latest localized manifestation of the cyclical national education crises, so often declared in public educational settings, and so often tied to student literacy – a cycle that harkens back to the very existence of public higher education in the first place.

The account of the institutionalization of the written theme as part of the entrance exam, and the subsequent creation and evolution of the Freshman Composition course at Harvard and elsewhere is a precursor to today's public cry for higher standards in writing for college students, and the subsequent enactment of testing devices to achieve this end. Both the cry that illiteracy in written English is a burgeoning problem among college students, and the resulting institution of written exams to "solve" the problem are as old as the university system itself.

At City College, this cycle is even more pronounced because of the college's supposedly symbiotic relationship with its city: nowhere else in America is a single university so directly tied to its geographic populace, and in few cases is the mission of a university so explicitly linked to the well-being of its society's economic, civic and social survival and success. Even with its grand cosmopolitan transience, for New York City, debates about CUNY's future are nothing short of debates about the city's identity and well-

being.

From the birth of CUNY as The Free Academy in the middle 1800s, its existence has been threatened in the name of everything from economic austerity, to student worthiness, to veiled ethnic and racial myopia. Though the waves of dissent at one time had the power and swiftness to flatten the idealistic, fairy-tale castle of higher education for all, over the years, the university has survived and built itself into a sturdy fortress, which, like the skyscrapers that surround its campuses, sways with the winds of change without cracking. Though the attacks still come – with increasing frequency – the future of the university’s existence seems no longer in doubt. However, its size, its mission, its importance and the way it functions within the city that defines it are concerns still very much in protracted-conflict. Who should have access to higher education and who should pay for it is a tandem of questions as old as the university itself. Increasingly, these questions are largely tied to questions of student literacy. In the thirty years since Open Admissions at CUNY was instituted, the Basic Writing classroom has become the living space where the historical, philosophical, democratic, moral, educational and civic debate over who should have access to college plays out. As James Traub and Mary Soliday both claim, decisions about the size of the remedial program at CUNY need to be looked at as harbingers for the direction of college as a whole, not just as decisions about remedial students (Traub 75; Soliday, *Politics...* 38). The elimination of remediation at senior colleges by September 2001 was the latest reactionary twist in the long debate over who CUNY should serve, using what resources and for what end.

* * *

¹ Some have traced the move to end remediation at The City University of New York senior colleges in 1999 to the late 1980s when a “standards crisis” in the California state system resulted in the limiting of remedial courses to the lower tiers of the university in the early 1990s.

² Twenty-six people were arrested including State Assemblyman Edward Sullivan, (D, Manhattan), chairman of the Assembly Higher Education Committee.

³ After the May 1998 vote, Murphy was quoted in the *New York Post* saying the plan to end remediation was a “meat cleaver. This is radical surgery on the mission and role of City University of New York.... [T]he door is being slammed shut” (Edelman and Neuman).

⁴ Retrospectively, I think this was the moment when I first began to look at my project’s phenomenological essence. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, a phenomenological study foregrounds the personal involvement of the researcher in the culture under study. In my chair at the Board of Trustees meeting, was when I first began to understand what the “lived experience” of the researcher could add to my study. I was, in all the ways I present here, intensely involved in the actions and debates that I had chosen to study for this project. It would be foolish to think that I could, and unethical to the reader to even try, to separate myself. Here is where I began to realize that an attempt to report the data of my study objectively, and distantly would not be enough. My methodology would have to include a good deal of my subjectivity. I needed, as Max van Manen states, to “study the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (9). My project could not be hypothesis driven, in search of conclusions, or experiment driven, looking to control variables and solve laboratory-limited equations. Such research, in my view, would be too limiting, would be reducing the world into binary choices (remediation yes or no). I wanted to look closely at the tension point instead, revealing the complex lived experience of the writing teacher, researcher, activist, human in the midst of this radical culture changing series of events. This project is as much about the change in me, as it is about the change in life forces that occurred all around this tense decade of events.

⁵ Common schools would be what we would consider elementary schools today. Students admitted to The Free Academy were 13 years of age. There were 224 common schools under the jurisdiction of the Board in 1853, serving 9,313 students, according to the Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education (8).

⁶ According to the fifth annual report of The Free Academy (1853) examinations of common school students for entrance to the Free Academy consisted of Spelling, Reading, Writing, English Grammar, Geography, Arithmetic, Elementary Bookkeeping, History of the United States, and Algebra, “as far as simple equation, inclusive” (Appendix to the *Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education* 8.)

⁷ City College was not alone in this early institutionalization of pre-freshman work. In a work I will discuss extensively later in this chapter, *The Politics of Remediation*, Mary Soliday documents the reliance on sub freshman coursework at virtually all U.S. schools of higher education (28-9).

⁸ The program became a certified public high school in the early 1900s and the building remained dedicated to that function until the “prep school” was eliminated in 1943.

⁹ As with all discussion of “on-time” graduation rates, some context is needed here. Evidence from the Fifth Annual Report of the operations and conditions of the Free Academy indicate that for the first one or two years of existence, the academy had not yet standardized its curriculum (see Appendix of the Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Education).

¹⁰ A fall 1997 issue of *CUNY Matters*, quotes numerous editorials and letters to the editor from 1847, just prior to the passing of the act authorizing the creation of The Free Academy. “In voting for this bill...our citizens are increasing indefinitely the annual expenses of the city,” Col. James Webb wrote in *The Courier* (Schmidgall12).

¹¹ The needy, the unprepared, the undeserving are taken in, educated (“converted,” “transformed”) and then sent back into society to contribute economically, democratically, morally--to work for a new and better city. The

traditional humanistic and civic tenets of a college education are quite clearly displayed as desirable attainments for all city residents; a City College education will make its graduates into better humans, better citizens and better workers, and therefore, everyone will benefit from the public education endeavor. The rhetoric calls for – even demands – access to education, if not to benefit individual lives, then to benefit society as a whole. Public education is presented as the latest, and perhaps last New Jerusalem.

¹² See Wallace Douglas' "Rhetoric for the Meritocracy: The Creation of Composition at Harvard" in Richard Ohmann's collection *English in America* and Donald Stewart's 1992 article "Harvard's Influence in English Studies..."

¹³ In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose traces the critique back further than Harvard's creation of the Composition course, citing a statement by Brown University's president in 1841 that students were severely lacking in English Grammar (5).

¹⁴ Connors underscores that the Harvard faculty role in the debate seemed to be one of avoidance, if not downright insult toward the secondary schools. He states: "...the most notable college teachers of rhetoric refused to admit publicly that they should deal with the problem, or that they were dealing with it everyday. Instead they constantly cried out for deliverance by some sort of secondary school *deus ex pedagogia*" ("Rhetoric..." 81).

¹⁵ Also see Soliday (*Politics...*) who states, "the authors of [a literacy] crisis also have to blame someone for the decline of skills. For that reason a literacy crisis will assign agency to particular groups, programs and institutions, or even social attitudes" (120).

¹⁶ Berlin's *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* discusses the one notable exception, Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan.

¹⁷ This administrative decision mirrors the choice made by many CUNY colleges a century later, when students who failed the "placement" entrance exam were allowed to matriculate and had until 60 credits to pass the test before they could move to the upper division coursework and/or graduate (in the case of a community college). If, after their initial required remedial course, which they paid full tuition for, the students had not passed the exam, they could get all the way to 60 credits without any other intervention, producing a log jam of students at the 60 credit mark.

¹⁸ For Connors full treatment of labor issues in composition, see "Overwork/Underpay: labor and Status of Composition Teachers since 1880."

¹⁹ Of course the workload of grading endless compositions considered demeaning as well as overwhelming by faculty, was solved in later years by the institution of adjunct labor.

²⁰ In "Grammar In American College Composition and Historical Overview," Connors details how the teaching of grammar fell into disfavor in the mid-1800s, but was revitalized with the development of "a new pedagogy for grammar" called "sentence building" which later got a boost from Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg's *Higher Lessons in English*, a popular text for students filled with sentence diagramming exercises and drills.

²¹ Berlin and Crowley trace this overemphasis on correctness to this period as well (See Crowley 69).

²² This is what Berlin calls the conflict between Jeffersonian excellence and Jacksonian numbers (61).

²³ A plan to increase access had already been developed by the university administration. Soliday points out numerous other factors, besides the student protests that made open admissions a possible outcome (72, 124-6).

²⁴ Writing for the Campus alumni publication in the fall of 1969 (just a few months after the on-campus student protests triggered the forward push for new admissions standards), Ackerman provides an excellent, nuanced retelling of the seizure of the South Campus of City College.

²⁵ The student protests in the Spring of 1969 provided the trigger to speed up this change in admission policy, and led to the involvement of New York City Mayor John Lindsey who pushed through a revised plan to make larger and more immediate changes to admission policies than the administrators plan desired.

²⁶ Critics harp on this myth: that all of education went under a radical, liberal, free-spirit transformation in the 1960s. "There's a tendency to indict the movements of the 1960s," Richard Ohmaan states (*Our vanishing...* 234). As if one decade in American schooling changed everything--permanently.

²⁷ Soliday boldly maintains that the student body in American colleges, and at City College in particular, has never changed substantially in terms of social class in the history of American higher education. In other words, the rise and fall of remediation over the years has more to do with enrollment concerns than falling or rising standards of academic preparedness in the student population (also see Crowley 244). As Soliday states, "critics [of the university]...argue that standards don't change, only students' abilities do. Therefore, literacy crisis is always new" (120).

²⁸ Three quick examples. (1) James Traub writing in an editorial for the *New York Times* in 1996, "CUNY has to stay the course, not only out of an obligation to its students, but to keep pressure on the public schools to produce graduates who are ready for college" ("Faint Praise..."). (2) Heather MacDonald writing for *The City Journal*, in 1998, "...all taxpayer subsidized remediation should stop. Students who graduate high school without basic skills in the future will have to pay for their own remediation" (CUNY Could Be Great Again" 68). (3) A staff written *New York Times* editorial from 1999, "The CUNY Board is asking for \$9 million in additional funds—a small price to pay given what the city and state will get in return" ("A Solid Remedial Plan for CUNY").

²⁹ The City University Faculty Senate estimated that state support for CUNY decreased by close to 40 percent since 1980 and tuition rose 93 percent from 1988-1997 (CUNY Affirmed... 4).

³⁰ As the crisis over bilingual education evolved in the media, it overlapped with the ongoing dispute over affirmative action in California college admissions. Following a similar pattern where standards were questioned by its own faculty and two-years of simmering public debate, the California state university system voted to eliminate affirmative action as part of its admissions process. As reported in the *New York Times*, "Black and Hispanic undergraduate admissions to the University of California campuses have been cut nearly in half under the new admissions policy, while more White and Asian students were accepted" (Perez-Pena B8). Unlike the subsequent claims for the end of remediation at CUNY, California politicians and sympathetic journalists were able to portray the argument over affirmative action as a race issue, according to Perez-Pena, who goes on to describe how, unlike the debate in California, the CUNY debate became a discourse on standards, rather than a discourse on race. "The politics of race differ substantially on the two coasts," since New York has a more powerful black population than does California where Governor Pete Wilson could abolish affirmative action and eliminate services for immigrant and still gain in popularity. "But in New York, aides to Mr. Pataki say he understands how politically dicey, and racially charged the argument over remedial education could become and has avoided it as he runs for re-election. Mr. Giuliani has campaigned loudly for the need for higher academic standards at CUNY."

³¹ For another indication of the national crisis over literacy and the focus on college students lacking basic skills, see Wildavsky, "Hot Debate Over CSU Standards" in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Wildavsky details how California State University students supposedly lag in basic skills. In the article, Chancellor Barry Munitz declares, "I think we're headed toward a fundamental philosophical crisis in the state on remedial education."

³² Critics of the resolution argued that remedial courses actually make the university money, since the classes are largely taught by low-cost adjunct labor, while students pay full tuition without accumulating college credit.

³³ In a piece analyzing the defeat of bilingual education in the California school system, the *New York Times* describes the public's simplification of complex educational issues as "the swing of the pendulum." "Whether the issue is reading or mathematics, outcome-based education or open classrooms, public schooling in this

country lurches from one trend to its opposite with alarming speed and little forethought...” (Bronner, B-11).

³⁴ Nathan Glazer puts it a different way in an article for *The Public Interest*, “The City College of the past, the hope seems to run, must be and can be restored. But can it? Should it?” (31). He argues that CUNY should take up the role that today’s city demands: an urban college that caters to a largely immigrant population.

³⁵ For some of the CUNY faculty counter arguments to the remediation proposal, see “CUNY: For the Record,” a sampling of some of the testimony to the Mayor’s Advisory Taskforce on CUNY.

³⁶ Traub’s influence went beyond concerns with CUNY’s writing programs. In one editorial, he raises the issue of the tiering of the university, a proposal also put forth by former Baruch president and now CUNY Chancellor Mathew Goldstein. Under the plan, CUNY would develop flagship universities, mid-level four-year schools and community colleges at the bottom, with remediation at the bottom of that bottom. Traub states, “...you can’t have excellence without an element of hierarchy,” (A14). Subsequently, the university has moved in this direction with the adoption of a master plan in 2000.

³⁷ The role of the media in producing the remediation crisis at CUNY was chronicled in an expose in the *Village Voice*, a New York weekly known for its investigative reporting and liberal stance. Reporters Alisa Solomon and Deidre Hussey trace the connections between the CUNY critics, mainly conservative republican political think tanks and the media, noting that “though these assaults on New York’s public universities use the catchphrases ‘academic standards’ and ‘bachelor’s degrees of value,’ they aren’t really motivated by educational concerns” (2).

“Which leads me to my main question. Did I happen to get a group of bright, interested students? Are the students in my class an unusual group? Personally, I find that hard to believe. At least that’s not the only reason this class is giving me more than anyone seems to expect of them.”

Amy (Basic Writing Teacher)

10/1/99

“In order for me to become a good writer I would have to control my run-ons and sentence fragments. I can also improve on my punctuation. I’m not a bad writer I just messed up on the...test. I will improve on the things I need to improve on through this class. Also I have to learn how to include my opinion more often and don’t just state the facts (sic).”

LaToya (Basic Writing Student)

8/30/99

CHAPTER 3

The Semester Story: Starting and Sustaining a Conversation

CONTEXTUAL FRAGMENTS

On May 28, 1998, when the City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees met to vote on a proposal that would end remedial courses at its senior colleges, a group of 150 students and faculty gathered outside the board’s headquarters on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to chant and wave placards in protest. It was a last ditch effort to swing a vote or two among the 15 board members. Sandra Ynoa, a Hunter College student, was among the

24 protesters arrested that day. Her black-and-white photo was published the next day in two of the city's tabloid newspapers. With a brown-skinned, round, young face and her hair wrapped in a stylish headscarf, I could easily picture her sitting in my writing class at the City College of New York (CCNY). In the photo, she stands in front of two NYPD officers, a full-size white poster-board with the words SAVE CUNY in thick block letters hanging from her neck. The officers have her arms pulled tightly behind her to apply the plastic handcuffs commonly clipped on the wrists of non-violent protesters.

In *The New York Post* version of the photo, her large brown eyes look directly into the camera; she bites her lip in a pained grimace that seems to say, "Rescue me." But in the *New York Daily News* version, perhaps taken just a second later, or earlier, her head tilts upward, her chin juts out, her eyes are closed peacefully, but her mouth is open just slightly. There is a sense of defiance in her face. She seems both resigned and steadfast in the face of manipulation.¹

* * *

In offices and venues far removed from any college classroom, the decade-long public and political debate over remedial courses at CUNY continued to boil in the summer of 1999. The previous June, a task force appointed by the Mayor of New York City to investigate the economic, administrative and educational standing of CUNY released its report declaring the university "adrift" and suggesting major overhauls to its administrative practices and educational mission. The report commended the proposed change in admissions policies at the senior colleges that called for the end of remediation. In response, later in the summer, a group of faculty activists, prospective CUNY students and parents filed a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights at the United States Department of

Education, declaring the new CUNY admissions and testing policies to be biased against minorities (Brooks).

In August, a new group, the Friends of CUNY, led by an ex-CUNY board member and consisting of faculty and students from across disciplines and campuses released its own evaluation of CUNY, claiming that the mayor's committee had downplayed the state of CUNY finances and ignored many CUNY successes in terms of its programs and its students (Arenson, "Rebutting..."). The Friends of CUNY wanted to influence the New York Board of Regents who had the power to rescind the planned end of remediation at the senior colleges that had been enacted the previous Spring. The Regents had just announced dates for three "town hall" style meetings for the fall semester to discuss remediation and admissions, after which they would vote on approval of the new policy.

Meanwhile the CUNY Board was moving to execute the recommendations of the Mayoral task force. On the day the fall semester opened, the Faculty Affairs Committee of the CUNY Board declared its intention to require students to pass national standardized tests in basic skills before being admitted to senior colleges. Students looking to pass out of remediation after they were admitted to community colleges would take the same tests. For the first time, the whole CUNY system would follow a single standard for declaring students ready to graduate community colleges and/or ready to attend senior colleges: a new three-part high stakes test in reading, writing and math developed by a national testing company. Herman Badillo, the CUNY board chairman and a member of the academic affairs committee, commented on the decision: "We want to be sure that when students come into the colleges they are ready for college work.... If we had had these tests in place 30 years ago, a lot of the problems we have had would not have taken place" (Arenson, "In Shift...").

Despite the summertime turmoil in courtrooms and boardrooms, the remedial writing courses at City College in the Fall of 1999 ran as usual. The department offered 16 sections of English 2, the second level writing course, each section staffed with an adjunct, and an enrollment as high as 23 students. The long-term adjuncts were uneasy about their future as teachers in the English Department, but for Amy, whose class I was observing for the semester, and her fellow short-term graduate student adjuncts, teaching was offered as a financial aid enticement, and so their future in the department was somewhat secure.

The remedial students were not concerned either; they had their foothold into the university and a grandfather clause that kept them out of immediate peril. Those who would or would not be sitting in their seats the following fall were not visible to them.

* * *

Before I sat in her classroom for the first time, I interviewed Amy at a local Spanish restaurant. Between mouthfuls of a monster-sized bowl of soup, Amy used her spoon like a baton, as she spoke earnestly and thoughtfully about her modest goals for the course. She wanted students to write each day in class, to develop into a community that discusses writing (others and their own) seriously and honestly and she wanted the students to trust themselves as writers and to see what the reading and writing life could offer them.

Though she had never considered what it meant to have a particular “pedagogy,” Amy believed that good teachers have classrooms that feature open discussion, that encourage students to take risks and to speak and write freely, without penalty or insult. She saw the class progression as growing outward from the texts she chose based on what the students found interesting. Although not trained in composition, Amy copied a classroom model of a professor she had during her undergraduate years at Barnard College—one of her favorite courses ever, she told me.

Within the structure of the course, which would meet three times per week, a 50-minute session on Mondays and 65-minute sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays for a total of three hours of class time, she had built a series of steps for the students to build their writing from early draft to well developed essay. After each set of readings and subsequent class discussions and freewriting assignments, students would do “paragraph reactions” about some idea from the class or the readings. From these, students would generate more-developed topic ideas through assigned writing-process projects and then pick one of these to write a longer, theme-based essay. In the last third of the course, students would write more formal essays, drawing from the course themes where they would more thoroughly incorporate more than one reading in support of an argument they wanted to make about the texts.

Throughout the course, Amy intended to use class time for full-class discussion of the readings and texts, small group work and reading and responding to each other’s writing. It was important, she said, to create an open free-flowing classroom, where students were given plenty of time to talk about their work.

* * *

As had been the case since the start of the Open Admissions era, in the fall of 1999, individual CUNY colleges determined how their Basic Writing programs were run (the number of levels and sections offered, the entrance and exiting criteria to use, the amount of credits—usually none—a remedial course was worth, the number of repeats allowed, how large the class size would be etc.). Perhaps most importantly, individual colleges determined what kind of access “remedial” students had to other college courses. At City College, a typical full-time student would take one, two or three remedial courses while filling out his/her schedule (from 12 to 18 credits) with introductory, credit bearing courses like world

civilizations, introduction to philosophy, introduction to psychology, or art history. Students spent part of their day intermingled with the regular student body, and at other times were separated out, most often for their lack of writing skills.

In 1999 City College still had two levels of remediation in writing, known as Writing 001 and Writing 002. Both were courses for no credit.² Thus, students could last through four semesters as a matriculated student if they failed and then passed Writing 1 and then failed Writing 2 twice. However, a student could also withdraw from a semester and still keep his/her eligibility status.

Alternatively, if students passed Writing 2 at any point, they could remain matriculated, with fairly broad access to the core curriculum and some courses in their major; they could accumulate up to 60 credits in this fashion before a stop was placed on their registration, and passing of the writing exam (and/or reading and math exams) was required. For some students, this produced the bizarre scenario of accumulating 60 credits with decent or even high GPAs, but, after failing the writing exam, yet again, simultaneously being told they were not prepared for college.

* * *

The five early-twentieth century gothic, grey-stone buildings of the City College of New York (CCNY) rise from the highest hill in Harlem, their stoic, stable aura contrasting with the urban chaos outside the campus gates. Amsterdam Avenue is a major north/south thoroughfare for cars looking to avoid the traffic-clogged parkways and a major bus route for those heading to or from the heart of Manhattan, a hundred blocks below. But it is also a neighborhood city street, lined with competing bodegas, pizzerias, Spanish coffee counters and a cramped Greek restaurant of rickety chairs and sticky tables, where the owner, his wife, and son, cook and serve a set of hearty, grilled meals with truly alarming speed.

In the middle of the block, an auto parts store doubles as a storefront mechanic's shop, with men in greasy clothes toting large duct-taped toolboxes to attend to jacked up and torn apart vehicles, often double, and sometimes triple parked at the curb. It is a drive-through approach to car repair and also an interactive public performance for the young and middle-aged men who peer over the shoulders of the mechanics. They point into the engine and comment in a combination of Spanish and English about the puddle of green liquid pooling onto the blacktop or the best way to find an electrical short.

Across the street, an elegant and sturdy block-long stonewall topped with spiky black iron posts marks off the original City College buildings. There is no mistaking the fortress-like feel of the native-grey schist buildings with terra cotta cornices. They are elaborate, proportioned and pointed: wide flowing staircases, stone-arched entranceways, the occasional chiseled Latin phrase, decorative cast iron lanterns, floor-to-ceiling inset wooden windows, and artistic but functionless pillars with triangle-shaped tops. An arrangement of mischievous gargoyles completes the sandcastle motif; they peer off the buildings like pranksters looking to hurl objects down below. The buildings, which outline a pentagon-shaped common area of grass and trees, even have a touch of ivy scaling their walls.

There is a sense of the gated-city of Oz to the placement of City College. With these five buildings, City College sits as a proud memorial to the great American pastoral of educational promise in the euro-centric tradition of Harvard. It is an educational sanctuary, right here in the middle of a random, evolving neighborhood where urban renewal never seems to renew. The stone wall acts as a barrier between barrio and ivory tower, such symbolic pomp set amid neighborhood hustle. What is this nostalgic elegance doing here, casting its ominous presence onto the sloping Spanish Harlem neighborhood to the west, and

down the rocky cliff-like drop into the Black Harlem neighborhood to the east?

In the mid-to-late 1990s the buildings were undergoing a multi-million dollar refurbishing, so scaffolding and mesh curtains hid each facade, often for years at a time. The workers removed, repaired and replaced the stones (each one weighs close to 70 pounds) one at a time. Then, over the course of a week, the curtains and scaffold would come down and the reborn building would startle even a long-time New Yorker's eye with its magnificence.

In 1999, as I trudge up the hill from the subway in the not-quite warm September sun to begin my ethnographic study of remedial classrooms at the college, the ivy turns a burnt orange as if on cue.

* * *

I spent the morning of the first day of my research project, sitting at a desk in the Writing Center, in one of the five original buildings, Harris Hall, where I shared an office with five other part-timers. After preparing my own classes for the next day, I was teaching an English 210 Writing for the Humanities and a Freshmen Composition class, I read over the elaborate plan I had made for the project, tapped my pen on the desk beside the pages--more nervous than if the course were my own. Eventually, I began writing about what I expected to encounter now that the "into the field" stage had finally arrived. Half writing, half copying from my project proposal, I wrote the following notes:

In any literacy context, there is the internal human struggle to attain literacy and the external, societal implications if you don't. Through all the mass discussion of literacy, literacy theory remains knotted in this single paradox: language acquisition creates community, and ultimately, the community of language users creates exclusivity. A literate community is limited to, and by,

those who speak and write the language. By its very nature, literacy builds borders....

Literacy questions are as old as any that can be asked and they always twist in political winds: Who is literate? What role does literacy play in a society? How should literacy be taught? Who should be taught? Who should teach? And for what benefit?

In the United States in 1999, literacy hangs in the air like a marionette puppet with tangled strings. We all think we have the best way to control the puppet; we all have our little strings attached. Some have more strings, but no one has complete control. We seem to work at such cross-purposes, jerking teachers and students, pedagogy and curriculum, rules and requirements back and forth like a bunch of rag dolls in the hands of an amateur puppeteer.

* * *

CLASSROOM NARRATIVE 1: TAKING OUR PLACES ³

Class Context

Since it is a commuter college with rolling admissions, the first few weeks of the Fall semester at City College are akin to the opening hour at a bingo hall. Players appear out of nowhere and overrun the newly groomed campus, get their cards and find their seats. The systems the college puts in place to keep the process orderly and timely are simply overrun by the mass of bodies and their specific needs. The first few days are followed by a longer period of distraction, as late arrivals enter anxiously and try to find their places among the minimally established players.

For the 22 mostly freshmen students and the adjunct instructor teaching her first college course ever, the mayhem is especially noticeable. Amy, who was in her first semester as a Master's student in the creative writing program at CCNY, had put together a two page syllabus (see Appendix C), a preliminary course schedule for the first month (see Appendix D) ordered books that she "enjoyed reading" from a local book store and waited anxiously for her college teaching career to begin.

On the first day, Amy introduced herself and the course and asked the students to "freewrite" on various general "first day" prompts, like, "Tell me three things you know about writing." The following three days were spent discussing and writing about how the art of speaking/writing has the power to free people or to harm them, to give them voice, or to silence their voices. Readings included a piece about the Yippies' protests at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, an essay about Native American Indians' attempt to take over Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, a close reading of the Bill of Rights, and an essay mocking beauty pageants.

The goal of this introductory work, according to Amy, was to establish the importance of words, to give an indication of their power, and to mimic that lesson, by writing everyday in class, and by creating an open dialogue between students. There were daily writing assignments, both in class and between classes. In terms of student discussion, the highlight of these early classes came when a male student commented that the democratic convention rabble-rousers were revolutionaries in his eyes, because, "If someone's giving an effective speech, then you're helping other people to speak." I am not sure if the students related the statement to themselves, but it was my feeling that this was exactly what Amy wanted the students to feel about each other. In any case, there was a definite sense that Amy

had successfully set the mood for the course as one of collaboration and respect for each student's ideas. As the writing center director told me after visiting her classroom early in the semester, "There was a really good feeling in that room; you can always tell that right away."

Though the semester was well underway and an open learning environment had been established, Amy was still adjusting to late registering students, incomplete class rosters, a late "re-order" of her books at the campus bookstore, the inability to get a set of office keys and the shocking information that the English Department would only allow her to make five photocopies at a time. Nevertheless, in the hallway before the fifth class of the semester, Amy suggested to me that things were beginning to settle down, and that she felt the course was finally ready to "really begin."

The Fall semester always starts like this, I told her, and I wouldn't be surprised if her prediction of a smooth road ahead was a little premature. I had always imagined the fall semester like an old crankshaft car, sputtering and leaping forward, moving away from summer bliss, before stalling, only to be re-cranked again. The fall semester does not reach full speed until October, when the air chills for good, the leaves clog the storm drains and backpacks expand, absorbing book after book and turning students into two-legged humped-back creatures from another age.

Classroom Narrative 1: September 9

I sit to the right of the doorway in Amy's classroom in the North Academic Center, feeling self-conscious as students shuffle or stroll past me and take seats across the room. Though it is the fifth class, I feel like a member of an audience, rather than a participant with

a defined role. Since the first day when I introduced myself and the project I was working on, the students have largely ignored my presence. I wonder if they are used to having observers who look similar to me in their classrooms—a white male, middle aged in their eyes, in dress shirt and slacks who speaks academic English and carries a notebook and an air of authority because I am not teaching the class.

The clock minute-hand that we all stare at seems to lurch onto the 2:50 mark all at once, and Amy, dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a faded, red, short-sleeve shirt, strolls over to the door and closes it. The clink of the metal lock sounds ominously final.

The seventeen students sit in a semi-circle, lining the walls of the room, which is almost a perfect square and just large enough for the 28 desks it contains. A few of the desks could not fit into the circle, and so they sit in the center making the room feel even smaller than it is. The windowless walls are made of cinderblocks, painted a shade darker than orange soda. The brownish-orange carpet, chosen in an attempt to play off the walls, I presume, is frayed at the doorway and by the teacher's desk, in the exact spot you would expect students to stand awaiting teacher input after class. The yellowing white drop-ceiling and banks of fluorescent lights seem closer than their 10-foot height, as the students shift in their seats, taking out notebooks and pens from an array of book bags and backpacks. No one talks.

Amy turns from the door, she asks about the readings due that day: a series of poems by Langston Hughes. A few of the students nervously report that they have not done the reading because the student-librarians at the reserve desk could not find them. Having been assigned the class late and with virtually no institutional guidance, Amy ordered books from a local book shop she likes, instead of using the campus bookstore, where the students have

greater access, and some have discounts. After realizing her mistake she ordered a second set from the campus bookstore, but they had not arrived. She then discovered that to send the Hughes poems to duplicating could take up to a week, and so in addition to lending out her copy of the text to be photocopied, Amy had put a copy of the Hughes poems on reserve at the library.

The students continue to talk over one another and rattle off a few sparsely detailed stories of rookie library employees searching haphazardly for the poems. “Yah that’s the same women that couldn’t find ‘em for me,” one student says. For most of them, these are the first days of their college careers, and, in their shyness, and perhaps in their reinforced high school habit, they were unable to push the librarians to find the photo copied poems, or think of another way to get them, so they came to class empty handed. At least three students have the book, though, and five others have photocopies, and I notice, one student has some of the poems written out by hand on loose-leaf paper. In response to this dilemma, Amy walks to the front of the teacher desk and leans backwards to rest against it. I do not know her well enough to guess whether the students’ excuses will upset her. I scratch at my red beard. Amy shifts her weight to her right foot and flips back her hair with her left hand. Her upper-torso is framed against the blackboard behind her; with her girlish face and open demeanor, she does not appear the least bit intimidating. I can’t imagine her lashing out here. With hesitation, she qualifies her initial inquiry: “Well...for the people who did get a chance to read them, what did you think?”

A student with a mischievous snicker of a smile, and the fluid, shifting body posture of a contortionist answers: “Some of them I didn’t understand.” Five heads nod.

“Which one in particular” Amy asks.

“I understand just a few of them. Sometime he talks about freedom,” the same student calls out, shifting his body to the left and extending his legs further into the middle of the circle. Amy, still in front of the desk, places her arms behind her, puts her palms on the edge of the desk and lifts herself onto it, as if she was sliding onto the hood of a car, a position that will become her favorite teacher position.

“Freedom,” she repeats. “True.” She pauses, then adds, “Let’s deal with one at a time. How about “Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Pages rustle as the students with the poems try and find their place. *Push harder*, I write in my notes, rushing to judgment. *The students are too willing to let her do all the work. They are unwilling to say anything meaningful, personal or risky. Longtime classroom patterns are hard to break, I suppose.*

The students without poems crane their necks to get a glimpse at their neighbors’ pages. After a few long seconds, a young woman from the right corner raises and drops her “call-on-me” hand in one motion, unsure of the classroom protocol. When Amy glances her way, she says, “He compares some of the rivers to his soul.”

“A connection between the river and his soul. Yes. I see that. Can we talk about that. What does a river do,” Amy asks. She has a calming, thoughtful demeanor and an energetic but not forceful tone. “What does it make you think of?” She slips off the desk and searches the board railing for chalk. There’s a knock at the door. Amy opens the locked door and a late student enters. Though there are seats to the right and left of me, the student crosses and sits opposite me in the only other accessible empty desk.

Amy who has a rounded, freckled face framed in shoulder-length dark brown hair, asks her question a second time, and the students call out as Amy writes down their responses in a list on the board.

“Feeds. Provides Travel. Nature. Movement. Rough and calm at the same time. Old. Flows. Forever. Never stops. Peaceful. Eternity. Carves out of rocks. Transportation. Cold. Has its own power...”

“There seems to be some connection to nature here, to natural elements,” Amy says. “You’re right. You could use these words to refer to humans, or to nature. There is some feeling that Langston Hughes is using nature to tell us...” Her tone rises, but not as if she asking the students to fill in the idea, but because she is searching for the right words. “Maybe he’s telling us about ourselves. I’m not sure. Mankind, even today, is a natural being with natural rhythms...” She stands sideways to the board, her head almost resting on it. I find out later that Amy is taking a field Botany class in addition to her creative writing classes. Nature will be a reoccurring theme in the course. The students don’t seem to know what to add on to her nature comment. They look down or at each other, but they don’t hold a stare on anyone for too long. There’s awkwardness to the silence.

“Can anyone read nature into the other poems,” she asks.

After a few more seconds of silence, she changes direction.

“Close your eyes,” she says, as she moves in front of the desk again. “Seriously. I’m going to read the poem out loud. Sit back. Relax. Eyes closed? Not sleeping...” A few students laugh. “Just open your mind. Really listen. Ready?” She picks up her book. I close my eyes. She reads “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the

flow of human blood in human veins.

Her voice is soft and sweet in tone, but loud in volume; it invites you to listen in the way that a starry sky invites you to stare.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

Her pace is perfect, her emphasis is precise. You can feel the rise and fall in each line. This is a poet reading a poem she admires. The students are still. The words float across the room in waves.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans and I've seen its muddy

bussom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

As she finishes the last line the words hang in the air like the last strong pluck of a harp solo. I open my eyes. Most of the students' eyes remain closed--out of obedience, passivity or serenity, I am not sure.

"Did you hear the rhythm," Amy asks. All the eyes open. "Could you imagine this

poem being sung as a Negro spiritual? Flowing up and down? Rising and falling. Does anyone know any?"

"Sing it to us," a student to the left of Amy calls out. A few students guffaw.

Amy blushes instantly, the red flows across her pale skin like a storm covering a weather map. "No I am not... I can't sing anyway," she laughs. "But you can feel it right? The poem. It flows to a.... There's a movement to it that repeats, a waxing and waning."

"A beat" a student to her right queries, his eyes lifted in hope.

"No, not... well you could call it a beat, but more... a long beat... continuous and running. It kind of mimics the flow of water. That's what it makes me feel."

"Moving on to the next one," Amy suggests. "Close your eyes. Ready...?" I keep my eyes open this time. All of the students have their eyes closed. There is little fidgeting.

Amy's voice cracks the complete silence, and she reads "Dream Variations."

To fling my arms wide
 In some place of the sun,
 To whirl and to dance
 Till the white day is done.
 Then rest at cool evening
 Beneath a tall tree
 While night comes on gently,
 Dark like me--
 That is my dream!

No one spoke or moved as she read. Many seemed to release tension from their bodies right into thin air. It's impossible to tell whether they understand and appreciate what she is doing, or if they are simply enjoying a moment of "poetic" peace amid a busy day. Maybe that is enough. Poetry to soothe the soul. She finishes. Eyes open bringing smiles and titters of laughter.

"Are there similarities between the two?"

"This one starts and stops more, more periods," a male student, twirling a pen between his fingers says.

"There are things from... Nature is in it, both" a female student says, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, bright-brown eyes gleaming. She is chewing gum and seems suddenly startled that everyone is looking at her. She moves her head side-to-side, looking back.

Amy waits for more. My eyes wander around the room. The classroom seems like a cliché of urban public education, an impoverished physical setting for an attempt at a full moment of enlightenment. Very little about the North Academic Center, rumored to have been built by a company known for its prisons, is inviting. From having taught at CCNY, I know this room is replicated throughout the building, only the size and the paint color changing: dark evergreen, pale purple and a yellowy-cream. Amy waits. We all wait.

Finally, Amy caves in and breaks the silence, "So we see...If I'm reading nature into these poems, I see Hughes trying to connect nature and people, particularly Black people. The rhythms of nature, he equates with the rhythms of his race. Can we broaden and complicate this reading? Can you see nature in any of the other poems? Can we look at or read them this way?"

"There's the sun in one of them," a male student from the right corner says.

“Which one,” Amy asks. They flip through the pages, but no one can find it.

“So what’s the connection. What are some connections between the nature and the soul” Amy asks. “How is the sun like a soul?”

The students call out:

“The sun and the soul are bright. They shine.”

“They both give us something.”

Amy writes the items down on the board.

“They guide us.”

“They burn. Desire.”

“Some souls are hot...”

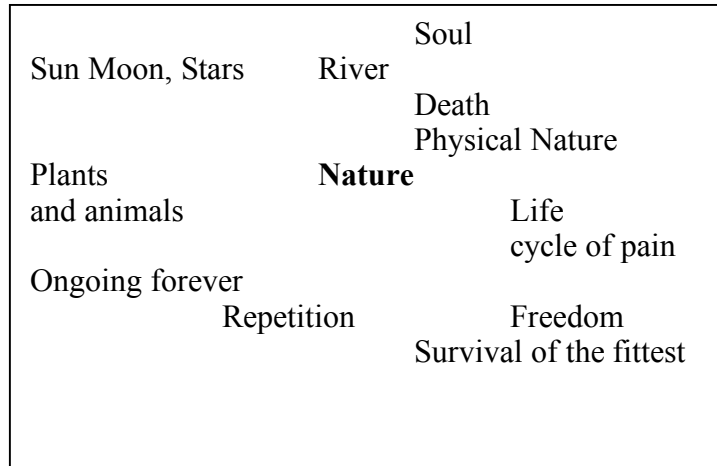
When I talked to her between classes, Amy said that each lesson has a plan or a purpose, and they all fit into the larger scheme. “It’s all connected,” she said. You can see her building something here. The students enjoy having her write what they say on the board. They call out over each other, then repeat what Amy misses. She tells me later, I am modeling a practice I hope they will take on: “building an essay from your initial reactions, getting the first word on paper to build up.”

The call outs come to an end, the chalk makes the familiar dull clank on the aluminum shelf below the board, and Amy turns back to face the class. “OK, what we are doing is a brainstorm,” she says. “Have you done this before? I am sure some of you have, in some form. To write... to have something to write about... we need to get some ideas, some thoughts out there... we want to see where we can go, where our ideas take us... We were kind of doing it already as I wrote down what you said. But what if we start from just one word. What if we pick just one word off the lists on the board. Take the word nature up

here. What comes to mind? In relation to the poems, what comes to mind with nature?"

The students, easily throw out ideas and Amy writes them down in a cluster formation.

On the Board



"So these are all ways to look at Hughes and how he discusses nature," she says. "These are all possible ideas to expand on. Can you see any connections between them? Some things that go... that are relevant?"

"Are you saying we can use these ideas," a student asks. His back is to the board, and so he arches his neck around and copies while he talks. "To write?" Amy is nodding.

"How do we know... what if they aren't good ideas," he asks.

"You will not know until you try it. Remember nothing is wrong in any essay." Amy says quite matter-of-factly. "You just have to prove it. So try to make a reading and see if you can prove it, give some basis...for it."

Amy waits a moment, looking at the board herself. "What if we try soul. I won't write it down, just give me... call out," Amy requests. "If I say soul, what do you think?"

The students respond to this. It is a pleasant cacophony of ideas, and Amy repeats them back. I write in my notes, *Amy really listens. She makes the students accountable for their words. She gives their words importance.*

Amy heads the students more deeply into the poem when she asks a student to elaborate on his call out. “It’s in the title,” he says. “When the soul grows deep like the river. Am I making sense?”

“Keep going, keep going...” Amy encourages.

“He’s saying, just because slavery is not around, does that mean that everything is O.K.? He wants to be alive. Get out of there. Not be held in. What’s... There’s a word for that.” After a pause, the student continues, “He doesn’t want to be sheltered from it. He wants to experience it.” He looks to Amy for confirmation.

“So, if you’re held in, you’re not being told the truth.” Amy says and then adds an affirming, supportive, “Yah, yah.”

“So let’s try this again,” she says. She puts “The Rivers” on the board. The students call out.

On the board.

Pain	In The Garden of Eden
	Flowing Experience
Freedom	
The Rivers.	
Metaphor for life.	Time passing.
	Baptism
	“If you feel freedom then you are real freedom.”
Never Stops	Travel from one place to another.

“Brainstorming is like freewriting,” she says at the end. It can help you open up your idea. Widen out your idea. Take all the information that you have. Your paragraph reactions you did for homework. Take out a piece of paper. Let’s try this with ‘Ardella’ (another poem). Let’s go around the room this time. Everyone should give us something.” She reads “Ardella” out loud.

I would liken you
 To a night without stars
 Were it not for your eyes
 I would liken you
 To a sleep without dreams
 Were it not for your songs.

“What if we focus on the stars,” Amy says, chalk in hand, heading for the board.

On the board.

		Something that can't be reached.
	They guide us.	Divine
Unattainable	distance	
we want to make	Stars	People put hope
patterns from them		in stars.
	navigation	
Famous People		Is it a false hope?
	We wish on stars	
Something that causes wonder.		
	Silly childhood wishes but we believe in them.	

Amy goes around the room and drags out responses, forcing each student to say something. Some students who haven't spoken yet struggle with this. They have nothing to say when it is their turn; they simply claim that someone else has already said what they were going to say. "That's OK," Amy says, "say it again your way." A few are too reluctant and she moves on. They try a second one using the word "sleep."

On the board.

Metaphor for death	Freedom and escape	
A need		society is asleep
A place where		Death: the ultimate sleep
you can't be		pleasant dreams
bothered	Sleep	Nightmares
private dreams		It's a struggle
		to get some.
	Comfort	
		body awake but sleeping brain
None!		

"O.K. try one yourselves," Amy says. "There are eight minutes left in class. Or you can freewrite off of one of the one's we already made. Try and expand, link the ideas together. See what... where you go."

After a shuffle of papers, I watch as some students take out pens for the first time. Next to me, a student with a backpack open on his lap aims the pen at the page and holds it

there, indenting the top line of a blank sheet. He is wearing an orange shirt, just about the same color as the walls, I notice. It hangs over brand new, baggy blue jeans. He is left-handed and begins to move the pen awkwardly. I look around; there are no left-handed desks. After a word or two he stops, but keeps the pen over the page, hoping—begging—for the words to leak out.

I begin to write as well. *She [Amy] is earnest and sincere and well meaning. The students are disarmed by her attention and obvious care for them. The threat is gone; the punitive teacher is not here. Certainly she is getting across the point of close reading, and of multiple readings—the first key step of analysis and critique.*

A cell phone goes off. I look up, but Amy does not. Some students are struggling. Five pens in the room are not moving. I find myself looking at the students' shoes: two sets of tall black boots, sneakers off the top shelf, and ragged, black, shiny "school shoes," some stylish sandals and one pair of pumps. The student next to me has stopped writing. He stares at the page; stares at his words. He moves his writing hand up to his ear, back to the page, now up to the ear again. Now he writes again: one word, maybe two. Adds a comma, and crosses something out.

Amy is seated at her desk, her brown hair dropping toward the page and hiding her face. Her pen glides. Even as her pen continues moving, she says, "Remember, no erasing or crossing out right now, they'll be plenty of time for that. Don't edit yourself!" A few students pause and look up, but others are cruising along and barely notice.

I write. *It will be interesting to see if they can pull all these ideas into a paper. Learning to freewrite, what a strange thing to have to learn to do...to just scratch out a few ideas. I can see why a critic of remediation would say this is not college level class time.*

Shouldn't students be able to do this already? But this is how I work, and how Amy works too. We have many of the same views about writing process. You have to start somewhere, putting words on paper and if you can't do that in a freewrite than you certainly can't do it in a more formal way. My pencil is loud on the page. I can hear it move with that low scratchy flow. I write: We claim writing is freedom. Do they hear my freedom? Does my freedom intimidate them? Do they feel the freedom I feel?

I am slouched in my seat, I realize, my butt having slid almost off the chair. I straighten myself up and look down at my worn shoes and unironed pants. I run my fingers through my ever-thinning red hair. I consider writing something more but just stare at the page instead. Then I look out at the students. On the left wall of the room, a male student in khaki pants and a colored shirt writes furiously. His notebook is angled on his desk and his whole body is without tension; his pen doesn't stop even for an instant. I am intrigued, what could he be writing? He looks relaxed and free.

Amy stops writing, peers around the room and calls the freewriting and the 65-minute class session to a close. Almost everyone stops immediately. A few finish slowly, looking up occasionally as they rattle off a last few words.

Amy clears her throat. "O.K. homework for Monday: Read the next set of Langston Hughes poems. Read them more than once. Choose one word from each and write from it, either a list, a brainstorm or a freewrite. Kind of what we have done here." The students are packing up as she speaks, checking schedules for room numbers, nodding their heads.

As the students filter out several stop by Amy's desk. She tells one that she cannot meet her for office hours this week because she still doesn't have a key for her office. Another complains about being unable to get the readings from the library. She lends out her

book again.

“Go photocopy it right now, but bring it right back.” Other students approach the student with the book. “I need copies too.” “Where is there a copy machine?”

Amy walks closer to them.

“Make one copy and bring the book back to me. Then make the other copies. There’s a copy machine in the library.” They nod, agree on a plan and rush out the door.

“Are you glad that’s over,” I ask.

“Yah, she says. I am so tired today. I don’t know why. I mean I wake up during the class, but right before, and now...” She has a thick blue cardboard multi-file on the desk, and she flips through it inserting various pages in each slot. I notice that each student has his/her own section.

“Teaching wears you out,” I reply. “People who don’t teach have no idea.”

Post-Class Commentary 1

Diversity and Discourse

Amy is the minority in this room in almost every sense, and as a female, even more of a minority than me. I don’t know her well enough to know what this means to her. My Research Journal, September 9.

As the largest public urban university in the country, with a student cohort that includes virtually every demographic category imaginable, City University of New York students represent a kaleidoscope of humanity, a human spectrum fractured and recombined into endless, stunning diversity. As the entry portal for more than one-third of the City College undergraduate

population, the remedial writing course is a microcosm of CUNY diversity. But the same diversity does not hold for the faculty.

As a white female, of Jewish heritage, with a BA degree in English from Barnard College of Columbia University, Amy faces 22 students varying in age from 18 to 47, 14 males and 8 females, who represent nine different “first countries” (Russia, Haiti, Japan, Mexico, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Guyana, Nigeria and the U.S.).⁴ Of the U.S. born students, only two have U.S.-born parents; eight other nationalities are represented among the parents (China, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Britain, Vietnam, Dominican Republic and Ghana). But, CUNY remedial students are even more demographically diverse than a list of nationalities can portray. Two of the students in Amy’s class just immigrated from other countries during the past year; others moved when they were young and attended school mostly in the U.S.; two others moved to and from their native countries twice in their lives. In the course of the semester, I hear many of their immigration stories and am often amazed by their shallow and precarious American roots.

Meanwhile, though probably more diverse than the faculty as a whole, adjunct writing teachers at CCNY are still mostly White and largely well-planted Americans. Since there have been no studies of racial and ethnic diversity among adjunct writing faculty at the college, and since there are no required adjunct meetings, I am unable to make concrete statements about the diversity of the adjunct faculty. However, in any given year in the CCNY English Department there can be as many as 25 adjuncts, and they teach mostly writing, yet, in two years I met only four Blacks, two Hispanics and one Asian instructor. A diversity gap between instructors and students is a critical issue in any conversation about classroom learning, but, particularly in a writing classroom, where the students perceive Standard Academic English (SAE), rightly or wrongly, as the requested discourse, and,

consciously or unconsciously as a language with ethnic and racial baggage. As Mike Rose, Richard Rodriguez, Victor Villanueva and Keith Gilyard document in their autoethnographic studies of their own schooling, the place of the minority within the largely white and largely Standard Academic English speaking classroom is a place of wobbly intellectual and personal negotiation. In the case of Basic Writing, with its gatekeeping role in the university, the gap between the demographic profile of the students and the instructor must have seemed even more pronounced and powerful.

Once the class began to take shape in the first weeks, it became apparent that the classroom diversity splintered into whole new sets of distinctions that startle the imagination. It is hard to suggest that Amy's students fall within even a particular range of ability in terms English language competencies in speaking, writing, reading and listening comprehension. It is not an exaggeration to say that every student in this Basic Writing course, including those born in the U.S., comes from a written "discourse world" that differs markedly, in one way or another, from each other, and from the language community they were now enrolled within. Some students have the direct influence of native languages or parental languages, but others have what we can broadly define as "language complexities" as varied as their backgrounds; that is, what is spoken and written at home and/or at work is not the academic discourse of the academy, but another, or many other challenging, versatile, complex language(s) or dialect(s).⁵ Tsegu and Vladislav could barely speak or write a full sentence in English, yet other immigrants such as Shafiqul had a full command of spoken English and Rosa could write complex ideas with a wonderful sense of audience and style. According to the class questionnaire I had them fill out at the start of the semester, Ghazi could speak and write in Punjalei, Arabic and Hindi; Ben was a fluent writer in Cantonese. Five students had fluent to passing ability to speak and write in Spanish. Even there,

one could detect differences; it would be a mistake to classify all those with Spanish language influences as one and the same. According to an interview with Eduardo, who grew up in Mexico, except for his time in the classroom, he speaks Spanish virtually all day long in Mexican-American peer groups, work life and home life. Meanwhile, a student like Juanita complained to me that she had lost most of the Spanish her parents use (her mother is from El Salvador and her father is from Puerto Rico). Juanita speaks fluent, almost completely unaccented English. Simply put, the influence of Spanish on Eduardo's and Juanita's English is far from similar.

Despite the lack of commonality in their skill levels in spoken English, however, it was quite evident from the outset that Amy's students have a complex set of oral skills: they are masters of a variety of discourses, both formal and informal, used in different circumstances and contexts. They move in and out of various English language settings with functional accuracy, navigating the subway system for example, or the registration process at CUNY. In fact, many have subtle, nuanced and beautiful English "fusion languages," where elements of various languages come together to produce marvelously versatile hybrid-dialects common only to those who hear them: Spanglish, Chinglish, French-Creole English, British Creole English and all sorts of unnamed combinations we can call "streetword," the combination of Puerto Rican Spanish and African American Urban dialect (Black English Vernacular) would be one example.⁶

In terms of their written language, having the same first language influence in common did not mean that the students English language competencies and tendencies were the same in terms of writing. For example, in writing samples from Spanish speakers Eduardo and Leanna, it is clear that Eduardo's writing is influenced by his spoken fluency in Mexican Spanish, both in terms of his inability to deliver complex ideas in English, and in his difficulty with subject verb agreement. For example, here are two lines from Eduardo's informal writing about Hemingway's

The Moveable Feast, where his verbs do not agree: “In conclusion, the main character find her interesting. He learn new knowledge.”

Leanna on the other hand, in a similar piece of informal writing from early in the course, writes about the 1969 Native American occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco. Leanna is able to attempt more complex ideas, without the relatively straightforward grammar mistakes seen in Eduardo’s written English, but her writing has limited syntax. “The native Americans were reclaiming the land of Alcatraz as the right of discovery for all American Indians making this land as a symbol of the great land they once ruled by free and noble Indians.” At first glance the lack of clarity might make it appear that Leanna has the greater problems writing in English. But, Eduardo’s limited vocabulary and sentence structure is a sign that he lacks familiarity and fluency in writing in English, while Leanna has moved beyond limited fluency to more complex ideas, but is struggling with how to express these ideas. So, while both students are influenced by the Spanish language in their backgrounds, the degree and kinds of influence vary widely.

The diversity of the language backgrounds of the students in Amy’s class may have been complicated by the fact that the college was in the process of eliminating its English as a Second Language department. It is unclear if this institutional change meant that more ESL students were placed into the mainstream Basic Writing course, as there were less than a half dozen ESL sections offered that semester. At the time, how a student was classified as ESL was a convoluted and haphazard act of personal attention or benign neglect. Some students landed on the ESL track or the Basic Writing track just based on test scores (TOEFL and/or CUNY WAT and RAT), though it is unclear exactly what combination of scores or single score placed a student on each track. Other students were the recipients of direct personal intervention by advisors and/or professors who would simply recommend that they go into one track or the other, based on their

own observations in the classroom or an ad hoc assessment of oral skills and language experience in an advising session.⁷ In this haphazard system, misplacement was not uncommon. Both Amy and I felt that Tsegu and Vladislav, for example, belonged in an ESL class. And at the end of the course, we discovered that James was supposed to be enrolled in freshmen composition.

Regardless of the causes, it was clear from Amy's classroom that the diversity of influence of second languages on the Basic Writing learning environment should not be underestimated. Though they all had a degree of English-language proficiency in common, the students literacy experience ranged across a smorgasbord of languages and dialects, not just recognizable by their native country or the birthplace of their parents, but by a complex combination of factors that included, when they immigrated, where they went to school, what languages were spoken and written at home, who their peers were and even how much time they spent in a particular slice of a city neighborhood. If every human carries a particular, personal identity, so too, it seems, each student in Amy's room carries a personal discourse--a very specific, social, cultural and linguistic "language identity."

Teacher Expectations

What remains foremost on my mind is the idea that this class is one step away from being asked to leave college.... I don't believe any of them fit into the preconceived idea of remedial. OK, what is that preconception? [She goes onto describe what she thinks the preconceived notion of remedial is:] Stupid. Can't do it. Can't understand. Don't expect too much. As a matter of fact, don't expect anything beyond the most simple thought. Amy's Teacher Journal, September 18.

Amy had no way of knowing what her students would be like in terms of their ability

to read and write at the college level. Before the semester, all she knew was that the class would consist of students who had failed the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT). Having never even looked at a WAT exam page or a sample WAT answer, she had no idea what failing the test meant. She also had been given very little guidance from the composition director or the English Department. Other than a book of procedures and what she could glean from the other graduate student adjuncts she knew, she entered the course without much knowledge of the students or their abilities. However, she admits in her journal that the image of the poorly prepared remedial student did exist in her mind. While she had little for comparison, she was imagining the worst, and her image was confirmed by the faculty she had met. In her journal, she declares that almost universally, the faculty spoke disdainfully of the Basic Writing courses and the students in the Basic Writing classes. As early as October 1, she states: "I haven't met a single person with positive things to say about English II. ...So if the teachers don't expect anything before the class even starts, they've lowered the bar. Why should the students feel more excitement in the class than the teachers?" Yet her own early assessment of the students in the classroom contradicted this image.

After just a few class discussions and after reading just a few informal pieces of writing, she writes in her journal that her students were more talented thinkers and writers than she had been led to believe. The students were "highly underestimated in ability. What they can say; what they can read; how their minds work." Her appraisal is based on plenty of close observation and attention to the students in the class and to their writing outside of class, and I suppose, her conclusions are placed against her own memory of her college experience at a private university. She finishes her early assessment by asking: "Would any

of these students benefit more from a community college? Is CCNY not the right place for them?” But she admits that she is unable to give a firm answer because she does not have enough information on her students, other CCNY students or the community college classrooms and students.

It is obvious to me from early on that Amy sees the potential in each student, and is able to find deeper meaning in almost every piece of their writing. Throughout the class, her optimism about their writing never waned. Amy would often tell me in our interviews about a piece of student writing she had just read. One day in class she says: “Shakespeare was a writer, just like you guys.”

Often it was Saleem’s work that moved her: she described it as difficult to understand, but sometimes “so poetic and so deep.” On September 25, Amy writes in her journal that Begum, who had never spoken in class about any of the four readings that had been discussed so far, had “some really beautiful writing about the rain.” She also writes about Leanna who wrote “some great stuff about the significance of symbolism of dreams.” And about the journals in general, she writes: “I’m happy with what I see. Abeni, Ghazi, and Gerardo to some extent all writing beautifully. Ghazi wrote about his love of Pakistan. Very few problems with English too. It seems that (for some) when the subject interests them, they write without hesitation. Amazing really.” It is possible that she sees more in their work because it is her first semester teaching here. She is constantly seeing promise in a single idea poking its head out of a morass of ragged prose.

Amy had a similar take on the class discussions in the course. While I often felt that the students were struggling to come to complex ideas, Amy would point to moments of insight and struggle as signs that there was a lot going on.

Personality and Pedagogy

She's contemplative and thoughtful; she has such a distinct presence; yet, she's also unassuming, meek even. I get the sense she would not do a good job directing traffic, would not want to tell people what to do. Yet I also think she would want to redesign the intersection. My Research Journal, September 20.

Next to the diversity of the students, the most prominent thing that reveals itself in the first few weeks of class is how much of what happens in the class is controlled by Amy—how the class takes on her personality. Though she is by no means an authoritarian, it is obvious that she has a vision for how she would like the class to run, and from the first day, she set out to direct the class down the path she sees. She chose the eclectic group of texts and decided the kinds of writing the students will do. She also has expectations for the classroom discussion; she wants it to mirror what she perceives as a good intellectual conversation about books and about writing in a classroom setting that she knows well from her own undergraduate experience at Barnard. Thus the desks are in a circle, and students are encouraged to speak to each other, without raising hands.

From the start of the course, I wondered if Amy might have trouble with the students taking her seriously: she is a female writing teacher in a mostly male room; she is no more than a couple years older than most of the students (and younger than others); she dresses down for class and will often joke with students; and she uses a non-authoritarian classroom design and manner of speaking. But, when she calls the class to order, or when she asks them to write they respond completely. It is not a free-for-all and not a restricted class either.

The room moves between frivolity and earnestness. When she stands at the board, waiting for students to call out, her search for a good reading seems serious and genuine. For example, in the class on Hughes, she is attempting to show the students how to struggle with the multiple meanings of poetry. Certainly the writing on the board is intentional, a way to mimic her own process of working things out through writing. She has the students write often, using it as a way to bridge the silences. She wants them to see that they are not as stuck as they think they are, that new directions do not come out of thin air or blank pages, they come through writing.

In a sense Amy helps the students develop a habit of mind. Her informal pedagogy allows the students to try out and try on ideas like so many bad outfits. The uneven, choppy conversations that sometimes lead to pieces of insight, are reflected in the students writing for the course. Her assignments reinforce the classroom in that she asks the students for simple reaction paragraphs to readings and journal entries and short assignments in response to class discussions. All of these "small assignments" are collected and responded to, mostly with compliments and exhortations for further development and deeper analysis. Although she admits later in the semester that she is no longer reading everything the students wrote, during these initial assignments, Amy reads every line.

Politics is Personal

Do these students know the special place they are in? If they were a year younger, they would not have these seats. My Research Journal, September 12

At the start of the class, Amy and the 22 students are largely unaware that our airless cinderblock classroom represented the last vestiges of a Basic Writing program, a 25-year

experiment begun by Mina Shaughnessy and a cadre of recently hired part time and full time instructors. Though large societal and political forces had conspired to set the stage for the creation of Basic Writing in the late 1960s, and to deem this class as one of the last of its kind in the late 1990s, it is mostly personal, department and local institutional forces that influence how this class moves. The students are merely attempting to do what all students do: to attend class three times per week to try and learn the material in order to obtain the best grade they can for their work. And though she expresses concern for her students (and future students) whose seats are in some precarious borderland space of the college, Amy is trying to do what most teachers do: to set up a classroom environment where the students have the best chance of learning the material and doing well. Simply put, both sides are more concerned with the work to be done, rather than with their place in the history of public, urban, higher education, or the placeholders that will or will not take the seats after them.

Like many of the professors who created the tiered Basic Writing system at CCNY in the 1970s, Amy is not overtly political. She understands, I think, the low-status her course holds in the hierarchy of the school, and she sometimes questions institutional practices. In her journal, she complains that the one time WAT exam could not possibly do a good job judging student writing and later she critiques the idea of accepting students into a college only to “kick them out a semester later.”

But, in terms of her classroom style, she does not preach politics--“Wake up! Do you realize the racist system you are in?”--or even browbeat the students with last chance rhetoric or speeches about how opportunity knocks and you have to answer. Both in the classroom and in her office hours she is attentive and intensely supportive, but her connection to the

students is anchored more in a love of language and the writing life and an intense respect for them as individuals, rather than in any desire to balance the scales of injustice. The students come to her class and to her office hours--some of them repeatedly--because both places offer an oasis of hospitality at an often impersonal campus. "This class is the only one where only students get to discuss," Vladislav said during an informal interview. "I never talk anywhere else in my classes."

When I went to Amy's office for our weekly interviews, it was not uncommon for two or three students to be waiting in the hallway with me, as Amy talked with a single student for 15 minutes or even one-half hour. When I ask her about these lengthy sessions, there is an element of parental care in her response: a student was having trouble adjusting to college or had problems at home. But mostly, she indicates, they talk about what the student was trying to say in a piece of writing. "We talk about something they wrote," she said, "and never get past the first paragraph because it is so hard for them to express all the things they want to say--and what they want to say is so complex, and they just have no idea how. It's exhausting."

Amy's goal, it seems, is to provide the space and time for her students to do what she loves to do: to be immersed in reading and writing as a way of making sense of the world. If anything, that is her political bent: to preach that a deeper literacy could not only make their college careers more successful, but a greater literacy could make life more meaningful. In many ways, writing has been a salvation for Amy, and she wants to give the gift of that feeling to her students. To do this requires her to forge a personal reader-writer relationship with individual students. So she listens closely and repeats back what they say in class;

responds to everything they write, and repeatedly offers her time before and after class and in her office hours.

Researcher Reflection

There are power issues here of course, in terms of intervening. It would change our relationship and potentially influence her relationship to the students. Though we hold the same rank in the university, I have been teaching longer, and if I were to intervene, even if she said I should, it could very well feel like a commentary on her teaching—or worse. The students could also misinterpret it. I do not think I will risk this relationship or the project any time soon. But as I write this, I wonder about my own caution. Certainly this is not what Action Research methodology would have me do. My Research Journal, September 21

I know only a few of the students names, and only know what they responded to in the biography questionnaire they filled out, scattered tidbits from full lives. Right now, for me the classroom is like one person, one character that has yet to split into personalities. Though I do not mean to, I read these students as I would my own, by their dress, their movements, their participation and their language. I am wary of prejudging. I want to keep a clean slate about the students, to let their words and actions (the evidence) show me things, rather than letting preconceptions and first impressions dominate: “talker, lazy, inquisitive, character, clown.” It is conscious work to hold the stereotypes and the instant likes/dislikes at bay, to avoid presumptions, to stop myself from filling in the unknown with rote responses based in previous experience.

I am still feeling like the outsider in the room. For the most part, I feel ignored by the students; I do not get the sense that they are acting any differently because I am present.

Have I achieved the non-participatory, fly on the wall, observational stance? Is this where I want to be? For most of the class, I simply write down everything I can. Do the students wonder what it is that I am writing so furiously about? As much as I have read and prepared for the life of a classroom researcher, I feel untethered to any methodology. I seem to just be playing it by feel.

At times, there are things I could do to get us rolling: redirect a question Amy has asked, provided a different reading of a text to help spin a conversation; pull a student aside after class to encourage them to participate more often. But I have let these teaching moments slide by without comment. It is not my class afterall. I should ask Amy whether she wants me to intercede. This is that moment where on the spectrum one wants to be between full, participatory research and collecting data through pure observation. Yet, I find myself subconsciously and consciously restraining myself from playing the alternate teacher role. An increased role in the class will change the experience of the class. But like a journalist who attempts to be objective, though he knows it is impossible, should I attempt to be just an observer? Or do I seek out places to insert myself, change the classroom dynamic and get a whole different set of data, and give the class the benefit of two teachers, and Amy and me the benefit of learning from each other in an interactive way over the whole semester? As a researcher in someone else's classroom, believing in action research can only be done in concert with a teacher who believes in action research as well. Since none of this was decided before the semester began, it is perhaps too late to instigate it now.

CLASSROOM NARRATIVE 2: FLIRTING WITH SHAKESPEARE

Class Context

In the classes prior to this one, the students analyzed scenes from *Macbeth*, specifically the scenes that emphasized the witches' prediction that begins the play, *Macbeth's* hesitation to kill the king and the role of Lady MacBeth in pushing *Macbeth* to commit his crime. Students were actively involved in the conversation and often pointed to lines they were struggling to understand. Some were familiar with the text from high school, with a few admitting they had mostly watched a movie version.

Amy had commented to me that a senior faculty member had questioned why she was using Shakespeare in such a low-level class. This had enraged Amy. "As if college students shouldn't be able to read Shakespeare," she said. She told me she likes using Shakespeare because it's easy for the students to provide many different readings. The students fulfilled her intention when one cited the witch scene as proof that MacBeth's actions were "pre-determined by destiny," while a second student suggested that the witches put the idea in *Macbeth's* head and a third quoted from the scene, before suggesting that *Macbeth* already had the impulse to carry out the murder. Another student said, "It's Lady MacBeth's idea, she's a power freak." Later, one student directed the class to Act I; Scene iv:

We still have judgment here; that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
 Commends th' ingredients of our poisoned chalice

To our own lips. ...

Then she said: "It's like what goes around comes around." Another added, What you put in motion can come back at you. It's like Frankenstein." *Now there's a paper topic*, I thought.

* * *

Classroom Narrative: September 30

Amy comes into the room, stops behind her desk, and unpacks her knapsack, the same type and style that some of her students carry. James, a pre-med student taking 21 credits has his head on his desk. Carver, a thin, young version of Martin Luther King, including the mustache, is reading the photocopy of scenes from Shakespeare's plays. Saleem, who Amy and I agree has a dream-like quality to him, stares at the floor, his body erect and almost tense, but his eyelids falling and opening like a theater curtain during the applause. Ghazi, from Saudi Arabia, sits just to the right of Saleem; he fidgets, never sitting entirely still for more than a few seconds. There are 12 students so far, scattered around the semi-circle. Amy makes a last shuffle of papers on her desk, and then silently walks over and closes the door. Click. This ritual has become like a whistle, calling all eyes forward.

The students were given excerpts from Hamlet to read. The excerpts include the ghost scene, where Hamlet's father appears and seemingly reveals the identity of his killer. Amy heads for the front of the teacher desk and asks: "Any comments or questions about it to begin with?"

"I found it easier," whispers Roberto, who is sitting next to me. He is a handicapped student confined to a wheel chair and he rarely speaks in class.

Amy swivels her head toward Roberto and raises her eyebrows expectantly. "Easier in what way," she asks.

“It was easier to follow. Easier than the other one,” he says, referencing MacBeth.

Amy waits for more. Nothing comes. She scans the room looking for another student to add onto Roberto’s comment.

There is a tug and then a light knock on the door. Amy walks over and opens it. Three more students shuffle in, avoiding eye contact, though Amy does not reprimand them either verbally or by gesture.

“Well let me ask you a question then,” she says, shutting the door in the process. Click. “Why does Hamlet believe the ghost?”

“He’s in shock,” Ghazi calls out from Amy’s left.

“If I saw a ghost who knew things about me, I’d certainly believe him,” Carver says exaggerating the second half of the sentence. Some of the students chuckle.

“Hamlet believed the ghost because of detail; he was able to detail,” Eduardo says.

Amy is nodding. She has walked to the front of her teacher desk again, and she slides onto it with one smooth motion. She calls on James. He is slouching back in his chair, seemingly displeased. But he leans forward and shifts upward as he prepares to speak. James’s parents were born in Britain and his speech carries that pronunciation. “The language and tone of his voice sounds like a father,” he says. “The tone of a king. Someone with power. And his father was the king. So that makes him.... um, Hamlet feels like he believes him.”

“Excellent,” Amy says. “All of those are solid reasons.”

But her accolade seems to stop the flow of responses, almost as if they are waiting for the next question. Amy, patiently, moving her eyes around the room, encourages the students to say more with her pause.

After 25 seconds, she says: “The spirit, the ghost, comes to him like a revelation. Like an oracle that tells the truth. Not saying that you’ve seen a ghost. I don’t want to get into ghost stories,” she laughs, “but has anyone had a moment where you’ve had a revelation, a moment of clarity, where you felt like you figured something out that you... Something you were having trouble with, suddenly became clear. What you should do became apparent to you maybe?”

Leanna, 20 years old with a child of her own, looks up from her notebook, and asks, “Is it possible that it is not his father, it’s not real?” This is strikingly out of context to Amy’s summation and seems to reference back to the previous conversation, as if Leanna has just now caught up. But she speaks with such earnestness that she turns the class toward her question. From the other side of the room, Charity says in a whisper, “Well I agree. It’s not so sure, clear... what if it isn’t... It may not be his father.” Charity, a Haitian student, rarely speaks and misses class often. Amy nods in her direction, and with a floating right arm, asks her to continue.

“He believes. He’s thinking it before...” she says. “The ghost comes after he was thinking...”

Carver overrides her sentence, “Ghosts can also play tricks on people. They have powers. Non-human powers.”

Leanna, with a firmer voice now, adds, “There’s nothing that points to that the ghost is his father. Hamlet has the idea in his mind already. If somebody tells you something you want to hear, you kind of agree with it.” No one else speaks, and so, after a pause, he continues, “He doesn’t like the uncle sleeping with his mother. He should have been king. So he... the thing is there. It’s like having a motive. He’s... He needs to believe it. And so

he does.”

There is a 45 second silence. Amy, her legs dangling, looks at Saleem for a contribution. He does not have the reading out. He stares blankly at the floor, seemingly in a trance. In between classes, she has told me how she thinks Saleem is the most intelligent student in the class. How he appears out of it all the time, but he writes some amazingly insightful things, “deeply philosophical” she qualified. She believes no one has tried to understand him before, and so he has gradually stopped talking. He doesn’t even notice her looking now though.

Instead, Amy begins asking a question, “So if he has the idea already and then the ghost...”

James, speaking simultaneously, says, “It’s about duty and revenge. He wants a reason.”

Amy looks to James, but he looks down, and Amy continues her previous statement “...or the revelation, whether you believe it’s a ghost or not, reinforces... so when he has the chance why doesn’t he do it?” She stares at James while she asks this.

Leanna answers, “He was praying. The king. You can’t kill someone when they’re praying.”

There is a pause as if Leanna’s comment sounds like the right answer.

“I think Hamlet is a coward,” Ghazi says. He pauses and looks around the room quickly.

“He’s mad enough. Just go ahead and kill him. But he holds back. He should have killed him.”

“Maybe Hamlet doesn’t believe the ghost. Maybe he wants to see for himself,” Ben says.

“So now he doesn’t believe the ghost,” Amy rephrases.

I note in my journal: *Though it sometimes stalls, the classroom is truly alive: multiple speakers, three or four more engaged, following the commentary their heads swiveling from speaker to speaker.*

LaToya, who speaks everyday in class, but has been silent so far, raises her hand and speaks simultaneously, “Well we all don’t follow through on things all the time,” she says. “It’s like when somebody tells you...” She begins telling a self referential, hypothetical story, and though I try not to, I tune her out, only picking up every few words: “A woman... school... boyfriend... it’s like... I had...when you don’t....” LaToya has worn me out with her hypothetical and personal reality tales, even though it’s only the end of September. Always ready to talk in class, she sometimes shows disdain for the course and the other students, and confesses to me one day after class that she doesn’t think she belongs in this class. She has received an acceptance to UCLA, she says, and as soon as her scholarships come through, she intends to go there. I think to myself, why does she perceive UCLA as being such a grander place.

I glance over at Carver who is scribbling on a sheet of loose leaf. He has half a page written. I notice the very big margins. He is probably doing the paragraph reaction that is due today, I think.

LaToya’s story ends and Leanna speaks as if LaToya had not spoken at all. She says, “I think he wanted the king to confess. Revenge is not good enough. He wants him to admit it. Killing without confession is not enough... of a...isn’t all he wants.”

“He didn’t kill the king immediately,” Lewis says, “because then everyone would say what... you..., especially his mom, why did you kill the king? He would say because I saw a

ghost. That's just not believable. So they wouldn't accept... Yah, um. So he just hesitates."

Amy nods, her chin touching her chest.

Lewis is an older student, who holds down a full time job at an accounting firm. He is returning to school part time after having failed out of an Engineering program at Brooklyn Polytech a year ago. He has missed class often but he is a quick study.

Surprising me, Charity speaks up again, but her sentence is unclear: "This is higher in salary not revenge (sic)."

Amy hesitates, "And so that means..." she asks.

Charity replies, "So he's... Nevermind." She puts her head back towards her book and blushes slightly. A few seconds pass, and then Amy says, "O.K. so let's come back to those." I glance at the clock; it is 3:27 and Charity gets up and leaves the room.

Still sitting on the teacher-desk, her hands in front of her, or sometimes making mild gestures with one or the other, Amy says, "Thinking about the scenes in the play that you have. If you were going to stage this as a movie, the ghost scene in a movie, the scene where the king is praying, how would you do it? What action, what movement is there on stage?"

James cocks his head to the side, almost with an air of authority, "The plan you mean? Hamlet, uh. The stage would be dark. Just Hamlet standing there."

Eduardo adds in, "I see a ghost would be in the air. Large."

LaToya says, "Hamlet could be hiding behind the wall."

Amy asks, "Is Hamlet doing anything?"

No reply.

"He's thinking, remembering..." James says.

Amy continues, "So it seems like a lot of this is in the head. There's no action.

When he has the chance to do something, he doesn't do it. He just stands there thinking and talking to himself. That's the action. In the head. It seems like, well. That was his chance. So it's not a play about action. He's very involved in his own thoughts. So what other things do thought and memory bring about? Where do you see a lasting impression?"

There is a rustling of pages as students avoid eye contact by looking to the text.

Amy continues, "What else is thought? What are our thoughts? Are they visible? Real? Tangible? Action?"

Saleem, sitting in his usual seat just to the right of Amy, raises his downcast eyes, and says, "Thought is the unconscious."

Amy, relieved, leans over and cranes her neck to get eye contact. "What do you mean?"

Saleem adds, "Hamlet speaks his unconscious."

Amy queries, "I'm not sure what you mean...." She waves her hand in a half circle.

Saleem stays silent for 10 seconds, then replies, "We get to hear what he thinks, but it's not like he's speaking. What he says are his thoughts out loud, but they're really just in his head. They are said out loud so we, the audience, can hear them." His eyes stay focused on the floor.

"So it's a writer's device that Shakespeare uses, Saleem? Shakespeare needs his readers to hear what Hamlet thinks" Amy asks.

Saleem nods and looks at her.

Leanna says, "Thoughts are like a wish. Something that you want to do that's been bothering you. By thinking it, he wants to make it real."

Amy says, "That's really profound." It comes out flat. She continues, "Look at line

30, page 59, line 30, no 29. Hamlet says, ‘Haste me to know’t that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or thoughts of love,/May sweep to my revenge.’ So what does Hamlet need to do to get revenge. Before he can get revenge?”

Ghazi, sitting next to Saleem, and therefore facing most of the class, plays with two pens. He puts them in an X then clicks them back and forth reversing the axis. Geeta, sitting next to me says to herself, “Thoughts are a plan and action.”

Carver says, “Hamlet starts to act crazy.”

No one speaks for thirty seconds.

I write, *This is painful to watch. I’m looking at the clock. Waiting for it to be over. But I totally understand what she is trying to do. She is trying so hard not to give into the silence.*

James says, “He has to think about it before he can do it. He has to know for sure.”

Amy says, “So let’s look at the text. Take it out. Find it. Where in the text does Hamlet talk about whether he knows for sure.”

There is a rustle of pages. One and a half minutes pass.

“So did anyone find anything,” Amy asks.

More silence. *It’s like we have run aground. No, that is not the right metaphor. A ship that runs aground has a crew that bursts into action, either because they are trying to save the ship, or themselves. Here the students are doing very little. They stare at the pages, but they do not flip them. Two skim with a pen in their hands. They work at avoiding detection, rather than working on the reading.*

Amy continues, “Let’s look at page 115.”

She reads a passage from the king, after he rises from kneeling in prayer. “My

words fly up, my thoughts remain below./Words without thoughts never to heaven go.’ So, can you separate thoughts from words? How are words and thoughts connected?”

Silence settles over the room again, and then a mumbled yes.

Amy says, “Did someone just say...”

Eduardo says, “Not always. Sometimes you just say things without thinking.”

Carver adds, “How is it possible to say something without words?”

Saleem says, “Words and thoughts. Thoughts and words. You think, you speak. All your thoughts are in words.”

James says: “It goes back and forth. You think and then speak, but what you speak influences what you think.”

After this flourish, the class is silent again.

“It comes down to, he doesn’t get what he wants,” James says.

Amy asks, “The King?”

James says, “No Hamlet.”

Amy says, “O.K. we have to stop there. Let me describe your assignment. Don’t forget to hand in paragraph reactions today and your journals.” There is some minor grumbling. Amy continues, “You knew that, c’mon. Here’s the assignment.” She distributes a page to each student. “It’s a group thing. The instructions are very clear on the page. Read them over before you leave and meet with your groups. I’ll call them out.”

She parses the assignment page: “Discuss similarities. Then freewrite. Discuss differences. Then freewrite. Then come up with topics. Then discuss those topics with each other. Then write about the topics. ”

She calls out names and puts them in groups. In a hectic scramble, group members

move toward each other. The class is technically over, but no one leaves the room.

The assignment requires them to meet between classes. I listen as they compare schedules. The group next to me goes through the whole week till next Thursday: Work, classes, family obligations...some flipping through day planners, they can't find a time. They ask Amy. She says they'll have to work it out. They agree on Wed. 2:30-4:00 and Thursday 12:00-1:30. One student will be missing each time.

Students begin to filter out, dropping their journal notebooks off on Amy's desk. LaToya, puts her notebook on top and asks, "You say you want to correct the journal, but how can I do my homework if I give you my notebook?" Amy looks at her and can't help but roll her eyes. I cannot hear her reply. She pats the top of the foot high pile, all shapes and sizes, marble, spiral, loose-leaf bound. LaToya turns away quickly and half-runs out the door.

Tsegu, a Japanese student who has never spoken in class stays behind to ask for extra help. Amy has been meeting with him in her office. He has an undergraduate degree from Japan that he is not sure counts for anything in the U.S. He wants to go to graduate school in international studies. I got this information from Tsegu in four or five separate conversations. His spoken English is limited to a few methodical phrases at a time, and his comprehension often lags behind, leading him to nod his head and say yes, yes, as if you asked him a question.

Post-class Commentary 2

Classroom Conversation

The silence of some students is astonishing. Charity and Begum can go weeks without uttering a single hmmm of agreement or hurrumph of disapproval. I don't think Saleem and

Tsegu have spoken at all, and they are not the only ones. How is it that LaToya is completely comfortable speaking until Amy cuts her off, yet Charity and Begum seem scared to utter a word despite Amy's encouragement. My Research Journal, September 21

We are more than a month into the semester and the class has set itself into a common behavior pattern. Attendance is high, although a gaggle is often late. The classes always start slow and then the conversation builds, with Amy pushing the students. During the pauses in the class dialogue, Amy waits. The seconds seem to click by in a physical way. Eventually she resorts to traditional teacher questioning of the students. They almost always respond to the questions, sometimes with more than one student answering. Before too long, something twists the right way and the conversation rolls. At least half-a-dozen speak and half-a-dozen more pay solid attention. But then, the conversation falters and slows to a stop. And Amy begins again.

Amy writes about her students' ability to initiate and extend conversation in her teaching journal. In addition to her graduate school courses and freelance web design work, she is also teaching an art/writing workshop to an eighth grade class for which she receives a stipend. Amy compares the rule-following attitude of her eighth grade students to the more independent remedial writing students. She states that the eighth graders are always asking "Can I do it this way?" or "Is this alright?" Meanwhile, her college students are able to decide for themselves, to "think outside the box" a metaphor she is using to suggest that they didn't need the constant teacher support. Yet to my view, the outside the box moments seem too few in number. I think the students are having a difficult time adjusting to the open-ended, free-flowing college level discourse that Amy is trying to encourage. They seem willing to let Amy direct every turn, as they turn their eyes to her after each student

comment.

Another discourse trait is the male-dominated nature of discussion. James, Lewis or Carver often take center stage and mostly talk with Amy. Carver, for example, is part class clown and part rebel class derailer. When he is interested, he uses his significant linguistic skills to speak authoritatively about texts and ideas, often stubbornly refusing to see alternative points of view. He writes the same way. In his opening statement for the course about his language background, he wrote how he considers French and Creole and English as separate languages useful in their own spaces. In the classroom, Amy has come to rely on his energy. But at times, Carver's combative male voice shuts down the other students. In the narrative above, he uses his authority to shut down the conversation about Hamlet's ghost. When Charity does speak, she lasts only half a sentence before Carver overrides her.

Another limitation on classroom conversation for some of the students is the confidence they have in their use of English on an intellectual level--in what they perceive to be a formal setting. Eduardo falls into this category. Though he is an older student (30) and always attentive in class, he speaks infrequently. When he does talk, it is in fast bursts. Early in the semester I ran into him outside the coffee bar in the atrium of the NAC building. He asked me about my study, and asked to read some of it. I told him I would be happy to share it, and then felt comfortable enough to ask him why he didn't talk more in class. He described his lack of confidence in speaking in English, suggesting that it's hard to come up with all the right words fast enough, and that he often thinks of the right thing to say after the class has moved on to a different topic. When I pointed out that he seemed to have all the right words now, he said it was different in class, in front of everyone. He talks more in groups, he said.

The silence of many students in Amy's classroom is surprising given the open and inviting forum for discussion that she has designed into the course. Students are not bound by classroom formality: they do not have to raise their hands; they sit in a circle; there is plenty of group work; they often write about the topics before discussing them; and, although she sometimes retreats to the question-answer-evaluation mode of discourse so common in traditional classrooms, Amy attempts to support any comment, any reading or analysis by replying to it or using it to launch into a more complex idea. She never dismisses an idea or declares a reading as incorrect. Amy makes no explicit statement about the formality of the discourse, no limitations are placed on student voices, and in fact Amy tells me more than once in conference that it disappoints her greatly that the students are not willing to engage each other in conversation, but instead wait for her to reply to each comment. When Amy offers them additional time, the classroom pace slows significantly.

One day Amy leaves her common perch on the desk and sits in a student desk in the circle with the students. They do not act any differently and the class has the same stop-and-go feel.

Written Discourse

In the early part of the course, Amy uses writing to generate ideas. The students are encouraged to keep a journal and write about anything they wish. They also write in the journal each day in class (freewrites that are often targeted to the question at hand) and Amy writes with them. She also often writes on the board, showing how writing can generate to ideas. And, she has students writing "Paragraph Reactions" to texts they are reading. Amy collects and responds to everything—including the journals.

Reading through these various forms of informal writing, I found that the students' written products vary in both content and in craft in complex, almost idiosyncratic ways (see Chapter 4).

But one generalization for all of these writers is that their written language complexity, versatility and competency (i.e. confidence, knowledge of forms, versatility of usage, understanding of audience, creative style, clarity and even volume written) lags behind their oral skills.⁸ This is noticeable even in their informal, nonacademic writing tasks (freewrites, writing in class, reactions to readings). Most strikingly, the students' written forms lack the energy and personalities I had come to know them as: by and large, their writing is pancake flat, as awkward and halting as a teenager at his first dance. Consider this example from Carver, the ever-present class clown and showboat in verbal discourse:

The Yippies make a point about why we are experiencing so many earthquakes and other natural disasters in the past few decades. They believe it's because we are covering the earth too much by building so many high- and express-ways on it. According to the yippies the earth needs to breathe. trying to prove their point, the yippies say that the eruptions of volcanoes are evident that the earth needs to breathe in some fresh air. Their idea has not been proven in any way, but I have to admit it makes sense. The earth crust is extremely hot.

They neuter their volume and their variety of discourse when they speak in class, and they silence themselves even further when they write. This is one of the places where Amy and I did not agree however. As I describe in the commentary for the first narrative, Amy sees much more willingness to write and much more creativity in their work and is constantly surprised by the insight and complexity of their comments. Throughout the course she saw ways into their work that I was not seeing.

Choice of Texts

Is using Shakespeare as a text hindering rather than facilitating Amy's goals for the course? She wants students talking and writing like college level students. Is this too big a leap? My Research Journal, November 1

Amy chose a reading list based on what she enjoyed as a reader and what she wanted to teach. After she made her choices though, and as she made her way through the semester, Amy became increasingly aware of the debates over acculturation and multiculturalism in relation to the choice of texts and the privileging of certain discourses. However, it was a less theoretical objection to her readings that she would recollect to me one day when we discussed the use of Shakespeare in Basic Writing class while sitting in our regular spots in her cramped office. Amy told me that one of the full time faculty physically cringed when she told him she was using Shakespeare in her basic Writing class. "They won't understand it," she quoted him as saying. She took this as a challenge. This was one of Amy's better attributes as a teacher. She was young enough, and naive enough not to believe the cynicism and she was unwilling to underestimate what her students could handle. I am not certain she saw the cultural clash: a classroom of black, Hispanic, Japanese and Indian students to whom the Barnard-educated white instructor offers up Shakespeare and Hemingway. She simply believed in the students' abilities and willingness to tackle what may be "different" and difficult for them, and, she told me that she thinks it's important for them to engage with texts that are part of the academy's canon, suggesting that it will empower them. So far in the semester the students show a willingness to meet her challenge.

Role of the Researcher

At this point in the semester, is it good enough to just have Shakespeare wandering around the room like a flirt at a cocktail party, and then to have the students freewriting about it? I haven't raised this issue in my weekly meetings with Amy. I am still lost in terms of my role as a researcher interloper/intruder into her class pedagogy. If I raise this issue, will it come off as advice, concern, reprimand? Yet, if I do not raise it, am I doing the students a disservice? Some of these students are ready for a deeper challenge. Others, of course are not and may not be during the whole semester. My Research Journal, September 28

As a researcher I have continued to resist the urge to interject during class. Even in group-work, I let the students direct the conversation. Before or after class, they sometimes ask me what I think, and I answer them honestly, but in a fairly concise way. On occasion I have redirected a group to return to the conversation we are supposed to be having. This feels very “teacherly” to me, almost parental, and certainly skews the data by forcing them to focus on the class content for longer periods. I am left wondering if the benefit of their learning, however directed, outweighs the importance of valid data for my project. But it's more complicated than that. How do I even know that by inserting myself I will enhance their learning? I may offer conflicting advice. I may not know the students' writing well enough.

But there is another issue I am now facing. In interview sessions with Amy, she often asks me what I have been noticing and/or thinking and sometimes she asks me what to do. My tendency here, as with the students, is to answer honestly to whatever she asks; it would seem unresponsive to hold back information and advice. In this sense the course is

collaborative. Yet I am fully aware that this act is in direct opposition to how I respond to the students' needs. I can rationalize of course, by saying that she is asking for a response; meanwhile, the students are, for the most part, ignoring me. I would have to insert myself in terms of the students; whereas, with Amy, I am reacting to her request. Yet there is a sense that I am helping Amy however I can, while leaving the students to go it alone. If I am helping Amy, however, I am certainly influencing the course, and helping to direct the students' learning. For now, this is enough.

Professional Status

Why am I in a position to make this type of decision [whether students belong in college or not]? And how many English II teachers are really qualified or interested enough to make this decision? Amy's Teaching Journal, October 1

Since Amy's class takes place late in the day, we often sit in her windowless bunker office discussing her course as the campus settle into the commuter college ghost-town hours between daytime and nighttime classes. The cluttered space she shares with three other adjuncts is narrow, like a subway car, and it has the feel of a government office: everything looks temporary, thrown together, but in fact, it has all been there for years. Two desks jut out from the far wall, right behind one another, each with a "visitor chair" beside it. There is just enough room to get by the first desk and chair to go to the second. There are two bookcases, every shelf with its own personality: one with composition handbooks and literature readers neatly arranged across from one end almost in size order, while another had uneven piles of eclectic titles from memoirs to works in anthropology, and a third had stacks

of papers and folders splayed across--an unholy mess. The three tall file cabinets look like they are made of tank-metal and the beige color matches the fading yellow-white walls. Each cabinet drawer is labeled with the last name of an adjunct, past or present, written on peeling masking tape or on a cardboard insert; sometimes one name is crossed out and another written in above. On top of one of the cabinets, a glass vase covered in dust sits next to a foot-tall pile of yellowing photocopies. Surely the students read Amy's lack of status through the obvious transience of this office space.

In the dim, fuzzy fluorescent light, the tape recorder whirring softly, Amy and I talk about how the class was going. When she got on a roll, I'd just let her talk and focus on the two-foot square outline of darker paint on the wall where a picture or poster had once hung.

During these interviews, from her hovel of an office, Amy often discussed the sequestered life of the adjunct teacher of Basic Writing. At the start of the class, Amy had no experience teaching Basic Writing or English as a Second Language (ESL), had never taught on the college level, was unfamiliar with the WAT and had no familiarity with the policies and procedures of the department, school or university. Yet, the program had no orientation for new adjuncts, no meetings of any kind and no mentoring program. Since she was a graduate student, she knew more faculty members than most adjuncts, both her fellow graduate student adjuncts and the full time faculty members who taught her seminars. But she complained about her lack of access to the composition director who called their one meeting of the semester short when he had to run out for an observation of another class. "I didn't even get to ask any questions," she said.

Typical of the stories Amy would tell, another graduate student adjunct that I interviewed described how he decided on a direction for his course.

I was supposed to teach English 110 [freshmen composition], but the composition director just called me one day a few weeks before the semester and told me I was now teaching English II. I came into campus one day. I am not even sure why. They didn't ask me to come in or anything. I stopped by the assistant composition directors office [not a faculty member]. She handed me some sample syllabi from 1990 and 1991 and pointed me to a wall of books and told me to pick a text for the course. I chose the one that was used on one of the syllabi. And so I designed my course just like that one. It was a disaster from the start.

* * *

CLASSROOM NARRATIVE 3: EVOLUTION OF EVA LUNA

Class Context

It is three long weeks before Thanksgiving, the moment in the semester when students and teachers--and classroom researchers--feel like the flow of the semester halts, like we are a bunch of logs pooled-up in front of a dam. We are swimming around in stagnant water and getting sick of it. After Thanksgiving, the semester schedule acts like a gravitational force, pulling us all toward the semester break with exponential speed. But right now, in this windowless, stuffy classroom on the fourth floor of NAC, time has slowed, patience receded, cabin fever set in. I am tired of observing, interviewing and piling up pages of data. I simultaneously feel as if I have enough information to write my project right now, while also having no desire to write it at all. I am in the thick of it, drowning in words and ideas and apathy, and nowhere close to figuring a way out. I have enough and also nothing at all.

Even Amy has expressed exasperation of late: in the previous class, she admonished

the students “Just so we’re clear, this is the last time I’m letting people in late. If the door’s locked; no one’s opening it for you.” In our interview today, she snapped about students “half-assing” the assigned writing, and about her perception that some of the students do not take the class time seriously.

In the same interview, I explained to Amy that from my experience teaching Basic Writing, mid-November is the point in the semester when students get weighed-down and begin to sink. In any semester of Basic Writing there is a handful who drop the course in the first two weeks: for some, employment or life circumstances are in the way; for others, there is a genuine lack of understanding about what college requires. This does not happen in Amy’s case; only Homer, a 47-year-old adult student, drops the course. But now, the missed classes, increasing demands and higher expectations for more complete essays have some of the students looking a little wide-eyed. To use a worn metaphor, they are able to tread water through October, but now the water flows fast and they will not have prepared enough to make the swim.

In this third classroom narrative, instead of providing a whole class uninterrupted, I provide sections from four different classes from early November as a cohesive unit. We spent most of these classes reading, discussing and writing about Isabelle Allende’s *Stories of Eva Luna*, more class time than on any other text. In addition, the classroom discussions of Allende show Amy’s most overt attempt to move the students beyond reaction to analysis, and over the course of the four days we slipped in and out of a somewhat contentious debate over feminism.

Amy had directed the students to read certain Allende stories, and to choose other stories they wanted to read. She emphasized, since all the people in the room had not read all

the stories, that before making a comment, the student should summarize the plot of the story for everyone. (She had them do this in written form one day.) In addition to preparing them for the essay they would write, this seemed to give the students confidence, as they became “the expert” on their particular story.

Classroom Narrative: November 4⁹

On the first day of the discussion of Allende, Amy asks the students to give some adjectives to describe the female characters in the book. This is an unusual move for her, to begin with such a direct question at the start of a conversation about a text. The students call out “courageous, strong-willed, humble, stupid, strong-minded,” and Amy writes down the words on the board. Amy asks a follow up question: “What else do you think of the women in the book? Are they free?”

“They make their own decisions,” Geeta replies. But no one else engages. Amy responds by asking the students to pick three of the stories they read and freewrite about them. She gives them six minutes. A student asks if he can use the book while writing. Amy says yes, and a number of students take books out. Carver takes Pierre’s book off his desk and pages through it. He does not write at all. Rosa sitting near me is writing furiously, but I notice her name on the top of the page and realize she is doing the paragraph reaction homework that is due today. She writes in perfectly aligned, printed, fully capitalized letters. But the rest of the students are reading some and writing mostly. The classroom takes on the feel of an after-school session.

When Amy reopens the discussion, the students offer simple comments about Allende, and Amy lets them hang in the air--safely. When they reach an impasse, she has the

students write—seemingly any time the class discussion comes to a halt. As students offer opinions, she sometimes pushes them to search the text for support. They settle into a back-and-forth concerning an ending of one story.

“The revenge was to kill the guy. But she killed herself. I think she should have killed the guy, instead of killing herself,” Rosa says.

“But I think it, it’s more painful if he lives,” Vladislav says.

“If he dies, he doesn’t suffer,” Eduardo adds.

“She didn’t know how to kill him the right way,” LaToya says.

“Revenge is something you need to get up in the morning all planned out, not something you can do right away,” James says.

“It’s pre-meditated,” Ghazi says.

“This is the same as Hamlet,” Ben says. “When to take revenge.” Some heads in the classroom nod in agreement.

The students here are talking across the room to each other. Amy’s role has faded into a background role of facilitating with a nod or a pointed finger which student will speak next. There’s a slight happy smile on her face.

After the conversation slows a bit, Amy restarts it by moving to a different story and a new conversation between the students picks up. Lewis, who has been an active participant throughout, cannot find a line to defend a claim he is making. “She doesn’t say it, but she implies it,” he says of Allende. From his comment, Amy reinserts herself into the class.

“Stories have literal and implied meanings of a text,” she says. “There is the plot, and then there is what the author is trying to make you think—what he or she wants to convince you to believe. It is not always spelled out. But there is a meaning to the story. It is the

unspoken that we talked about with Hemingway. Can anyone give me the unspoken, the implied meanings of a story, of one of the stories?"

She gives them only a few seconds to respond, before directing them further. "For example, what is she saying about women through these stories?"

The students remain silent.

"Does anyone know what feminism is," Amy asks.

"Women would be equal with men," Shafiqul provides.

"Feminism is when you don't need a man to survive," Rosa says.

"Whenever I hear about feminism, it always seems like more than equality," James adds.

Amy rephrases his idea, "So, you think it's as if the traditional male dominated society becomes a female dominated society. Do people agree with James?" But no one takes up the challenge. Amy asks them to look through the text and write down any passages that indicate something about Eva Luna. Carver has pitched forward onto his desk. Sound asleep, Pierre's book, which he borrowed during a previous freewrite is under his cheek. James is struggling to stay awake. His head bobs forward and then he catches himself with a sudden jerk backward.

Later, Amy asks if the students thought the female characters in Eva Luna were feminists. For the next 10 minutes, only men in the room speak. At one point, Lewis brings the class to a dead halt by declaring, "I don't want to stereotype, but most extreme feminists I know are lesbians." Some male students laugh like boys. And a few female students snicker in embarrassment or avoidance. Others focus their eyes on the floor.

Amy says, "Well, that is a leap I am...we can not make. It's just not an accurate...."

Lewis attempts to defend his comment. “I don’t mean...it sounds harsher than I wanted. It’s just that the women I know, are not really feminist oriented.” Pierre slides his book from under Carver’s face and begins paging through it. Carver sits up and rubs his eyes.

After a seemingly endless pause, Amy redirects the class. “Tell me what you think of this...If feminism is like you defined it before, if it’s equality in everything, the ability to act equally, then everyone of these characters did what they wanted to do.”

LaToya says, “They go about it...when a woman steps up to do what a man does, they should be allowed. They was just being human beings...to do what they want when they want.”

Shafiquel adds, “Evaluna could be feminist because she describes the position of women that have in this society.”

Others want to speak, but some are packing up. We have run past the class time.

Classroom Narrative: November 9

The following class is a Monday. As a way to begin preparation for the Writing Assessment Test, Amy has designated each Monday’s class for in-class writing. In this case, she manufactures a WAT-like question from the discussion of Allende: Are the female characters in *The Stories of Eva Luna* weak or strong?¹⁰ Although not required on the exam, she wants the students to incorporate quotes from the stories to support their ideas, and since many of the students end up running out of time, she allows them to take the essays home to do more work on them.

At the start of third class on Isabelle Allende’s short stories, Amy returns the

discussion to a feminist reading of the stories. She begins the class by asking them what they had noticed while re-reading the required stories and looking at the new stories they had chosen to read. “Who doesn’t think these women are strong, and I saw it in your homework, so I know some of you do” she asks, while walking from one end of the class to the other.

James says under his breath: “Don’t call us out.”

Leanna says, “I think certain things I can do just as well as a man. I don’t think...I think men are more powerful strength-wise.”

“I think women can do anything a man can do,” Eduardo says.

“And vice-versa,” Amy adds.

“Well men can’t have children,” James says.

There is a knock on the door. Because he has been late so often, Amy says “It’s probably Shafiqul, should we let him in?” The class responds, “yes.” As Shafiqul crosses the room, Amy asks, “I’m interested to hear what you have to say on the topic. Do you consider yourself a feminist?” Shafiqul replies, emphatically, “No!” A few male students laugh. Shafiqul takes his seat.

“So are these characters realistic,” Amy asks.

“They’re unrealistic, virtual kind,” James says.

“Are the characters real,” Amy asks.

“Why they not real,” LaToya replies. “What do you mean real?”

“Believable,” Amy says.

The students remain silent.

“A lot of people said they would have liked to have met these characters. What would you have learned from them,” Amy asks.

Sixty seconds of silence.

Juanita says, "How to live your life well."

Eduardo adds, "Do what you think is right, regardless of what people think."

Amy tags along, "Doing what you believe is right; this has come up before this semester."

"We all have the freedom to control our own destiny," James says.

"I think we tend to do what is expected of us. We would... rather than do what we think is right, we conform to what society wants," Amy says.

Abeni says, "The woman do what she thinks is right; we do what we are taught. That's the difference."

"As long as I can do what I want..., I don't care what people think" Leanna says.

"Are women prevented, are you kept from doing things...today" Amy asks. "We're recognized more," Leanna says. "I don't think so."

"What about the women in the book" Amy asks.

Leanna replies, "These women [the female characters] are more powerful in some way. There's not a list of women heroes out there. In some ways these women can be looked up to."

Amy pushes, "Anything to add to that?"

Charity speaks up, "In two words...in terms of her reading and writing...she writes things that weren't allowed. That makes her in powerful."

"They is strong, maybe, but not like Lady Macbeth. She has control," LaToya says. "These women just get raped. That's not being in control."

Carver laughs.

LaToya also laughs self consciously, and looks at Carver.

Amy looks at Carver: “I know you think these women are weak. Can you point to a part of the text and tell us why you think, why you believe that?”

“Can I get you back...” he half-laughs. “Can I get back to you?” Some of the other students snicker.

“Can anyone talk about a particular female character,” Amy asks.

No one replies.

“What was the question again” Ghazi asks.

Amy restates the question.

“She [Allende] is trying to portray Chickengod [one of the characters] as a woman who can...It’s like inadvertent sending a message. So indirectly she’s saying women can do whatever she puts her mind to,” Juanita says.

“She doesn’t... She’s saying women don’t have to prove themselves anymore,” James says.

“I think she just wants people to read the book, to understand about women, that women need to be looked at... differently” LaToya says.

The conversation dies again.

“So Carver, coming back to you, what do you think,” Amy asks. Carver is quick to judge, and stubborn in his assessments, but he usually has something to say, and so Amy has come to lean on him to keep the class moving.

“So, to me, the women in the book, they don’t make sense. He rapes her, comes back in 75 years and then....” He doesn’t finish.

“Why did she fall in love with him anyway,” Amy asks.

“It’s like... I didn’t quite mark down the pages.” Amy allows him to find a place.

“Page 87, ‘If You Touched My Heart’...when the guy locks up the girl for 47 years and then after the girl got rescued she still wants to stay with him. That’s just dumb.”

“Does this portray realistic relationships between men and women,” Amy asks.

“I’d just rape you again” Carver says and the class laughs.

Juanita says, “It’s just like women who are married to men for 30 years and they’re being beaten. And when the guy is taken away they scream and yell and go back to them. Even though it’s not the same setting...women being locked up. It is kind of the same thing.”

“So the men overpower the women in the stories,” Amy says. They use their physical strength, but is the power of words stronger than physical strength,” Amy asks.

“No, words hurt more,” Juanita says.

Ghazi interrupts, “If they just kill you, you have no words.”

Juanita continues, “Heat of the moment, bruises go away in time, but words don’t go away in time. They are more, have more power.”

“It’s like brain over brawn. Like Lady MacBeth. She controlled MacBeth with her words. Words can lead to violence. Words can lead to action,” James says.

Amy looks up at the clock at this point and declares that the conversation will have to end on that note, as she needs to introduce “the grammar issue” so the students can do their homework and prepare for the WAT exam.

Classroom Narrative: November 11

At the start of the fourth class on Allende, Amy tries to recapture the momentum of

the previous day's conversation. She invites the students a second time, "Can anyone add to what we said last class, when we talked about the women in these stories? Or do you have new ideas you want to raise about the additional stories you read?" Five seconds of silence, slowly creeps towards a half-minute. Amy sits in her usual spot, her legs dangling, waiting for a comment from a student--any student. Her thick mop of dark brown hair swirls in all directions, surrounding her round, friendly face like a nest.

The 19 students fidget, stare downwards and poke at the insides of their book bags. Even with three classes of discussion on the stories, they are hesitant. I write: *Do they lack confidence? Are they unwilling to easily break the classroom credo of non-participation? Are they bored by a return to the same text, mistaking depth and complexity for rehash and repeat?* LaToya, often the first to speak, rocks both heels back and forth in a frenzy, but this is the only sign of interest. Amy tells me later, that she has asked LaToya to speak less, so that other students can speak more.

Amy waits, the heels of her black boots click together lightly, but her arms are stiff, and her hands tighten their grip on the lip of the desk. She sways her head from side to side, looking for a student signal like an auctioneer looking for the next bid. There is tension in this silence, reminding me of a bad family dinner. Some students page through copies of their books, others simply stare at their desks, as the cinder block walls close in, seemingly a more grotesque shade of burnt orange than ever.

I am sitting next to Roberto who is wearing a fur lined hunter cap. Next to him is Rosa, who has a small emerald ring on the middle finger of her left hand that I never noticed before.

"Last week, Lewis said that perhaps Eva Luna was the alter ego of Allende. What

does that mean,” Amy asks.

Finally, Lewis, the older student with some college experience, raises his hand and once Amy looks his way, he says, “The women [in the Allende stories] are superior. The women were smart in an intellectual way. The men just use killing.” He smooths the material of his faded army fatigue-style book bag as he speaks. Amy rephrases this thought, “So men used brute force, and the women were more...intellectual?”

Carver groans. Amy shoots a glance his way and holds it, looking for him to reply. She raises her eyebrows. He looks down. Only 18, and in his first college class, perhaps he is unwilling to take up the challenge. Amy calls on Charity instead. She is one of two students in the class that Amy has told me are outright failing. In an office meeting, Amy has encouraged Charity to speak more. Charity begins discussing one of the stories to show that the women are smart. After a few sentences, Amy interrupts, “Wait, what story is that? Charity blushes, the red comes out on her dark-skinned face. The other students laugh, and I wonder why. Amy asks Charity to give a summary of the plot for the story she wants to use as evidence. “Just give us a summary, like we were doing the other day,” she says. “That way we can follow you, even if we have not read this story.”

Charity declines by nodding her head and looking down. Her black valour coat with “tiger fur” on the cuffs and collar is draped over the back of the seat. “Maybe,” she says quietly, but she stops and doesn’t look up. Amy, gently coaxes her, “just a couple lines, so we all know the plot.” But Charity shakes her head no a second time.

A Haitian student with a bright smile and shy demeanor, Charity makes visible attempts to do well, but often retreats after a setback. In the previous day’s class, she had done a decent job summarizing the plot of a different story. But now she is unwilling. Her

writing is full of errors, although her biggest problem, according to Amy is that she doesn't try to say anything. She is frozen: unable to speak in class and unable to move the words out onto the page.

Ironically, Charity often sits next to LaToya, as if that is who she aspires to be. LaToya talks everyday in class and writes pages and pages of written work. But Amy is dismayed that LaToya's commentary lacks complexity. She has succeeded because she produces words, when so many cannot, but she has not taken the next step, moving beyond hypothetical story and self-reference to analysis and comparison.

Amy asks, "Are you sure?" Charity continues to look down.

James, a student in the prestigious Sophie Davis School of Biomedicine, who is taking 21 credits, speaks up without raising his hand, "Well, I don't know...I have something..."

Amy turns to him, "Go ahead...what?"

"We know how she feels about things. From what she writes," he says.

Shafiqul who is sitting next to James says under his breath, "Feminist."

I'm not sure James heard him, and he continues: "Her characters provide some strong feelings about things, she thinks are important."

"Can we tell she is a feminist from what she writes?" Amy asks. Some nod yes, two or three shake no. No one speaks.

Amy intercedes again, "Well James said before that we can tell things about her from her writing. What else can you tell about Isabelle Allende from her writing?"

Vladislav, a Russian student majoring in music, speaks up, "I'd say she is trying to be seen." He says this line as if he has rehearsed it. He draws out the "n" on seen. But once he

hits the period, it's almost like he jerks back, like he's run out of rope. His eyes squint and he shifts his upper body forward, preparing for the question he knows is coming.

"What do you mean 'seen,'" Amy asks.

Vladislav rocks back and forth. His right hand opens and closes. But he doesn't say anything. Vladislav plays piano and composes. On his demographic questionnaire, he wrote:

There are many ways for people to explain themselves. One thing is writing.

In my opinion, music is the first thing which helps people to explain themselves, and writing is the second (sic).

After class one day he talked to me about how writing is like composing in music. It's about mood and flow, he said. "But in English, I can't create that," and shook his head slowly and disappointedly.

Ghazi, the youngest student in the class, looks to save Vladislav, "What's the question?"

Amy repeats the question. Though she tries to mask it, her face tightens. Her "blue jean legs" stop swinging. Her head moves faster around the room, her hair following behind. The students duck their eyes when she passes, as if from a searchlight. I have yet to see Amy really lose her patience in class. I wonder if this will be the moment.

Finally, without raising his hand, Vladislav speaks up: "Eva Luna, for example, is fixed. She's fixed. She's not real." He hesitates. "Ummmm, story. Ummmm. No. Well...character." He recoils in his chair. Flops his arms in a sort of dismissive double-handed wave. He crinkles his brow, his wavy black hair almost covers his eyes.

"No go ahead..." Amy coaxes.

“Um, she um. Allende is the author, Eva Luna is, has her, person,” Vladislav says.

“Persona?” Amy suggests.

“Yes, she is not the real person” Vladislav says as he continues to shift his six-foot body around in his seat. “She...Eva Luna is a character, not the author, right?”

“So the author is not the same as the character,” Amy leads.

“Yah,” he continues. “I think... They umm can have views. Views, same... views that are the same. But they are not sameness, necessarily the same. There’s no way we know. We only know it, the character.” Only a few of the students seem able to follow as he struggles to make his point. James is nodding his head. Leanna looks right at him. Some students stare at Amy. Two doodle on their notebooks. One is reading the text.

“Can you get to know the author through the character, through what they write,” Amy asks.

The silence returns.

Amy continues, “So what about the other things we’ve read this semester? Are their characters real? Is the character in the Hemingway, in *The Moveable Feast*, really Hemingway?” No one answers.

“O.K. take out some paper, let’s do a freewrite.” I think she intends this to be a way to do more thinking about the issue, but it comes out like a punishment. “Is... When we read... As a reader, are you able to tell something about an author from what he or she writes” she asks. The students shuffle papers and shift in their seats, but with no further prodding, they all begin to write.

I write as well: *This is a difficult question. It’s hard to write freely about it. I think she missed an opportunity there. It would have been great to rephrase what Vladislav was*

trying to say, to support his struggle. I think he was getting at differences between autobiography and fiction, certainly a complex idea. When is something fact and when is it fiction? What do we get to write in school? Are all writers making it up to a certain degree? But I am kidding myself. These are tough questions, and I am not sure what these students will respond to is more questions. I can't help but feel for Vladislav. He looked so helpless, trapped inside by a language, by not knowing a language. His point was so obviously a good one. Yet he was unable to speak it—in English. Some students even cringed while he spoke. Do we cringe? Is it possible that they dismiss him and his knowledge because he can't speak it well? Are they unwilling to accept ideas from each other because they see each other's language is not academic enough—and therefore they think each other's knowledge can't possibly be worth much? Certainly not useable in their own papers. Have they been taught to dismiss each other, as they have been dismissed? What is the effect of the student who stumbles on for the rest of the class? For Vladislav, he struggles inside the language box. He can't get out, and so, do the other students dismiss his knowledge as a waste of time? How much time out of the course would it take for Amy to validate his knowledge...to have a long enough exchange to get what he really wants to say into a language the students can understand.

I look up from my freewrite to watch the students. Most are still writing. I am surprised. Leanna is bent over her notebook completely absorbed in her work; her nose with her stylish brown-rimmed glasses perched, is just three inches from the page. There is an unopened fruit juice bottle at her feet.

Saleem is not writing though. He is staring across the room with the faraway eyes that Hollywood gives to geniuses, seers and psychopaths. But, Geeta, another student who

rarely if ever speaks is sitting next to me writing furiously. One thing you can say about these students: they have learned to write on demand for the most part. They willingly and easily engage when they are asked to write.

Amy calls the freewrite to an end and asks, “O.K. so what can you tell me about an author from their writing? Or why can’t you tell anything?”

I am struck by the pervasiveness of the binary nature of her questions. Is this on purpose—preparing them for the either/or of the WAT structure?

Shafiqul shoots a hand up and speaks simultaneously, “You can’t really tell. It’s not for sure... You can see things. Learn things.”

“So what can we tell about Isabelle Allende,” Amy asks.

“She has a strong appreciation for women,” he replies authoritatively, in perhaps the first clear complete sentence of the afternoon.

Ghazi, fidgeting as always, adds, “Maybe, we don’t know, we never know. I’m not sure if you... How do we know who she is?”

“Allende,” Amy asks.

Ghazi nods. “Yah,” he says.

Amy scrunches her face and offers the palms of her hands outward as if to say, “So, what else...”

Vladislav asks, “What is the question?”

Amy continues to wait.

Pierre, who grew up in Haiti and always wears a floppy cloth hat in class, raises his hand and then says, “You can tell the author is very patient. Her characters wait years to decide.” Pierre does not talk too often, but as with many Haitian students he has the precise

pronunciation provided by the parochial school system in Haiti.

“She can be a revolutionist,” Shafiqul blurts out. “Maybe she’s giving people an idea that there should be more for women. She tells what she did. She did the job. She lived. These stories are telling us different witnesses. Even though some women... Basically women have something to learn from this.”

“What do women have to learn from this,” Amy asks.

“To be more aware of their decisions,” Shafiqul replies.

“Good point, excellent point,” Amy compliments.

“Females can learn from her stories, about extremes,” Lewis says. “In the end, it shows...women that they should be forceful, and not just...guys are always on the take.”

From the front right corner of the room, Leanna says, “We need to remember that this was a different culture, a different time...but these are lessons of life that women can use now.” Leanna is the first female student to speak since Charity was laughed at in the first few minutes.

Amy says, “Good. Excellent point.”

With the tone of her voice slightly higher than usual, Amy gives in to the silence: “Well what we are talking about is internationality of the author, something we’ve talked about a few classes ago...” She glances back at the blackboard and mutters, “no chalk, no chalk.” She faces the class again and continues, “The idea that the author has a purpose in mind. The author intends for us to get something, there are additional meanings there. It’s what the reader gets from the text that matters. So in terms of whether the women characters are weak or strong, it’s more important that you form an opinion, and when you write your papers, you have to support what you say with ideas from the text. You have to use the text

to support your point. That's important to remember... But it's a whole different thing to then say that this is what the author believed. We can draw on the text to say this is what the author wanted us to understand. Does that make sense?" She looks around the room. All eyes are on her.

"OK, we need to move into groups now. In your groups, I want you to discuss the story I mentioned at the end of last class, "Walimai." How is this story different? Here the main character was a man. The characters are different. A male speaker. Different culture of relationship. Why? Why would Allende have this anomaly in her book? Why would she change from the established stories with female narrators. What is Isabelle Allende telling us about men and women and their relationships in general, but particularly in relation to this story. Ok, let's break into groups."

No one moves.

"Go ahead, go," she adds.

The students, reluctantly get up and move their desks to face one another. I join a group with Roberto, Shafiqul, Begum and Carver. Carver dominates the session, as I could have predicted; but Begum, a 20-year-old Bangladesh native, who does all the written work for the class, surprises me by taking an active role.

"They don't understand each other, men and women. One person thinks one thing and the other thinks something else," Carver says.

Shafiqul rephrases what Carver says. Roberto says nothing. They all agree that Begum should take the notes. "You have the neatest writing," Carver says.

Amy, who is walking around returning journals, says to the whole class: "Carver and LaToya, can you see me after class?"

I write in my notes: *It's 3:30, it's so quiet in here, and how is she going to get through class this way.*

I notice that Saleem gets up and leaves the room with his book bag. His lacrosse stick dragging on the floor follows him out.

Carver continues, "In a man and women relationship, no matter how you look at it, men are always on top." He taps his pen on the page.

"The relationship is not 50/50. It's more on the man's side than the women's side. Maybe when all the women start using their heads, it'll be different. I think it's in our genes. I think it's like that," Shafiqul says.

Carver joins in, "You ever seen a guy who doesn't work and the girl friend doesn't work. But the guy has all the control. Do whatever you want."

"So what do you want to say" Begum asks.

"I don't know, I just said it. You just have to figure out how to write it down," Carver says.

Begum hesitates. She's afraid to show what she has written.

Finally, she gives the page to Carver. She says, "Read it."

"It's good," Carver says and hands it to Roberto.

"I'm losing my voice," Carver says and coughs.

Carver turns to Begum. "What do you think?" Give us your point of view."

"If you always wanted to take revenge..." she says.

"Completely weak, right," Carver asks.

I notice that Vladislav is totally leading his group, talking loudly and often. Lewis, Leanna, Pierre and Ghazi are in a group. Leanna is talking. The others listening. They laugh a lot. Eduardo, Rosa, James, Ben are off topic.

We are silent. Shafiqul attempts a restart. “Do you think we have enough,” he asks.

I write in my notes: *Is the question strong enough to sustain the groups?*

“Like I said, it’s supposed to be 50/50 but it’s not. The men always get more for some reason. For some reason...,” Carver says.

Amy slips me a note: Vladislav dropped the class, but says he still wants to attend.

Amy regroups the class. “So what conclusions did you come to,” she asks.

“Men normally have the upper hand,” Carver says.

“The women do make their own choices. But they choose badly,” Shafiqul says.

“In this story, he had the key...,” Ghazi says.

Shafiqul interrupts: “If you make a decision, if it doesn’t work out. If you stick to it. You still don’t have freedom. We humans, we have a brain. We think. We’re smart.”

“Maybe because she was young. She was easy to push around,” Pierre says.

“He took her when she was young. She was too small to make a decision,” Leanna adds.

“In two words, there was no equality in this story. He has no control,” Lewis says.

“So at the end, she controls him,” Amy rephrases.

“At the end, I don’t know what happens, but the last sentence of the story...I like,” Ghazi says.

“Go ahead read it,” Amy says.

Ghazi flips open his book and finds the page. “what should I read,” he asks.

“As much as you want,” Amy answers.

“Well, the part I don’t understand, and it’s not the last line I like...” he says.

“Just read it,” she repeats.

Ghazi reads: “She was gone. I picked up my weapons and walked for many hours until I reached a branch of the river. I walked into the water up to my waist; I speared a small fish with a sharp stick and swallowed it whole, scales, tail and all. I immediately vomited it up with a little blood; it was as it should be. I was not sad now. I had learned that sometimes death is more powerful than love. Then I went to hunt, so I would not return to my village with empty hands.” He finishes and then adds, “I liked the line about death and love.”

Some students have begun to put away their things; others crane their necks forward, trying to hear over the noise. The class is deflating like air rushing out of a balloon. Amy could grab tight on the balloon’s neck, but even after just eight weeks of teaching, she knows that deflating classrooms have lost their moment. “So lets talk about that at the start of the next class” she says. “And I have some announcements.”

She begins a series of reminders about the work that is due. “For next time, make a list of all the possible topics for your final paper. Carry a theme through more than one work. On Monday we’ll work on your grammar sheet. On Tuesday, do this Siddhartha reaction. She hands them out on a small slip. It says:

By this point in the semester you should have read the entire text of

Siddhartha. Now answer the following questions. **As always, use quotes to**

illustrate your ideas. 1. What did Siddhartha have to learn? Did Siddhartha make any mistakes along the way.

After dispersing the sheets, she adds, “And your *BAMN* (*By All Means Necessary*, the collection of primary documents from the protest movements of the 1960 with which Amy started the course) rewrite is due on Thursday, don’t forget.” She continues to call out reminders, some to particular students, while others gather at the front desk to hand in assorted assignments.

Post-Class Commentary 3

Adjunct Life

I’m kind of worn down at the moment. I haven’t really had a real day off in about a month.

So I always feel like I am running from one place to the next. Get up. Get ready. Work.

Class prep or study or design or return business work. On and on. Run to class. Run back.

The house is a mess and all I want to do is sleep. Amy’s Teaching Journal, November 12

Amy’s teaching journal is testament to the splintered life of an adjunct. A page listing an appointment with a web design client falls next to a description and commentary of her morning grammar school poetry workshop; a discussion of issues in the Basic Writing class goes on for three pages, but is interspersed with references to her own courses, her own writing and complaints of being so tired. At one point she writes out various renditions of a business card; in a tell tale sign, there is no profession listed under her name in any version.

On one page, in all capital letters she writes: FIND OUT MORE ABOUT NATS, a reference to her Field Botany class. On another page is a full list of dishes for Thanksgiving dinner. In the middle of another page is a single word: *Harumph!* Often the journal talks about the price Amy pays for her hectic life:

October 5: I think I need to mellow out. Not take this so seriously.

October 27: I am so wiped out.

November 12: I babble when I'm tired. And sometimes I'm not even sure what I'm saying.

November 13: I feel like I am losing it a little bit.

December 7: My energy level tends to match that of the class. Entropy again.

Out of all of her endeavors, in the heat of the semester, teaching the one course of 22 students takes up the most time. In the journal she lists the hours she spends working on the class (something I asked her to do).

11/6 Saturday.:	responding to student work	2 hrs.
11/7 Sunday:	class prep/responding to student work	6 hrs.
11/8 Monday:	class prep/responding to student work	2 hrs.
	teaching class	1 hr
	student conferences	3 hrs
11/9 Tuesday	teaching class	1.5 hrs
	conferences	3 hrs.
11/10 Wednesday:	responding to student work	2 hrs.
11/11 Thursday:	teaching class	1.5 hrs
	conferences	3 hrs.
11/12Friday:		0 hrs
TOTAL:		24 hrs.

She kept this kind of tally for two other weeks, which listed 20 hours and 12 hours, the latter

was Thanksgiving week. Though it is her first time teaching at the college level, this is an extraordinary amount of time to spend on one course.

Academic Literacy

What do we mean by academic literacy? Vladislav's stumbling confusion or Shafiqul's clear statement: "She has a strong appreciation for women." Vladislav, though less clear, says more. My research Journal, November 12

The class has maintained its attendance throughout, only one, two or three students missing each class, and a core group of twelve have attended virtually every one. By my count, at least six students have confided to me that this is their favorite course, saying something like, it is the only one where they get to talk about what they think. Despite Amy's recent complaints, students are participating in class and handing in plenty of written work. (At this point in the semester, Amy seems to have at least one written assignment due every day in class. I am often confused about what reaction, revision or new project is due when.)

Amy has been successful in offering a welcoming, non-pressured, collegial speaking space for the students. And, by her assessment, the course is producing a meaningful engagement. In her teaching journal Amy often comments on the positive moments of the course, and on more than one occasion declares her surprise at how smart or talented the students are. On November 11, she writes: "Do I have an exceptional group of English 'Ilers'? Or do people rise to the level one expects of them? Or fall to that level?" Amy of course has only her own memories of college level work for comparison. Since there is virtually no interaction with other faculty, and certainly no workshops where student work inside the classroom or in written products is compared, she has been left alone to make this judgment of her students.

At times I agree with her assessment. Certainly there have been moments of profound literacy growth: Vladislav's attempt to put his complex idea into English; Juanita's wrestling match with her own notions of women's rights; a few exchanges between students that lasted for five or six turns without teacher intervention; Charity's continued attempts to insert her shy self into the class; two students attempt to connect the female characters to Lady MacBeth; and certainly the connection of the revenge theme back to Hamlet.

Yet, there is something nagging me. The successful moments of engaging, free-exchange at the end of the last class on Allende are too infrequent. Those moments where knowledge is generated and accelerated into complex ideas through student self-sustaining conversation seem rare and fleeting. And yet, this is the implied and explicitly stated goal for Amy's course. It is her desire and the program's desire to have student's engage fully with texts to integrate and combine their ideas with the ideas in the texts. This, I suppose, is one narrow definition of academic literacy.

It is troubling that at this middle-stage in the semester, in such an open, non-threatening half-circle space, with material that the students have read and written about for three classes already, the students cannot spontaneously begin a conversation about the text and keep it flowing without direct and repeated intervention from Amy. Even with Amy's prodding, no one will look forward at times. During the Allende discussion, I felt Amy's struggle--all teachers would--as she refused to give-in to their silence. She was expecting of course an analysis of author intentionality, an interpretation of the characterization of the women in the stories, or some discussion of the text within a feminist frame. Instead, a few flurries of discourse devolved into silence—each time.

In thinking about the lack of spontaneous and consistent conversation, I am also

struck by how hard it is for Amy to carry over ideas (even just the nature of a topic or the books themselves) from one class to the next. The class is in a constant restart. It is as if the class reforms each day anew—a random occurrence--the students seemingly unaware that there is a continuum to the ideas both in terms of the readings and the craft of writing.

I think about my own courses and how similar they are to Amy's: the time-consuming struggle to sustain a focused conversation that leads to a complex reading of a text, or a solid comparison between two conflicting ideas, or the treatment of question as having more than one answer. Since I began my time as a researcher in the classroom, I have become increasingly reflective of my own practice. Like Amy, I am often struggling against the rescue move, avoiding the silence with a pointed teacher question; trying to hold back my own ideas, and not being disappointed when they don't say out loud exactly what I hoped they would say that day. But if the silences are left alone for interminable periods, the conversation dulls out, class time slips away, and there is the question of what can be accomplished in fifteen weeks this way. A pedagogy where students take charge of their own learning conflicts with years of training to the contrary: the students are well versed as passive receivers of information, and to undo that learning pattern may require more time than Amy has.

When I ask Amy about her tendency to lean on direct questioning as a means to jumpstart conversations, she responds that she knows she does that and wants to do it less, but she is not sure how. Besides, she says, "It's not much different than what I would do if I was discussing a piece of writing with another writer. We ask questions and try to answer them, right?" I nod in response, knowing there is still something so teacherly about the ways we ask questions in this classroom. It's not the same as two writers or two readers talking.

Expectations for a higher form of engagement at this point in the semester seem reasonable, I think. It's November after all. Yet so few are willing to take a risk and say something they are not sure about, to offer up a guess, to talk freely and build an interpretation from each other's ideas. The long-invoked intimidation of the classroom setting overpowers their recently instilled, but too insecure desire to speak.

Consider Juanita's surprising exchange. She was born in the United States, but her parents are from El Salvador and Puerto Rico and she is the only one of her four siblings to go to college. She missed three out of the first five assignments and often comes late to class. In class, she barely speaks, when she writes, she barely writes. The exchange in the November class was one of just two or three times where I felt she was actively engaged all semester. This positive moment was just that, a moment. How many similar moments would it take? For Juanita to become a fully-involved college student, she needs hundreds of considerate and thoughtful forays into academic thinking with considerate, measured and thoughtful responses. But that will never happen in the time frame of this course. And, even if all of her classes offered her the same comfortable space of spoken and written academic conversation as this course has (something I doubted was true, since other freshmen classes were larger and less based in class discussion), given her less than complete participation, and the limited number of opportunities to fully participate, there was no way Juanita could make significant progress in academic literacy in one semester.

But Juanita did not understand any of this. As she wrote in a piece of reflective writing early in the course, succeeding as a college level writer was simply a matter of expressing your ideas "clearly and to the point." Juanita and some of the other students in the class had skewed views of what landed them in remediation. Like LaToya, many

students thought that sprinkling in a few commas or taking them out, fixing a run on or avoiding fragments would solve their writing “problem.” And the system somewhat encourages this thinking by failing to provide them with a more complex view of what they need to do; the single test as the focus offers the students a false hope that becoming a better writer is simply about writing a better exam. Similarly, the remedial course, and its position on the borderland of the university, gives the students a threshold to cross that reinforces the idea of a simple 15 week solution to what is actually a school-long, even lifetime issue.

As in my own teaching, when the semester moved towards its conclusion, Amy began to doubt whether there would be enough time for the students to get where they needed to go. In a sense Amy and I were falling victim to the same philosophy that enables the creation of an immersion program that attempts a crash course in academic initiation. We wanted to believe that in fifteen weeks beginner writers (beginner English thinkers) could emerge into fully fluent college level writers--as if there was an observable line of demarcation between the two. But it is a colossal mistake to think that students can master academic literacy in fifteen weeks, that they suddenly cross a line into an entirely different level of discourse. Language learning is a process of development, and all Amy could hope was that the process that had started in almost all of the students would continue, as long as they were given the opportunity to join other academic conversations before they lost their head of steam. In this way, the idea that Amy had come to know these readers and writers so well, had invested so much time in them, it now seemed absurd that they would be sent off to join a different community after spending just fifteen weeks.

Cultural Conflict

There's conflict in the room over the Stories of Eva Luna. A misogynist air to the students' comments that seems to come from a cultural standpoint. Confronting the cultural underpinnings of this could take a whole semester. My Research Journal, November 12.

Amy paddles in treacherous waters throughout the discussion of Isabel Allende. She has come upon a generative theme full of tension and the potential for meaningful writing that could change the perceptions of many of the students about women's role in society. But turning a serious, spontaneous brushfire into a controlled burn that produces beneficial results is an extremely difficult thing to do.

Clearly, by the questions she asked and the assignments she gives, Amy wants the students to investigate their feelings about women's rights.¹¹ But once the students start talking about it, the loud male voices of Carver and Lewis take over and are joined by the silent male majority in the room, students like Shafiqul and Lawrence. Only James is able to offer even a modicum of support for the female side. In this intimidating atmosphere, it is difficult for any of the female students to talk back to the onslaught. Leanna, just finding her sea legs in an academic setting after a self admitted lack of caring about school and then some time away from school to have a child, is the only one to consistently speak across the three classes.

It would be possible to change the direction of the course here, to go with the life that has been created in these classes, add on readings that expand on and critique the issues raised by the students' readings of Allende. But such a move is extremely risky, and would require a great deal of mid-stream modification in the course plan. It occurs to me that I should raise this issue with Amy. But I think it is too much for her to handle in her first

semester teaching at the college level.

In my years of teaching I have made a similar move twice, once with great success and the other with dismal results. There is a sense that Amy would learn a great deal about teaching from making this move, but if it flops, she would have risked and lost the students in this crucial class. In the end I decide not to say anything to her. When theorists write about teaching the conflicts, and following the students generative themes they dismiss course planning and direction as almost trivial matters. But it takes a veteran teacher with masterful skills and perhaps a certain confidence to teach the conflicts in the classroom.

* * *

¹ For versions of the photo, see the opening pages of the dissertation.

² The college was in the process of fading out Writing 1 however, and only two sections of it were offered in the Fall of 1999.

³ Prior to entering the classroom, I outlined the project in detail to the instructor for the course, and she agreed to participate, signed a permission letter, and said she looked forward to any insights I could provide into her teaching and any help I could offer with the class. On the first day I entered the room, I introduced myself and gave a full accounting of the nature of my study to the students. I provided the students with introductory letters and full contact information and asked for each student to sign a permission form. Receiving permission back from the instructor and all but one of the students, I began the process of collecting field notes on each classroom session. I attended all but four of the 45 class sessions during the semester, and attended the Writing Assessment Test (WAT) they took near the end of the course. I present all or part of nine (one fifth of the) classes in chapters three and four and make reference to others.

⁴ The enrollment for remedial writing classes at CCNY can be as high as 25, but often hovers around 20.

⁵ These students come from bilingual, tri-lingual, bi-dialectical households, and/or their language skills are divergent from the dominant academy discourse because of social, economic and cultural class differences.

⁶ The latter is a name a student of mine provided for the street discourse of his neighborhood, everyone around my block understands streetword (Perez).

⁷ One thing seems clear however. By and large the ESL track was much more of an Asian track. As part of this project, I visited two ESL classes, and was astonished to notice both the large Asian population and the lack of the Spanish students I was so used to seeing in Basic Writing. One course had six Asians of the 12 students in attendance. Amy's class, by contrast, had five Asian students out of 22. Conversely, students with Spanish Language influence (six in Amy's class) and Caribbean Creole influences such as Haiti and Guyana (three in Amy's class) seemed to end up on the Basic Writing track. In the 12-student class mentioned above, only two were from Spanish Speaking countries and none from countries with Creole languages. One explanation for the Spanish-influenced English speakers and writers is that most of them came out of the NYC school system, and therefore did not take the TOEFL exam, usually meaning that they were placed in the Basic Writing track regardless of the degree of influence of their Spanish language background. More

investigation into the placement mechanisms, especially in regard to outcomes for particular language users, is certainly warranted.

⁸ For more on orality and its influence on literacy see Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy*. For site-specific research on the development of complex oral language, see Shirley Brice Heath.

⁹ It should be noted that Amy was being observed by a full time faculty member during this class session. All adjuncts were observed for one hour of class time each semester, unless they had taught for 10 semesters in a row.

¹⁰ The previous week, Amy had announced that all of the remaining Monday classes would be spent doing practice, in class WAT exams. The first week she gave them out of context topics written as simple binary questions. (i.e. Do you need money to make it in America?). The full question for this week however offers more guidance and complexity: "Some people describe the women in Isabel Allende's *Stories of Eva Luna* as strong. They follow their own will. Sometimes their decisions lead them to unpleasant (or even horrible) situations. Others say the women of Eva Luna are weak. They do not make their own decisions. Instead they feel lead by the will of others." Amy reports in her journal that these WAT-like questions, tied to the content of the course has produced "some of their best work."

¹¹ For example, one of the paragraph reactions asks the students to analyze the female characters and the male characters.

“I will freewrite my thoughts and my desires, about love and fear and hope and pain and then... I will try to relate them to our class readings.”

Leanna (Basic Writing Student)
November 20

“Actually, I think most of them [the students] have a style. And, it would have been rather painful to read all that writing if they didn’t.”

Amy (Basic Writing Instructor)
December 20

CHAPTER 4

The Story Of Student Texts:

Reading Into The Writing Of Basic Writing

CONTEXTUAL FRAGMENTS

At City College, the North Academic Center building houses all of the humanities and social science departments, the only campus cafeteria and the school’s massive general library. It has the large dimensions and drab, long-tunnel feel of an aircraft carrier. The massive seven-story wings meet at the building’s main entrance, a three-story atrium, with a single escalator rising from the middle of the floor. The atrium lobby and its overhang on the second floor act as an informal student center for the campus.¹ Despite CCNY’s somewhat older student population, the traditional-age college student environment thrives in the NAC atrium, the crossroads for the campus. They gather around indoor picnic tables and the Starbucks coffee kiosk, while people scoot past them like marbles on a linoleum floor. The hum of moving feet, the campus radio station that airs over the speakers overhead, the chatter

of the students and the echoing acoustics create a dull white-noise, which is sometimes pierced by a screeching hello or a bit of hysterical laughter.

Oddly placed to the right of the escalator, there is a former lecture hall that has been converted into a computer lab for students. The circular, stadium-seating arrangement features six rows of computers, nine across, making it the largest lab on campus. The wall of the lab that faces the atrium is floor to ceiling glass and so as you ride the escalator you can watch the students sitting behind the large box screens working away. As you ride up, you begin at eye-level and then rise above them and go over their tops, the glare from the screens shining off their faces.

After Carver and Pierre tell me on separate occasions that this is where they “type up” their papers after writing them out by hand, I decide to visit. Though it faces the atrium so prominently, to enter the lab, you have to first go into Cohen Library on the second floor of NAC and then down a staircase to the basement through a different computer lab and through a narrow tunnel.

There are a few newer Macintosh computers, but mostly the computers are old PCs of various brand names, with about 20 inches of table space separating them. When I visit, in the early afternoon of a weekday all but three of the mismatched chairs are taken, and there are signs on those computers declaring them off limits for one reason or another. I discover that there are two female students ahead of me waiting: one snaps her gum and shuffles her body back and forth impatiently; the other is slouched in an extra chair, reading a library copy of Henry James’ *The Ambassadors*. She sits the book on top of the fat book bag on her lap, turning a page from time-to-time.

Despite the number of students present, the tight quarters and the frantic activity outside the window-wall, the room is busy and the students focused. Two students in the front row are working together, one pointing at the screen and asking questions in a whisper, the other typing and answering. But everyone else works silently except for clicking of keys and rustling of pages. About a third of the students are on the internet, scooting from web site to web site; three or four are playing computer games, shooting fluorescent dots or streams at various enemies, or moving clunky figures through obstacle courses and passageways to either elude or chase prey; and the rest are typing in Microsoft Word or some other word processing program. More than half of the latter category are typing from handwritten pages or notebook notes propped up beside their screens. The rest are composing directly from head to the computer.

After just a few minutes, three or four students pack up their things and scurry out and so the three of us that are waiting take the available seats. I sit in the back row, close to the door. To my right one student asks another about how to indent. To my left, a student pages through a sociology text, fanning the pages forward and then back. Down below a student yells, "Shit, I lost it. Fuckin' computer lost it. Shit." A few students look up, but many do not. The student pounds at the keys hoping for his document to return. "Shit," he says again.

"Go ask the computer guy to come help you," someone calls out. The student dressed in baggy jeans and a large white t-shirt that billows off his lanky frame, rises, asks the student next to him to watch his stuff, then hustles up the steps of the classroom. "Fuckin' A, I'm so screwed," he mutters to himself.

* * *

As the students pile up the written assignments in Amy's classroom, the city-wide dialogue over the planned changes to CUNY's remedial policy heats up, with various groups holding forums, mostly to express displeasure and to predict doom for the minority and lower class New York City students that the new policy will most directly impact. I attend many of these gatherings, everything from community and union protest rallies to a campus-based conference on Blacks, Open Access and the American Dream. Melodrama is often at the forefront, as when Heather MacDonald, a main CUNY critic and instigator of the policy change in remediation, attends a forum at the CUNY Graduate Center and defends her attacks on CUNY's enrollment policies, leading the crowd to a chorus of boos and chants of "bullshit." But mostly, it is concerned students, parents, faculty and community members voicing strong opinions about a policy change that they think will change the face of CUNY into a less multi-cultural, more upper class institution.

The most important meetings of the semester are the three run by the New York State Board of Regents, who have the final-say on whether the change in policy will be enacted. One of these stands out, and not just because it was held on a September day that was so hot my car overheated on the way there, or that it was held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in an East Harlem neighborhood noted for its poverty.

About 80 people watch from the audience as students and faculty argue—once again—almost exclusively against the new policies. But the forum also features representatives from the chancellor's office and the Board of Trustees who are in favor of the change, and language scholars and testing officials who provide intricate and balanced readings of the role of remediation in higher education and the language difficulties students

face in remedial courses. Unlike the CUNY Board hearings, the Regents' Board members ask precise and thoughtful questions of the pre-arranged speakers.

Throughout the hearing, I think of Amy's classroom. The speakers raise the issues of academic standards, student demographics, diploma value, the connection between higher education and lifetime earnings, adjunct hiring practices, and the validity of student proficiency measures. And these large issues play themselves out—often in conflict with each other—three times per week in Amy's tiny classroom. At this point in the semester, I had seen enough of Amy's class—and reflected enough on my own--to know that remediation was not fulfilling what it was expected to do for many of the students; in fact, it was unclear, really, what was expected from remediation. But if change was obvious, the question then became what kind of change.

After a few hours at the meeting, there is a break, and an odd situation develops: everyone is invited to gather downstairs for lunch. Proponents and opponents sit across the table from each other in the windowless basement room eating an inexpensive meal of small sandwiches, soda and cookies. The tension is palpable at first, but then diminishes after a few well-timed jokes about there being no plastic knives on the buffet table for a reason; soon, the general pleasantries of a shared meal take over. Except for a few extremists on each side who huddle together in the corners, there is plenty of cross-dialogue.

I end up sitting with a *New York Times Reporter*, a woman from the chancellor's office and a radical graduate student I know from City College, and we discuss the "impact numbers" on enrollment should the new policy is fully enacted. There is one set provided by the chancellor's office and another set offered by sociologist David Lavin from Queens College, and the numbers are drastically different from each other in all categories (Whites,

Blacks, minorities, women, adult students). We take out scratch paper and do some intense mathematical calculations involving test scores and past enrollment figures. In the end, we all agree that neither set of numbers makes sense to us, and so, we spend the rest of the lunch discussing our contrasting views, highlighting what each of us see as the key issues. There is a genuine sense that despite our opposing stances, there is plenty that we agree on. It is the first meaningful, cross-dialogue I have had about remediation in the two years of attending these kinds of meetings.

Despite the complexity of the discussion at the forum, however, at the end of the day, the Regents are left with a simple up-or-down vote on the university-wide elimination of remediation at the senior college campuses. It is a binary decision between two poor choices: extinction or the status quo. Either Amy's class—and hundreds more like it—exist or they do not.

* * *

After observing Amy's classroom and interviewing her for a number of weeks, it becomes apparent that we have a lot in common regarding our philosophy and goals for teaching writing. We both envision a good classroom as a community of writers working together to produce entertaining, thoughtful texts; we see the teacher's role as one of facilitating students desires, both in their attempts to do their own writing and in their attempts to help each other write well; we follow the same progression of reaction to revision (her terms) and informal to more formal writing assignments; we want the students to write about ideas they care about; and, ultimately, we expect that our classes will help the students feel that writing can change the way they see the world.

The longer I observe Amy's class, the more I find that what I learn there enters into my own pedagogy and curriculum. I wait longer for student responses during discussion; I use more freewriting, I am less directive, allowing more room for the students to take their ideas in odd directions; and I hold more conferences, seeing from Amy, how important that personal connection is to students' willingness to make changes to their writing process and subsequently take risks with their writing, both in terms of content and craft.

In the semi-weekly interviews, many of the topics that come up are common concerns we have about the classroom. We talk a lot about teacher authority for example. Like Amy, I have an easygoing classroom personality that tends to be misinterpreted by the students as indicative of a lack of seriousness about the work of the course. But by far our most common interview theme is about tiredness and energy. We are both living fractured lives as students, teachers and freelancers. (She builds web sites; I work as a freelance writer.) And we both struggle to maintain our energy level at times. Using her expanding vocabulary from the field botany class she is taking, Amy describes it as "entropy seeping in." At another point she writes: *I just read through this journal. I can't believe how often I talk about being tired.*

I have come to enjoy our late afternoon sessions, and depend on them not only for my research, but my own sense of the classroom. As we talk about teaching, our students and our busy lives, I am reassured that what I am living is not a singular experience. Though I have been adjuncting for a while, and Amy has just begun, we are kindred spirits in many ways. During one session, Amy confesses to some doubts about the whole idea of teaching. "There hasn't been a single semester we're I haven't had those thoughts," I say back to her. She nods. The gap between the veteran adjunct and rookie adjunct, and the more profound

gap of researcher and research subject has evaporated. We are simply two colleagues talking.

* * *

On November 22 I talk with Amy for more than an hour. She suggests that a recent class on Siddhartha did not go well and she knows it. “I mean people talked, but it definitely wasn’t one of the best classes, but their writing, their writing was very interesting.” She says this has happened before, where the conversation in class was flat, but the writing was not. When I ask her what she means by interesting writing, she responds, “I enjoy reading it.” She qualifies this by saying that when she reads a student’s work, somebody who is writing well, she is not struggling with the work, she “stops looking at language and sentence structure... I’m just hearing what they have to say. I look less at the writing and more at what’s being said.” In other words, I summarize, “It’s interesting writing when you’re reading it as a reader, not as a teacher reading a student’s work.” She stares at me blankly for a second. Then she says, “Good writing is writing that entertains, right?”

But just after saying this, she says something quite contradictory. “It was only after their writing started to make a lot of sense to me that I started to notice the grammar and punctuation errors a lot more.” I ask her what she means, and she says that when the writing was not making sense, she couldn’t focus on error, but once the clarity increased, the mistakes stood out.

She uses Saleem as an example. “Out of all the students in the class, Saleem has made the most progress,” she says. I tell her that I find this to be “astounding,” since he never participates in class, rarely writes during freewrites and the early writing that I have seen is so disjointed that it’s hard to follow. “But he probably not pass the test because he is

so hard to understand,” she says. Saleem is one of the only writers in the class who has a true voice and style, she suggests. She contrasts this to James whose writing is flat and uninvolved. Again, I try to summarize what she is telling me: “James has succumbed to an academic voice that lacks personality.” Amy responds, “They are opposites aren’t they. So does one deserve to be in college and the other not? Whose writing would you rather read?”

* * *

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENT WRITING

When I think of the writing in Amy’s course, the first word that comes to mind is volume. Amy established the role informal writing would play in the class early by assigning a journal and also having the students freewrite three times during the first class. Throughout the semester, she used free writing and brainstorming to encourage class discussion and to develop ideas for the writing assignments, and she referenced and collected the journals to encourage the daily writing routine. For each text the students read, she assigned one or two reaction papers that she called paragraph reactions, which were usually quick responses to a series of questions she would pose.² Then, as the class discussion moved onto a new text, Amy kept the old ones alive by assigning an ongoing set of more formal “process-based” assignments. These assignments varied dramatically: for the selections from the BAMN text, Amy assigned a topic generation exercise followed by a draft of a traditional argument essay; for Langston Hughes she asked for an explication and commentary of one of the poems; and for Shakespeare, she had students complete a group discussion and writing-project that looked to develop a common theme from the play excerpts.

After the process-based work, Amy assigned a draft paper that asked the students to

expand and support a theme that had been developed during the reading, discussion and informal writing on that text. At the end of the course, the final project asked the students to find a theme for the course and support it with a number of texts. Many students—wisely—chose to expand/complicate themes they had already written about, thus completing the progression aspect of the assignments (See Eduardo’s final paper at the end of this chapter for an example.)

As a result of the progressive structure of the writing assignments, the amount of writing produced expanded as the semester wore on. In addition to the daily journal they were asked to keep, the students wrote during virtually every class and there was an informal or formal writing assignment due in every class. In the second half of the course, the formal assignments, which were handed out ahead of time, could be due on the same day as an informal assignment or a journal check. In the end, the students created more writing than any instructor could read, even an instructor who was only teaching one course, and even a first-time instructor like Amy who had a virtual addiction to reading and responding to student work. In the first half of the class, she read and commented on everything they wrote, from journal writing to freewriting to process-based assignments to more traditional essay drafts, often handing back more than one assignment at a time. But, by early November, when she began the policy of using Monday’s class to write practice exams for the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT), she was inundated with new paragraph reactions alongside a practice exam and a more formal writing assignment.³ In an interview, she admitted to me that she could no longer keep up and was skimming paragraphs on certain students’ papers.

As was her practice during class discussions, when Amy read papers, she took in

everything a student had to say, and then responded by accentuating the positive and pushing the student to go further. She was willing to read past some of the bland and ordinary, and even the nonsensical and poorly written, in order to concentrate instead on the lines that really hit on something that could be developed. Her method of responding was consistent throughout the semester. She always provided marginal comments, usually a heavy dose of compliments, (“nice writing;” “good start;” “I like how...”) mixed with questions that asked for “more” in some way (examples, focus, why and how prompts, connections to other ideas). For most of the work, she also provided end-comments that featured more supporting compliments and then direct advice about where the writer should turn his/her focus in a revision. Her end comments often finished with an invitation to talk about the particular piece of work more during her office hours.⁴ Amy also put a margin check on any line with a grammar, punctuation or style error, and sometimes offered a hint as to the problem “preposition?” or corrected the mistake outright. She did this on both formal and informal writing.

Even with all of this commentary, Amy felt the students were not receiving all the response they needed or deserved. She wrote in her journal, “I spend a lot of time commenting on papers. And for most of the written work, my comments are minimal. Only two papers have I written rather extensive comments. But I feel like that’s all I’m doing.” Her own critique aside, by any account, Amy offered the students plenty of feedback in the form of personal, supportive close readings of their work.

When I talked to Amy about the student papers, she often had something to say about the content, some way that she had been enlightened by a piece of student work. In her journal late in the semester, she commented on her reading of student work: “It also forces

me to analyze and read more closely than I've done in the past. And I hear new interpretations of texts [the readings from the course] I've read so many times before." It was as if, the students' pieces were no different than reading for one of her own courses. She respected the students' ideas and their ability to see things in provocative unusual ways. She was willing to spend time with student work, to struggle with meaning, to work at making sense of what at first might seem nonsensical. As a result, she became a profoundly talented and personal reader and responder to the work of these particular writers.

What follows are texts from all of the different kinds of writing Amy assigned in the course. In compiling the chapter, I follow the assignment arc of the course, providing selections in the approximate and overlapping order they were assigned throughout the semester. For each selection, I provide the context for the assignment, the entire student text, a sense of Amy's response to the text (when available), and my own close reading of the text.⁵

As I detail in the methodology chapter of this dissertation, I did not choose pieces of student writing intending to prove a particular argument; I selected pieces of writing that allowed me to expand and complicate the themes and issues raised in the history and narrative chapters.⁶ I was looking to represent the writing for the course, not the writing of any particular student; therefore, I did not use any writer more than once.

In terms of choosing student writing, it should also be noted that there is an excess of writing related to the Isabel Allende text. This is indicative of the amount of writing the students did about this particular text. Amy did spend more class time on this text than any other, and those classes (as narrated in the previous chapter) did offer their share of controversy and tension, perhaps sparking the students' desire to write more about this text.

When looking through the work from the class, I realized that more students handed in the Allende reaction papers and the Allende formal papers than any of the others, and more students chose to use Allende in their final paper than any other class text.

Two other minor issues about the student writing should be mentioned: (1) The writing was not corrected or improved in any way, and so all errors in punctuation, spelling, grammar and style are as the writers originally presented them. I therefore do not indicate in the text, through the use of “sic” that a mistake was present in the original. The reader can assume that all of the mistakes were in the original. On some occasions, when I quote a line from a student text that is not included in its entirety, and there was some doubt as to whether a particular error was in the original, I do use “sic.” (2) These pieces were written before student computer labs were widely available to CCNY students, and the reader should keep in mind the well-reported lack of access to computer technology in the home for lower class students . Thus, while today spelling and/or certain grammar mistakes are indicative of a student’s apathy in failing to spell-check or do a minimal rereading of his or her work, we cannot make that judgment in regard to these student texts.

Reflective Writing (Saleem)

During the first few days of the course, Amy had the students write about writing itself. She wanted them to begin the process of thinking about what it means to write and what it feels like to be a writer. One question prompt, stated in Amy’s obviously supportive way, provoked the students to think of themselves as talented writers: What makes you a good writer? In response, Saleem, the seemingly out of touch dreamer composed a single paragraph that, on first reading, seems so abstract and disconnected that the reader is tempted

to dismiss it. But a closer reading tells us something about Saleem and his writing at this early moment in the course.

What Makes You a Good Writer

The thing that makes me think I'm a good writer is, the quiet do speak. There are so many ways my knowledge of writing exists in the world. It makes me think, was this meant to be. Then it happens! Emotional pain that only fear can bring. So instead of facing it where I can hurt someone, I hide them within the words I preach. Although the things I write may have opinion, I like to use fact. This is the only thing the mind collects. Witness it or be censored. The victims I swallow are expressed in what I write. So, what's your choice.

Saleem startles the reader with the opening clause: "the quiet do speak." The disjointed, seemingly nonsensical ideas that follow halt the reader's momentum, however. By the time the reader reaches the fragment, "Emotional pain that only fear can bring," surprise has given way to confusion. Given the brevity of the piece, the missing question marks, the subject verb agreement error, and the lack of connection between the ideas, it would be easy to write off Saleem's piece as not worth it, possibly created in a rush by a non-caring student. But, such a reading would not fit in with Saleem's profile. Throughout the course Saleem cared a great deal about his written work. If anything he was guilty of reaching for too much; he was always trying to make a grand statement or write something completely off the charts.

As the classroom narratives show, Saleem is a bit aloof in class, seemingly out of touch, but somehow, every once in a while, he would say amazing things that would catch me off guard. In his journal and in discussions with him, I get the sense that he perceives

himself to be a bit of a poet and philosopher. Amy thought Saleem was the most intelligent student in the class. His lines here show an attempt to identify himself as a writer who sees writing as his chance to “witness” the world, his method of critique for his surroundings (“...the quiet do speak”). I also know from Saleem that he has doubts about his ability to succeed as a writer, especially in the school writing environment. This lack of confidence leaves him caught between the dramatic confidence of the opening line, and the simultaneous school writing move of repeating the question as a statement, which robs the opening statement of some of its power. The insertion of “I think” in the first line also indicates a degree of doubt.

This short text is an “at home” freewrite, not intended to be cohesive or expansive on one particular idea. Saleem launches a number of powerful feelings and beliefs, all of which offer opportunities for further development: Writing offers an alternative way to speak; writing records events and that is important; writing is power over others and over reality; if you don’t write you are silenced; and fact is more important than opinion because it reveals the truth. Saleem’s individual sentences or small clusters of sentences are only slightly related, but this is exactly what the assignment was designed to do, to encourage the writer to lay out some ideas on the page. Though the reader wants to hear more on this topic from Saleem, but what he is “lacking” here does not destroy what he has: a set of complex and personal ideas about writing and the writer.

Though the middle lines are hard to pin down, mostly because the excessive use of pronouns leads to the inability to connect the pronouns to any antecedents, Saleem provides enough evidence to read into his meaning, as we would do in a close reading of a difficult poem. Lines two to five can be read as Saleem’s attempt to declare how he uses writing to

avoid confrontation with others. He finds solace and perhaps resolution in words. He sees himself as a chronicler of truth with a capital “T” (fact over opinion). In the end, Saleem calls out to himself and to other writers to “witness” the world “or be censored” by it, to be a writer (to “preach”) or to be a “victim.” That is the choice he asks the reader to make, almost indicating that if you choose not to write then he will “swallow” you up whole. Such a “lionesque” statement from the sheepish Saleem seems contradictory. But this grand voice often surfaced in his work.

Saleem’s piece has a “meta” quality to it. It is a piece of writing that is doing exactly what it is trying to mean. Saleem claims that writing offers quiet students a chance to speak. And that is exactly how he uses writing here. Though Saleem is far from a prolific writer, his written output dwarfs the amount he speaks in class. Even during the group work in narrative five, Saleem makes just a few forays into meaningful dialogue. However, in this assignment and elsewhere in the course he attempts to establish a powerful persona, or to entertain the reader, as he did in a practice WAT exam where he assumes the voice of a credit card company ad. Thus, when read in context, as more than just a single written product, Saleem’s freewrite stands as a powerful statement about the role writing plays in his life, and about how the life of a writer can be a lonely and perhaps oppositional, even to those he knows.

Journal Writing (Shafiqul)

Amy assigned a journal on the first day of the course, and told the students that they should write in it everyday. She expressed the importance of a journal for any good writer, as a way to spark ideas and a place to move writing forward and as a method for increasing

fluency. She also talked about use of a journal for her own work. The students were encouraged to use the journal for class notes and in-class writing, as well as taking notes on what they read. But, most importantly, she said, she wanted a journal in the traditional sense: a place for the students to record what they were feeling and thinking, a place for them to react to the texts and ideas in the course in a way that mattered to them, a place to experience the empowerment writing can provide, a place to experience how a commitment to writing can change how you see the world and how you live in the world—Amy’s somewhat hidden underlying agenda for the course.

Amy collected and responded to the journals three times during the semester. However, quite a few of the students were uneasy about letting me see their journals, and so I said that they should show them to me only if they wanted to. The students also needed the journal on a regular basis, and so it was hard to arrange a time where I could have the journal and return it to them in time for their needs. As a result, even those that were willing to share what they wrote, rarely gave them to me, though I think this was more out of forgetfulness than any desire for secrecy. So I did not get to see to many journals or any journals frequently.

From what I did see, and from what Amy reported after reading them, the students used the journals to write about their experiences and feelings, to respond to things they were reading, and to write in class or begin early drafts of assignments. And, for some students, according to Amy, the journal became a profound experience; specifically, Leanna, Charity and Rosa used the journal to write what they could not bring themselves to say in class, especially while we were reading *The Stories of Eva Luna*. Amy commented often about Leanna’s journal, which often featured expansive writing directly related to the course. She

commented: “Leanna wrote some great stuff about the significance/symbolism of dreams” (Dreams were a theme in Langston Hughes and in the Shakespeare excerpts.) For Ben and Ghazi, in particular, the journal offered a place to write about the home countries they missed. After reading the journals early in the course, Amy wrote in her own journal: “Took a look at some of the journals. I’m happy with what I see. Abeni, Ghazi, Eduardo to some extent are all writing amazingly. Ghazi wrote a couple of pages about his love of Pakistan.... Ben wrote about coming here too. It seems when the subject interests them, they write without hesitation. Amazing really.” Others used the journal to write about things outside the course. Amy commented after reading Begum’s journal: “Her journal also included some really beautiful writing about the rain.”

Sometimes Amy suggested journal topics, or suggested that the students write in their journals before completing an assignment. While reading Hemingway, Amy talked in class about autobiography and assigned the students to write a little bit of their own autobiography. In response, Shafiqul wrote a short entry in his journal about his move to the United States.

[Journal Entry]

When I first heard and was confirmed that I was coming to America, I was very happy and excited. I thought about coming to America, a country far away from my country. I was wondering about the new country and thinking about writing letter to my friends from this new country and telling them about it and my feelings about it.

When I just stepped in this country, I was surprised by its novelty, the new world, big buildings, clean wide roads, so many kinds of people. I liked it and also was confused about my adaption to this new world. I wrote letters to my friends back in my country. I felt very lonely. I began missing my country and friends. I was so happy to come to this country but I felt very bad when I missed them. After so many years in this country when I made many friends, I still miss my friends and my country. I don’t think, I can ever forget them.

Shafiqul's writing reminds us of who many of these students are and of the tenuous and difficult space they occupy, in a literal sense, in a socio-cultural sense and even in a linguistic sense. Now nineteen years old, Shafiqul moved with his family from Bangladesh five years ago. He attended a New York City high school for four years before coming to CUNY as a Biology major this Fall as the first member of his immediate or extended family to go to college.

It is interesting that despite what we would perceive as an entirely appropriate assignment after reading *A Moveable Feast*, and despite the perceived attraction to writing about your own life, Shafiqul gets down the barest ideas and then moves quickly away. However, though it does not seem like much, this is a lot of writing for Shafiqul in the early part of the course, especially for an optional journal entry. His other entries are one paragraph or just a line or two, and even his other writing for the course is often much too skimpy both in terms of length and depth of ideas. The piece has a built in tension: when he "first heard" about coming to America, he was happy indicating that subsequently his expectations were not fulfilled, or something (his longing for and memory of his homeland) stood in the way. Even more interestingly, Shafiqul writes that even before he arrived, he was "thinking about" writing letters to his friends back home about his new country. He imagined himself in a particular place and now has his current life experience to place against that imagined position. This entry, it seems to me, actually indicates that Shafiqul has something he wants to say about immigrating to the United States.

Amy's class did not require much personal writing, like this, and so it is not surprising that Shafiqul is limited in what he can say and in how he goes about saying it—without the necessary details and in a detached voice. It is clear that Shafiqul finds it

difficult to talk about his friends and his home country. For this to become a more significant piece of writing, Shafiqul needs to take the further step of deciphering his life experience, analyzing it, theorizing it and connecting it to the larger extrinsic forces that influence his life. This seems like a daunting task, one that might take a semester-long series of assignments and scaffolding to accomplish.

When Shafiqul writes about how his confusion over his “adaption to this new world,” I am hoping for more—not as a teacher looking for a writer to fulfill an assignment, but purely as a reader who craves the always profoundly meaningful stories of the diaspora. What struggles did Shafiqul face? How does the culture of the U.S. clash with his specific upbringing? there are few essay topics that are richer in possibility than the personal story of the uprooted and tenuously replanted. But Shafiqul does not have the time or impetus to tell a fuller version of his story.

Amy did not write any comments next to this journal entry. (On the whole, her comments on journals were slight, in comparison to the other written work.) And even if she had noticed these two short paragraphs from Shafiqul, I am not sure she would have known what to do with them. Though Amy valued the use of the personal in writing, and even encouraged students to write about their personal experiences on the WAT exam, her class structure—with so many books to cover—and limited range of writing forms (as discussed earlier, this was by default, not by intention) would not allow for the multiple writing assignments and opening up of a different kind of writing voice that would be required to make a piece like this work for Shafiqul.

There is a sense in Shafiqul’s piece of a missed writing moment, where the student does not recognize his desire or interest in a subject, and the course does not do enough to

encourage students to locate and fulfill these desires. The books were picked, the assignment given, it was time to move on. Shafiqul's tension over coming to the "new world" would have to remain unresolved for now. Though brief pieces of writing like this are generated by Amy's use of informal writing, they have little outlet in a course structure that prescribes a narrow range of potential topics developed during class discussion and an even more narrow range of forms limited by what has been traditionally considered the school essay.

Process Writing: Explication (Rosa)

Throughout the course, Amy preached the benefits of informal writing as a doctrine. Not only was it the answer for slow moving conversations as shown in the classroom narratives, but also the way to find a topic, develop a topic, flesh-out supporting ideas and develop a conclusion. Amy supported her preaching by writing with the students in class, by discussing her own writing processes with them, and by assigning process writing throughout the course and being willing to collect it and respond to it thoroughly. The process writing assignments took a number of forms, from a course-long journal to in-class freewriting to at-home process assignments that asked the students to complete specific tasks designed to help them with more formal assignments.

For the discussion of Langston Hughes' poems, Amy asked the students to explicate a poem line by line before giving an overall reading of the poem. Rosa chose "Mother to Son," writing in perfectly vertical capital letters and connecting each line to its explication with a precise arrow.

MOTHER TO SON

WELL SON, I'LL TELL YOU

⇒MOTHER TALKING OR GIVING
ADVICE TO HER SON

LIFE FOR ME AIN'T BEEN NO CRYSTAL
STAIR

⇒LIFE'S STAIR IS NOT MADE UP
OF CRYSTAL. THE STAIR
OF LIFE LEADS YOU TO
GOALS, DREAMS.

IT'S HAD STACKS IN IT

⇒IN LIFE WE FIND STACKS,
SPLINTERS

AND SPLINTERS AND BOARDS TORN UP

⇒AND BOARDS TORN UP THAT
CAN HURT

AND PLACES WITH NO CARPET ON
THE FLOOR

⇒IT'S NOT LIKE CINDERELLA'S
TALE WHERE THERE WERE
CARPETS ON THE BARE
FLOOR. LIFE IS SIMPLY
BARE AND IT CAN BE VERY
UNCOMFORTABLE.

BUT ALL THE TIME

⇒ALL THE TIME WHILE THE
MOTHER CLIMBS

I'VE BEEN CLIMBIN' ON
AND REACHIN' LANDIN'S
AND TURNIN' CORNERS

⇒SHE KEEP GOING ON
⇒SHE REACHED LANDING, IN
OTHER WORDS SHE
REACHED HER GOALS

AND SOMETIMES GOIN' IN THE DARK

⇒SHE EVEN WENT THROUGH
DARK PLACES

WHERE THERE AIN'T BEEN NO LIGHT.

⇒PLACES WHERE CONFUSION
EXISTED AND THERE WAS
NO HOPE

SO BOY, DON'T YOU TURN BACK.
DON'T YOU SET DOWN ON THE STEPS.

⇒NOT TO STOP CLIMBING
⇒AND NOT TO GO BACK. DO NOT
SIT

'CAUSE YOU FINDS IT'S KINDER HARD.

⇒TELLING SON HE IS GOING TO
FIND HARD SITUATIONS

DON'T YOU FALL NOW
FOR I'VE STILL GOIN' HONEY

⇒DO NOT GO BACK.
⇒MOTHER IS STILL CLIMBING
THE STAIR

I'VE STILL CLIMBIN'

⇒AND SHE IS STILL TRYING TO
PURSUE HER GOALS

AND LIFE FOR ME AIN'T BEEN
NO CRYSTAL STAIR

⇒BECAUSE LIFE IS NOT EASY

IN MY OPINION, THE MOTHER IS GIVING AN ADVICE TO HER SON. THE SON OBVIOUSLY HAD SOME SORT OF PROBLEM AND DOES NOT WANT TO KEEP ON GOING. THE MOTHER IS GIVING AN EXAMPLE OF A STAIR AND COMPARES IT WITH LIFE. SHE EXPLAINS THAT LIFE IS NOT A "CRYSTAL STAIR" BUT THAT IN FACT IT HAS STACKS, SPLINTERS AND BOARDS TORN UP. SHE COMPARED LIFE WITH A STAIR, BECAUSE STAIRS ARE TO BE CLIMBED IN ORDER TO REACH A CERTAIN PLACE. IN THIS CASE THE STAIR OF LIFE WILL TAKE ONE TO REACHING ONE'S GOALS, DREAMS AND OTHER TASKS. SHE ALSO MENTIONS THAT THERE ARE PLACES WITH NO CARPETS ON THE FLOOR. THIS REMINDS ME OF A FAIRY TALE WERE FLOORS ARE FILLED WITH PLUSH CARPETS. AND SINCE THERE ARE NOT CARPETS ON THE FLOOR AND ITS A BARE FLOOR. SHE'S ALSO BEEN IN DARK PLACES WERE THERE IS NO HOPE. SO SHE KEEPS TELLING HER SON NOT TO TURN BACK BUT INSTEAD TO KEEP CLIMBING. THE MOTHER TELLS HER SON THAT SHE HERSELF IS STILL CLIMBING, EVEN THOUGH LIFE IS TOUGH, HARD, AND IT IS NOT A CRYSTAL STAIR.

In general, the students liked the explication assignment because the task was concrete. The line-by-line work of explication gave them something to do and enough to say--by their standards. As with most of the students, Rosa's explication favors the literal. Some of the explications are a mere rephrasing of the lines of the poem. Still, by being forced into this line-by-line process, Rosa and many of the other writers, landed on crucial insights almost by default. In looking for something to say in response to each line, they couldn't help but stumble on something to say that went beyond direct translation.

The role of teacher commentary proves crucial here, however. In her marginal comments, Amy corrects Rosa's only misreading (her use of the word "stacks," instead of "tacks"). But, rather than disparage the one-for-one rephrasing of the majority of Rosa's close reading, Amy picks out the specific places where Rosa offers more than paraphrase and encourages her or asks for a more thorough treatment. For example, when Rosa adds the

word “simply” to Hughes’ adjective “bare” Amy compliments: “Good.” When Rosa suggests that Hughes’ use of “turning corners” means that the mother has reached her goals, Amy compliments the extension. More importantly, Amy asks prodding questions of some of the assumptions Rosa makes. She pushes Rosa to think further about why Hughes chooses particular images like the crystal stair. She asks for clarification when Rosa declares the son’s trouble as obvious (“How is this obvious to you?”) and questions what Rosa means when she says that the mother reaches a certain place (“What is this certain place?”). Finally, Amy attempts to push Rosa into seeing the implications of her most solid piece of analysis (“This reminds me of a fairy tale...”) by asking “Why does this remind you of a fairy tale? What parts are like a fairy tale? How is a fairy tale filled with carpets?” In her end-comments Amy compliments Rosa’s “wonderful insights” and asks for clarification: “For example what does it mean when someone says life is a board with tacks and splinters?” She finishes, as she often does, with an open-ended invitation to continue the discussion, “Let’s talk more about this.”

For Rosa and the other students this direct and specific questioning seems to be a critical moment in academic literacy. It is obvious that Rosa put time into her reading, and in doing so, she stumbled onto some worthy ideas. But there is no evidence in the commentary at the bottom of her process writing to indicate that Rosa is aware of which explications have potential for an insightful reading of the poem. If she is unable to select out the good readings from the literal translation, then the generating assignment creates volume without creating the necessary next step of focusing and delineating a reading of Hughes’ idea. Being told that something you have is worth pursuing further is a critical step that can lead to being able to do this recognition process for yourself. This assignment and Amy’s feedback

provides the kind of scaffolding that Basic Writers use to launch into more complex ideas. Without this generative step, the writers are faced with coming up with insightful, cohesive analysis all at once. This is a true example of the dialogue of writing, and one that can occur only if the instructor gives the thoughtful and thorough reading that Amy provided.

Process Writing: Paragraph Reaction (Vladislav)

In the third classroom narrative, during the discussions of the Isabel Allende stories, Vladislav, a Russian immigrant student, struggled to make a point during class about the role of women in the stories. His spoken English skills limited his ability to deliver his complex idea. The writing assignment for the next class was to write about how Allende's female characters are portrayed. Amy wanted to know if the students thought the female characters were in control of their own destiny. "How much power do they have?" she asked. In the last piece of writing Vladislav would do before dropping the course, he attempted to write what he could not say in class, and support it with citations from the text, as Amy had been increasingly demanding.

"Stories of Eva Luna"

Women in Isabel Allende's stories portrayed in many different ways. From one hand there is no mystic in the stories, but in the other hand female characters are not seem to be realistic in their actions. All stories emphasize overdone attitude towards women. Women are main characters through the whole book. Isn't there a bit of feminism? It is obvious that most of Eva Luna's stories are based subconsciously on feminism theory. For example Hortensia, the main character of the story "If you Touched My Heart" becomes victim of one man's negligence. Being a very humble and passive, Hortensia does subdue with the attitude toward her. "She believed the woman had a calling to be a slave, and was happy being one, or else had been born an idiot and like others in her situation was better locked up then

exposed to the jeers and perils of the street.” It sounds like a challenge to me, in which Isabel Allende is trying to tell about discrimination of women in general.

In “Tosca” we deal with a totally different case, there is Maurizia Rugieri, very talented and creative person, who fell in love and get married with Ezio Longo, a first generation-immigrant, an architect, without degree and builder. Their marriage hadn’t been successful and after awhile, Maurizia prefers another young gentleman to him.

Maurizia is free in her actions. After some unsuccessful attempts of begging Maurizia to stay, she leaves the house and the only child to join her lover for the rest of her life. She seems to be happy after that, but memories of her son never leaves her. Maurizia tried not to think about him because it gives her animal pain each time when she thinks of him – so she chooses never to mention his name. After many years spending together with Leonardo Gomez, Maurizia decides to visit a tavern in Agua Santa, where her former husband and her son the owners of construction company suppose to have a lunch. When she enters tavern and recognizes Izio Longo and the young boy who must be her son, Maurizia wants to believe that Ezio had continued to desire her and wait for her during all that time, with persistent and impassioned love that Leonardo Gomez could never give because it was not in his nature.

“At that moment when she was only inches from stepping from the shadow and being exposed, the young man leaned forward, grasped his father’s wrist and said something with a sympathetic wink. Both burst out laughing, clapped each other on the shoulder, and ruffled each other’s hair with a visible tenderness and staunch complicity that excluded Maurizia Rugieri and the rest of the world. She hesitated for an infinite moment on the borderline between reality and dream then stepped back, left the tavern, opened her black umbrella, and walked home with the macaw flying above her head like a bizarre archangel from a book of days.”

Maurizia leaves the tavern unsatisfied, but at the same time everything stays on its places.

It seems to me that in each story is the example of women mentality and I would say that Isabel Allende through her stories is trying to show it from different points of view. Allende’s women, it seemed to me, to be inadequate in their actions in most cases.

Before coming to the United States a little more than a year prior, Vladislav attended university in Russia. He told me that he had taken and enjoyed literature classes, and particularly liked Isaac Babel’s short stories. It is not surprising then that he knows what he needs to do in this piece of writing. He understands that he should read the stories through the lens of feminism that has been repeatedly raised in class. He introduces feminist theory

early in his response, and he smartly phrases it as a question in a non-totalizing way: “Isn’t there a bit of feminism?” But instead of defining what he means by feminism and showing how it works in the stories, he simply answers the question: “It is obvious that most of Eva Luna’s stories are based subconsciously on feminism theory.” However, even though it is a non-word, his use of “subconsciously” subtly indicates that he understands that Allende’s stories are not trying to deliver an overt message. He sees the stories as providing a worthy challenge to a patriarchal world: “It sounds like a challenge to me, in which Isabel Allende is trying to tell about discrimination of women in general.” And, in a complex way, he wants to argue that Allende’s critique of patriarchy is a bit heavy handed (“overdone”).

In addition to a worthy, complex reading of the text, Vladislav certainly has a sense of how to construct this piece of informal writing about literature. Although, at times, he fails to indicate to the reader when he is quoting directly from the story, he paraphrases with speed and a confident voice providing the brief summaries and selecting the pertinent details relevant to his reading, without retelling the whole story, as when he summarizes the relationship between Izio and Maurizia in the story “Tosca” and when he uses the phrase “animal pain” which comes from the story. He directs the audience from idea to idea, facilitating the flow (i.e.: “In ‘Tosca’ we deal with a totally different case....”). He knows that he needs to provide a narrative of the story, but more importantly a comment on what he sees in the story. So, after the long narrative quote about the tavern scene Vladislav suggests that Maurizia is in a conflicted position, both unsatisfied by the meeting in the tavern, but also accepting of what has become of her son. However he leaves this point undeveloped. Vladislav was not a lazy student, running out of gas. I feel that he simply did not have the words to go further with his analysis. Instead, he moves on to two other ideas: the influence

of patriarchal society on female “mentality” and his belief that the female characters are “inadequate in their actions in most cases.” He does not fill out either of these ideas either, however, and so Amy writes in the margins: “I’d love some examples” and “Tell me more about this.”

In this piece, Vladislav demonstrates that he knows what a reading of literature requires. It is Vladislav’s lack of familiarity with English that limits his response, and ultimately frustrates him. As an ESL writer, Vladislav struggles with fluency. He is cognizant that what he is writing has to sound academic, has to feature a particular syntax, even a particular vocabulary (“subconsciently”). In a conversation before class one day, he told me how he struggles to say things in English; how he knows that he is thinking in Russian and then trying to translate and it is not working. He says that he knows what it means to be fluent in a language because when he writes music (he is a classical piano player and composer) he feels that flow. He concluded, “But in English, I just am plodding.”

His ESL difficulties surface in a number of ways. His use of “mystic” in the second line is obviously not the right choice, and using “subconsciently” instead of subconsciously indicates a present difficulty with standard word forms. Occasionally his idiom is off (“From the one hand...”) and there are missing and misused articles, and plenty of trouble with verb forms. But Vladislav is also turning phrases here and there that indicate that he is a writer whose vocabulary and style are on the rise. I particularly like when he references Allende’s feminist overtures as an “overdone attitude” or when he suggests that Maurizia has settled for the status quo, “everything stays on in its places.” These two examples contrast sharply with his “plodding” and indicate that this is a writer with a voice and style, someone who

understands the potential in language to say something meaningful in a vital, entertaining way.

His limited ability to express his ideas in both spoken and written English, it seems to me, is a matter of an English as second language difficulty, not an academic literacy issue. But Vladislav is different than a writer like Tsegu who is stunted by his lack of fluency, producing just a few sentences in an hour's time. Vladislav has enough fluency to make good, complex readings. But as frustrating as it is for the reader to draw out what he means, it is even more frustrating for Vladislav as he tries to meet the increasing expectations of the course. As the semester moves faster, Vladislav is unable to keep up and he recognizes his own struggle, telling Amy that he needs to drop the course. He asks if he can continue attending the class, which he does for the next two weeks before fading away.

Formal Assignment Early in the Semester (Ghazi)

Below is an essay from Ghazi in response to the first formal writing assignment of the course where he writes about a theme from the three selections of the BAMN (By All Means Necessary) text.⁷ It should be noted, that though Amy was looking for the students to develop a voice and to try out a variety of styles, her assignment descriptions (See Appendix F for the BAMN assignment) were fairly traditional, as well as lacking in specific detail. In this assignment description, she writes: "Once you have developed a topic, write the paper." In a subsequent line, she adds, "While creating the topic, you should have written out proofs for that topic. Now fully explain each of your proofs." From these directions, which emphasize the idea of a topic and insinuate the idea of an argument structure with evidence

(“proof”), the students would naturally assume that they should write a fairly traditional school essay, and that’s what Ghazi does here.

BAMN

Introduction

There are many things the people of democratic country did to stop the unfairness of democratic government. The BAMN (By All Means Necessary) is the book that shows some of the events happened in the history of the United States of America. In this book, there were different ethnic or other groups protesting for their desire freedom and rights. The groups that will be discussed in this report are Yippies and “No More Miss America”.

[Page Break]

No More Miss America

There were many things people of democratic country did to protest for their rights and desire freedom. The author of “No More Miss America” did the same by giving ten point that why there shouldn’t be a Miss American. Some of the points were so extreme and negative, but others were agreeable and acceptable.

There are some points that were made in “No More Miss America” article with which I agree. One of the points is that Miss America is a living commercial. This point is agreeable because different companies such as “Pepsi, Toni and Oldsmobile” sponsor the Beauty Pageant. It resulted in the increase of the sale of their products because for example, in the commercials, Miss America is drinking the Pepsi and saying this is the reason I won the Beauty contest then the every girl will drink Pepsi. It’s just a tick of selling a product; in other words it’s a trap.

One other point that is agreeable and acceptable is that it hurts women’s emotions. As mentioned in “No More Miss America” that the one that wins is to be used and the other forty-nine are useless. Therefore, it hurt those forty-nine women’s feelings because for example the one that wins goes to different tours and places all over the world; those who loses to become Miss America, when they went back to their states, they don’t get that much respect and sometimes called losers. For that reason, I think there shouldn’t be the Miss America, which hurt somebody’s feelings and emotions.

There were also some points that were made in “No More Miss America” article with which I believe were wrong, extreme and negative. One of the points that I disagree with is that every girl does not hope to grow to be Miss America; every boy doesn’t hope to grow to be president because I didn’t. Also, just because boys and girls have the role models as Miss America and President doesn’t mean that they will grow up to be like them.

One other point that is not agreeable is that it’s not bad to be the cheerleader for the soldiers. They fight for their country. They have a right to be entertained and if Miss America is entertaining them by talking with them, then it gives them the support because they are risking their lives for people of that country.

[Page Break]

Yippies

There were many things the people of democratic country did to protest for their rights and desire freedom. The Yippies also did the same by giving some points to achieve the freedom of doing nothing. Some of the points were so extreme and negative, but others were agreeable and acceptable.

Some of the points that were made in article about Yippies were agreeable. One of points was that I agreed was the point that Jerry Rubin made. It is agreeable that "if you speech is ineffective, it is protected by the Constitution, [and] if your speech is effective you are 'inciting to riot'." It is true because the Yippies were protesting for freedom against the democratic government, which was beating them and breaking the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The first amendment says that you have a freedom of speech, and Yippies were expressing their views and opinion, but the government ordered the police to beat them. The Yippies speeches were effective and many people were agreeing with them. Therefore, the government incited them to riot.

One of the strong points that Yippies made which I agree was that to share food, money, bodies, energy, ideas, blood, and defense to attempt the peace. This proves that the Yippies wanted the peace, and I'm peaceful person too. For example, when they will share ideas they will able to get the plan for achieving their goal which was a freedom of doing nothing. When they will share love, no one will fight. When they will share food and money, no one will be needy, and when will share blood then no one will die.

There were some points that were not acceptable. One of them was that the women were not allowed in the convention delegates (meetings). They had 230 rebels men ready to rape the daughters and wives if they tried to involve in their desire freedom (freedom of doing nothing). Therefore, it only benefited the males not females.

One other point that I dislike and disagree with was that to smoke marijuana and use drugs. I don't like that point because I think the using drugs and smoking are the worst things a person can do to harm him/herself. It is because the studies have proven that you can get lung cancer and eventually die from using drug and smoking.

In conclusion, the Yippies and the author of "No More Miss America" are one of those who did many things to protest for their rights and desire freedom. The desire freedom for Yippies was that they wanted the freedom of doing nothing and for "No More Miss America" that there shouldn't be a Miss America. To support their freedom they made some agreeable and disagreeable points. That's why they are the same, and they are different in that they weren't one ethnic group. The author of "No More Miss America" didn't want the Beauty Pageant, and that's okay because she gave ten points and after all it's his opinion. On the other hand, Yippies wants the freedom of doing nothing. That's a big difference. The difference is that the world could live without having beauty contests but it can't live without people doing nothing.

In many ways, Ghazi was, by far, the most entertaining voice in class. He often had the whole class laughing in response to a one-liner and his energy and outgoing personality were nothing short of contagious. To be a likeable class joker, Ghazi negotiated complex rhetorical situations on a number of levels. He knew how and when to deliver a line, even one that had the potential to offend, like when he asked Amy to pick up the pizza for the class party. In class discussions and especially in group-work he was active and willing to throw out ideas to others easily, and to accept and incorporate the ideas of others. Once I watched as he held two conversations with different group members simultaneously. In another group session, where I questioned one of his answers, he smartly read into what I was saying and made his original answer plausible, while also giving the answer he thought I wanted. He also had a profound influence on Saleem's learning; his energy and inquisitiveness practically dragged Saleem out of his shell. All this is to say that Ghazi was a versatile and personable classroom presence who understood his audience and liked to entertain them. He was a communicator by nature.

Yet, in this essay, he delivers a dry paper that repeats the same summary points without energy or insight. Ghazi's voice disappears, as he focuses in on the classic school-paper binary of agree/disagree. He does add some complexity by at least providing some evidence in support of both sides of the binary, as opposed to the usual course of picking one side and defending it. In addition, he uses the words "extreme" and "negative" as well as "agreeable" and "acceptable," to create some nuance within the standard extremes of agree/disagree. But as he makes his way through the essay it becomes clear that he uses these alternatives as pure synonyms rather than as a way to increase the complexity of his

discussion. He does not tackle how certain tactics of rebellion are acceptable, while others are extreme, for example. Thus, his paper remains a strict binary of agree/disagree, as shown in the opening line of the second paragraph: “There are some points that were made in “No More Miss America” article with which I agree.” And later, “One of the points that I disagree with is....”

By recounting the points from each piece of writing, Ghazi is fulfilling what he perceives as the number one goal of the student writer, to summarize the texts thoroughly, so as to indicate that he has read and understood the text. And, except for a misreading of Rubin’s idea of effective speech being unconstitutional, Ghazi reports the points of both pieces accurately and thoroughly. But unlike in Vladislav’s *Stories of Eva Luna* response above, there is no process of selection here, of choosing summary points as a way to react to a particular concept or argue an interesting point. Ghazi’s essay is simply a list-type, catch-all summary, where just about everything is included.

Furthermore, to keep his summary orderly, as he presumes the teacher would want it, he is methodical in his structure and delivery. His essay is overtly clear, filled with all the explicit sign posting taught to students who are writing not to entertain or deal complexly with an idea, but to present agreed upon points that offer the reader little nuance to chew on. In the first sentence of the second paragraph of the Miss America section, he states that he agrees with certain points and then follows with “one of the points [with which he agrees]” in the second sentence and “This point is agreeable because...” in the third sentence. The next paragraph begins with “One other point that is agreeable and acceptable...” He uses the excessive signposting throughout the sections of the paper where he disagrees with the viewpoints presented in Miss America as well, and follows this same three step reassurance

structure at the start of the agree section about the Yippies. The subheads add to the feeling of overt clarity, acting almost like headers in a book report. The essay ends with the standard signpost, “in conclusion” and then he maintains the binary structure and connects the two readings merely by repeating one after another the points he has made in the essay.

Other elements that limit this piece and place it squarely in the category of the traditional school essay are the attempts at formal academic writing that lead to some awkward writing (“with which I believe were wrong, extreme or negative”), the tendency to lean on ideas that are obvious (smoking causes cancer) and the fall back from or minimizing of anything controversial by using statements of universal escape (i.e. “...after all it’s her opinion” and “...they made some agreeable and disagreeable points”). He concludes the essay with such an expression, declaring: “In conclusion, the Yippies and the author of ‘No More Miss America’ are one of those who did many things.”

Given the elaborate set up of the essay with its separate page introduction, subheads, signposting and the thoroughness of his summary of the two readings, there is a strong sense that Ghazi thinks that this is all that is required of a piece of writing. In his essay there is no sense that he understands what to do with the information and ideas he has garnered from the text. He does not build toward an argument or even much of a reaction to the two pieces. He does not play the pieces off each other, or talk about how the pieces relate to the rest of the world. The lack of analysis and opinion leads Amy to ask in her end comment: “What exactly is your topic?” Ghazi has failed to make a reading in his paper, failed to take any risk. There was no complexity to chew on, nothing for the reader to do. I wonder if this is what makes writing for school dull for students, and, perhaps, what causes the halts in conversation during class.

This piece also provides interesting insight into the question of error in student writing. Though there are many grammar, punctuation and style mistakes in this piece, when I finish reading the text that is not what stands out. I can find only one instance where flawed writing makes the meaning of Ghazi's writing indecipherable: "They had 230 rebels men ready to rape the daughters and wives if they tried to involve in their desire freedom (freedom of doing nothing)." The rest is free of the mangled syntax or the incomplete thoughts, that dominates Vladislav's piece earlier. The lack of voice and lack of worthy and interesting content overwhelms any feeling that this piece is full of error. If we correct every error, we still have a piece of writing that does little analysis and lacks reader enticement or style; we are left with a piece that no one wants to read.

There are tiny glimpses of what is missing in Ghazi's essay. At times his voice appears, as when he suggests that the soldiers "have a right to be entertained..." and when he uses the personal "I" ("because I didn't [become president]" and "I'm a people person too"). There are hints of analysis and opinion, which Amy notes and then encourages him to develop further. When Ghazi discusses the connection between Miss America and selling products like Pepsi, Amy writes "Nice analysis!" in the margin, and then asks, "What does all of this tell us about fighting for rights and a desire for freedom?" The last line of the essay offers both a hint of an opinion and a bit of style: "The difference is that the world could live without having beauty contests but it can't live without people doing nothing." There is a lot there, and Amy tries to tease it out by writing, "Good opinion.... It really explains what's necessary and what's not."

Ghazi's essay was not the exception to the rule on this first formal assignment, but rather the exemplar. By-and-large, the students delivered what they thought academic writing

requires: complete clarity, a summary of what was read or discussed and little risk in terms of analysis or argument.⁸ But Amy is looking for something else. “I would like to see...a clear opinion,” Amy writes to Ghazi in the last line of her end comment.

In-Class, Targeted Freewriting (Lewis)

With almost magical regularity throughout the course, when Amy stopped the class discussion and asked the students to write, almost all of them did for almost all of the time. These writing sessions were not true freewrites, as put forth by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*, in the sense that Amy focused the students to a particular idea through verbal prompts. Often she asked them to write when class discussion had come to a halt. She wanted the students to write themselves out of their silence. At other times, she used freewriting as a way to recapture what had just been talked about, as a way to recall what the class had tried to accomplish. As shown in the narratives from the previous chapter, Amy would often use this freewriting process two or more times in one class period.

During these sessions, Amy would sit at her desk writing, although, admittedly she would sometimes not write on the question or statement prompt she had given, but on how the class was going, or about what she planned to do next. She would then look up after just a few minutes, when she ran out of things to write herself, and, she told me, if more than half of the students had stopped writing she would call the session to an end. Rather than have the students share what they had written by asking for volunteers to read out-loud, or asking them to read their responses to each other, she would simply restart the conversation with a general question that any student could take in any direction. Something like, “So, what do

you think?” However, she sometimes collected the freewrites at the end of class, so they were not entirely “free” in that sense.

As with the journals the students kept, I did not read everything the students wrote during these classroom freewrites, but from those that I did read, almost all of them were on topic. For the most part, the students took the freewrites seriously, and except for the extremely restricted writers like Tsegu and Roberto, they were able to write a few paragraphs or two in the five minutes or so that Amy allowed them.

The selection below is a series of three freewrites from one class done by Lewis, who could write on demand regardless of the topic. The freewrites are from the class day where the students discussed *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse for the first time. Though she warned them periodically that eventually they would be responsible for *Siddhartha*, the only full text of the course, when the class day finally arrived to discuss it, the sense in the room was that no one had read the text fully. The class discussion, as had so often happened before, floundered quickly, and Amy turned to freewriting to help build up some ideas to talk about that related to the text. Here Lewis responds to Amy’s targeted questions about a text, he admits later in a group I was in, that he barely read.

[In-class Freewrite from Lewis]

I believe the themes in this book deal with not taking life and what it has to offer for granted. The reason is that you will not know how much things, people or places mean to you until you lose them. This book also uses religion to get that message across. Another is the message that we should respect our surroundings and what it gives us. An example of *Siddhartha* practicing the art of self denial, shows that we as humans should try our best not to be selfish, to respect others, to respect animals. Another theme is that we don’t need our personal possessions to survive. Materialistic possessions are useless in life.

* * *

The ideas presented might have something in common such that they are lessons of life. Maybe the meaning of life itself, teaching us how we should go about dealing with the troubles and hardships experienced with the goodness. Also the idea that in order to be more knowledgeable and self aware you must experience life from all different angles before you form your opinion, view or belief of the world. Don't make any quick judgments, assumptions or decisions before you've seen a little of everything.

* * *

I believe the theme or idea I can draw out from all the readings in the class is freewill. Life is full of different influences, religion, society, social groups, racism, culture, sub-cultures, etc. All these things deal with the free will to choose who we want to be, how we dress, think, act and talk. Many people are oblivious to the fact that there are other ways of living life, not just one mindset, not just to be influenced by your immediate surrounding. But to experience varieties and differences before you form conclusions, hypothesis and opinions about the universe. Keep an open mind because being close minded and stubborn can lead to [unfinished thought].

Take into consideration before passing judgement [unfinished thought].

In the first freewrite, Lewis is dutifully, and a bit limitedly, responding to Amy's question, about the themes in the *Siddhartha* text. In complete sentences and fairly flat prose, he quickly provides three main themes from the book. Lewis begins by restating the theme he has accepted from the class discussion: to not take life for granted. He then moves onto two other themes that offer viable places for expansion: the need to respect our surroundings and the need to avoid centering ourselves on materialistic possessions. As Amy points out in her margin comments, either one of these would be a worthy spot for investigating his personal feelings or our society's general feelings about Hesse's claims. Amy wrote: "Do we take care of our surroundings?" and "Are you a materialist?"

But it is the almost throwaway tangent in the middle that offers perhaps the most possibility for a complex reading of *Siddhartha*: Lewis hints that Hesse "uses religion to get that message across." Left, completely undeveloped, this comment could lead to an

interesting take on whether the Siddhartha text is offering a religious or secular philosophy to its readers. It is just this kind of complex idea that freewriting is supposed to produce. It is a thought that came from writing out the obvious theme from the book that had already been discussed, and then being willing to write more. Through writing Lewis propelled himself forward into a worthy idea. If he is able to recognize the worthiness of this idea (see the analysis of Rosa's text earlier in the chapter for a discussion of this step) he could be onto a good paper topic and the freewriting will have served an even greater purpose than what Amy had intended: facilitating better class discussion.

In the second freewrite, Lewis is responding to Amy's question: What do the ideas in the book have in common? Lewis begins by repeating the question as a statement, but then quickly moves to a reading of the overall text. Judging from Amy's previous pedagogical and curricular methods, this move by Lewis is exactly what she wants. After having mentioned and discussed various unconnected aspects of the book, Amy wants the writers to create an organizing principle or a commonality within the text that will unite the disparate ideas—a crucial move in composing the thematic academic essay writing she eventually requires. Lewis's reading of the text as a meaning of life/way to live book is fairly straightforward, and would certainly need more development and tension in order for it to be used as a paper topic. But the freewrite does give him something to say at a point in the class when no one was saying anything. When Amy calls this particular freewrite to a stop, Lewis is the second person to speak, and he basically repeats what he wrote here. This was not uncommon. Though I cannot think of a single instance where someone read out a freewrite, when Amy resumed discussions after freewriting, the students did have more to say, even if she restarted the conversation on the same point where the class had stalled previously.

Finally, in the last freewrite, later in the class session, Lewis responds to Amy's request to connect the themes they uncovered from *Siddhartha* to the themes in the other texts in the course. The students are largely unaware at this point that this freewrite is directed at their final assignment which will ask them to take a theme from the course and develop it using at least two texts.

Here Lewis hits upon freewill as a possible connecting link. He suggests that the key to freewill is to move outside your set beliefs, to take in multiple points of view and then to actively choose a path to act. He takes on an almost preachy tone as he delivers his message. "Many people are oblivious to the fact that there are other ways of living life, not just one mindset, not just to be influenced by your immediate surrounding. But to experience varieties and differences before you form conclusions, hypothesis and opinions about the universe." In suggesting the importance of gathering a variety of viewpoints before forming opinions, Lewis is not only commenting on what he has learned from reading and discussing *Siddhartha* in relation to the other texts in the class, but also, what he has learned from class discussion in the course.

Lewis was an outspoken student from the start of the class, not in terms of the amount he spoke, but in terms of his ideas being set. He was often quite sure of himself and dismissive of other students' and Amy's opinions. For example, as described in the *Stories of Eva Luna* class narrative in the previous chapter, Lewis took a hard line against the Allende book, jumping on the bandwagon that Carver led in declaring the female characters "stupid." He also made the obnoxious, misogynist comment that most feminists he knows are lesbians. However, Lewis often sat next to and was grouped with Leanna who offered a much different take on Allende's female characters and on patriarchy in our society. In

Leanna, Lewis came in consistent contact with a peer that he respected. (In addition to general class discussion, they were often in groups together because they sat near each other.)

The culmination of Leanna's influence and his own self-reflection about the feminist lesbian comment led Lewis to write about Allende in his final paper. In his five-page piece, Lewis develops a nuanced position where he establishes that both in the book and in real life, men are given undue advantage over women, and that women need to assume a larger role in their own destiny. However, he successfully critiques Allende's position as being too extreme because she offers up too many depraved male characters that act in stereotypical patriarchal ways. He considers this a flaw in the book, claiming that Allende's real purpose is not to have equality among the sexes, but to have women "play a dominant role in society," something he calls "gender-centric beliefs."

Given that this freewrite was written as Lewis was developing his final paper, it is interesting to read it in relation to that paper, and to see the freewrite as part of the developmental process of his final work for the course. I believe that Lewis was influenced by what he wrote spontaneously here. The discussion of Allende and the conversations he has with Amy about his positions, both in commentary on his papers, and in his visits to her office, plus his conversations with Leanna, move him away from his misogynist position. As he writes in the final paper, *The Stories of Eva Luna* presents "many points of views of feminism" (sic). Lewis has taken what he writes as a general statement of wisdom in his freewrite, to "take into consideration" positions other than your own "before passing judgment" and applied it to how he analyzes texts and the world around him.

A final point about Lewis's freewrites is related to his Allende paper as well. Note the overreaching in the use of "universe" at the end of the third freewrite. Similar to Saleem (see

the first piece of student writing in this chapter), as a writer, Lewis has a flair for the dramatic. He wants to use writing to take control and define his world and the world of others. Even in this private freewrite, he is out to make a forceful statement. In the Allende paper he knows he is writing to an audience that needs some convincing on the topic he is writing about, and he recognizes that his lesbian comment has weakened the trust the reader would have in him, especially on this topic. He therefore tones down his rhetoric and writes from a more neutral tone and leaves out his tendency to be overly sensational or dramatic. His nuanced and well-supported position on Allende is a sign of a maturing writer who understand his audience.

Formal Assignment Middle of the Semester (Ben)

Ben always came to class smartly dressed in chinos and a collared shirt and dress shoes. Born in the United States, his parents had emigrated from Vietnam. His spoken language was a fusion of their language and multiple versions of English and Spanish that made his accent like nothing I had ever heard before.

Ben did not start the course until more than a week into the semester and he stayed quiet for the first few weeks. Then he warmed up and contributed regularly to class discussion, did all of the assignments, and was thinking concretely about his work. In a piece of reflective writing from the middle of the course, he lamented the momentary aspect of the writing process: "Try to write down as much as you could with the time that you have. But like myself if you think about it afterwards you won't have an opportunity to put it on paper, or maybe even forget about it the next day." But as the semester turned toward Thanksgiving, Ben's participation waned. He missed some class days and some

assignments. He often seemed rushed, arriving late and leaving early. At the end of the course he handed in a bunch of freewrites and paragraph reactions, looking to fulfill the requirements of the course, but ignoring the idea of these pieces being part of the process of his work. It's as if school was not his first priority, or at least this writing class did not rank.

However, when he put the time in, Ben would often deliver a sound piece of writing with more than a few moments of insight, as he did here on his Langston Hughes paper, the second of three formal paper assignments on the individual texts Amy assigned. Amy's assignment page asked the students to look to their process writing to find a topic. In class she had modeled the practice of drawing a general theme from a poem through the use of clustering and/or freewriting. Then, in the reaction papers to Hughes, Amy had asked for a line-by-line explication of a poem (see Rosa's text earlier). When she handed out the assignment page, she referenced these and indicated that the paper should take one of the ideas generated in the writing and develop it further, into a full-essay. "Don't try and do a whole bunch of themes," she cautioned. In her assignment page, she added this warning, "Your job is to make sure the topic is a real topic, an arguable opinion." It was clear to me that what she wanted was a fairly standard theme-based essay that used explications of the Hughes' poems to support the theme. But I was unsure how many students would understand this. I wondered why she had not directly referenced the process steps and more concretely defined the form, style and audience for the paper in her assignment page, even without the explicit directions. It surprised me that many of the students were able to deliver the structure and style of writing that she wanted. Even writers like Tsegu, Roberto, Charity and Lawrence who could not come close to developing a thorough treatment of a Hughes' theme, or who had trouble doing more than a direct paraphrase for an explication, had no

trouble providing the form and style appropriate for the assignment. Lewis, Saleem, Rosa, Pierre, James and Ben, whose paper I include below, were able to deliver a fully-developed thematic essay worthy of any introduction to Literature class.

Langston Hughes poems are based on reflections on what his people have lost.

Langston Hughes is a famous Harlem Renaissance poet, who has written a lot of poems, describing the time period where black people are recovering from the past. Through reading most of Langston Hughes poems, I have got the feeling that it describes what his people have lost, their heritage, dreams, hopes and freedom. In these poems that could be based on the many lives of black people, describing their lives in a way that we show sympathy for what they have lost. Hughes must know a lot about his people and how they have felt. He wrote these poems during the Harlem Renaissance, a time period where a lot of black artists like Hughes, do work that would last for their descendants to know how life was like when their people were being mistreated.

In one of the poems Hughes had written, called the Afro-American Fragment" he describes images of there homeland African as a distant and foreign place.

[Writes out the entire poem in paragraph form.]

After reading this poem, I felt that Hughes describes more than just losing their homeland. When these ancestors are forced as slaves to come to America, losing their heritage. Their descendants now could only learn about their heritage through reading history books that have memories that aren't even alive. Without real meaning when they compare it to the language they are learning. Compared to the UN-Negro tongue. The last couple of lines: "So long, So far away, Is Africa's dark face." Is Africa's Dark Face, this last line I believe, is telling us that Africa has been long ago taken away from us, that it is so distant to us than in only cast it's shadow over us. Yes, Africa's our homeland but we don't know anything about it, its true heritage has been taken away from us. The title "Afro American Fragment" tells us that Africa to them is no more than a fragment of what they know.

In the "Mother to Son" poem, Hughes describes to us how typical black women feel during the time period of the Harlem Renaissance. In this poem, written in a context of a mother, talking to her son, talking about the hardships she went through. That her life isn't like walking on a crystal stair, that it's full of tacks, splinters, boards torn up, places with no carpets on the floor. The poem tells us that even though the journey of life is hard that it isn't like walking on crystal stairs, that you still have to walk it through. "So boy, don't you turn back; Don't you set down on the steps." Cause you find it's kinder hard; Don't you fall now—For I'se still going honey, I'se still climbing." This poem is an encouragement telling the son that, don't give up along the way, because your mother is still with you along the way.

In this last poem I am going to talk about is the "Blues at Dawn," a poem that was hard to understand, because it makes us picture a character who doesn't want

to think in the morning. I had a hard time trying to understand it fully, even now. But through free-writes and a lot of analyzing I think I know what this poem is telling us.

[Writes out the entire poem written in paragraph form.]

This poem describes a person that wakes up in the morning asking why do I have to live the way I am now, unhappy and miserable. Even if I think the way things won't change for the better anyway, so why even bother, it would just make me feel, even worse than before. Hughes here in this poem, is describing a person who has a lot to expect and a lot to suffer throughout the day. That this person doesn't dare to even imagine or remember the hardships he or she is going through.

Hughes in his poems describes things that had happened anyway without you knowing it or wanting it. Losing what they would have valued. Things that have been lost to them even before they were born, lost their freedom, heritage, pride. Through the Harlem Renaissance they wanted to regain all of that, creating their own new culture. Through these poems, Hughes wants to replace the old history books that don't even have memories that are alive, but with poems that contains feelings, of how they have felt in a more meaningful way, and because of that, the poems contain a general feeling of sadness, irony and lost. These poems are generally an encouragement to the readers, that you should value what you have lost, that compared to the black people you should see we are regaining what we have lost.

Stylistically and structurally, Ben is doing many things right. He offers a worthy and focused general reading of the poem in the opening; he chooses good poems to support his idea; he moves in close and explicates specific lines of the poems; and in the closing paragraph he gives a confident reading that is supported by and expands on his explication of Hughes' work. He writes: "the poems contain a general feeling of sadness, irony and lost." There are some difficulties here, however. He is still a novice in certain stylistic conventions: he provides the whole texts of two of the poems; he does not always use quote marks when he uses Hughes' specific language; and he has difficulty moving from one poem to another. Structurally, he could do a better job integrating the middle poem into his overall reading, and there is no sense that the poems have been used in any particular order, to further the reading; they are presented, merely, as three examples to talk about. Nonetheless, Ben clearly understands many academic conventions and is developing a

complex academic voice. Most importantly, Ben's paper shows a complex relationship to the subject matter of the poems. The line he uses in regard to his own reading of "Blues at Dawn" could be applied to his work: when I read his paper, "I have a hard time understanding it fully, even now." It is a nuanced piece of writing where Ben simultaneously explores and distances himself from a personal connection to the plight of American Blacks.

Ben establishes that Hughes' is writing about injustice and maltreatment of African Americans through no fault of their own. He writes: "Things that have been lost to them even before they were born." He uses an idea that was initially stated in class by Saleem, about Hughes' attempt to reclaim the history of Black culture, by declaring that "reading history books...have memories that aren't even alive." But he doesn't just use Saleem's idea, he expands on it. He claims, "Through these poems, Hughes wants to replace the old history books that don't even have memories that are alive, but with poems that contains feelings, of how they have felt in a more meaningful way, and because of that, the poems contain a general feeling of sadness, irony and lost." Ben suggests that Hughes' work is an attempt to replace the facts of the history books with the previously missing "feelings" of people's lives. The poems are a rewriting of history, a revitalization of Black culture, which will highlight Black experience as a human experience.

From there, Ben references the historical context that Hughes is writing in to suggest that Hughes not only wanted to reclaim Black history, but to push Blacks to take their culture seriously. He writes, "Through the Harlem Renaissance they wanted to regain all of that [freedom, heritage, and pride] creating their own new culture." Hughes believes that Blacks need to recover the past in order to find a direction for the future of the race, according to Ben.

But, there is something so unexplored, and even troubling about Ben's reading. There is a distance and lack of connection to Hughes' project. Ben does not explicitly or implicitly connect to his comment about race in the opening of the essay, and this carries throughout his analysis in two ways. He sees the plight of American Blacks as something that happened out of no particular human intervention and as an issue that no longer exists. There is no sense that he recognizes that racism against Blacks in America is an ongoing problem. He writes, "Do work that would last for their descendants to know how life was like when their people were being mistreated." He truly sees the Black experience as something "other" and as something circumstantial rather than propagated.

This leads him to offer only simple sadness and pity: there is just a "general feeling of sadness, irony and lost" and later, we should "show sympathy for what they have lost." In his reading of "Blues at Dawn" he does identify with the narrative voice that asks "why do I have to live the way I am now." But he suggests, going further with this questioning is pointless, since "things won't change for the better anyway, so why even bother."

In the original version of this essay, Ben had included a personal story here that described how he hated to go to school. "I learned that there are things that have to be done anyway even without your consent, so why even bother thinking about it." He cuts the story in response to Amy's comment on his draft that it is "distracting." She states, "Personal examples like this are usually better for personal essays (like the WAT) most of the time. Personal experience is kept out of this type of poem analysis paper." But it seems like this personal connection is exactly where the push needs to take place. He is able to generalize Hughes' ideas to abstract concepts of loss, but he is unable to actively engage the work in a

present context, or a personal context—to give us a greater sense of why reading Hughes today matters.

Ben's final rhetorical move is indicative of this lack of personal connection. He wants to broaden his reading beyond Hughes' intended audience, to make a connection to the poems that travels across race and history to today's readers. He ends by declaring "These poems are generally an encouragement to the readers, that you should value what you have lost...." Ben is telling us that everyone should value his or her cultural history. But his last line is quite curious, as he uses a comparative statement to offer the reader some advice. He writes, "[C]ompared to the black people you should see we are regaining what we have lost." If we read the "you" as the readers of his paper, and the "we" as inclusive of the readers, Ben is breaking the human connection to the Black people. As if no Black person will be reading his paper, and as if their experience of lost heritage is not what other races and ethnicities experience. In an earlier draft of the paper, Ben ends with the line about readers valuing what they have lost. Amy comments to him: "I don't quite understand this." And that is where the last line comes from. This means that the line is purposeful; it is something Ben thinks will clarify his reading. It is indicative of his reading of all of Hughes' work, as discussed earlier. As a Vietnamese American reading these poems 70 years after Hughes' wrote them and more than 140 years after slavery, Ben is having difficulty seeing how they relate to his personal experience. He is unsure of where he stands in relation to his own lost heritage; has failed really to identify that he has a lost heritage. It is a complex and curious way to end the paper, and a conflict that Ben needs to explore further.

Still, given that his writing is full of thoughtful ideas and complexity, at times I wondered how he had managed to do so poorly on the writing test to end up in Basic

Writing, but then again, I had seen cases like his before. Ben made a lot of errors in the work he completed for Amy's class. In this particular paper, Amy had put 25 check marks, indicating errors, and though many of his mistakes are clearly patterns that could be worked on fairly easily (there/their; that/which/who; pronoun confusion), there are enough structural sentence issues here to thwart a reader in making a clear reading out of his essay. Amy's comment, "One main thing detracts from your writing and that is sentence structure. Check carefully for sentence fragments, comma splices, run-ons and general comma usage." In addition, the reader often feels lost in time because of Ben's inconsistent verb structure and confusion over tenses. Examples include: "I have got the feeling;" "things that had happened;" and "she had went through." Simply put, though you can always get meaning out of Ben's writing, sometimes it takes a lot of work.

The problem is, this essay was developed over time, after class discussion with plenty of feedback from Amy. On a one-shot, timed, impromptu exam, his error count and his sentence confusion naturally would increase. His practice WAT exams in Amy's class bear this out; he had almost twice as many errors in them than in this assignment. While the class assignment on a topic that he has developed over time allows him to develop complex ideas, provide nuanced meanings and attempt a complicated rendering (somewhat effectively), the impromptu 50-minute writing exam does not allow for this development. The combination of the lack of complexity in his response to an out-of-the-blue, fairly flat topic on the writing exam, and the increase in errors fails to represent his true writing abilities to the readers of the exam, who express their one-time reading of a one-time paper in a single numbered score. The reverse is true of course for Amy, who sees his writing all semester, including the process writing for this paper, and is always looking to accentuate the positive in her

students' work, and so, she confidently offers this end comment: "Well done I must say again!"⁹

Practice WAT Exam (LaToya)

At the start of November, Amy began using the short Monday class for the students to complete practice WAT exams. For the first two topics, Amy used the course content to frame WAT-like questions, but for the remainder of the class before the test (four Mondays), the students wrote on model questions that Amy devised, which were entirely acontextual to the course and mirrored the kinds of popular controversy questions on the WAT exam. Amy's topics ranged from the death penalty to the excessive use of credit cards.

Amy responded to each of the practice exams, sometimes providing full comments, and, at other times, simply check-marking errors and indicating where the exam needed improvement. Eventually she had the students bring in all of the practice exams for a full class discussion on the test. But, throughout this part of the class, Amy's irritation with the intrusion of the WAT into her classroom was noticeable. She complained about it in interviews and wrote about it in her journal, and during class conversations about the WAT, her patience seemed to evaporate (see Chapter 5).

Amy did not review the standard WAT essay structure with the students and she did not narrow the stylistic or aesthetic choices that they could make. She did not explicitly state that they were writing for her, nor did she state that they should pretend to write for the true WAT audience, a largely unknown group of test graders, whom the students, rightly or wrongly, presume to have a common type of essay in mind. In fact, all the practice exams were written prior to the class discussion of the WAT, and so the students were writing their

essays according to their own perceptions of what is appropriate for this writing task. The overwhelming majority of the students used structure and style moves they consciously, or perhaps unconsciously, associate with exam writing.

In this particular practice exam, LaToya chooses the question about whether it is responsible for parents to have children.

[Untitled Practice WAT Exam]

God's gift to the world is suppose to be children. If this is so, why do many couples decide not to have children? The reasons are the children drain the couples of their time and energy their expensive and the children also interfere with the relationship between husband and wife.

Time is very prescious and not many people are granted a lot of time. When children are involved in a couple's relationship there is no such thing as time. Children are usually not able to mind from themselves so someone has to be present to take care of them. You have to constantly watch the children with everything that they do. This means you do not have anytime to do what you would like to do. A parent is usually band from any form of social life because constant awareness has to be on the child. This means no time for parties, movies, night-on-the-town, or even sex. The only thing you can probably make time for is work. Your schedule would be something like kids, work, work, and then kids again. This does not sound like fun at all. With a lot of time you usually have a lot of energy but if you don't have time then you don't have energy. Whether it is running behind them, taking them to the park, or just spending quality time with them you are always on the move when it comes to children. This leaves you tired and unstable, without rest. Sounds like fun? Wait until you see how much they cost.

Diapers, clothes, toys, and food are all essentials that all children need. In order to get these essentials you have to buy them, and in order to buy them you have to have money. When you get your check, you have to situate the money according to needs. Children's needs are suppose to be taken care of first. Make a list food about \$100, clothes about \$250, toys about \$70, diapers about \$50 and miscellaneous about \$150. When you do the math you will see that you spend about \$650 a month on children. That is \$650 that you could have been richer. Children may have rosey cheeks but money green eyes. Money isn't easy to come by when you have children. Parents usually do not get to spend money on themselves.

What could be more worse than being in love with a man, get married, buy a house, but don't get to live the fairy tale marriage life. That what you would most likely be living if you have children. These is no time to do what usually couples would do, like go out, spend quality time together or have sex one of the main things that keeps a relationship going. Children bring about many problems in a

relationship. The parents disagree on many decisions that should be made, about the child.

Children are fun when you know that you can send them home to their parents. Otherwise than that they can really be a nuisance.

For what it is, LaToya does the “test assignment” quite well. Given the generic nature of the topic—which was provided to her, instead of coming from her—the limited time she has to develop her ideas and then write one final version of her essay (in stark contrast to the way Amy has been encouraging writing through the use of the writing process all semester), what more would we expect her to do then what she writes here? Though a bit on the obvious side, her essay does present an opinion with support—however hypothetical and strained—in clear and mostly error-free prose. And, to a certain degree, she shows a sense of humor and style, something I do not see much of in the practice exams from the other students.¹⁰

LaToya begins by turning the practice WAT statement into a question (an alternative to the even more common paraphrasing of the statement), and then picks a side against having children. She offers three briefly stated reasons for her choice of sides, statements that have an element of truth, but also are a bit obvious. Though she does not state it explicitly the reader can predict that she will cover these points one at a time in the body of the essay. With her opening sentences, Amy drains away any sense of expectation the reader has. We are prepared for another dull and tedious exploration of obvious ideas supported with even more obvious examples. To a certain extent, the essay plays out this way.

LaToya, like Ghazi, is one of the more entertaining and vociferous students in the class, often offering detailed, personalized opinions before other students are even willing to speak

on a topic. But here she restrains herself. She devolves her ideas into generic, trite statements that border on tautologies. She writes:

- “Time is very precious and not many people are granted a lot of time.”
- “With a lot of time you usually have a lot of energy but if you don’t have time then you don’t have energy.”
- “[I]n order to buy them you have to have money.”

She tries to maximize her word count, and so her sentences often nudge an idea along in tiny increments, each sentence repeating half of the previous one in a subject to object exchange that makes her writing deliberate and slow-paced. She states, “When you do the math you will see that you spend about \$650 a month on children. That is \$650 that you could have been richer.” She obviously understands that examples are needed, but she falls into a list pattern where length is increased but not much is added to the meaning. In one list she gives us “tired” and “without rest,” for example. She attempts serious analysis of obvious concepts (i.e. time being a limited commodity for parents.) and uses pumped up vocabulary at times (“[Y]ou have to situate the money according to needs.”). She stays in the third person, offering nothing personal, even though in class discussion this is often the first and only way she supports her ideas. And certainly she follows through on the predictable five-paragraph essay structure. It seems like she runs out of time at the end, so she fails to finish off the piece with the expected pattern: a summary conclusion.

Yet, her attempt to fulfill the standard test essay—risk free content, clear prose, definitive structure and a neutered voice—is unsuccessful in the end. She comes out too strongly for her side, against having kids, which is not the safe opinion to have. Her rebuke of couples that have children seems personal, despite the distance provided by the use of the

third person. Her comments about going out on the town and having sex, for example seem so specific and vociferous, as if she knows couples in this situation. And most interestingly, perhaps because she is writing off the top of her head in the short time frame, her personality, opinion and humor make brief appearances, almost as if she lets her guard down. She writes:

- “This does not sound like fun at all.”
- “Wait until you see how much they cost.”
- “Children may have rosey cheeks but money green eyes.”
- “Children are fun when you know that you can send them home to their parents.”

These playful lines are entertaining. They contrast with the formal essay structure, the bland content and the non-personalized voice. Her energy comes through the dull presentation.

The use of the second person in the second line in the grouping above may provide a hint about the tension in her conflicted rhetorical position. The use of the second person here and elsewhere underscores that Amy is unsure of who will be reading her work. From the use of the second person, one could surmise that she believes she is writing to peers or even to a younger group of potential parents who need to be dissuaded from having children. Her essay reads, partially, as a warning to peers—a clever position to take in a piece of writing like this. But she does not follow this writerly position throughout the piece, and so it sits in conflict with the more formal academic essay form, style and voice described above. She is either not talented enough a writer, not confident enough in the move given the context of the assignment (formal exam), or simply not conscious that her piece is targeted to two different audiences, neither one clear.

As I read and reread her essay after she wrote it, one thing stood out to me: the degree to which she comes out against having children. There is a certain sense in the piece that LaToya is overdoing it. She comes out so strongly against having children that the reader begins to distrust her motive, as if she does not believe what she is writing, but is merely fulfilling the assignment, using a method she believes works (picking one side and supporting it to the hilt). It is almost like she is just playing with the topic—not taking it or herself seriously.

Discussions with LaToya indicate that this reading is plausible. In a small group interview about the WAT exam, LaToya told me that she feels that content on the exam does not matter. She is convinced that the readers are grading the pieces on the “ways you write; not what you say” (see the end of Chapter 5). And in a class discussion, LaToya said that using made up stories on the exam, if you do not have real ones, is a good idea. “Your made up idea maybe better than anything that really happen to you,” she said.

In the end, I feel that LaToya is writing as the situation demands. She sees the test as a completely inauthentic writing experience, and therefore, she plays up one side without regard to her beliefs. She also limits her choices in terms of structure, style and voice to fulfill a preconceived notion of what she thinks the readers want on an exam like this one. If she is indeed conscious of these moves, then LaToya is a talented writer who is assessing rhetorical situations and taking action to fulfill her audience’s needs, something all good writers do. The fact that the two major moves that she makes are in conflict with each other is indicative of a writer who is not completely able to handle the rhetorical context and demands of the exam.

Freewriting to Find a Topic (Leanna)

The design of Amy's course followed a progression of informal writing to formal writing. The students started the course by writing in journals and in class and completing reaction paragraphs to the readings for the course. Then, as they continued these types of writing, they were also assigned process writing and then more formal essays. It was not until early December that the students received the assignment page for what Amy ominously called, The Final Paper. The assignment was to develop a course theme and thoroughly support it with at least two texts. When Amy handed out this assignment, there was a significant amount of grumbling from the students. In her journal she wrote, "that last assignment did piss them off.... Now I know what it means to have an angry class." One possible reason why the students responded this way was because they saw the final paper as coming out of nowhere. They did not realize that Amy wanted them to develop a previous idea from the course (something they had written about before) and carry it further by relating it to at least one other text in the course. In that sense, the final project was a revision project or at least an extension project. In a sense all of the writing they had done up until now was preparation for this assignment; one could view the class as a long series of process writing steps culminating in this final assignment.

But some students remained leery, believing that Amy was asking for something new and something gargantuan to finish off the course. When they talked about it, they acted like it was a term paper. About a week before the assignment was due, Amy reported in an interview that Leanna, had come to her office looking for advice. Leanna had had particular trouble focusing her topics all semester, and now with the added pressure of "The Final Assignment," she was distraught. Amy turned her worry into action by telling her to think

back on the course, and write about the texts and the ideas that she cared about from the course. Through this writing, she told Leanna, she would be able to locate what it is that she wanted to write about. The advice was something Amy knew Leanna would take to. No one in class had become more of a practitioner of informal writing to generate ideas than Leanna. She had gone from a writer who rarely composed, to one who liked to write before talking in class.

The piece below indicates the dramatic change in Leanna. Leanna writes about how she came to the course having never finished a book before. In addition, her early pieces of writing, even the draft essays, were a loose collection of scattered thoughts, sometimes just a short list of ideas. At the start, Leanna felt that writing for class, even informal assignments, had to be fully developed and extraordinarily profound. She put so much pressure on herself to “get it right the first time” that she sometimes barely wrote at all—even though, she declared, that she loved to write. Amy’s encouragement of freewriting and other informal kinds of writing took the pressure off Leanna to produce a worthy product every time she wrote something. Once Leanna realized that her informal writing did not have to be polished to perfection, her pieces grew longer and more complex. In addition, Amy’s constant and thorough attention to her ideas gave her the confidence to write more, and eventually to focus and pursue specific ideas. So, when Amy suggested that she find a final project idea by freewriting for an hour about the texts in the course, it was not surprising that Leanna took to the idea, and it was also not surprising that she ended up writing her way back to Allende, the text that had touched her so much that it brought her to tears.

[Leanna's untitled freewrite]

I have to free-write and I have to write for an hour and develop a theme within my writing (this will be interesting).

I remember thinking about the class and our past discussions, and I remember a topic on freewriting and what we thought it meant and as I remember that topic, I remember Hemingway being mention. Most of the class thought Hemingway's tactics for freewriting was a good example of freewriting, and the rest of the class thought otherwise. Hemingway's tactics were to write about two things that he knew about and stick with them and keep writing. I remember him saying it was serve [severe] punishment for him just to write about one thing. I don't know why but that discussion came to me as thought and I remember thinking what freewriting really was. Freewriting is about writing freely with no restriction. Hemingway's tactics may have worked well for him but I believe that it held back his writing. When you restrict yourself from something (in writing) you close the door to possibilities of other ideas. I will freewrite my thoughts and my desires, about love and fear, hope and pain and then I will try to put all these things and try to relate them to our class readings.

Our class selections were interesting, Miss Friedman choose readings that open minds, open worlds of other thoughts and also made it frustrating (Hemingway reading). Going into this class I had no idea what real literature meant, what I mean is that I've never [read] a book before, I had no idea of the kind of literature that [is] so amazing to read, the kind of words that would move every muscle in your body. I remember when I first started to read it painted pictures in my mind, I actually visualize scene in my head when I read. Some of the reading selection gave me a newfound love for reading, though my first true love has always been and always will be writing.

Writing has been my love, my desire, my hope, my fear and my pain and I could associate all of these to most of the writers in the reading selections. Langston Hughes was my pain and fear: In his writing I saw pain, fear and I also saw hope, but I saw more pain and fear. His writing was an outlet, of pain and fears that he and black people faced at a time were there was no equal rights. I read about people suffering and about how they ere not able to be free in a world that belong to white people. You can visualize and feel a black boy's fear when he stood in field in front of a nation of white man in their white suits. These men were the Klu Klux Klan and they are famous for their hatred and lynching of black people.

Langston Hughes shows his pain through his writing. It is his outlet, and I also have adapted that method myself. It is a sense of relief when you let out build up anger that has plague your mind, body and soul.

I found my desire and hope in the writings in Isabel Allende stories. Her stories were different than I could have ever imagined her stories. Her words were sensual and breathe taking. Allende made worlds that only exist to the power of women, she made some of the women in her stories dominating, and she gave them the upperhand. These stories gave me the desire and hope because I saw a different style of writing, a new perspective. This writer was deep in my mind, she

had created scenes that I never imagined before. In other class readings women were portrayed as a mere object with less to offer in the storyline, and the women were less intriguing.

As a returning student, Leanna is not confident in the academic setting, and in class discussions she often talks in a whisper, allows another student to take over her point, or cuts herself off in mid-idea to ask her audience whether she is making any sense. In the hallway outside Amy's office right around the time we were discussing the Allende text in class, I asked her why she did not speak more during class discussion. In a characteristic posture, she looked down at the floor and told me that the Allende stories really moved her, but it was hard to be that personal in the classroom. "It's like I have too much to say," she said.

Leanna is in search of the confidence to speak, and perhaps even more confidence to write. It is a confidence she admires in Langston Hughes and Isabel Allende. Their willingness to write about their "pain" and gives her hope that things can change. Her opening section on Hemingway indicates how completely she has given her self over to the ideas of the course. "Freewriting is about writing freely with no restriction. ...When you restrict yourself from something (in writing) you close the door to possibilities of other ideas." But more important than just agreeing with Amy's ideas about writing, this piece reveals how she has become a metacognitive writer; someone who is thinking about ways of writing and thinking about her writing life. Leanna's opening line is reminiscent of Langston Hughes' poem, "Theme for English B," which they did not read for class. Leanna writes, "I have to free-write and I have to write for an hour and develop a theme within my writing (this will be interesting)." Like Hughes, she is questioning how writing works and doubting it to a certain degree. Hughes writes:

Go home and write

a page tonight.
 And let that page come out of you---
 Then, it will be true.
 I wonder if it's that simple?

Like Hughes' poem, Leanna's piece is indicative of someone who has become aware of her own presence as a writer. She is wondering if the freewrite she is undertaking will lead to success. It is a glimpse of a writer coming into her own, beginning to understand what it means to proclaim your ideas and yourself in words. About Hughes, she writes, "It is a sense of relief when you let out build up anger that has plague your mind, body and soul." She believes it is writing that enables Hughes to overcome the fear of oppression, and she sees it as her salvation as well. She states, "It is his outlet, and I also have adapted that method myself." Here she refers to her desire to confront the issues that Allende raises about the role of women in society. Leanna has come to see writing as the way to "make worlds," to re-make her world.

She puts a tremendous amount of hope in writing, treating it as a way into new worlds of personal exploration. "I will freewrite my thoughts and my desires, about love and fear, hope and pain and then I will try to put all these things and try to relate them to our class readings." In Allende, she has experienced writing that the kind of words that "would move every muscle in your body." She wants to be that kind of writer, to radiate that kind of power over her reader, especially on the issue of feminism. She sees herself as Hughes' little black boy, a single woman standing in a field in front of a patriarchal nation.

Leanna's freewrite also points out the importance of writing to her in the way she refers to writing as primary and the texts they are reading as secondary. She will write her ideas into existence and then find other people's writing to support her ideas.

By the end of this short but potent freewrite, Amy frames what could be an excellent final project: “Allende made worlds that only exist to the power of women, she made some of the women in her stories dominating, and she gave them the upperhand.” And later, “In other class readings women were portrayed as a mere object with less to offer in the storyline, and the women were less intriguing.” But she stops there, before the idea takes full hold. If Amy had read this freewrite, she would have posed a question: Can you tell me how certain female characters are portrayed as objects, while those in Allende’s stories have the upper hand? But Leanna does not recognize this paper topic for its potential. Instead, she rewrites her freewrite into her final project, in which she tries to show “how some writings influenced me.” The piece talks about Allende and Hughes, lifting some of the sentences from the freewrite and then adding more. It is a good next step, perhaps, but a long way from a finished product; it feels insubstantial and unfulfilled.

Though she gained more from the course than perhaps any other writer, Leanna has strides to make before she is able to have the effect on the writer that she desires. Having spent so many years not writing and not being aware of herself as a writer, she now has a lot of catching up to do. But in this freewrite, there is a sense that a window has opened, and Leanna is looking out on a new world, a world she can inscribe and in which she can take control through writing.

Final Project #1(Roberto)¹¹

Roberto is a handicapped student confined to a wheelchair. A free city service for the handicapped called Access-a-Ride would send a van to pick him up, but at times he would

have to wait an hour for the van to show up. But his commuting problems did not end when he arrived on campus. Most of the access to the upper floors in the NAC building is via a series of escalators; therefore, the NAC elevators are notoriously slow and crowded at peak times—and sometimes out of service entirely. One day in the middle of the semester, I showed Roberto an elevator that I used which often was available. From time to time I would run into him as he went from floor to floor. I asked him about the course and in a low but direct voice he told me how much he was enjoying it, using platitudes like, “I’m learning a lot.” and suggesting that he had never written so much for any course. He did come to all the classes except three, and handed in all of the work.

But Roberto was a silent student. As shown in the class narratives from the previous chapter, he went through most classes without saying a single word in full class discussion and saying very little in group-discussion as well. Unlike Leanna, he remained silent throughout the course, never changing his practice. He was also a plodding writer, perhaps the most restricted writer I had ever seen. He followed the same essay structure and made the same rhetorical moves regardless of the kind of writing, the audience or the subject matter. He was very unwilling to make any changes to the words that made it to the page. Amy required the students to hand in process work with their final drafts of papers and Roberto’s freewrites were virtually identical to his final products. Having watched him write in class, I can almost see him tediously going from line-to-line constructing this piece in linear fashion, word-by-word.

Roberto is not only a constricted writer in this formal assignment. All semester long I watched as he struggled to write out even a few sentences even a freewrite. I noticed at one point during a series of class freewrites that Roberto would title them, often

underlining the title two or three times. During another freewrite, I write in my journal: *Six minutes have passed in this one, and he has written two lines; I see one capital letter and one period.* Roberto remained a silent student in class and a completely stuck writer on paper.

He had such limited trial and error experience. He was unable to judge what affect his words would have on the audience because he so often did not utter them.

Final Paper [Roberto's Title]

Power is what all men and women desire. It's what students go to college for and what people work for. Furthermore, people feel that when they get this power, their lives will be more in control and they will be trouble free. On the other hand, the quest to get this power could be very dangerous. People would do anything to get the power they desire. In addition, getting power is not good because it could drive a person mad and the means of getting it could be wrong.

A reason why getting power is not good is because it could drive a person mad. If a person is so determined to get this power, in the end it could drive the person mad just thinking about it. For example, in the story Macbeth the character Lady Macbeth wanted this power of being queen so bad that she drove herself crazy thinking about how this power would be great.

Another reason why getting power is not good is because the means of getting it could be wrong. In the story Hamlet for example, his uncle was so determined on getting power that he killed his own brother to get the throne. This shows how low a person can go to achieve what he or she wants.

All in all getting power is not good because it can drive a person mad and the means of getting it could be wrong. Why is it so important for us humans to want power? Is power so important that we are willing to kill in order to have power? I think that this power that we desire so deeply is what corrupts us at heart.

Triple spaced in a tall, fat font, two lines of Roberto's paper creep onto a third page. His piece is unmercifully clear; ten readers of Roberto's paper would be in complete agreement on the meaning of every line. The grammar, punctuation and style errors are almost nonexistent: he ends a sentence with a preposition; there are a few typos (i.e. in for is; thins for this), and that is all. He also fulfills the assignment. He chooses a theme that has been discussed in class and supports it with at least two texts.

The paper is also not without particular stylistic moves that Roberto has picked up in class. He provides transitions both within paragraphs (“Furthermore...”) and between paragraphs (i.e. “A reason why...” and “All in all...”) to move the piece along. He offers a nuanced argument by moving beyond the clear benefits of having power, to the idea that “On the other hand, the quest to get this power could be very dangerous.” The paper flows well; each idea methodically connected to the next. His sentence structure and the overall essay structure are sturdy and straightforward. These are usually perceived as writerly moves with great benefits.

But in Roberto’s case, his strengths are also his weaknesses. The biggest concern with Roberto’s essay is that he is not willing to say anything risky. His sentences are so clear that all the tension has been drained away; there is nothing for the reader to see into or argue about. He has taken away the surprise, just writing along the surface of a flat lake. His excessive focus on clarity and the traditional essay form and his overtly clear sentences have limited his ability to learn through writing—to get to a difficult and meaningful place of exploration. He is simply recording the most basic observations made during class discussion.

In his opening, Roberto attempts to establish the importance of his topic. He barely makes reference to the course texts, giving only obvious references to the plot of the two Shakespeare plays. As with Ghazi’s BAMN paper in the early part of this chapter, Roberto ends his paper on a wonderfully complex question: “Why is it so important for us humans to want power?” He has written himself to an idea, but he does not realize that this is a worthy question to focus on.

In other pieces, Roberto did write himself into a good idea. In a hand written short reaction to the Isabel Allende stories, Roberto makes a tepid connection between Lady Macbeth and the female characters in the story “Two Words.” “...[B]oth make their own desisions and are strong minded too. ... [T]his women is smart and can take of herself just like Lady Macbeth [sic].” But he just fails to see the potential in the connection he has made. He takes the safer route, using the two readings from Shakespeare instead. From talking to Roberto, I do not feel that he is the kind of writer who is simply trying to do the bare minimum to slide by in college. He works hard on his pieces. But either because of personality or the ways he has been taught writing, Roberto is unable to see the paths to follow in his own work. He is so restricted by his original idea that when something appears that is beyond his initial scope, he does not recognize it, and, therefore, leaves it out.

Final Project #2 (Begum)

Begum is one of the quiet females in class. In the whole semester, I learn virtually nothing about her. She does not answer the midterm questionnaire, does not participate in any group interviews and the couple times I approach her, she provides the shortest possible answers to my questions. All I know is what she writes in response to the opening survey: Her family moved from Bangladesh, she has a sister who graduated from college in Switzerland and two other siblings in the New York City school system. She is 20 years old and majoring in computer science. Out of all the students in the class, she is the biggest mystery to me; that is, until I begin reading her writing.

In a reflective piece at the start of class, Begum writes, “I can express really good my thoughts and feelings by writing” (sic). Her assessment of her own abilities is on target.

Begum always seems to have a strong and nuanced opinion, and she writes with feeling. In her BAMN paper she writes that the Indians had the right to reclaim Alcatraz Island, but went about it the wrong way. In her writing about Allende, she makes the argument that the female characters in the stories are strong because they make their own decisions, even if their decisions lead to poor outcomes.

Her ESL difficulties sometimes limit the effectiveness of her writing, not just because her errors are significant enough to distract the reader, but, also she writes slowly, trying to avoid errors. Even in work she does at home, there is brevity to her pieces, many moments where the reader is left wanting further definition or another example. In every piece from the semester, it is apparent that Begum has something important to say, something she believes in. There is energy to her writing, a contemplativeness and seriousness that attracts the reader.

Final Paper "You are Free Only When You Die"

Freedom is the kind of word, which doesn't only have one meaning. It's always meant differently to different people. There isn't also only one way to find freedom, but people who really wants to find freedom, chooses to go away from this earth. That's the only way to find complete freedom, because in this world there is no man without problems or tension about something.

In Isabel Allende's "Revenge," Dulce Rosa fell in love after twenty-five years with her rapist Tadeo Cespedes, who also killed her father. She didn't know what to do. Having planned to marry Tadeo, Dulce Rosa couldn't decide if she should marry him, because she had lived for revenge. She was in a situation, where she was restricted by two choices, either to marry her love or to take revenge. Any choice she takes, she'd never be happy. "She knew she would never be able to carry out the revenge she had planned, because she was in love with the assassin, but neither could she silence the Senator's ghost" (311). So, she chose to kill herself, to be away and free from everything. That was the only way for her to find freedom.

In Langston Hughes' poem "Suicide Note," the author also shows us how the speaker finds freedom by death, committing suicide. The speaker may have

committed the suicide to be free from any trouble or tension, or to hide it's shame. "The calm, cool face of the river" (85) means that the river has peace in it and it has an appearance of shamelessness. So, the river is the place where freedom is found, by hiding or going away from everything. The speaker knows that only the river could help him find freedom. When the speaker says "Asked me for a kiss" (85), means to put the speaker into the water, means to die or suicide. In this poem, the river is used as a metaphor for freedom by death.

The saying "you are free only when you die" is true, because in this world every single person is struggling with it's life for something. Everybody is looking for freedom and can't find it, because there is no such thing called freedom in this world. The only way to reach freedom is only when you die. As people are used to struggle with life and don't want to leave this world, they are always searching for freedom.

Begum's opening is a little obvious; of course: freedom certainly has more than one meaning. But as is so often the case with writers who are leaving behind the secure structure and content of "school essay writing," even though she is using a standard opening paragraph, she quickly shocks us with the idea that "people who really wants to find freedom, chooses to go away from this earth."¹² It is an interesting take, and one that provokes the reader to read on.

The lack of freedom for the female characters in Allende's stories was a major part of the class discussion, of course. Even the example she chooses to use, the character Dulce Rosa, is one of the stories the class debated. Yet, Begum does not merely reiterate what was said in class, but defines the issue succinctly and effectively, declaring the character as restricted by two choices, neither of which will make her happy. She provides the right amount of summary detail for the audience, and chooses precise insert quotes, which gives her reading confidence.

But it is the choice of the Hughes' poem and her ability to connect them that makes Begum's paper work so well. In the opening lie she makes the connection, which is somewhat self evident, but then differentiates it, by observing that the narrator of the poem

may have considered suicide as a way to avoid shame. The reading of the river as a place of shamelessness where the speaker is invited with a kiss is a wonderful reading that she could talk more about—the seductiveness of suicide.

It is in the last paragraph that Begum's paper fails to reach its potential. Rather than adding a third text to complicate the presentation of suicide further, or determining whether, or how the Hughes' poem can be given a feminist reading, Begum escapes from the complexity of the essay by returning to a well-worn expression ("you are free only when you die"), which she states and then repeats later in the paragraph. While a good close reading of the two pieces. The essay needs a more specific discussion of what both writers are telling us about suicide and freedom, perhaps by making a connection to the limited choices of American females today.

It is interesting to read Begum's paper alongside Roberto's. They both use the same methodology, taking a large amorphous concept (power/freedom) and then attempting to explain it and explicate it through the readings from the course. Their essays even have the same structure: an opening paragraph that explains the chosen concept that will be explored, two paragraphs that attempt to explicate the concept within the readings and a conclusion that attempts to reiterate the concept and show its importance and connect it to the world outside the texts. In that sense they are both fulfilling the tenets of the assignment. But there is no question that Begum's has achieved a level of academic literacy with her essay, while Roberto's piece languishes behind.

Begum takes her amorphous subject and focuses in on a particular reading, a slant or hook that Roberto does not locate. This seems to be the most crucial thing. The ability to find and recognize where the story is. She narrows her initial idea not only into something

doable and supportable, but something interesting and risky. Roberto makes none of these moves. Secondly, though they both use texts to support their ideas, Begum makes much better choices, and then chooses much more specific information from the texts. Roberto's casual references seem obvious and minimal.

To me these two instances are indicative of the importance of process writing and writing over time. The moves that Begum makes involve her willingness to explore texts, listen well and write her way into ideas. They are not product-centered stylistic choices, or particular stylistic moves. The success of her paper hinges on what she brought to it before she sat down to write it: it is the thoroughness of the ideas in her work, the complexity of the way she has considered her thesis, not her presentation that enables her to succeed in the paper where Roberto fails.

However, in addition to having the better ideas on the way in, Begum does also have more accomplished academic writing skills than Roberto. She knows how to summarize in a general way while still providing specifics; how to use quotations, both picking them and inserting them well; and how to decipher and present a metaphorical reading. She sounds more academic in the way she introduces and talks about the literary texts: in referring to the narrator of the Hughes' poem, for example, she says, "The speaker knows that only the river could help him find freedom." Meanwhile, Roberto clumsily states, "In the story Hamlet for example, his uncle was so determined on getting power that he killed his own brother to get the throne."

Begum also has a vocabulary and sentence structure that Roberto has not reached yet. For example, she writes, "She was in a situation, where she was restricted by two choices, either to marry her love or to take revenge." She sounds natural and confident in the more

formal register. Roberto's diction is still in a lower register at times: "This shows how low a person can go to achieve what he or she wants." In other instances, Roberto reaches for the more formal academic prose he rightfully believes he needs, but it sounds quite awkward: "A reason why getting power is not good is because it could drive a person mad."

It is interesting to note that despite the success of Begum's paper, its main flaw is the same as Roberto's. Both fail to take their ideas far enough. Both land on a complex point in the last paragraph of their paper but fail to pursue it. But there is a sense that Begum is much closer to making this leap into complexity than Roberto is. What she has here is a solid base, whereas Roberto would have to scrap his entire paper and simply begin with the question he asks at the end.

Perhaps even more interestingly, as I present in Chapter 5, though Begum did very well in Amy's class, she has trouble on the practice WAT exams and, eventually, on the exam itself. Though she has a much more developed sense of process writing and finding ideas, Begum cannot accomplish these skills quickly and so her complex thinking causes her trouble on the exam. Roberto, on the other hand, is able to use his well-honed ability to keep it simple and clear to his advantage in the context of the timed exam.

Final Project #3 (Eduardo)

Along with Leanna, Eduardo was the writer who took what Amy was saying about the writing process to heart, and as a consequence, both the quantity and complexity of his writing exploded. At the start of class, Eduardo was a slow moving writer like Roberto and had difficulty putting much down on the page. But unlike Roberto, Eduardo also had severe

ESL issues that distracted the reader and at times made it impossible to figure out a meaning for certain sentences. As he struggled to write correctly, Eduardo often wrote short, precise pieces that seemed stilted and disjointed. By the end of the class, Eduardo was completing pages of freewrites for each assignment, as well as multiple drafts that changed significantly from one to another. His final project is a cohesive full-length essay, accompanied by 15 pages of process writing. Like his class performance where he could often be seen perching on the edge of his seat, Eduardo went after his writing process with gusto. An older student, Eduardo was motivated by his desire to have a college degree before he and his wife had children.

Eduardo's final project exemplifies the kind of writing process that Amy envisioned for all of the students in the class. It shows the influence of a group discussion he participated in where the members agreed that the more texts you could use to support your points the better.¹³ The part of his essay that discusses Shakespeare in fact, goes all the way back to another group session about power and greed.¹⁴ In addition Eduardo not only followed Amy's lead in the way he worked on his writing, he also used the course to move beyond seeing the writing process as a solitary endeavor. More than any other student, Eduardo became a devotee of the workshop model of writing development.

MAN ARE NOT BETTER THAN WOMAN

There are men of all kinds in same way women are. Some are intelligent, some are weak, some are insecure, and some are stupid. In the The Stories of Eva Luna we can see different kinds of men. Other readings where we can see men with different characteristics one from another are Siddhartha, A Moveable Feast, and Shakespeare.

To begin, the Colonel from the story Two words was intelligent. He showed it by winning many battle and transformed into victories the ones that he lost. People were afraid of him. Belisa help him, she knew the power of the words and she sell

them, by selling to him two words, which made him speak like candidate and made people love him. This didn't make him less intelligent. Just that he never knew the power of the words, and he didn't know how to use them. His knowledge was on wars. "The Colonel was weary of riding across that godforsaken land, waging useless wars and suffering defeats that no subterfuge could transform into victories" (Allende 14). Hemingway was intelligent in a different way. His style of writing makes him intelligent; he knows how to call the attention of the reader. Hemingway makes the reader get involved in his work. His style of writing does not follow a sequence. The reader has to pay attention because Hemingway goes back and forward. Therefore, if the reader isn't paying attention, easily gets confused.

Second, Amadeo Peralta from the story *If You Touched My Heart* was greedy. He wanted power at any cost. Mr. Peralta learned this from his father. Mr. Peralta took advantage of Hortensia plus she didn't stand for herself. She was locked up in a room for more than forty years. When he was put in jail, a reporter asked him why he kept her locked up like a miserable beast, he answered, "Because I felt like it" (Allende 92). Other people who were greedy were Macbeth and his wife. They wanted to kill the king because they wanted power. He wanted to be king and she wanted to be queen. Macbeth wanted to kill the king but he wasn't sure. His wife always pushes him to do it, by telling him things that she would be able to do and therefore he could do too. "I have given suck, and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, And dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you have done this" (Shakespeare 57).

Third, Walimai from the story *Walimai* was a noble man. In a certain time in his life he was a slave. In one of those days he saw something that he didn't like, a woman was being raped by all slaves living there. Walimai saw the suffering in her face, so he thought that the best solution to liberate her from her suffering was killing her, so he did it. After he killed her, Walimai suffered for more than 10 days because of his custom (Allende 148-149). Other men who were noble were the American Indians from the region of BAMN. Besides they were fighting for their own land. They were worried about the environment; they wanted to restore it. "An Indian Center of Ecology which will train and support our young people in scientific research and practice to restore our land and waters to their pure and natural state. We will work to depollute the air and the waters of the Bay Area (BAMN 187). This made the Indians nobles to nature.

Fourth, Clarisa's husband from the story *Clarisa* was an insecure man. He and his wife had two retarded sons, but Clarisa's husband instead of facing the problem he buried himself in a room. Probably he felt guilty or embarrassed for his sons, so he didn't want to be seen (Allende 43-44). Another man who was insecure was Siddhartha from the book *Siddhartha*. He tried many different things in life; he never was satisfied. He always wanted something more, but he never knew what he was looking for. There were a few times when he had everything, but he left it and went looking for something else. As he was getting old, he was losing the desire of moving from one side to the other. Siddhartha decided to state in the river with the ferryman.

In conclusion, I just expose many different men with different characteristics, the same characteristics that women have. Men and women are human beings therefore are created in the same way, so they should have the same characteristics. None of the two is smarter or more stupid than the other.

Eduardo's final piece of writing is an overt reaction to the class discussion on Isabel Allende, where Carver repeatedly refers to the female characters in *The Stories of Eva Luna* as stupid.¹⁵ He is taking a radical position because Carver was a class leader of sorts, and along with Lewis certainly tainted the debate over the discussion of feminism in Allende with a patriarchal, misogynist stink. Eduardo shows great confidence as he chooses and supports a complex and contradictory stance, and does so in an unorthodox way. He wants to show the diversity and range in the male characters and then argue, in an a priori sense that there would have to be just as much diversity in the female characters. He therefore successfully argues that women should not be characterized as all one type, and especially not in a purely pejorative way. He has thus defined an interesting and worthy project for the reader, though one that he has trouble pulling off.

In choosing to write about the perceptions of women and men in society, Eduardo is, smartly, working from a piece of writing he has already completed. In his paper on Allende, he underscores the patriarchy he sees in the world. He writes: "Our society mistreats women in comparison with man. Women are limited to be or do certain things, and usually man can do anything they want" (sic). He sees Allende's tales as making a claim that women can be leaders in society. He writes, "The stories of Eva Luna show how women can be strong, intelligent, or important for their communities." But he also critiques some of the female characters' actions, falling just short of suggesting that in some cases women play into the patriarchy and cause their own demise. In his paper, after he describes the life that Hortensia

leads and how she chooses to be locked up by Peralta for 40 years, he states, “In my opinion that was not smart, people should always stand for themselves.” The deliberate use of the words “people” and “themselves” is indicative of Eduardo’s lack of sexism, and is perhaps the genesis for his final project. He wrote himself into his final project idea months before.

His familiarity with the readings through writing and discussion, and the energy level he brings to the paper as an argument against ideas stated in class, accounts for the great deal of authority and confidence throughout his essay. Eduardo writes in a strong firm voice, as he moves from text to text detailing instances of male characters that show diversity in personality. The reading of each text is firm and sure-handed. He summarizes succinctly, focusing in on the part of the story he needs to tell, and, at times he chooses supporting quotes well. (The Shakespeare quote is the exception here.) When he arrives at the last line of the fourth example paragraph where he discusses Siddhartha, there is a sense that he has reached the academically mature voice he has been striving for all semester (despite the typographical error): “Siddhartha decided to state in the river with the ferryman.”

Structurally, Eduardo still follows the standard school essay: a short introduction at the start, a conclusion that repeats the main ideas at the end, and a middle filled with similarly structured example paragraphs. But he moves beyond the straightforward structure by connecting two texts in each paragraph, rather than just discussing the examples one at a time in list-like fashion. Of course an attempt to include all of these texts in support of his thesis is an almost impossible task. Connecting Allende stories to Hemingway, Shakespeare the American Indian piece in BAMN and to Herman Hesse is a leap across genres, history, styles of writing and content that, to be successful, might require a lifetime of research and a book length treatment.

Therefore, in each case, it is difficult to see the connections between the texts that Eduardo puts together in one paragraph. The ideas seem so disconnected in fact that a reader might assume that Eduardo does not know how to define a paragraph, that he is simply jamming ideas together into a mash. However, from his other work in the semester, it is apparent that Eduardo understands paragraph boundaries. The problem is that the complex connections he wants to make would require more than one paragraph and much more dexterity than he can muster. For example, in the second paragraph of the essay, Eduardo establishes the strength of the female character Belisa in Allende's story "Two Words" and indicates how the Colonel lacks the literacy she can provide. Then Eduardo moves directly on to Hemingway. The reader is jolted by the jump in contexts across genres, history and nationalities, and Eduardo never clearly explains why he lines these two writers side-by-side. Connecting an author, even an author writing autobiographically, to a character in a short story is perhaps a move that does not quite make sense of course, and to pull it off requires a context and style of academic literary writing that Eduardo is nowhere near possessing. But nonetheless, his attempt at connecting these two examples is not as illogical as a first reading makes them appear. What Eduardo wants to tell us is that while the Colonel does not have the literacy skills to persuade his people, Hemingway is a master rhetorician. Both examples stand well on their own, but connecting them requires more than the single line that Eduardo provides: "Hemingway was intelligent in a different way."

In the subsequent paragraphs, Eduardo follows the same pattern, leading with an explication of a character from an Allende story and then making a brief, surface connection to another text in the course: Peralta wants power just like Macbeth; Walimai is noble just like the Indians from the BAMN text; and Clarissa's husband and Siddhartha are both

insecure. Choosing what to connect and then knowing how to sufficiently connect them are crucial academic writing skills that Eduardo struggles with here.

Eduardo also continues to struggle with complications from his primary language, Mexican Spanish. If Amy check-marked this final project, there would be a mark on close to every line.¹⁶ In his early work, however, there were sentences and even sections of his writing that the reader would have trouble deciphering. But, here, Eduardo has improved his coherence to the point that the reader understands his entire paper. There are still problems with sentence boundaries and verb endings as we see in this sentence from the Hemingway section: “Therefore, if the reader isn’t pay attention, easily gets confuse.” However, there are times when Eduardo’s fluency takes over and he produces virtually error free writing.

Consider these sentences from the Siddhartha section:

Another man who was insecure was Siddhartha from the book Siddhartha. He tried many different things in life; he never was satisfied. He always wanted something more, but he never knew what he was looking for. There were a few times when he had everything, but he left it and went looking for something else. As he was getting old, he was loosing the desire of moving from one side to the another.

Certainly some of his errors are still distracting enough to prevent certain readers from trusting his work. But the improvement in fifteen weeks has been nothing short of astonishing.

In the end, Eduardo’s final project is a truly remarkable static product that reveals individual flaws and strengths of a writer who is in the process of attaining academic literacy, a writer who is taking risks in content and craft, and therefore struggling in both areas.

When viewed in a holistic sense, Eduardo's paper represents the complexity involved in any discussion of Basic Writing. As an end-of-the-semester paper it offers a snapshot of a writer who has used the class well, found a voice, exploded into a world of literacy he was only glimpsing before the course. This paper offers an example of why the existence of Basic Writing is so crucial—it is the place for this kind of growth to take place. But this is also a writer who struggles to control his ideas, misreads certain parts of the text, fails to connect others, is just learning how to use sources, lacks an overall cohesiveness to his essay, and often offers difficult to read prose that is tangled in ESL complications. By many measures, he is not a college writer yet. Does Eduardo deserve to be in City College based on the potential he shows here? Or does he need to be excluded based on what he currently cannot do?

Eduardo provides his answer to these questions when at the start of the essay he is talking about Allende's story "Two words." In the story, the female character, Belisa, sells the male character The Colonel "two words, which made him speak like candidate and made people love him." The story is about literacy and how the Colonel cannot rule effectively through force alone. Eduardo writes that the Colonel's lack of literacy "didn't make him less intelligent." According to Eduardo, the Colonel just had knowledge of other things, such as how to win wars and to turn losses into victories. In a perfect parallel to his own situation in Academic English, Eduardo states that it is "Just that he [the Colonel] never knew the power of the words, and he didn't know how to used them."

¹ This is somewhat ironic considering that one of the buildings torn down to make way for the NAC building was the student center, called the Finley Center.

² The readings for the course included the following scheduled texts: three short selections from a collection of primary documents from the 1960s protest era called BAMN (By All Means Necessary); a selection of poems by Langston Hughes; a series of scenes from two Shakespeare plays (Hamlet and Macbeth); Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*; Isabel Allende's *Stories of Eva Luna*; and Siddhartha by Herman Hesse. In addition, during the course of the semester, Amy added in two readings: a short selection from the philosopher Gurdjieff and a short selection from the *Kama Sutra*.

³ The latter is a curriculum change Amy makes reluctantly once the students start showing signs of worry about the test (see chapter 5).

⁴ As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, many students took her up on her offer, coming to her office with uncommon frequency.

⁵ Similar to Chapter 3 where my intention was to provide narratives of entire classes, I provide the full student texts, to accentuate the phenomenological, experiential aspects of this dissertation and to represent the students in the course and the reality of the course in its full complexity.

⁶ See Chapter 1 for complete methodology, including a discussion of reasoning and complications resulting from choosing to present a sample of texts from many students as opposed to a series of texts from one or two students.

⁷ As described in the narrative, the students read three selections from this text, which is filled with primary documents from various protest moments in American history. The students read ten points of protest about the Miss America Pageant, a collection of primary documents (leaflets and speeches) from the 1960s YIPPIES and a declaration from an American Indian group that wanted to take over Alcatraz Island in San Francisco.

⁸ Though, at this point, I do wonder if Amy's classroom strikes the students as nontraditional. At this point, do many classrooms use circle conversations and ask students to lead discussions, while, in the end, still requiring traditional school writing? While the classroom pedagogy may be non-traditional, writing assignments may remain traditional (see Harvey).

⁹ For a fuller treatment of the issue of test writing vs. assignment writing (see Chapter 5).

¹⁰ After reading a batch of practice WAT exams, Amy could not stop talking about Saleem's paper in response to the wise use of credit cards, in which he assumes the voice of a credit

card company advertisement. “No one else did anything this creative,” she said. We then discussed whether such an essay would pass, given that it was filled with the shorthand and voice of advertising copy. We decided it would not, unless we were the readers.

¹¹ For the three final papers, I do not present Amy’s commentary, as she read and returned these papers before I could photocopy her comments.

¹² The topic of Begum’s paper is, of course, worrisome. The seriousness of suicide as an issue for the young, and the thoroughness with which she analyzes it as a viable solution for characters and narrators that lack choices leads me to reflect the piece back onto its author, especially when she says in the opening, “there is no man without problems or tension about something.” I also note the distance with which she treats the subject. I did not read this piece until well after the course was over, and so there was not much I could do anyway. But, in looking at Begum’s writing from the rest of the semester, I see a comparable serious tone and intellectual rigor and conclude she has merely read into these works a plausible and sound analysis.

¹³ As part of a planned exercise by Amy, the students met in small groups to prepare themes for their final projects and to talk about what texts to use to support those themes. One of the questions that came up was the number of texts to use. Eduardo’s group moved from the idea of using five or six texts, down to two and then to as many as possible. The latter seems to have resonated with Eduardo, who in general felt that volume was a good thing.

¹⁴ The students met after class to develop possible paper topics and supporting ideas for the topics. After developing six topics together (Amy used classroom exercises to support this process), each student was asked to pick one of the group-generated topics and fully develop detailed supporting ideas for it using the Shakespeare excerpts they had read and discussed. The students were required to hand in evidence of their group work, as well as their personal work (See Chapter 3).

¹⁵ See Chapter 3.

¹⁶ It should be noted, as I mention elsewhere, that Amy used check marks to indicate not just grammar errors but punctuation and style issues as well.

“For the remainder of the semester, my goals are to master myself in writing and to pass the writing exam” (sic).

Shafiqul (Basic Writing Student)
November 15

“I know it’s good writing when I’m no longer thinking about what the problems are with it... when I am enjoying myself as I read.”

Amy (Basic Writing Teacher)
November 22

CHAPTER 5

Evaluation: Double Jeopardy or Double Access

CONTEXTUAL FRAGMENTS

We are into November and they are still coming. This impresses me. While only Homer and Vladislav have officially withdrawn from the course, such a low number of students withdrawing is not unusual in Basic Writing. It is the disappearing students that Amy does not have: students who do not officially declare their intention not to complete the course, but who stop showing up in class and start showing up at office hours or on voicemail or email with excuses for missed classes and missing work--some legitimate, some not. Gradually, they stop showing up there too. Only one student has disappeared from Amy’s course: Abeni. Amy writes about her in her journal, “two chances are enough, don’t you think?”

I can only presume that the students have continued to come to the class out of enjoyment rather than fear or obligation. Amy encourages attendance certainly, but there is

no official policy and she has only a pass/fail non-GPA grade to hold over their heads. It is a sign of a healthy community that Amy's class attendance is never less than 15, and usually there are 17 or 18 filling out the room. Most of the students continue to do most of the writing assignments most of the time as well. She tries desperately to keep up with her goal to read it all, and I watch her accordion folder grow fatter and fatter with their words. In addition, after some initial missed meetings by the students, and a reprimand from Amy, she has now met with each writer at least once in conference, a difficult task at an urban, commuter school where working class students—and their working class adjunct instructors—often fail to participate in much of anything outside of class hours.¹

Amy's interest in the students and the amount of work she puts into the course has not waned either. She continues to estimate that she spends somewhere between 18 and 25 hours each week preparing for class, teaching class, reading student work and meeting students in conference.² One day, I ask her what she thinks her hourly wage would be and she laughs her sweet spontaneous guffaw, and tells me, "Please, please do not do that math." After one long day, she writes in her journal: "Man those conferences wear me out."

* * *

Basic Writing II is a Pass/Fail course administered by the English Department at City College, and in that sense it is completely autonomous from the university-administered Writing Assessment Test (WAT). The students' path to full matriculation can only be achieved by passing the WAT exam. But, if they pass Basic Writing II (even without passing the WAT), students receive a matriculation upgrade: access to the entire slate of core courses

required for all CCNY students, entry into Freshmen Composition, a key pre-requisite for other courses, and further access to some 100 and 200 level courses in their majors.³ They can accumulate up to 60 credits this way.⁴

In contradictory fashion, if a student passes the exam, it does not matter if he or she passes the remedial course; the exam grade overrides the course grade, and the student becomes fully matriculated at the college. Thus, the students rightfully perceive the test as more important than the course. However, from my own experience and what I know of the pass rates for other adjunct instructors, by far, the more common route was for students to pass the Basic Writing course but fail the exam.

Either by design or apathy, the English Department does not encourage any link between the testing instrument and the course.⁵ Of course there is an implied connection: any writing course designed and taught by college instructors, it is presumed, should help students pass a test that supposedly marks a minimum competency standard for college. Still, the degree to which the test is represented—even discussed—in Basic Writing is entirely up to the professor. I know of professors who do not address the test at all, and others who open their class with a practice exam and teach a standard test preparation course.

Logically, of course, the students perceive a connection and are surprised and often confused when they find out that the test grade has nothing to do with their course grade. The relationship between the course and the exam is a form of double jeopardy or double access, depending on your point of view. Early on in the semester, Amy rightfully surmised that the students are in an odd position. “In a way they have two chances for success this semester,

but in another way, they are facing two separate hurdles,” she says. She did not mention the odd position she was in, potentially having an outside exam contradict her grade for a student in her class.

* * *

When Amy asks Tsegu to write about his experiences with writing at the beginning of the semester, in 15 minutes, he painstakingly composes four sentences. Here are the last two: “The way of writing or of expression is different from my language. Especially assessment test is big problem for me” (sic). Both Tsegu’s earnestness and his complete misunderstanding of his situation come squarely into sight in these two lines. He understands that moving from his native language to English is a difficult task, but he looks to the test as the primary barrier to his success—as if passing the test will eliminate his difficulties with listening, reading, speaking and writing in English.

Because he comprehends so little, Tsegu never speaks in class. In one-on-one everyday conversation he takes 10 seconds or more to compose even the simplest of responses. And, with minimal vocabulary in English, he often struggles to keep his spoken sentences going. Though he stays alert in class, I often wonder how much he is even hearing.

His writing is actually better than his spoken English; his practice WAT exams from later in the course contain fairly clear, although stilted sentences. But it takes him so long to compose even a handful of these that there is no way for him to get a passing score on an exam like the WAT. Tsegu’s development is limited by his lack of fluency, and it is obvious to me that he is wrongly placed in Amy’s class. The course is pitched too high and is held

too infrequently for it to make much of a difference in Tsegu's development. He needs an intensive English program. But there is no such program at City College, and though I try to recommend it to him, for him to agree would mean withdrawing from City College altogether. In his mind, that would be a step back.

Instead, Tsegu soldiers on, taking in half or less of the goings on of the course, submitting two or three overly crafted, stilted paragraphs for full-length essay assignments. Despite all the extra sessions Amy holds with him in her office, Tsegu makes minimal progress and as the semester moves into late November, his frustration gets the better of him and he stops showing up to Amy's office, and misses a few classes as well.

Yet, when I talk to Tsegu in the hallway of the NAC building between classes one day, he tells me that he is looking forward to the test because he believes that he has a good chance of passing it. "New strategy," he repeats to me twice.

* * *

One afternoon, Amy and I go through the roster by memory, predicting who will pass the university's test. Amy feels that a number of writers have a solid chance to pass (Pierre, Shafiqul, Ghazi, James, Lewis, Ben, LaToya, Rosa and Carver). She then put a few in the maybe column (Roberto, Leanna, Lawrence, Eduardo, Geeta) and a few in the no column (Juanita, Charity, Abeni, Rosa, Tsegu). Overall, I thought Amy's projections were optimistic. She was seeing the writers for what they could produce over time, after class discussions and with all the mini-assignments and scaffolding of her course. Writing in a set time frame, under the pressure of a test-taking environment, for unknown readers, on a blind topic would

be a different matter—as I knew from experience.

While we talked, I also noticed her continued mention of grammar as the key issue that would limit the students' success on the exam. It is not that we had not talked about this element of their work at all, but it had certainly been only a background issue, and then just for a few students. But now, she feared the readers would not get passed the errors to see the smart ideas of these student writers.

I asked Amy if there was one student that she really wanted to pass, someone who she was rooting for? She said Saleem. “He has to be in the exact right environment to learn. There are such amazing things in his writing. He is profound at times...so introspective. But I’m not sure any test reader would understand where he is coming from. You kind of have to know him. But he is so smart. Without knowing him though, just reading his writing product...and the fact that it’s written in an exam...on a ridiculous topic...that will limit what he has to say. I don’t expect him to pass, but I really think he deserves to be in college.”

* * *

Without fanfare, the City University of New York’s plan to eliminate remedial courses at all its senior colleges is approved by the New York State Board of Regents on November 22, 1999. A sparse crowd of 80 students and faculty attend the Regents meeting and heckle from the audience as the votes were cast--nine in favor; six against. This is the last hurdle for a policy that was first devised almost 18 months earlier. In a concession to the largely minority and lower class population of CCNY, the Regents push back the start-date

for the new policy at City College for one year, to September of 2001.

Once the full policy is put into effect, approximately 1,400 entering freshmen will be excluded in any given year, according to CUNY figures (Arenson, “Plan to Exclude...” A-1).⁶ Students who are accepted to Bachelor’s programs and then denied admission because of poor performance on the placement tests will be given the chance to attend language immersion classes prior to the start of their first semesters, at the end of which they can try and pass the test again. If they fail a retest, they will have to begin their CUNY careers in the community colleges and remain there until they exit remediation.

In making the change official, the university’s four-year colleges are now among only 19 percent of four-year colleges that do not offer remediation (Arenson, “Plan to Exclude...” A-1.).

CONTEXT FOR A DISCUSSION OF EVALUATION

In the first two-thirds of the course, the students discussed and wrote about the texts that Amy assigned and the ideas that they generated in class discussion. As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, there were many moments of success in the course, but there was plenty of struggle as well. Through the ups-and-downs the students had formed a community of readers and writers, who were progressing at variously different rates in their attempts to attain the kind of writing processes and academic written products that Amy valued.⁷

Though individual success was uneven, the classroom environment was coming together as the students grew more comfortable with each other and with the pattern of the

course. Over time, Amy had succeeded in cultivating a friendly classroom dynamic, where the students were at ease with each other, talking easily and joking freely. In this excerpt from group work, Juanita chides Eduardo about his handwriting.

“Somebody gonna write things down, O.K.,” Eduardo says.

“Did you write that,” Juanita asks, pointing at his bad penmanship.

Eduardo Laughs. “It’s ok. Look he writes like that,” he says. Pointing at Ghazi’s writing. “Which is better? He can write or me?”

“Maybe I better write too,” Juanita says and laughs.

The rapport between the students and Amy was comfortable as well. Here, at the end of a class where the WAT exam was the topic, Gahzi and Amy discuss what will happen in class on the day of the test. (Amy has planned for a guest speaker.)

“Do you have any other questions about this test,” Amy asks.

“Do we have to come back to class after,” Ghazi asks jokingly.

“Anyone else want to answer that,” Amy asks.

A chorus of “Yesses” fills the room.

“Isn’t someone coming,” LaToya asks. “Someone coming, right?” She looks around at Carver to her right and Geeta to her left. They nod.

“Yes Nico’s coming,” Amy’s says.⁸ “And I am going to be mad if no one shows up to hear Nico speak. I’m gonna be hurt.”

“Don’t be mad,” Ghazi says.

“Well if you hurt my friends I’m gonna be mad,” Amy says.

“You told me we were havin’ pizza,” Carver says.

“I have been thinking really hard about that,” Amy says.

“What is your conclusion,” Ghazi asks.

“We havin’ it, right,” LaToya says.

“I’m gonna see what I can do, I have to figure out how to get it here,” Amy says.

“You can go get it while we are taking the test,” Ghazi says and snickers, his eyes gleaming.

“You’re sending me out to get pizza,” Amy says. “Real nice, nice guy.” And she laughs too.

The comfortable dialogue between the students and between the students and the instructor is indicative of the open learning environment that evolved in the classroom from the group work and the student-centered discourse of the class. For the most part, Amy had successfully negotiated a central place in the classroom, while maintaining a student-centered course. Attendance remained steady and participation increased as the semester progressed, and the classroom settled into a predictable and productive state. Here is an excerpt from a class where the students worked with Amy to come up with connections between the course texts, in preparation for their final project.

From her customary spot on the teacher desk, Amy asks the students if they have another theme to tie the texts from the course together. “Can we make another connection,” she asks.

After a few seconds, Ben raises his hand. “The struggle for freedom is a theme that appears,” he says.

“The struggle for freedom...good, give me an example,” Amy says.

“Even in Isabel Allende’s stories, the women are trying to gain freedom from the men...maybe not successful, but they try, or like another example is when the Indians take over San Francisco [Alcatraz] island for freedom,” he says.

“And, well, what about Gurdjieff,” Amy adds. “Can we talk about Gurdjieff in terms of freedom?” Both James and Geeta offer readings of Gurdjieff regarding freedom.

Amy, her energy rising, then asks about whether Hemingway is free, and Lewis suggests that he is not free because he is the opposite of Gurdjieff, searching in all the wrong places for happiness “in bars and in other people, rather than inside.” Amy glances at me, something she rarely does during class time. I take this to mean she is impressed with the responses.

This is a small sample of the kind of successful class discussion that Amy hoped would have evolved sooner and more often. Students offer multiple views of an issue; they play off each other’s ideas and truly construct new ideas in a collaborative way. Directed by Amy, and given the time to write before speaking, the students comfort level with the course content, the processes of the course and each other enable them to sustain a focused conversation of a text for a series of turns.

As the students construct this knowledge together, I feel strongly that this is what the initial steps of academic literacy look like. The process of attaining literacy occurs no differently than the learning of any other complex task: it is not cohesive or clean; it occurs at a slow, uneven pace, with many stutter steps and outright blunders. Amy made room for the process to take place and now she was finally reaping the rewards in these few fleeting moments of incomplete, but promising analysis. This narrative indicates the potential of the course, but also its limitations.

Another way to evaluate the progress of the course is to look at the students’ written products. As shown in Chapter 4, the student writing was as uneven as the classroom discourse. During the semester the class seemed to splinter into two groups. While some made large strides (Leanna, Lewis, Saleem, Ghazi, Juanita, Rosa, Eduardo and Begum)

others seem stalled, their later projects showing little change from their earlier pieces (Lawrence, Abeni, Pierre, Charity and Roberto). Some of the students do not fall neatly into these categories, LaToya for example whose written products were uneven, seemingly based on whim, and Carver whose work and attention devolved as the semester progressed. However, though there is a complex individual story for each writer, a general case can be made for a split between those writers who are succeeding and those who are stalling. The students who approach the class the same way now as they did at the start of the course, in terms of reading, writing and even class participation have gained little ground in their writing. If attendance was an issue at the start of the class, it is still an issue now (Abeni); if freewriting and “freetalking” in class was limited, it has remained so (Charity and Roberto); and if a writer has not invested him or herself into the ideas of the course, if they have not been motivated to write something they care about, then they remain producers of staid, dulled-out school writing (James and Lawrence).

Meanwhile, the students who have advanced are trying out new ways of writing (Lewis), talking more in class (Leanna), and/or investing themselves in the ideas of the course (Rosa). When you compare a student who is making amazing progress like Leanna to one who has made little like Roberto, it all seems to come down to investment in a blind project of self-exploration—to take risks both with writing process and written products. Leanna, for example, has taken to writing constantly during each class (taking notes/ drawing diagrams) and also speaking—hesitantly—on most class days, not only what she thinks but responding to the comments of others. Roberto, however, remains largely silent, never

speaking and still struggling to write even a few sentences during a freewrite. One is spinning endlessly around in the same pattern, and the other has leaped into a new world of literacy.

Leanna's written products reveal her new-found risk taking, as she struggles to write herself into and out of complex ideas. Her writing at this point in the semester is a mess, full of fractured ideas and lost tangents. Roberto, on the other hand, has carried the same straightforward, non risky content moves and uninvolved, flat style and voice forward throughout the semester. Ultimately, their work would probably receive nearly the same grade in an evaluation. But Leanna's work shows much more potential.

Writers like Leanna (and others like Begum and Ben) have responded to Amy's questioning and directed comments on their work by increasing the complexity of their thinking and their support for their ideas. On the high end, here is an example of where one of the better writers in the class, Lewis, makes a thorough, purposeful reading of Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. In a formal paper, Lewis writes about "the unspoken" a concept that had been discussed in class.

Another "unspoken" is when he says in the story, "People of the Seine," "But you knew there would always be the spring, as you knew the river would flow again after it was frozen. When the cold rains kept on and killed the spring, it was as though a young person had died for no reason. In these days, though, the spring always came finally but it was frightening that it had nearly failed." It was as though he was questioning the power of nature and why the seasons come and go. He might think that, even though nature is important and powerful, it is also very fragile. He compares the spring to a human being and how it can have the ability to fail at what it does best.

Lewis still struggles with some of the stylistic conventions here: he doesn't quite know how to introduce the story, and he writes about the text in past tense, for example. However, Lewis' selection of the quote and his close reading of Hemingway's figurative meanings clearly show that he has mastered the concept of how to write about literature, one of the unstated goals of Amy's class. In the full text of the paper he uses six citations like this one to show the different ways Hemingway uses the unspoken.

All of the students are not writing as well as Lewis, but his piece indicates that the class has settled into a certain writing mode. Amy has been consistent in what she asks the students to do in their written work, and to varying degrees, the students are using the writing processes she has taught and are working toward producing the kinds of texts she privileges: close readings of literary texts that lead to argument-based essays.

By early November then, the classroom has been well-established in terms of pace, mood, requirements and ways of working. However, when the students receive notices from CCNY announcing that they need to retake the Writing Assessment Test (WAT), a challenge to the classroom begins to take hold. The form letters from the testing office provide the scantiest of information about the test, such as, the date and time and the basic details of what to bring to the test. Almost immediately, the students approach Amy with timid questions after class. And just as quickly, Amy approaches me to ask what the rules are surrounding the test. I explain the regulations and my experiences with the test in the past. Perhaps with too much emphasis, I tell her that I have seen many good writers from my classes fail the test, including two students who burst into tears during the exam. I also tell her that at

CCNY, there are no department guidelines or requirements that you have to include work on the test in Basic Writing II. I ask Amy if she feels any pressure professionally in regard to the pass-rate of her students. She said she had not even thought about that. The English Department keeps no records of the percentage of students from a particular class who pass the test, so she did not have to worry that her performance would be judged by a pass/fail percentage on the exam.⁹

As we spend more-and-more time discussing the exam and its ramifications, Amy asks me how much grammar matters on the WAT. I give her my take, based on watching writers I had known in class take the test for more than five years, and then being sometimes astonished at who passed and who did not. In general, I say, while a good essay would pass, even if it had errors, essays with only marginal content and style would be at risk of failing if there were too many errors. A case could be made, unfortunately, I add, that the outcomes for students who fall near the pass/fail line could be tied directly to the number and egregiousness of the errors a student makes on the exam. Again I feel as if I overemphasized my beliefs about the exam—and with dramatic results, as Amy is considering making curricular changes to the course.

In response, Amy expresses the hopelessness of this situation. She feels some of the students need more work on grammar, but their errors are all over the place, and the remaining class time leaves no room to cover them all. “I wish I had tackled this sooner,” she says.

In truth, she had been worried about some students’ grammar since the early part of

the semester, mostly the ESL students like Tsegu, Ghazi and Begum. Partly due to my suggestion, she had been using a check marking system to indicate errors in their work for some time. We had talked about any outside the classroom help for grammar that the college offers, and she had researched it, and found, correctly, that there was little help out there. The Writing Center offered one-on-one tutoring and some group workshops for ESL students, but that was about it. Now, two-thirds of the way through the course, Amy became hypersensitive to all the students grammar issues, worrying that she had done too little to remediate them.

At first Amy holds off the students' concerns with promises of "later, later." But, as a first-time teacher of Basic Writing II, it would be difficult not to succumb. Amy decides to make changes to the curriculum. One day in class, she announces the changes:

- Each Monday class will be devoted to in-class writing, "on a WAT-like question based in the things we have read." (She would change this idea later to include generic WAT questions that were not tied to the course content.)
- Class time will be used to analyze the test and its requirements; one final paper assignment will be eliminated to relieve some of the burden of the extra writing.
- There will be a series of grammar workshops/exercises to do in class and for homework.

Oddly, the students do not react, as if they were almost expecting this substantial shift in the course curriculum. Though she asks if there are any questions, there are none.

The arrival of the student letters from the testing office upends the established mood

and pedagogy of the class. By late November, Amy's new testing curriculum has been rushed to the front of the room to compete alongside the already established classroom practice of reading, discussing and writing about literary texts. There were now two magnetic poles and gradually everyone in the class—including Amy—was sucked toward the test pole.

In the sections below, I look at the influences on and consequences of the university exam's introduction into the basic Writing course. In attempting to define and analyze particular influences on the course, I use data from interviews, Amy's journal, class narratives, student writing samples and the students' grades on the exam and in the course.¹⁰ I also use large sections from a classroom narrative where Amy had the students discuss what makes a good WAT, and I provide a complete narrative of the day that the students take the exam.

Student Authority Over the Rhetorical Act of Test Taking

After they have accumulated six practice WATs that Amy reads and returns, she asks the students to review them at home and come to class prepared to talk about what they notice. She puts them into pre-determined groups of four, according to who she thinks will work together.

The following is an exchange from class group-work between Eduardo, Juanita and Ghazi. Roberto was also in the group, but he did not say anything here, or in the rest of the group and class discussion that day. The students discuss a question Amy has written on the board: What elements go into a passing WAT? She gives them directions to use their

practice WAT exams to support their claims. Each student has their six practice WATs in a pile in front of them as they begin.

“Good grammar,” Eduardo says.

“Structure, the way they are structured in order to connect thoughts,” Juanita says.

“Like what? Like what,” Eduardo says.

“Sentence structure, put it that way,” Juanita says.

“To make sense,” Eduardo says.

“Yah to make sense,” Juanita says.

“Then you have to make a body and conclusion and introduction,” Ghazi says.

“Yah,” Juanita says.

“How you call that,” Ghazi asks. He looks at Juanita.

“The introduction should present what you are going to talk about. The main points,” Juanita says.

“Then what,” Ghazi asks.

“Then the body,” Juanita says. “Then concluuuusion.” She draws out the word as Ghazi writes.

“What else,” Ghazi asks. “The thesis?”

“That should be in the introduction,” Juanita says and Eduardo speaks at the same time, “That element should be institution, introducing.”

“No, no, I’m just saying,” Juanita says, as she shifts forward in her seat.

“So I need to put not just thesis...,” Ghazi says.

“No, No. Yah. You’re still writing it,” Eduardo says.

“It’s good to know that,” Ghazi says and nods toward Eduardo.

“Write that the thesis should be in the introduction along with the main points,” Juanita says.

“Yes it should be,” Eduardo says.

Juanita reads what Ghazi has written, “...the thesis along with the main points in the introduction. Good,” he says.

“How about choosing one side. Pick just one side,” Eduardo says.

“Yah,” Juanita agrees again.

“Yah so, choosing one side,” Eduardo says, gesturing toward Ghazi’s page. He looks over what Ghazi is writing again.

“Maybe, um, supporting your ideas, what you say,” Juanita says.

“Using examples and, and...,” Eduardo says.

“Facts and experience,” Ghazi says as he writes.

“Some facts if you know a fact,” she says and laughs. Both Juanita and Ghazi have these small, almost insecure bits of laughter, kind of a titter, after they speak. It undercuts the importance of what they have to say. I can’t decide if it’s personal doubt or a way to stay cool while participating in the work at hand.

“Something like, ‘in the news I heard that...’ You can make it up,” Ghazi says and laughs. Juanita laughs with him. Then there is a silence for fifteen seconds. They all stare down, but no one looks through their practice exams. Roberto doesn’t say a word, just nods once in a while. I have the sudden urge to reach out and “thwack” him with his own WAT exams and say, “Speak up; it’s your turn; we’re waiting on you; these folks won’t bite.” But I don’t.

“Let’s say like in the introduction you give ideas, your ideas, but then what do you do in the body,” Ghazi asks.

“In the body the main points should be supported,” Juanita says.

“Explaining them,” Eduardo says.

“Yah,” Juanita says.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Ghazi says. “In the introduction, you....

“In the introduction you go for the ideas that should be included and then the main points should be supported and thoroughly explained in the body,” Juanita says.

“Introduction...ideas...with examples of them....” Ghazi half-reads from his notebook.

“What, what about a conclusion,” Eduardo asks.

“That’s just a summary,” Juanita says.

“The thesis should be repeated,” Ghazi says.

“Not really,” Juanita says.

“You can also...” Eduardo says but Juanita overrides him.

“You can add, yah,” Juanita says and laughs.

“You can give the solution,” Eduardo says.

“Yah,” Juanita says. She pauses and adds, “You need to summarize the body.”

“No you don’t have to,” Ghazi says.

“What I mean, you need to say again your main point,” Juanita says.

“Yah, I think that’s tight,” Eduardo says.

In this group discussion, the students speak fast and free; they speak simultaneously; they build ideas from nothing; they build ideas together; they listen and speak to each other as knowledge makers. And they write everything down!

In discussing the writing exam, Juanita, Ghazi and Eduardo are confident in their use

of specific, rhetorical vocabulary. The terms roll off their tongues with ease: introduction, body, thesis, supporting examples.... Mostly they agree on what these terms mean. In a concrete and static way, they define an iron-clad structure for the test essay. Only occasionally do they offer conflicting possibilities, as when they are not sure if the conclusion should summarize. In cases of disagreement, they work toward getting to the right answer, as if there is a blue print to follow for this kind—or any kind—of writing.

In one sense, it seems impressive that they have such confidence in their rhetorical analysis of this writing task; their responses could be read as a certain expertise. But, in another way, it is revealing that they are able to reduce the convoluted act of writing, all its choices and contradictions, to this set of concrete rules to follow.

It is not at all astonishing to hear them quickly develop this list of correct approaches on the WAT in a short group session. I have heard this before. Perhaps as a consequence of the role high stakes writing situations play in their lives, the students exercise a sense of authority about the WAT. They are able to analyze and verbalize what they think makes a good WAT much more successfully than when they are asked to look closely at other kinds of writing—writing that is not from school and not from students. Analyzing other writing, published writing, often freezes them up. But they know the components of the traditional school-based argument essay as if it were the steps to tying shoelaces. This is, perhaps, why they do not refer to their WAT exams that are piled in front of each of them, as they were instructed by Amy; it's all so obvious to them, just a matter of calling up what they already think they know, rather than analyzing the essays with a new critical eye, and seeing the

differences in approach even within the narrow form and limited writing context of the exam. They have carried over a limited view of their own discourse choices from previous essay exams and school papers; they all think they are out to right the same basic essay. The content does not even matter: all content can be fit into this form, they believe.

The rhetorical authority the students have over the exam is repeated when Amy reconvenes the groups for a full class discussion. She is making a list of their advice on the board, trying to finalize a plan for the test.

As in the group work, the students are able to deliver plenty of rhetorical vocabulary for this kind of writing task but it is unclear whether they actually know what the terminology means. With Amy's direction, they begin to untangle and define the terms topic sentences, thesis statements and transitions. Thesis statements and topic sentences are defined in a specific way. By reading out examples from their work, Amy has the students engage with their texts and hear specific instances of the abstract terminology. LaToya even produces her own vocabulary for what a transition does: "connective."

"And, how would the paragraphs, let say you have two ideas, how would the paragraphs fit together," Amy asks. "Let's say you are talking about gun control. And you talk in one paragraph about, um, a time when someone on the news was shot by someone else who carried a gun and didn't have a license for it. And then in the next paragraph you are talking about what, guns in general and what the laws are. What would you need to have to put those paragraphs together?"

"Topic sentences," the student says.

"Topic sentences," Amy says with a questioning tone, as if it was not the answer she was expecting.

"Transitions," Pierre says.

"Thesis statements," Ben says.

“OK, so I am hearing, thesis statements, topic sentences and transition sentences,” Amy repeats. “What are these three things?”

“Connective,” LaToya says.

“Connective,” Amy asks.

“It let’s the reader know when you are going, leading from one idea to the next,” LaToya says.

“Ok which one is that...cause we said three different things,” Amy asks.

“What’s the difference between them?”

“Topic sentences are your ideas, main ideas and the transitions connect between the two,” Carver says.

“Exactly: transitions sentences are connective,” Amy says, using LaToya’s word. “They lead from one paragraph to the next. It lets you know the connection between the two paragraphs. But what about a further definition of topic sentences or thesis sentences?”

“Thesis sentence is your main...what the essay is about,” Lewis says.

“Topic sentences are what a paragraph, each paragraph has an idea,” Ben says.

“Good, but there is one more important part of the definition to thesis statement,” Amy says. “It has to be something you can argue. Something that not everyone will agree with. Ok, so now go to your own WATs and I want you to see, do you have transition sentences in your own paper. Do you have a thesis or a topic in each paragraph? And what else have we been talking about, do your paragraphs fit together. So choose one of them or two of them and take a look and read through it and see whether or not you see them in your pages. And then I want you to give an example. Find one example of each thing. Of a transition, of a topic, and of a paragraph structure.”

The students shuffle their pages. But Amy gives them only 30 seconds.

“Ok so who can give me a thesis or a topic from one of their WATs,” Amy asks.

“Exploring outer space waste of money,” Eduardo says.

“Exploring outer space is a waste of money. Exactly,” Amy says. “Who can give me another one?”

“Death penalty is an ongoing issue that is still being argued today,” Pierre says.

“Ok. So can that be argued,” Amy asks. “Can it be argued that it is an issue that is ongoing?”

“Well there’s more to it than that,” Pierre says.

“OK then say the rest of it,” Amy says.

“I am one of those people who is against it, not that I am for criminals, but I am against putting people to death,” Pierre reads.

“OK. So what can be argued there,” Amy asks. “That sounds more like the statement of the side you are picking but not quite a thesis statement yet. Why are you against it? Does anyone else have one?”

“The death penalty costs too much money to carry out,” Ben says.

“Yes,” Amy says. “Good. See how it can be argued? OK, who has an example of a transition sentence?”

Speaking, rather than reading, LaToya says, “None of these reasons, neither of them can tell us whether, why the death penalty should be legal, whether we kill criminals.”

“Do you have an example from your paper,” Amy asks.

“That is from my paper,” LaToya says with a bit of anger.

“Does anyone have an example from their paper,” Amy asks. “That’s the idea, but without knowing what comes before and what comes after, it’s hard to know what you’re going between.”

“I’m saying, that the death penalty has been going on since the beginning of time, and it will continue to go on,” LaToya says, then she begins reading. “Many people believe that it should be illegal because it’s taking a life. But many other people believe that if you commit the crime you should do the time. I

for one do not believe the death penalty should be legal because I feel that this should be between God and we should accept that idea in our society.”

“OK, it all sticks together,” Amy says. “When you hear some people believe this, some people believe the opposite, I believe the first one. Those things fit together logically, there’s a progression.”

“They do,” LaToya asks.

“Yah, they do,” Amy says quietly.

Just like the group discussion, the full class discussion takes off easily and goes for long stretches without silence. The conversation twists and turns as students call out one over the other; they are actively engaged. Although Amy is still leading the majority of the discussion, she is directing and “saying back” more and asking specific questions less.

In part, the full class discussion is successful because Amy is reaping the benefits of the group work. Having used groups often during the semester, the students have become used to staying on task in group work. They generate plenty of things to say that then get repeated in the full class sessions. But I think the students are also motivated by the idea of having a list on the board that they can follow on the exam; it is a way to simplify and universalize the writing task. By its very nature, a list of this type has the feeling of instructions or guidelines--a writer’s key to a passing score.

The students are able to locate and read out examples of thesis statements from their work, and when directed by Amy they successfully critique them as being “something that can be argued.” When LaToya reads her example, and Amy defines the pattern as setting up a tension, this offers solid craft analysis—a structure the students can use in their work. Though a contradictory reading would suggest that students might see this sort of

validation of a set rhetorical move as something to mimic, regardless of content: a rhetorical boilerplate.

Audience and Evaluation

It is interesting to note, at various times in the narrative how the content of the essays appears to be interchangeable. At various points, Amy simply makes up an essay to prove a certain point. The writing task is presented as acontextual and inauthentic, simply a set of rhetorical rules to follow that can produce an essay about any possible topic. Success in this writing context is presented as being able to recognize a thesis statement, for example; it does not matter whether the writer cares about the statement or whether the reader is moved by the writer's words.

Part of the reason why this writing task can be presented this way is that the students (and even the instructors) have no sense of who the audience is for these pieces of writing. Below, the class tries to figure out who the audience is and they rightly or wrongly have surmised that the point of this testing exercise is not for the students to say something that matters, but for them to show that they know how to say something.

“Well you’re talking about, everyone’s saying they, they’re looking for this they’re looking for that who is they,” Amy asks

A number of students call out: “The professors...; the people they pay...”

“What people, who, who’s grading it,” Amy asks.

“The people that are here everyday,” Lewis says forcefully, without raising his hand.

“We don’t know them,” Ben says,

“You can’t say, uh, [she puts on a stage voice] “Oh Ms. Friedman, because we don’t know the names, so you just have to say...” LaToya tails off.

“But I mean are they finding people on the street and saying here read these or are they asking....” Amy says. The class erupts in laughter.

“Teachers of the English classes, I think,” Lewis says.

“It might be all teachers,’ James says.

“No I think it’s English teachers,” Lewis says.

“I think it’s Senor X...,” Ghazi says and the class laughs.

“What, who,” Amy asks.

“No name, so a little mystery,” Ghazi says.

“Oh Mr X,” Amy say and laughs.

“And Tim you can correct me because you know more about the test than I do,” Amy says. “Who is grading it is, from what I know, basically it is mostly people adjuncts, and people like me, who are looking for extra money, and so they, I mean they are qualified to read them...”

“I wonder,” Eduardo says and the class bursts into laughter again.

For the students, the consequence of not knowing who the readers are and of presuming that form is more important than content causes them to separate form from content. They no longer see what they say as valuable; they no longer see cohesive pieces of writing that try and move and persuade the reader. Instead, for the most part, they see a piece of writing that is supposed to go through the motions to simply show a minimum proficiency in constructing an essay, particularly in the regard to grammar, as detailed below.

They write an exam and, a few weeks later, receive a single number score in return. It is impersonal and mystifying to them. The students do not feel connected to this writing task, and they do not trust that they will be given a fair reading. On December 2, just days before they are to take the test, I write in my research journal: *On the WAT, the students chuck their words into the abyss and wait for a single number as a reply. The act of writing is reduced to the trade of a few hundred words written in haste for a single number reply given in even greater haste. There is little caring for the writing on either side. The inauthentic disconnect between writer and reader causes the students to distrust the process. In the group discussion from earlier in the class, the distrust of the writing experience is very apparent. (I am in this group and when they ran out of things to say, I began to ask the students specific questions.)*

“Who reads the WAT,” I ask.

“Teachers right,” Juanita asks.

“Maybe you,” Ghazi says and laughs. and then they all laugh, and I do too.

“Yah, who does,” Juanita asks. “Isn’t it English teachers?”

“Only for freshmen. Right, I think they read like tons of them in one day,” Ghazi says.

“Really,” Juanita says, thinking Ghazi’s assertion is quite plausible.

“Who reads them,” Eduardo asks directly to me. He is always looking for the straight, direct answer.

“You don’t know who you are writing to,” I ask, trying my best to avoid a teacherly tone, but I fail.

“We write to a person, aha...,” Juanita says.

“I think all of the people,” Ghazi says.

“All of the people,” I rephrase into a question.

“Yah that’s right,” Ghazi says.

“You mean some kind of general audience,” I ask. “Do they have any defining characteristics, the people in this general audience.” Ghazi looks at me oddly, wondering what I mean by my question, I suppose. Before I can rephrase it, Amy calls out, “Take another couple minutes.”

Then Juanita says, “I, um, think, only professors, but we don’t know if they read it.”

Later in the discussion, the students lack of awareness of the audience leads them to think that the test makers are out to trick them.

“No, I mean who writes the questions on the WAT, I don’t get that,” Ghazi says. “There’s always some grammar mistake in the question.” Juanita laughs.

“Can you explain it” Ghazi asks looking at me.

“What do you mean,” I ask.

“Every time I read some question on the WAT, there’s comma splices, or two ideas in one...,” Ghazi says.

“It’s confusing,” Juanita says.

“Yah, right,” Ghazi says.

“Confusing,” Juanita says.

“That’s like the main thing,” Ghazi says.

“Plus that, the reading, the readings...,” Eduardo says.

“And then you’re asking yourself what is the point you should agree on. Cause it’s like so confusing,” Juanita says.

“It’s so many points in one paragraph, right,” Ghazi says. That’s why they call it a WAT [meaning ‘what’] question.” They all laugh.

“Why do they confuse you like that,” Juanita asks. “And then if you get it wrong, and there question is wrong anyway, cause it’s all messed up and you get it wrong. So who wins?”

“Yah, I get them wrong too, like, that changes ok,” Eduardo says. “The question I copied from...”

“How can you get it wrong,” I ask. “It’s not a factual question.”

“Because the question is wrong,” Ghazi says.

“You know what I mean, right,” Juanita says and laughs, looking directly at Eduardo. Ghazi is pointing at the group page on Juanita’s desk, indicating she needs to sign. She does, and passes it to Roberto who signs quickly and passes it to Ghazi.

“Yes,” Eduardo says.

“Are you trying to get the right answer,” I ask.

“No, just it’s your opinion,” Juanita says.

“We try to paraphrase, paraphrase, you know based on the topic, but the topic is already, that there is something missing, I don’t know something like that. Always, I don’t know,” Ghazi says.

“They probably don’t really care about the question. They just care about how you’re writing the answer,” Juanita says. “Or your opinion....”

Eventually, the distrust of the exam process leads the students to question the exam itself.

Partly as a way to rationalize why they did poorly on the exam, but also in genuine recognition of the odd nature of the task, the students critique the exam page with humor and a certain degree of genuine recognition of the oddness of the task that leaves them with a lack

of understanding about what went wrong and/or what they are supposed to do to make it right. “Always I don’t know,” Ghazi says.

In her office, Amy described to me how she thought that the test readers would not judge Saleem’s writing fairly because they did not know him as a writer, and therefore would dismiss his writing as nonsensical, when it was actually full of complicated ideas. In talking about Saleem’s chances, she was essentially laying out one of the main problems with the test for all of the student writers: the relationship between writer and reader has been severed and this has profound consequences not only for how the exams are read, but for how they are composed. They are read blind, but they are also written blind.

In the group I observed, when I ask who they think grades the exams, the students have no idea. The unknown readers produce causes the students to manufacture and believe a certain test mystique, almost mythology. For example, they imagine that the readers use whimsy or fancy to determine who passes the exam. In a group interview, Lewis recounts a story that he heard from another student that a professor told him that the test grades were assigned randomly, and so that’s probably how he failed. LaToya and Lawrence, who are also in the group interview, agree with Lewis’ story as a probable explanation for their own failures. A related myth invokes the idea that a particular exam will fail purely on the basis of poor grammar, or because the writer used the personal “I.” If only they had done “X” or had not done “X” then they would have passed.

None of the issues the students raise are pass/fail make or break issues for WAT readers, of course. Having a few grammar errors or using the first person (or not) does not

result in automatic failure. The highest score a student of mine ever earned on a WAT was a “10” (the only 10 I have ever seen) and it was written in a personal narrative style with quite a few grammar mistakes.

Like so many things in regard to writing programs and administrative involvement, the way the WAT is administered has a lot more to do with cost limitations rather than sound writing program policy. The readers of the WAT are, as Amy describes to the students, hired guns who are normed in a one day session and then “qualified” to read for as long as they want to read. They are a hodge-podge group with little of particular in common regarding what is a good WAT exam. So the students are writing for a somewhat amorphous group that lacks a defined identity. The idea that a piece of writing would be judged as good or passing, or college level is a largely impossible thing to believe given the complexity of writing issues presented in chapter four. CUNY does provide a list of criteria and a sample set of essays, but the criteria listed are broad and subject to their own interpretations and the examples leave little for comparison, other than length.

So with only the barest of guidelines to go by, the students—and the instructor—move toward the default: the standard form, limited style and dull voice of the school essay. As presented, the way to pass the WAT runs contrary to everything that Amy has tried to show them about writing all semester, and therefore, it reintroduces the safe and secure idea of writing as a simple and straightforward task. The choices are gone: do this and do it that way and you pass. It was the essence of the one shot exam, the students’ would be judged on their product only, by readers they did not know, and readers that did not know them.

The Grammar Issue

In our last interview session, I ask Amy what mistakes she made in teaching the class, and her first answer is a concern that she didn't teach enough grammar earlier in the semester. She also writes in her journal:

Some things I'll do next time I teach this class. I'll deal with grammar throughout. I think we will have to have some quick grammar days. Hopefully a month of grammar will be enough. Next time I will do a 20-minute session at the beginning of class. So we'll deal with grammar consistently. I was resistant to it before because I thought it would be boring.

During the semester, Amy goes through various stages of avoidance to overcompensation concerning the ever-present issue: what to do about grammar. Near the start of the semester that she is hopeful that students with the most problems with grammar are getting help elsewhere, in the college skills class or in the writing center. As early as October 5, she identifies students as needing ESL supports: "Tsegu, Charity, Eduardo and a few others." She attempts to get help from outside the classroom for the students' grammar issues, which she often attributes to ESL complications. She tries to contact professors in the ESL Department to see if they can help her understand the issues, and or to give her advice on how to work with these students, and she attempts to contact the ESL writing lab for her students to "receive more directed attention." What Amy is unaware of is that the college is downsizing its ESL Department and has closed its ESL lab. The latter change is so recent that the lab is still listed in the university handbook and on the college web site. The phone

number is still active, but the ESL lab is below the Writing Center in Harris Hall, where my office is. I tell Amy that I have not seen anyone in there for months. “What’s the point,” she says in exasperation. It is a little odd, I tell her that at a time when the diversity of language backgrounds among CUNY students has never been greater, we both agree, why are they are shutting down the ESL lab?

In an interview later in November she tells me that for many of the students, she has only just begun to notice grammar issues. As their writing has improved, as they have begun to say more complex and interesting things, then the grammar issues start to stand out, she claims. Prior to that, when they were “saying very little, it didn’t matter if they were missing a comma or had bad subject verb agreement. You never got that far.” She is also noticing the errors more because she is using a check marking system, at my instigation, where she puts a check in the margin on each line where an error appears. Since she makes no delineation between grammar, punctuation and style errors, for some of the students, this means there is a check on virtually every line. Now she sees just how many mistakes they make. But after recognizing this, there is the larger question of what (if anything) to do about it. Predictably, the focus on grammar rises as the test approaches. At one point in the semester she feels so powerless over it that she simply writes at the top of each practice WAT exam some version of “check your grammar and punctuation.” But, as the test gets closer and she reads more of the student work and sees little change in the number and kind of errors, she concludes in her journal that in the case of grammar, “I don’t think I can avoid it.”

When Amy decides to hold various grammar workshops, where she prints out sheets

on various grammar issues and explains them to the class, the focus is enhanced. Amy chooses the issues to cover based on her readings of the students' work. In one session she covers past participle, comma, colon, semi colon, apostrophe, "which vs. then vs. that" and conjunctions. The students take it all in, nodding and looking at the handouts, but it is a blur of information that might make sense to them out of a writing context, but offers little help when they are in the midst of their own complex prose.

Later in the semester, Amy holds a class day where they review their WAT exams for errors and for homework, make a chart of the pattern errors and how to fix them. This is a slimmed down version of a month-long exercise I do, and I am uneasy about her using it. It is the first time she has uses something of mine so directly, though she has realigned it to fit her purposes.

For their part, many of the students are obsessed with grammar as the sole cause of their writing woes. In a group interview, Latoya, Lewis and Lawrence all agree that their lack of correctness is the reason why they did poorly on the test and ended up in Basic Writing. In the class where they talk about what makes a good WAT, grammar and punctuation concerns dominate the discussion. "Good grammar," Eduardo announces, "Put that on the list." He repeats this twice more, even before his group even decides who will be the note taker. In the class discussion, grammar issues end up being more than half of the items on the list. Below, with Amy's guidance, the students are attempting to define some of the grammar terms on the board.

"Good punctuation," Amy says.

"Correct punctuation," LaToya says.

“What would be correct punctuation,” Amy asks.

“If it’s a long sentence it needs to have correct punctuation, commas in the right place,” LaToya says.

“Ok so punctuation. What else about sentence structure,” Amy says.

“No fragments,” James says.

“No run ons,” Ghazi says.

“Ok we did do this before, but what’s a fragment and what’s a run on,” Amy says.

“A fragment just has a subject or a verb; one is missing,” LaToya says.

“Ok so it’s not a complete sentence. So it doesn’t have a subject and a verb,” Amy says. “Now, what’s a run on?”

Eduardo calls out, speaking over many others, “Many ideas in one sentence.”

“OK, many ideas, many sentences put together but it’s punctuated like it’s one sentence,” Amy says. “So you have ‘I did this I did this I did this’ and no stopping, it just all goes together, that’s a run on. Alright, what else, what else makes a good WAT?”

For the students, when they think of what is wrong with their writing, the default is grammar.

They leap to grammar first, at the start of the list and return to it often. Even more so than with the general rhetorical terminology, the students are able to list out grammar terms fairly easily, but it is unclear whether they know what any of it means, especially in relation to their own work. Can they recognize subject-verb-agreement in their own work? They seem to be reciting things they have been told, whether it applies to their writing or not. Near the end of class, when Amy asks the students to prioritize the short list that is left on the board, the

students put grammar on top. The confusion over who the audience for this exam is again plays a role in their inability to discuss the grammar issues in any specific, useful way.

“No, I think that when they grade it, they seen how you write, not if you support your idea,” LaToya says strongly. “So you could write that drugs are bad and then you write I like peanut butter and jelly and I think they look at if you know how to write the sentences well and put sentences where they belong and stuff as well as support your ideas and I think they looking for the structure of the sentences punctuation more than they looking for supporting things, well they’re not.

“What makes you think that,” Amy asks.

“I just know that,” LaToya says. Amy laughs as well as a couple other students.

“OK,” Amy says with exaggeration.

“Because they can’t that be the way you writes the sentences and the way you put in punctuation, that’s how come you write,” LaToya says.

“So do you...” Amy starts to ask a question.

“The way you support your ideas tell how you think; they judging you on the way you write,” LaToya surmises.

“OK, so what do you think would effect you more if you had two run on sentences that were enough of run-ons that people would notice,” Amy says. “So you had three ideas: you know, I believe this...I believe that guns are bad and that we shouldn’t have them and that many people get hurt when you use them and that’s a really terrible thing. OK?” Ghazi and a few others laugh.

“Yah your readers would feel, wait I have to catch my breath,” Amy continues. “But what if you said, what if you didn’t have an opinion, what if you just said, many people believe guns are bad and that, that, that you can buy them on the street and that guns kill people. And it was all in good sentences. No Run ons.”

“I just really think that they just think that the punctuation and the way the sentences are because you can write down nothing but facts on the paper and it will still be correct as long as your sentences and your punctuations are in the right place,” LaToya says.

LaToya takes to the extreme what the other students express tacitly: content does not matter, only correct form is important. Amy tries to counteract this by offering a hypothetical example, but it is too hard to follow. Shortly after this exchange, however, James makes a case for content being important.

“I think if you don’t pick a side, then you don’t have nothing to write,” James says. “So if you are not going to have anything to write, I mean if you stay neutral, what are you going to write about?”

“So, having something to say is more important, is important, not just the perfect grammar,” Amy says. “I mean I can say, as a reader, it is more interesting to read something where someone says I believe this but if someone says well it could be this and it could be this and these are all the reasons for this and these are all the reasons for this, it’s not as interesting. I don’t find those things as interesting to read because I can think of those things myself but I want to know what you think. Ummm. But I can’t say, I don’t really know exactly what they’re looking for because I’ve never graded them. I have gotten lists of things that they are looking for and all of these things are on them ummm, James you wanted to say something.

“Sometimes, I think it’s whether you give your opinion,” James says. “If you don’t have a strong opinion on the topic, it’s hard to have, to know what to say.”

“Like what,” Amy asks.

“Like, like, I believe...” James says.

“Like, why couldn’t you say definitely,” Amy asks.

“I think you have to say, ‘I believe,’” James says.

“But they know it’s your opinion. If you are saying the death penalty is wrong. That’s an opinion, and they know it’s your opinion, it’s your essay,” Amy says.

“I mean if you don’t really, if you don’t have a strong opinion either way,” James says. “You should choose a side anyway.”

“Well could you say something like, umm, the death penalty is wrong that man a week or two ago, a man threw a brick at a woman on the street, she ended up in the hospital, she almost died if she had died that man did not deserve to go to jail. It’s different if you throw a brick at someone or if you shoot a gun. Those are facts aren’t they? That it did happen. And it’s your opinion that they are different. Or it’s my opinion,” Amy says.

“I mean, I think, everything is important, but I think the grammar is more important because when I take last time my test, I had a side and I supported it, but,” he pauses, “still failed,” Eduardo says and the students laugh.

“OK,” Amy says.

“Writing is... my grammar is one of the problems, the problem for me,” Eduardo says.

“OK. So Carver you wanted to say something,” Amy says.

“We’re going home,” he says, pointing at the clock, and the students laugh.

James’ point that choosing a side, having something to say, is presented forcefully. But Eduardo is able to dismiss it due to his perception of his own experience. Due to the mystery involved surrounding the test, the students really have no idea why they did not pass, and the easiest and least threatening thing to do is to blame it on grammar.

The Building of Rhetorical Literacy

There are moments in the group and class discussion where the students begin to work out some of the rhetorical issues of writing. As with their attempts at close reading literary texts earlier in the course, this process of literacy is slow moving, and often times it is

unclear whether the students are aware of the breakthroughs they make. Here in their group, Eduardo, Ghazi and Juanita begin by talking about a simple choice they have to make: whether to use the personal “I.”

“What about, ah, the first person,” Eduardo asks. “‘I,’ ‘I’ shouldn’t be included.

“Do you repeat the ‘I,’” Ghazi asks.

“It shouldn’t be included,” Juanita says shaking her head.

“Yah I think so,” Eduardo says. “That’s what I have been told...by a professor. They are not looking for that especially.”

“Yah, Oh,” Juanita says with doubt.

“A point of view I was gonna say,” Ghazi says. I am not sure what he is referencing.

“I mean when you mean your experiences you mean “I” you just don’t say it,” Eduardo says.

“No you don’t say I, you say from my experiences. And that...I, I, I you can’t do that,” Juanita says.

“You say my ideas...,” Ghazi says making a rolling gesture with his hand.

“No but...,” Juanita says.

“When the reader is, when the reader is reading your essay he knows that it’s your writing,” Eduardo says.

“But how would he know if it’s my experience,” Juanita asks.

“But it will...huh,” Eduardo moves forward in his seat. “The reader knows.”

“You read it and you have this feeling,” Ghazi says.

Eduardo leans even further toward Juanita. “In examples,” he says. “When you use examples, I think you should use your, ah... I think you should write that...”. He gestures toward Ghazi “except, except when you use examples.”

“Where did you get that from,” Juanita asks. “You heard...”

“In this class,” Eduardo says.

“That was in this class,” Ghazi asks and laughs. He angles his notebook so Juanita can see it. “You can change it,” he says and laughs again and Juanita laughs with him.

“You can say no,” Eduardo says and laughs as well.

“Are you embarrassed,” Juanita asks as Ghazi blushes.

“Porque? Porque,” Ghazi says, snickering louder, while pointing to himself. “If it’s disturbing you I’ll take it away.”

“No, Hmmm,” Juanita says.

“What shouldn’t be included,” Eduardo asks, while looking up at the board for a new question to discuss.

“Too much many examples,” Ghazi says.

“Yah it shouldn’t be included, right,” Juanita says. “Too much detail can lead to boredom.”

“Can be boring, right,” Ghazi asks.

“No, it can confuse the writer, eh, the reader,” Eduardo says.

“Well, not completely,” Juanita says. “Oh what shouldn’t be included, multiple points in one paragraph shouldn’t be included.”

“No I know, wait, I gotta one,” Eduardo says.

“What,” Ghazi asks.

“You shouldn’t repeat the sentence,” Eduardo says. “The sentence, you shouldn’t repeat the sentence, something like, ‘for example...’”

“No,” Juanita says.

“You shouldn’t repeat the same idea twice,” Ghazi asks. “Twice, or you might sound...”

“At this point, there shouldn’t be too many points in one paragraph it could confuse the reader,” Juanita says.

“Yah that’s good,” Ghazi says.

“Oh and, you shouldn’t start up with a subject, stop, start up with another and, and then return to the first one again,” Juanita says.

“I think we did it,” Ghazi says and laughs.

“Same thing as too many points in one paragraph,” Juanita says.

“No, no no,” Eduardo says. “What’s she saying is something different, that you just, you jump....”

“Yah you jump,” Juanita confirms. “There you go. That’s when you go back-and-forth from subject to subject.”

“Don’t change your argument, right,” Ghazi says.

“Yah, yah, that’s pretty good man,” Eduardo says.

“Yah, that’s a good word. That’s different,” Juanita says.

“Different word right,” Ghazi says.

Juanita reads Ghazi’s writing, “Don’t change your argument in the middle of a paragraph.”

“But, we say it, already there,” Eduardo says and points.

“Yah I know we said it,” Ghazi says.

“Where did we do that,” Juanita asks.

“When we said that, that...” Eduardo says.

“Aha, no no no, wait, no, ‘don’t jump back and forth from subject to subject (reading), but that’s what Hemingway did,” Juanita says.

“You’re not a Hemingway fan,” Ghazi says, reading her tone as negative.

“No, I mean he did it and it [worked],” Juanita says.

“But it’s not a story,” Eduardo says.

Ghazi, understanding what Eduardo meant, reads out the jump line again and adds, “In an essay, you can’t in an essay.”

There are stumbles and misdirections here, as when they suggest that you only need to use the personal “I” when you are using examples. There is also a great deal of abstraction; the students produce blanket statements that go unchallenged, as when Juanita states that too much detail can lead to boredom. Again we see the creation of a list to follow that seemingly offers help to the writer, but the amount of detail to use in a particular essay is a decision related to a particular situation or paragraph within a writing situation. As an overall rule, it offers no help.

But ultimately, the students reach some interesting and viable points, as when Eduardo suggests a difference between the genres of writing Hemingway is doing, and the task they have to do a school essay. Instead of a closing conversation where the students are trying to get to definitive rules, this discussion sounds like a first attempt to seriously grapple with the decisions writers make as they work their craft. If more conversations like this one were held, especially as the students analyze specific texts, there is a sense that they would be able to come to some solid craft readings, not to then develop hard-and-fast rules, but to realize the choices that are open to them, even in a narrowly defined writing task like the WAT.

Testing and Pedagogy

Amy expressed to me in interviews, and wrote in her journal about how belittling she thought the WAT exam was, and how bored she would be if she had to write one herself. In the class sessions where the students do their practice exams, she claims she will write the test as well, but she never does, and instead, writes about the test itself or what is going on in class. During one practice exam, she writes “Damn am I glad I don’t have to write this stupid essay.” She then goes on to talk about the class schedule and other subjects, never returning to the test topic. In another case she declares how inane she thinks the question is—a question she created. During another practice WAT she writes:

I do think if I don’t write them why should they. BUT I JUST CAN’T BRING MYSELF TO WASTE MY TIME WRITING ABOUT A TOPIC THAT DOESN’T INTEREST ME. ACTUALLY IT BORES THE SHIT OUT OF ME. AND TO TOP THAT OFF THE QUESTIONS ARE BADLY WRITTEN (Caps in original).

In an interview, I ask Amy what she thinks is wrong with the test itself. She says that 50 minutes is not enough time and chastises the questions again. Pointing at the steaming cup on her desk, she jokes: “Why not ask, herbal tea, agree or disagree?” Amy also thinks that the test is unfairly connected to the students’ enrollment status. She states in an interview:

It is just not enough of a way to judge whether someone should be in college. I mean that’s ridiculous. It’s ridiculous to have someone [an entering student] come here and pay for classes and then kick them out afterward. I think it’s

unethical quite frankly. Why are you making them pay to decide whether or not they should be in your college.

Though she does not fully recognize it, Amy's anger at the intrusion of the exam into her course influences how she teaches. In class discussions both her motivation and her patience seem in short supply. Her usually energetic tone is muted and her willingness to wait for student replies is limited. In this class segment, Eduardo speaks up and questions the purpose of breaking into groups to discuss a good WAT.

"In what way is gonna help us" Eduardo calls out.

"What do you think," Amy asks. "How would it help you to know what should be in the WAT test?"

"Yah but, how, how do we know we're... if we are doing, I mean we saying the right things," Eduardo asks.

"We'll talk about it after," Amy says.

"Oh, ok," Eduardo says meekly.

"Any other questions," Amy adds, "OK, go ahead."

Later in the same class, while they are in groups, Amy cuts off Ghazi with a quick, "We'll talk about it later." Then she shrugs her shoulders and turns away.

In another, more dramatic sense, the sudden incorporation of the WAT preparation into the class curriculum influences Amy's pedagogy. Because she knows it is what the students' desire, and because she is dismissive of the kind of writing the test asks for, she plans a class around developing a list of rules to follow on the exam. Though she sets up the project as group work followed by a class discussion, as usual, from her point of view, the outcome for the class, what she wants said, is predetermined. For the first time all

semester, Amy has a set list of guidelines that she wants to make sure the students receive. In other words, the class content is predetermined, rather than exploratory and experiential. For, perhaps the first time all semester, Amy enters the classroom with a definitive agenda—a lecture on her mind.

When Amy calls them into class discussion to compile what they have developed, the students have plenty to say, but Amy takes over the discourse, and often speaks for minutes at a time.

“OK, so what should be in a WAT, what makes a good WAT,” Amy asks.

“We wrote down examples,” Ghazi calls out, wiggling side-to-side in his seat.

“OK give me one,” Amy says.

“Alright. Hmm,” Ghazi scans the notes he recorded for the group. “No first person point of view repeated in your exam, like you know like you say ‘my point of view’ like...” Ghazi says.

“OK well let’s talk about that,” Amy says and writes, “No first person” on the board.

“Except on examples,” Eduardo, who was in Ghazi’s group calls out.

“Because it’s already...except on examples when you’re describing experience,” Ghazi repeats.

“OK people agree with that,” Amy asks. “No first person?”

“Didn’t you tell us that,” Ben asks.

“Well I’m not saying that this is something you should do or shouldn’t do. I’m just asking,” Amy says. “No first person. A while ago, a couple of weeks ago when we did a WAT, I said, you don’t need to say, in my opinion because the essay is your opinion. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you can’t use first person. Um, an example, that’s a good time to use first person, when I was ten years old, this and this happens and this is why I believe that you shouldn’t carry guns. That’s a good way to use it. But when you say in my

opinion, you are not really telling your reader anything, you are just telling them that..., something they already know, that it's their opinion, so is that true that there's no first person?"

She lets only three seconds pass.

"Actually most of you do use first person especially when you are giving examples," She says. "And it works. I mean I think they make good essays and make it interesting. Um, there is a question do you use first person in the regular papers that you write?"

"Depend on the teacher," LaToya says.

"Right, it depends on the teacher. Depends on the person who is grading it. I don't mind first person, I think it's fine," Amy says. "A lot of people, a lot of English professors, a lot of people who look at papers in a lot of disciplines don't like first person. Um, but that, you can always ask and see if you can write in first person, for your papers. But for now, I am going to take this one off." She erases the board. "It's true but it's not true. In papers a lot of people don't like first person but it really depends. So how can we word this..."

Carver raises his hand.

"Yes," she says.

"So on the test do you think we should do it," Carver asks.

"I think it's fine to do it," Amy says. Her chalk hand drops to her side.

"Um. You've all been doing it. Until now, it's been working. I'm gonna write it down, you're all gonna take a look at your own and you tell me if it works. And if you are using first person does it work in your own writing?" She writes, "Use first person when necessary/when giving examples."

All of the items the students call out for the list are qualified and complicated by

Amy. This is partly because the students toss out the rhetoric of terms without really knowing what the terms encompass. Of course a piece of writing that determines your full-matriculation into college should have good punctuation and sentence structure. But what

exactly are the elements of good punctuation and sentence structure and are they the same regardless of the content and context of the piece of writing is where the time consuming work of defining this term comes.

For example, it is not clear what the students mean by “first person” and Amy’s brief explanation does not help to clarify it. “First person” is part of a larger category of point of view and is one of the more complex decisions a writer has to make, calling into consideration context, genre, audience and style. Even if an expert writer has a solid sense of all four of the issues involved in making this decision, it would probably come down to a situation-by-situation decision. In other words, the list is an attempt to make rules about writing where no rules apply.

What Amy presents to the students in this class goes against what she has preached about writing all semester: while she is somewhat narrow in the genre of writing she is looking for (literary essay), through her choice of a mixture of texts and her comments on the students’ papers as well as in conference and in class discussion, she has encouraged the students to explore alternative writing choices. But, perhaps because she dismisses the WAT exam as a simple rhetorical exercise she is seduced by the idea that a set of guidelines will solve the students’ problems on the exam. Chair and whip in hand, Amy wants to tame the testing lion in one class session, so she can return to the more interesting writing work.

As the students raise more issues to be added to the list (many of them grammar related, as described above) the class discussion devolves because of how difficult it is to reduce the complex act and art of writing to a set of guiding principles—even in a seemingly

simple rhetorical situation like the writing exam. Ultimately, as she complicates each item, she is pulling the security blanket away from the student writers. Suddenly, they have all these writerly choices to consider again—exactly what Amy has been trying to show them all semester, but not what she, or they, want to deal with on the exam.

In her journal, just before she makes the curricular changes to her class, Amy writes: “So again, I have the question. How much of a feeling of mastery and understanding should students have? And how much should they be left confused?” In my mind, her query is indicative of the difficulty of teaching to the WAT. The students actually have the mastery of this kind of writing—at least they can spew the guidelines verbatim. This maybe because they have had these things drilled into them over time. Amy understands that for her to attempt to deliver a set of principles to master about writing will not deliver the kind of versatile, contemplative writer that writing in school demands. Mastery means the memorization of a set of steps in this case. Confusion means tackling the difficulty of the writing process, of understanding the role of the writer in making choices that ultimately create or doom a piece of writing; solving the confusion for a particular piece of writing is the work of writing.

Near the end of this class, feeling that the whole process of making the list has gone nowhere, Amy tries to salvage the confusion by taking control of the dialogue. Unlike in any other class all semester, she hijacks the last 10 minutes of the class and lectures the students with her guidelines. Here is what she tells them.

“OK, anything to add to the list on the board,” Amy asks. “OK, because I have to add a couple. OK your thesis and topic, you want to choose a side, you want to say, I believe this, or I don’t; I agree or I disagree. You want to give more than just one reason. You say I believe the death penalty is wrong because it

is immoral. Well, you need to explain what makes it immoral. Or, let's see, or let's say you say I don't believe people should discipline their children because my father disciplined me and I didn't like it. Does that tell you enough?"

A chorus of emphatic "Nos."

"Well what could you add to that that could give you more information," Amy asks.

"It didn't make you stop," Lawrence says. In a formal small-group interview with me, he said that even at this late date in the semester, he still had no idea why he was in this class. He admitted that he still holds a grudge against the way the test was administered, claiming he was told that the test was for a scholarship. "I thought the test was so easy, I was done early," he said.

"OK, so he told you to stop," Amy says. "He punished you and yet you still did it."

"You could talk about did it effect you now," Lawrence asks, not sure of himself.

"OK, did it effect you now did it make you a better person," Amy says.

"Alright. Everybody's mentioned it...but examples, give examples to illustrate your point." She pauses, but no one speaks.

"Ummm I can tell you when I am reading your papers, what I look for, what I notice the most," Amy says. She is standing at the board, next to the short list of the advice items the discussion has raised about the exam.

"Ok, first thing I notice, do you have an opinion, do you have something important that you want to tell me. OK, it's the first paragraph of your paper, it's the first thing I see, that's the first thing I notice, so that's the thesis topic and choosing a side (pointing at the list on the board). Examples for me, and I am speaking for me, because there are a lot of people that grade these and read them, so I am coming from my perspective. Examples go a long way, if you can...., she pauses. "I believe this, I believe the death penalty is wrong," You need to be clear with examples. This is true... a friend of mine was working for the justice department in South Carolina and he's looking at, reviewing people's death penalty cases, people on death row, and he found that 25 percent of the people on death row were innocent, clearly innocent, and people just reading the transcripts of the court documents could have said that, so obviously mistakes were made. That kind of example goes a long way. Yah,

you're right, people shouldn't die, if they're innocent, and if 25 percent of the people are innocent and you are putting those people to death, is it fair that 75 percent--O h we make mistakes--no it's not fair. Umm. And it can go the opposite way. If you feel that it should be enforced, for me a good example, or evidence, goes a very long way. "So 'I believe in the death penalty because society is based in a code of conduct and if there is no punishment for breaking the code then no one will follow it.' Do you see what I mean?"

She scans the students from right to left. No one is taking notes, and there are no questions.

In this section of the class, Amy resorts to talking for long stretches about what she believes good choices would be, but she has trouble giving definitive answers and she acknowledges more than once that what would be considered good practice if she was the reader, may not be good practice for the WAT reader. Even though she reduces the list to just a few failsafe items, she complicates even those.

More importantly, the inviting, student-centered and collaborative feel of the class is gone. Because she moves to a pedagogy of transmission rather than dialogue, the student involvement and sense of knowledge building has been lost. The students see the test as a can't miss chance to move themselves from the failure column into the pass column on a single hour's work. The design and pedagogy of this class session plays into that allure and greatly undermines the planned and evolving trajectory of the course in the previous weeks.

In the end, the unknown desires of the readers force Amy into contradicting ideas that she has set forth earlier in the class. For example, though she stresses conflict and multiple points of view throughout the semester, here she encourages the students to choose one side of the binary argument and stick to it.

An instructor who had been given some guidance, or who was more experienced balancing her class between her curriculum and the outside-of-class evaluation would know how to negotiate this complex space, where the test and the course are requiring two related and yet quite different kinds of writing. Instead Amy is left with a fractured classroom, and little time left in the semester to recover.

Testing and Student Texts

It is impossible to say to what degree the focus on WAT writing has on the other course work at the end of Amy's class. By the time they take the test, only two formal papers are left to be done (the Allende rewrite and the final project), and due to the progressive nature of the course, they are revisions, not papers the students' start from scratch.

In reading through the final projects, there is a sense of disappointment. Many writers fail to produce the culminating piece of writing that Amy hopes for. For many of the students the last project is not their best work. There is no way to tell how much the exam and its accompanying pressure took the wind out of the sails of the students, and/or how much the formatted structure of the exam writing influenced the students, as they make choices for their more open ended final products.

However, there is no question that the looming institutionally-administered exam gives Amy's class the feeling of a double ending where the students are so focused on the outside-the-class exam that the inside-the-class work, so long in developing, now seems like

an afterthought. The students have been trained to think of exams as having the larger clout, and so once the testing gorilla is in the room, there is no way to ignore it. The workshop and community aspects of the course fade away as the students come to the realization that on the exam day, each will face the test alone—the battle of one writer versus the blank page will be renewed.

Similar to her classroom presence, Amy's demeanor changes regarding the students' writing, as she begins reading a practice WATs each week. In fact, she stops reading every word of their exams, and simply check marks the errors and gives some direct advice at the end of each. On Leanna's practice WAT she limits her end-comment to: "You've got some strong writing here. Good job. Two things. (1) Check your grammar and punctuation. (2) You answer the question. But I think you could support your answer with more explanation." On Leanna's coursework, a student she is especially interested in, Amy often writes full paragraphs and provides marginal questions and teasers. Perhaps knowing that they are impersonal, she does not even sign the WAT exam comments.

It is understandable that Amy is having trouble responding to the practice exams. Written in fifty minutes and without the idea generation, drafting and editing processes the students have been using in class, the content on the exams is often as dull as the questions Amy is forced to devise. In addition, with the increased time pressure, the number of errors in the students' writing increases, especially in terms of sentence structure and sentence boundaries.

The following paragraph from Lewis is from a practice WAT and can be compared to

the sample from the Hemingway paper provided earlier in the chapter. Here he is writing in response to a question about the overuse of credit cards.

There is also another reason why using your credit without having the funds to pay it back, is a bad idea. Being in debt from the overspending of credit cards and taking out unpayable loans would most likely give someone bad credit.

When one has a bad credit history, it could cause an individual to find it difficult to buy a house, a car, obtain more credit cards or even a job because the credit history would show how irresponsible that person is with finances.

This individual's future would definitely be affected in the long run.

As one of the more talented writers in the class, Lewis does what he can with the question. In comparison to his analysis of the nature theme in the Hemingway provided at the start of the chapter, however, Lewis' writing has been reduced to the literal and the hypothetical. The tone is distant and matter-of-fact, unlike his Hemingway paper; his use of "one" and "[t]his individual" is an attempt at distance and formality. There is no sense that Lewis enjoys what he is writing here. The reader learns nothing about credit cards and even less about the way Lewis' thinks.

Looking at a second practice WAT, in this case Begum's, it reveals a different problem that the acontextual exam causes. In struggling to find things to say in reply to the question, she leans on overstatements based on conjecture. Begum writes in response to a question on the death penalty.

The real criminals who are maybe gone to jail more than once, I think, never be a good person. They'll do the same thing again, because they know they'll come out from jail. If there was any law saying, any kind of crime you do like murder or rape, you'd be given death penalty, then maybe people would be afraid.

A lot of big criminals are also out because there is a bail system. People who are rich and who have enough money to pay the bail, could make come out big criminals. So maybe that shouldn't exist. Once a criminal (with proof) is in jail, then he should be penalized to death.

Though the essay has more energy than Lewis's the drop off in content is even more noticeable. Begum is writing an opinion here, but, unlike in her final project on Allende (see previous chapter), Begum has not come to the draft writing stage with any previously discussed and planned-out evidence to support her claims. Therefore, she is reduced to offering unjustified claims (repeat offenders will always repeat their crimes) and implausible declarations ("Once a criminal (with proof) is in jail, then he should be penalized to death."). Judging from her writing in class, Begum has shown that she knows how to support an argument with interesting and complex ideas and examples. But, the impromptu nature of the exam limits her ability to convince the reader. She is forced to write something out of thin air, in direct opposition to the strategies of idea development through writing and discussion that she learned in Amy's course.

Lewis and Begum's WAT exams also reveal something about how the impromptu nature of an essay test influences the errors writers make. Both are ESL students, but the influence of Lewis's Chinese-American language identity is minimal; he came to the course with a great deal of fluency in spoken and written English and had attended college previously. After a semester completing all the writing in Amy's class, Lewis's essays grew in complexity and his sentence structure improved as he needed it to make more complex ideas work. In addition, the number of errors in his writing decreased.

When Lewis drops down the register of his sentences and his ideas to meet the simpler demands of the exam, his sentence structure remains strong and his sentence level errors actually decrease. He is, in a sense writing below his ability in terms of content, and so his sentences do not have to do much. Therefore the WAT exam does not pose an error issue for him.

Begum is in a different situation, however. Her first language, Bengla, is still a strong presence in her spoken and written English. Her written English has plenty of errors, even in pieces she has worked on over time, with input from other readers. She worked just as hard as Lewis in class, but because she had more errors to work on in her writing, she is not as far along as Lewis in terms of writing error-free prose. In fact, as Amy's class asks for increasingly sophisticated papers, her errors, especially her syntax and verb structure errors increase. Her final project (reviewed in the previous chapter) shows an increased sophistication of analysis and argument, but still has plenty of errors.

For writers like Begum, timed exams pose a particular problem. Making a simple argument in English is not so easy for Begum. It takes her time to formulate ideas and then

support them. As the test-time runs out, she struggles with what to say, writes quickly and her error count rises. On the exam, her writing moves beyond the level of errors that cause the reader distraction (as in her final project) and instead results in errors that affect the meaning of her ideas. But the other problem is that she is forced to concentrate more on error and therefore produces less text, making her errors more striking.

In this way, like so many other aspects of writing, error in student work is a recursive issue. Writers do not simply reduce their errors and stay that way. Depending on the context and the content errors can rise or decrease. In addition, we see in Begum's work how content and form are interrelated. Because Lewis has more sophisticated content his errors do not increase when confronted with the simpler content requirements of the exam. But, since Begum has more difficulty coming up with content, especially in an impromptu environment, her errors increase as she tries to write a her argument on the go. She is trying to figure out what to say; therefore, she has trouble with how to say it.

Writing Environments

December 7 is the day of the WAT exam and it overlaps with Amy's class time. Not willing to lose a class day, Amy made the students promise to come to class after the test. She bribed them in a way by having a speaker come that day and by ordering pizza for them with money out of her own pocket.

The speaker, Nico is a friend of hers who she has mentioned in class several times, as a radical artist and street philosopher. Her husband Noah is also coming to hear Nico speak and to meet Amy's students. With the speaker, the pizza, and her husband, Amy has

marked this class as a kind of a celebration—giving the successful completion of the test credence as the true accomplishment of the course. But before the class, there is the WAT exam. Everyone took the exam except for two students. James was actually mis-registered in Amy's course. He had passed the exam but his test score had not been entered into the computer in time. By the time everyone realized this it was way past the add/drop date and so James finished the course but did not take the exam. Leanna also did not take the test. She decided not to take it because, she said, she was afraid of failing it and thought she would be more ready after English 110. Little does she know that English 110 has its own exit exam. Clearly, she had made the largest gains of any student in the class, from my vantage point. It was a sign of her still fragile academic ego that she did not take the test, even though both Amy and I had told her she was ready.

In the following narrative, I provide a full description of the exam and the first few minutes of class that feature the students' comments on the test they just took.

Classroom Narrative December 7

On a rainy December morning, Amy's students, along with many others, file into the science building to take the Writing Assessment Test (WAT). They flash ID's and make their way into a building many of them have never entered before, as science courses are not generally included in the first semester curriculum for those with the remedial designation. The sterile first floor hallway is a main thoroughfare and the students join the flow, though they are not sure where they are going. They ask each other, "Is this the right way" and "It says Room 002," while waving their pink letters from the testing office. There is a large

gathering outside the lecture hall where the test is offered, and they all seem to naturally flow into line. Some join the line at the end; others scan it for friends and classmates. Hugging the wall, two or three deep, it is a gaggle of students with plenty of pent-up worry. Their voices bounce off the walls so loudly that it's almost like you can see the words in the air. They quiz each other on what they know about the test: "How long should you write," one student asks. "How hard is it," another asks. "I'm not doing a rough," I hear another say. "I'm just going to write it straight."

As I walk the line, I nod to those in Amy's class who make eye contact, and a few greet me, something that rarely happens in class. Some of my own students are on the line and I stop to wish one of them luck. I feel awkward, not like their teacher, partly parental and partly like I am in a doctor's office waiting room running into someone from another context.

Amy's class is in two separate bunches, with a couple of strays here and there. Ghazi is holding court to one group, suggesting that they should all sit together. Saleem, predictable, stands in the group, but seems alone, looking down the hallway over Ghazi's head. The other group is clustered around Carver, who talks in anxious animation. I make my way to the front. A previous test session has ended and a few stragglers are still streaming out. The room is a standard science class lecture hall with an angle as steep as the upper deck in a hockey arena and furnishings that date to the mid-70s.

I go inside and watch as the students file in, proctors in each aisle check each I.D. and compare it to the pink letter from the testing office, then they funnel them into rows, starting

in front, putting an empty seat between each. The head proctor—I'm guessing, from his stance--stands at the base of the downward slope peering up with a hand to his forehead. He is wearing blue jeans and a red sweater with a blue collared shirt and a herringbone sports jacket. He has flowing, shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair parted in the middle. Once the hall is about three-quarters full, he quiets the students with his booming baritone-monotone, and then begins the directions.

“O.K. on the pink card... On the orange form...”

A female student enters and calls out: “There’s my nigger down there.” She waves. A student in the front row waves back. The female student tries to get by another proctor who is directing students to an aisle high above; the student reluctantly goes where she is pointed, her strut diminished to a head down shuffle.

The chief proctor continues his recitation, while other proctors try to keep up distributing the pink cards and orange forms, and another trails behind with a box of golf pencils. Others continue to check identification and direct the students into the uppermost rows.

“I know it’s very complicated,” the proctor says, sarcastically, drawing out the “very.” “So again...after sex” he laughs, (he meant after six) but no one else does. There is a constant muted beeping noise in the background. Some ancient science machine with a dying battery, I bet.

“Are you ready for the white essay booklet” the proctor calls out.

A Chorus of “Nos.”

The proctor folds his hands across his waist. He repeats for the third time: Last name, then skip a block, then first..." He pauses at the end, inhales deeply. The white test booklets go around and he gives directions for them as well.

"OK, it's time. The questions are coming around. Take one and pass them down toward me," he says. The canary yellow and flat pink question pages are faded and wrinkled, worn down from use. The rows have a long table-like desks that go from aisle to aisle. There are 12 rows, 11 or 12 students per row, 140 students total. (There is another smaller room of approximately 40 students taking the same test down the hall.)

"O.K. The instructions." He reads them out loud and then adds his own commentary. "Just pick one question and answer it. Don't spend too much time. Just answer the question. You need to write, at least 2 1/2 good pages, that's all. Make sure it's written well, in good English, that's what counts," he says. "You have to answer one of the questions that are being asked. Make sure you write in complete English, school writing." Then he reads out the questions. The room is quiet for the first time.

"And one more thing, if anyone's pager or beeper goes off, they will be castrated and maybe shot later," he says. "Any questions?"

"Can we have any scrap paper," a student calls out.

"No. Next question," the proctor says with a sarcastic laugh, before adding. "Just use this," he points at the inside cover of booklet, maybe page one and then copy it over on pages two and three."

"Remember you are all here for the duration of the test. Use the time. Just keep

going over it and over it. Correct every mistake. Take a nap. Pray...do something. OK, Whether you are ready or not, fifty minutes. Starting now.”

I take a seat in the very last row, which is empty except for another person I assume to be a professor. He has a pile of blue books in front of him and he follows the line of his red pen across each line.

A student calls a proctor over and asks about the question on school uniforms.¹¹ The first statement of the question says that “school uniforms may improve student behavior in high schools.” The student asks if the statement is true, or is it an opinion. The proctor says, “What do you think.” The student says, “Well I think it’s an opinion, but I am not sure. Is that what we need to argue about?” The proctor says, “Do what you think is best. Maybe you should choose the other question if you are not sure about this one.” The student looks back down at the test page.

The testing supervisor for CCNY, whom I know stops to say hello on his way in. He tells me that he is worried about the smell in the room. “They just put new rugs down,” he says in an Indian accent. They used a chemical glue. Smells like that chemical smell. Do you smell?” I tell him I hadn’t noticed it. He nods and makes his way down the clunky steps. All the proctors leave, except for the testing supervisor; he paces from side-to-side at the front of the hall.

I can see Ghazi. He scratches a few notes on the inside cover of the book: maybe three lines. He’s left handed, and does not have to worry about writing on a right-handed desk at least. He begins to write, beginning the essay from the first line of the booklet.

I can see Roberto, barely. He is sitting all alone at a desk in the right front corner of the room in his wheelchair, right next to a huge periodic table chart on wheels. There are boxy TVs hanging from the ceiling; one is imbedded in the wall to the right of the blackboard. Another should be on the left, but it is missing, a gaping hole reveals a large pipe. A square black clock with a round face the size of a tea saucer with a red button on top of a table keeps time. There is no way anyone beyond the front few rows can read this clock.

I look through each row, trying to find Leanna, hoping that maybe she has changed her mind and come to the exam. She is not here. The student in front of me is erasing the front inside cover page furiously. The student at the end of a row, three down from me, is staring into the distance--waiting for lightning to strike, perhaps. Three minutes later, he is still staring.

Lewis is directly in front of me, wearing a blue plaid shirt, a scruffy beard is coming in white, which looks odd on his boyish face. He plays with his hair and stares ahead as well.

The student who asked about the scrap paper raises her hand. The testing coordinator talks to her. He writes something on a pad that he pulls from his pocket. She gets up and leaves. The humming noise from the fluorescent lights seems to have gotten louder, almost like the whirl of a bug zapper. A student in front of me stares at the inside cover of his booklet where he has one tiny paragraph written. It's like he is waiting for it to move or something. The air is dead, and I am sleepy. I can rest; my career is not on the line.

The other instructor in my row continues grading blue books. Maybe 40 years old, he is wearing a brown vest over a blue dress shirt. His glasses are perched in the center of his

nose. He nods to me when our eyes meet—some sort of teacher solidarity, I think. Later, he shows the testing coordinator a student paper. He underlines something without making a mark. They both laugh.

In the row in front of me, a female student stretches her legs into the aisle, while she holds the question page a few inches from her face, as if it will yield some more ideas. She's written one page, skipping lines so far. Twenty minutes have passed.

I focus on a student in the middle of the hall wearing a fabulous multi-colored dress with a large weightlifter's belt around the middle. Her dark as night black hair is twisted in a tangle and stands up like frozen seaweed. She has three red computer disks, three pencils (plus one in her hand), all sharp, a pencil sharpener, an ID face down and a crumpled tissue splayed out beside her. Her head is on the desk, tilted toward her booklet, and she writes as if she is trying to judge the height of her letters off the page.

I can see Saleem's fluorescent-green baseball hat. He is sitting up straight and writing continuously but without any panic. I'm thinking of Amy. She said she'd be surprised if he didn't pass. I don't think he has a chance. While the pieces he hands in from home are often very philosophically intriguing, they are often abstract and not filled out enough for the reader to understand. I've never seen him produce anything viable during in class writing. Amy told me that they had discussed his practice WATs in her office. He had written a very creative response to the credit card question where he assumed the voice of a credit card advertisement, hawking cards to the unwitting consumer. In another practice exam he wrote a flat standard WAT essay that Amy described as boring but might pass. She

advised him to avoid using the creative approach on the exam.

A voice out of the silence, the original proctor has returned through a door on the left down near the front of the room. “Fifteen minutes left,” he booms.

How many tests have they taken in their lives, I wonder. Any bigger ones than this?

I look at Lewis to my left. He is now writing furiously, as if his life depended on it. The final charge. Suddenly he stops and sits back. He does a full crack of his knuckles, like a card player before the deal. The student in the colored dress has three lines on the third page—skipping lines. Some students have folded over their booklets. They stare ahead.

Saleem has just made it onto the third page. Ghazi uses white out: he paints over two or three lines of text, then holds the page up and alternately blows on it and waves it in the air.

The sound of pages turning fills the air. They are going over it and over it. Though there are maybe five minutes left, no one has announced anything. A student fakes a sneeze. A few others laugh.

Minutes later the proctor calls out, “OK, nearing the end. Contemplate that final, final, final sentence....finish it up. Just a couple minutes.” No one so much as looks up.

Exactly three minutes later, he says, “O.K. that’s it. Above your ID#, write your signatures. Pens down folks.” Some are still writing. The proctors comedown the row, give them another warning and then coax the pen onto the desk.

“O.K. Now comes the hard part. You’re still writing. Please stop writing. People want to leave. How can we do this in an easy civilized way. We’ll start in the back now.

OK the last row. You can go. Next. Next. Next.”

I watch the students file out, and then catch up to Ghazi and Leanna and a few others in the hallway. They see me, but no one says anything. Feeling like a stalker, I drop back and take an alternate route to the classroom. When I arrive no one is there, except for James, who had been exempted from the test, Amy, her husband Noah and Nico, the guest speaker. Amy introduces me to Nico. Everyone else arrives at once, talking loudly. The atmosphere is festive, almost rollicking. They are all here, and this surprises me.

“Get some food and drink,” Amy says. They choose a seat and crowd around the teacher desk in a feeding frenzy. Individuals emerge from the fracas carrying pizza and cups filled with soda.

With only Carver and Ben still at the desk, Amy asks “So how did it go.”

LaToya responds, referencing the proctor, “The guy said, it’s not what you write, it’s how you write. There’s only one guy in the whole world that be givin’ you the absolute truth. It’s grammar. You have to write correct sentences to pass.” I am not entirely sure that she means to offend Amy personally, but her tone is abrasive. Amy doesn’t flinch or show any sign that she takes this comment personally. “I can’t believe... he would say...who was he,” she asks. Tim, you were there, what did he say, do you know who he was?”

I am caught off guard by Amy’s direct question, and I almost physically recoil as all eyes land on me. It is one of only a handful of times that Amy has “called on me” in class. I decide to just report what I heard, but I also decide to downplay it, so as to not directly contradict LaToya.

“Well, I’m not sure...He never mentioned grammar that explicitly,” I say.

“He said it’s not what you say it’s how you say it,” LaToya says.

“So what’s your interpretation of that,” I ask. (Later as I listen to the tape of this exchange, I think of how classic this move is, to deflect the question back onto the student.)

“He said all you have to do is write it the right way. Capital letters, periods, subject-verb, as long as you do that...,” LaToya says.

“Well, that’s not quite right,” I point out. “He did say to go over your paper a lot, but he didn’t say that that’s all that matters.” None of this is feeling good. I feel like I am sabotaging their experience on the exam, when I did not have to take it. Yes I was there, but I did not have to fill the white essay booklet. I wish that another student would say what they heard. Since everyone is still looking at me, I add, “He was not saying anything that isn’t in the directions.” Though, I know this is not true.

“It’s not in the directions; he was ad-libbing,” LaToya says. “Telling us what to do. Writin’ correct, he said.”

“But that’s not what he said,” I say plaintively.

“What did other people think he said,” Amy asks. But no one is willing to enter the fray.

“Why don’t we move on,” Carver says.

Surprisingly, Amy repeats this idea, “Yes, we have to get to Nico,” she says. “We’ll talk more about it in the last class.”

Amy introduces Nico, who rises from his chair as she speaks. He has a scruffy beard

and pony tail. His well worn clothes fit his billing as a radical, a torn t-shirt and military style fatigues, though not the camouflage kind. He begins with a question: “Ever been to Chicago?” The students munch on their pizza and look on, as Nico paces and talks. We are all hoping to be entertained right now.

* * *

The writing space of Amy’s class differs dramatically from the writing space of the test. The silent, rule-bound, impersonal, one-time product centered atmosphere of the test, sticks out next to the close, collaborative, developmental, process-oriented mood of the Basic Writing course. The atmosphere of the test-taking venue reinforces the feeling that these are unqualified students participating in a pressure-filled mass activity where they have to prove themselves in order to be invited back into college. The students are utterly alone with their pens and white booklets composing in a set time frame for a reader none of them knows. Their struggle is so obvious: as I watch them, the writers inch their high stakes essays along word-by-word, white-out at the ready, spending more time “going over it” then writing it. This is in such stark contrast to how they write during class time in Amy’s course. There the stakes are low, their words—spoken and written—are delivered to an audience they know well and who responds thoroughly. Amy describes this in her journal early in the semester how the students seem to write effortlessly at times: “It seems that (for some) when the subject interests them, they write without hesitation, amazing really.” But the test takes this energy and freedom away, and replaces it with the plodding acts of writers trying to follow a formula without making mistakes.

The proctor enhances the bureaucratic, even militaristic, atmosphere by belittling the students as they fill out the paperwork and making jokes about how easy the exam is. The advice he gives to the students reduces the rhetorical act of writing for the exam to its barest components: length and good proofreading. “You need to write just 2 1/2 good pages,” he advises. And, “go over it and over it,” he adds. The students are reduced to having directions read aloud to them and being told where to sit and when to leave.

In this solitary single-shot affair, all of the elements of process writing, collaboration and support from Amy’s classroom have been removed. There are no discussions, or slow accumulation of ideas over time and certainly no commentary on what ideas have been written. Even the practice exams Amy’s students take offer more writing process supports as the students know Amy will be reading them, and they receive her comments and discuss the exams in class when they are returned (to a limited degree). The class and the test were two entirely different environments for knowledge creation.

Thus, despite Amy’s concessions to test preparation in the second half of the course (the practice exams, grammar review and full class discussion of the test) Amy’s class leaves the students mostly unprepared for the task of the test. If anything, they have been working on a writing process that conflicts with the core steps of the test. Even in terms of content the test and the class diverge: the students have been writing about literature and the test features a current, issue-oriented topics. Certainly the aggravation Amy shows for the days where the test is the subject and the disdain she shows for the test itself compromises the test preparation in the course. Yet, they accept the test-taking writing environment without

flinching. They simply take the test, as they have been trained to do, and they complete the process of the test as they have been told to do: by writing structured topic-sentence based essays with plenty of attention to sentence-by-sentence construction in the time allotted. Everyone finishes and all of them receive a score of six or eight, right on the pass/fail line.

Though this rankles me, and bothers Amy as well, there is little sense that the students are perturbed by their experience, or in anyway perceive this as unfair. The writing task and writing environment of the test is normal to them, I suppose; it is Amy's class that is odd. Other than LaToya's comments about the proctor's advice, none of the students mention to me, in either formal or informal interviews, that what happened in the class during the semester contradicts the environment and goals of the test. Even when I ask them explicitly, they seem unfazed by my comparison. "It's a test," Eduardo tells me. "They all that way."

For the students, the one-day clout of the test actually subconsciously or consciously trumps the fifteen weeks of Amy's course. Solving the test puzzle will not only clear the registration blocks, but also stamp them as approved and successful college level writers—in with everyone else. The benefit of doing well in Amy's class is not nearly as tangible for the students as the test score. And what they gain from Amy's course is only the start of a process that they may not even be aware of yet. Amy writes in her journal in late November, "I wonder if they learned this semester. I wonder if they feel they learned. Do they feel empowered to write?" Contrasting that abstract statement as a course goal with the finality and clarity of a single number grade for the exam pulls into contrast the cross-messages the

two writing environments create. Amy wants her students to feel the power of the writing life. The test wants to quantify a certain skill set.

In a final, full class interview, just after the last class, I ask them about how their feelings about writing. Again no one compares the two distinct writing tasks they had to do over the last weeks of the course: prepare for and take a timed-exam on a topic out of the blue and compose a formal project about a course theme after having completed exploratory writing and mini-writing projects, group and class discussion and what amounted to a first draft of the project. Though they said they enjoyed writing in the class, and felt that it did help them, they were not so sure the processes they had worked on were going to be of much benefit. “Maybe in English class, or for certain professors,” LaToya said. “But most of school writing isn’t like that.”

Contradictory Evaluations

Throughout the semester Amy is aware of her role as a gatekeeper for the university, as someone whose course grade can restrict the movement of students. On October 1, she writes about the awkwardness of her position: “And what about accepting students into school only to kick them out a semester after.” On October 8, she reports, happily, that the students have stopped asking for grades on returned work. When the semester moves on, and some students are not making progress, she is increasingly aware of how her grade could influence their lives. On November 1, she writes: “I must check my options. Where can students go after this class? Can they receive more help, additional classes that won’t penalize but will give more writing practice?” Perhaps instigated by conversations with me, she has written and spoken often about how she thinks the new policy on remediation is

wrong. One day she asks me what would have happened to her students if they had come to CCNY just a semester later. I tell her that they would have to go to a community college, most likely BMCC, first and pass the writing test there. “I can’t picture Saleem there,” she says. “He would be swallowed up.”

The bind that introducing the exam forces Amy into, stands in contradiction to how she feels about the students and the class at the end of the course. In her teaching journal, on December 20, after the class is over, she writes, “All in all, it’s been a good semester. I learned a huge amount about teaching. About student/human potential and how it cannot truly be measured.”

As it turns out, Amy’s evaluation options are fairly limited, and because her class still falls under the old system of Basic Writing policy, and the fact that she has mostly first-time freshmen, failing her course has a comparatively minimal impact on the students’ lives. For Basic Writing II, the students can earn three possible outcomes: Pass the course and move onto Freshmen Composition and the core curriculum; Fail and retake the Basic Writing II course (if they have not already taken it once); or be recommended by Amy for English 2.5, a between semesters workshop offered by the Office of Freshmen Year programs. So a student who fails has paid tuition for a course that he/she will have to take over and he/she will remain very limited in their access to other courses at the college. None of the students will receive a final strike from Amy.

But even with this reduced influence, Amy becomes increasingly obsessed with her role as evaluator as the semester ends. Up until now, she has not given grades on papers,

following a philosophy that worked for her in her favorite writing class. Having no grades on the papers forces the students to pay more attention to her commentary on their work, she believes.

In contradictory fashion however, she decides to not only assign the students' pass/fail grades for the course, but individual letter grades, even though they will not count for anything. "They need to know where they are at," she says. Interestingly, I do the same in my Basic Writing courses. When I ask what she will base her grades on, she offers: "Overall grade on overall improvement and overall understanding of writing and learning techniques for writing a paper." Improvement and proficiency become two main criteria but these constructs have not been defined in her mind or for the students. Then as she moves on to discuss individual students a third criteria comes into play.

In discussing James and Lawrence, Amy describes how James is the superior writer, even from the start of the class. But Lawrence attended all the sessions and tried a lot harder than James. Yet, she reports, "his writing quality is still pretty bad." But both writers will pass. "I gave James a 'B+' and Lawrence a 'B-,'" she says. I suggest that James received his grade for proficiency and Lawrence mostly for his effort. Amy concurs with this analysis.

As she is deciding on grades, Amy declares other writers to be in James' category, meaning they will receive a high grade for proficiency: Pierre, Rosa, Ben, LaToya, Saleem, Ghazi and Shafiqul. But a writer like Carver poses a challenge for Amy to evaluate. In her journal she writes that while he wrote one of only a handful of "B" grade papers at the start of the semester, his work has tailed off, and he has

mostly just “fucked off” at the end. By the effort scale she uses to raise Lawrence’s proficiency grade, Carver should probably fail. But as with James’, proficiency trumps effort and Carver receives a “B-.”

For my own part I can see the progress of certain students clearly. Leanna, Ghazi, Saleem and Rosa have all entered a new phase in their writing life. Leanna is using writing to explore her connection to the world, especially as a female and a single mother. Ghazi is increasingly aware of the complexity of ideas, and how he needs to interact with these conflicting ideas. Saleem now understands that there is an audience and that if he works harder to reach his audience they may respond to his ideas as Amy did. Already talented thinkers when they arrived, Rosa and Lewis improve as writers and become confident in delivering their ideas. But for other students, I haven’t seen much change. Roberto, Charity and Carver seem to have regressed in the amount they write and in their willingness to explore ideas. Lawrence is, as Amy describes, still clinging to the literal, and seemingly not capable of responding to anything complex.

In the end, Amy passes sixteen out of the nineteen students who finish the course. She tells Tsegu that he needs to enroll in an ESL program and gives Eduardo permission to attend the 2.5 intersession workshop, putting his grade in suspension until he completes that course. And she fails Charity and Abeni. The pass rate on the exam is not as high, as only seven students out of the 18 who took the test see the “P” when they go to the testing office to look for the last four digits of their social security number on the results list outside the testing office (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Outcomes

Student Name	Course Grade	Exam Grade
Ruslan	W	--
Pierre	B+	P
Tsegu	F	F
Shafiqul	B	F
Rosa	A	P
Lewis	B+	P
Carver	B-	P
Juanita	B	F
Ghazi	B+	P
Geeta	B-	F
Eduardo	***	F
LaToya	B-	P
Homer	W	--
Abeni	F	F
James	B+	*
Saleem	B+	F
Begum	B	F
Lawrence	B-	F
Ben	B+	P
Leanna	B+	**
Dionnys	C	F
Charity	F	F

W=Withdrew from the class, and therefore, not allowed to take the exam.

*=Did not have to take the exam.

**=Chose not to take the exam.

***=Given permission by Amy to take intensive intersession course to receive a passing grade.

¹ Amy is also not paid for these conference hours.

² Here is a to do list from Amy's journal indicative of where she spends her time.

1. Choose which student paper to discuss [for the next class].
2. Write out sentence by sentence guidelines (Go through WAT checklist again)
3. Choose Rumi poem at the end of class.
4. Write out Hughes Assignment
5. Note for Each student
6. [Prepare for] Conferences
7. Read rest of papers.

Though the list is long, the last entry is the one that takes up most of her time (5 hours) vs (4.5 hours for the rest).

³ During the 25 years since open admissions, each of the CUNY junior and senior colleges devised their own Basic Writing programs and their own matriculation rules regarding the writing, reading and math exams. The evolution of the relationship between the WAT and the basic Writing courses and the limitations on registration is a history that has not been written. As described in Chapter 2, changes in the requirements for students who had not passed the exam occurred frequently; in 1998, for example, students who had matriculated into the core curriculum by passing Basic Writing II, had to take a WAT workshop offered by the Office of Freshman Year Programs before they were allowed to take the test again.

⁴ Students who have not passed a remedial exam as they approach the 60-credit limit are required to take a non-credit workshops offered by the Office of Freshmen Year programs. You have to take a workshop in order to be eligible to retake the test. This class is often added into a student's regular course load in mid-semester.

⁵ I was able to find no evidence of the former, and other distancing behavior by the English Department in relation to all matters involving writing leads me to believe the latter.

⁶ Bachelor's programs throughout CUNY admit approximately 14,000 students per year.

⁷ Some would critique Amy's course for focusing on the skills and writing styles of literary analysis.

⁸ See later in the chapter for an explanation of who the guest is.

⁹ I had encountered to varying degrees at other CUNY colleges. At the College of Staten Island, all the adjuncts had strong suspicions that adjuncts were rehired based on passing score rates. This was partially confirmed for me, when I received a comment on the top of one of my test grade sheets that said: “Great pass rate!” I felt the sudden urge to post the page on my office door. At City College, the Composition Program had a long progressive history dating to Mina Shaughnessy and Maralyn Sternglass, and so I had always believed that the English Department failed to keep track of the testing outcomes because it intended the Basic Writing course to be more than a test preparation class. But I was never able to substantiate this belief in the archives of the department meeting minutes or in any faculty interview. Regardless of how it was created, I was fairly certain however, that this separation policy was currently in place because of a mixture of apathy and infighting that prevented any agreement on what influence the test should have on the course.

¹⁰ For a full description and rationale of the methodology of this chapter, see Chapter 1.

¹¹ This was not the actual question. To have access to the testing area, I promised to maintain certain test security protocols, one of which was to not write about the specific test questions, or talk about the test questions with the students afterward.

“[T]he trouble with the observation-based theory building in which we are engaged is that the resistant, obstreperous voice of the observed world always wants to have the last say, to still resist the theory builder’s urge to coherence and closure.”

Linda Flower

The Construction of Negotiated Meaning

“[P]atterns of conflict created by...agendas in the metaphoric carnival...”

Susan Miller

Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition

CHAPTER 6

Talking Up From The Classroom:

How Lived Experience Can Inform the Theories and Policies of Basic Writing

It is very tempting to try to deliver closure here. After looking so closely at a single remedial writing classroom from multiple perspectives, the researcher and the reader want to be able to draw--to be satisfied by--sweeping and unwavering conclusions. But as Linda Flower writes at the end of her exhaustive study, *A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing*, “the truth is not a unified story” (292). And, if the previous three chapters indicate anything, it is that the Basic Writing classroom is not a cohesive, easily defined space.

Therefore there are some necessary qualifications to this final chapter. I do not intend to work the discussion into a particularly cohesive argument about the way basic writers become literate and/or about the viability and purpose of Basic Writing. This chapter is simply a freeze-frame, a stopping of time and action so we can see what is here more clearly, reflect on it more completely, and open up a space for further contemplation.

In this fourth “showing” of the classroom, I select particular issues--tension points--that offer the possibility and promise of nuanced elaboration. The points I choose are those that remain the most prominent to me as I look back over the data; they are the issues that most deeply affect what happened in the course—the most dominant patterns I see in the thicket. I then place these individual points within a larger framework of Basic Writing at a public college and, in an admittedly cursory way, connect them to the discipline-specific discussion of Basic Writing and/or to the larger public discourse of literacy and the role of the public college.¹

Of course, any attempt to schematize the classroom, to separate out particular issues of focus from a complex, fluid and dynamic reality and then to present them as isolated static elements is largely a false methodology that denies the reality of classroom life, where nothing is singular or static. In addition, many of the issues presented here overlap each other, making it impossible to discuss one focal point without leaning on another. However, looking closely at individual components seems like the only useful way to have the classroom reality interact with theories of teaching and language development and the politics of Basic Writing. I isolate issues to better understand how these pressure spots control the whole of the classroom and by extension, can be seen to influence other reading and writing classrooms and their role in higher education. Tension points can be used as a way to “talk up” from the classroom, to make sure that the vivid details of lived classroom experience remain a crucial presence when Basic Writing is discussed, theorized and politicized, to make sure the reality of the classroom plays a role in the future of Basic Writing.

A ROOKIE TEACHER

Amy was a first-time college teacher, who was given a Basic Writing II course two months before the start of the fall semester, though she only had a BA degree and had never taught a college-level course before. Her appointment was a case of institutional need meeting student need: for entering MA students at City College, teaching is offered as a form of financial aid, since the public college does not have much funding for other kinds of aid; and, as is the case in most English Departments, writing courses are considered the least desirable assignments by full time faculty, and Basic Writing the least desired of even those, and so there are open classes to fill.

In late August, with only a few sample course syllabi from the department to reference, Amy designed her first full writing course using her own experience as a guide. She was an excellent student, who understands her own learning and writing processes well. She remembered her freshmen-level writing course at Barnard as being a breakthrough moment in her development as a writer, and so incorporated a classroom pedagogy of open conversation and informal writing. Early in the semester, I asked Amy why she had designed the class the way she did. She leaned back in her chair, and said:

I am kind of following one of my college professors, my favorite class from college.

I am doing the same things, setting it up that way. We sat in a circle. We read things, discussed them, wrote about them, just our reactions. There was a lot of time to talk, discuss. I learned so much in that class because you could just express yourself, say what you thought about. That's what I am trying to do, I guess. You know, I remember that class so well.

Amy loved her time at Barnard, and she mentioned this class and the professor who taught it often in our conversations. When she spoke of it, there would be a physical response: her eyes would open, her head would tilt upward and she would lean back in her chair as her body relaxed with the rush of nostalgia.

Amy presents a writing process to the students that works well in her own work: to generate text in all sorts of ways, and from that unwieldy mess, locate a theme or strand to construct a piece of writing around. In fact, as a master's student in fiction at CCNY, Amy brought to the classroom what was currently helping her as a writer and a thinker in her courses. She liked the workshop model of her fiction writing courses, and spoke fondly of classes and instructors who let the students do most of the talking. Amy's course design and the environment she wanted to set up replicated what she knew had helped her as a writer and a learner.

The influence of her own schooling went beyond her role in the classroom. In an interview near the end of the semester, Amy described how she came to the realization that she expected the students to act like she did in college: attend classes, hand in assignments, and be active and involved.

By copying the pedagogy of her professor, and developing a pedagogy and curriculum that relied on the ways she used writing, she was playing into a powerful motivation for much of what happens in writing classrooms: as veteran students, instructors only naturally tend to imitate what they remember from their own classrooms, often formulating a pedagogy that replicates the type of classroom they liked the best, or the one they believe taught them the most, especially when no mentoring or faculty development has offered a space for contemplating alternatives.²

The compositionist Gordon Harvey points out, that teachers often incorporate strategies from their own schooling, not because they liked them, or found them useful, but because they can't conceive of another way. Though there has been a revolution in the kinds of texts we ask students to read, Harvey says, "college teachers seem to assign the kinds of papers—compare and contrast, summarize and respond and so on—that they were assigned by their own teachers, who in turn assigned what their teachers did" (3). Certainly, it is not uncommon to hear instructors declare that their students should have to undergo the same rigorous assignments and readings that they had to withstand—sink or swim as the expression goes. But for Amy, the replication of the pedagogy she remembered from Barnard was not an attempt at "standardized drudgery" or "excessive" busy work, but an attempt to create an intellectual community where students are given the time and space to express themselves freely, and to trust that what they had to say was important, meaningful, and the start of something (Harvey, 3).³

Without college-level, front of the classroom experience, Amy tried various pedagogical and curricular moves over the course of the semester, as she learned how to teach college writing while on the job. She was well read across a variety of genres, and so chose an eclectic group of readings that she thought exemplified good writing, and that she herself enjoyed reading. They ranged from a text she read in her own freshmen-level writing class (*Siddhartha*) to a text she had recently read and was moved by (*The Stories of Eva Luna*). She designed writing assignments based on her area of expertise as an English major who had written her share of literary analysis essays. And she set up a progression of assignments that utilized her own ideas about the writing process, where ideas are generated and refined over time through a series of informal writing sessions. She planned classes by a

feeling of what should come next; alternated full-class discussion and group work; and designed assignments to provoke the writers into writing more, if not writing particular kinds of things. Amy assigned different ways to approach informal writing, showing the students the different methods a writer can use to develop different kinds of writing, explicating a poem one week, doing a focused freewrite technique the next. She knew from intuition and experience that the way to write well was to write plenty, and the students certainly were assigned plenty of opportunities to generate text. In short, since she was not provided any guidance, Amy designed a course that would help her if she was the student in her classroom; she aimed to teach the practices that worked best in her own writing life.

Amy also had two intangible features that helped her design and carry out the course. She was an excellent listener and reader, who had the patience and personality to establish personal, vital and useful relationships with her students. Secondly, she was willing to put in an incredible amount of time responding to the student work, both on their papers and in conference. In many ways, when Amy's class succeeds it is because she is a careful, honest and engaged responder to the students' work. She made it apparent to the students early and often that she would read and respond to everything they wrote (Chapter 4).

In our weekly interviews, Amy and I did not talk often about her successes, however. Amy was fully aware that many things in the class were not going as well as she would have liked. She often amazed me with her reflective practice, reviewing with me individual moments in particular classes, or writing about a particular student response in her journal. Certainly her participation in this project increased her analysis, but there is no doubt that Amy would have been writing about these students and talking about her teaching to anyone who would listen. The research project gave her a more formal and productive way to do this

(see the Researcher Reflection section at the end of the chapter). Though the institution does not offer her any opportunity to reflect on and develop her teaching, Amy worked on it herself—constantly.

Thus Amy brought to the room certain talents as a teacher and she played to those strengths in a thoughtful way to reach the students and guide the majority of them to a stronger place in their writing lives. Without knowing that there was a theoretical basis to this kind of teaching and this kind of writing pedagogy, Amy had designed a writing classroom steeped in expressive writing theory. She enacted what Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, James Moffet, Ken Macrorie and other expressivist thinkers have preached: the first thing to do in a writing class is establish a place for exploration of ideas and a love of writing, to validate and encourage the expressive self in each writer. Amy wanted writing that was sincere, that expressed something meaningful to the writer, and she wanted the students to learn from the writing they did—the purpose of the course, she would say, was to have the students learn about themselves.

Amy's overriding sense that writers work best when they look internally to find their own voice was not the only strain of composition theory that we can see in her teaching, however. When we look at Amy's course through the lenses of Lester Faigley's three theories of writing process, elements of all three theories come clearly interview. While, as described above, Amy's belief in the expressive nature of composing (described by Faigley as writing with spontaneity in search of originality and personal integrity) might be dominant, his other two classifications, the cognitive and social writing processes are also clearly evident.

The social, audience-driven nature of Amy's pedagogy and curriculum is evident in

her attempt to establish a student-centered classroom, where student voices are valued and responded to. In responding thoughtfully and thoroughly to student work almost exclusively concerning their content, Amy reinforces the idea that the students are members of a discourse community—that writing takes place in a space where audience matters.

Going farther than Faigley's description, we can also classify parts of Amy's course as enacting a critical pedagogy, one that attempts to confront the power relations in the status quo of society (Freire, Shor, *Empowering...*). She sets the tone of the interpretive space by having the students read and write about three primary texts from the 1960s American protest movement (B.A.M.N.): a feminist satire of beauty pageants, an account of the Chicago Democratic convention protests in 1968, and commentary on the goal of an American Indian tribe's plan to take over Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay to establish a cultural and educational center. Subsequently, she uses another text for the Allende text to critique the role of women in society. She attempts to overturn the safe space of the writing classroom by raising issues of cultural conflict (Graf). Amy is therefore not setting up a classroom with safe walls outside of cultural conflict, as David Bartholomae accuses Peter Elbow's expressivist notions of doing—falsely in my view (Bartholomae, "Writing with Teachers..."). Amy wants her students to write not just for the sake of writing or not just for personal growth, but also for its potential influence on the reader. Her class is a collaborative one, not just in the sense of writers having an audience for their words, but also in the sense of minds influencing other minds.

Elbow himself makes the connection between expressive and social theories when he writes, "The goal is for the writer to come as close as possible to being able to see and experience his own words *through*" the readers' minds (*Writing Without Teachers*, 77, his

emphasis). Through the power of experiencing the influence of your words on an audience, the social writing teacher believes, the writer will obtain the motivation to write more often and will consequently develop the nuance and dexterity of language to produce the reading that he/she wants. The expressive notion is contained in what Brenda Ueland suggests to all writers, “So remember these two things: you are talented and you are original. Be sure of that. I say this because self-trust is one of the very most important things in writing...” (Ueland, 236). The second half of her statement contains the essence of the social writing teacher: that we are motivated to write better by the lived-experience of our readers; the writer writes because the writer wants to have influence, to make a connection, to share expression, to participate in a community.

Finally, there were also strong elements of cognitivism in Amy’s classroom. She was fully aware of writing as a series of practices undertaken by writers as they move from thought to completed task. As defined by Faigley, cognitive writing teachers emphasize the role of thinking and awareness in the way writers learn to write. She encouraged writers to think reflectively about process, to understand the moves they were making. In asking the students to write about how they viewed themselves as writers, and in encouraging them to use the process steps of writing, Amy provided some of the essential elements of a cognitive teacher of writing process. She wants each student to come to “his or her own working theories of writing” (Flower, 297).

Amy did not see the writing process as linear, moving from idea to draft to polished final version. As in her own writing process, she encouraged the students to use informal writing throughout their projects, to constantly re-explore the points they were making, to see what new paths emerged.

In front of the class and in conference, Amy attempted to persuade the students that they could evolve their ideas by writing blindly even after a piece of writing was well underway. It was not surprising then, that she explicitly taught the steps of freewriting, brainstorming, close reading, and writing more than one side of an issue as ways to generate or expand ideas. She always asked questions when she commented on student work (both on informal writing and on final pieces) as a way to provoke the students to return to their ideas.

All of these methods were designed to get the students to think about writing as a process rather than as a way to produce a static text. She wanted them to use writing recursively, as a way to evolve texts, rather than as a way to simply record what they had already decided. So each project had at least two informal writing assignments before the draft, and there was also the writing done in class.

Amy's pedagogical stance and curricular decisions were obviously not conditioned by a conscious, preset theory of how to teach writing. But her unknowing use of expressive, social and cognitive practices led to a class that worked because she was reaching out to the students in a variety of ways. Like Linda Flower argues in *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*, Amy teaches a writing course where, "the transformation of an individual and a social system are both possible" (293). While Flower's text is concerned with negotiating the space between cognitive and social strains of the teaching of writing, I am suggesting that all three visions of how writers come to meaning were adapted into Amy's writing course. Though without formal training in the teaching of writing, I think the writers in Amy's class worked well because of the varied pedagogy and curriculum she offered across the three theories of writing instruction that Faigley wrongly presents as in conflict.

EXPRESSIVISM AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

If we accept for the moment the simplistic definition that the main goal of any expressivist writing teacher is to help students to gain, and enhance their own writing voices, then it is certainly clear that Amy's pedagogy accomplished that. I would also suggest that if we accept the admittedly reductive goal of critical pedagogy as helping the writer to see that the voice we speak in is constructed by the environment in which the speaking takes place (that our voice is socially constructed), then it seems clear that Amy's class also fulfilled the major objective of the social epistemic writing teacher. In the politics of Letters, Richard Ohmann writes:

Writing. The word whispers of creativity and freedom; yet there is usage, there are assignments and deadlines, there is the model of the Theme, there are grades. We tell students to find their own voices, yet most feel subtly and not-so-subtly pressed to submerge their identities in academic styles and purposes that are not their own (252).

By limiting the intrinsic voices of our students, we limit their desire to speak, we squash their naïve energy, we do not allow them to believe that what they have to say, and how they want to say it is meaningful and worthwhile. We cut them off before they feel the joy of creation; and in its stead, we place rules and regulations, so they can grow into us.

Peter Elbow says in his introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*: "For of course it's not uncommon for people to develop a voice that is strong or lively or distinctive or authoritative, but which feels somehow alien--and to feel like using it means remaining without power or authority" (xliv).

As Sondra Perl hints at with retrospective and projective restructuring, developing a

voice, a writing voice, a strong writing voice, seems to depend on looking inward and outward at the same time. It involves feeling empowered: to have the right to say what you want to say, how you want to say it. In fact how can you see the world, be critical of the world without locating your place in it? Looking inward gives the writer a sense of agency; it provides the writer with a reason for the telling. You have to see the possibilities of your own voice--its capabilities, and its effect--before you can become an agent for anything, including an agent for yourself and others.

Writers that have strong voice are writing in their own voices; to write in someone else's is to be without power. Without expressivism, social epistemic rhetoric is an empty shell lacking a heart or soul because the writer has not located him or herself in the world. However, without social epistemic goals, expressivism ends up leading students down a singular road where the "cash language" and the status quo looms as too big an animal to rise up against. Elbow tells us that the goal is to gain "more flexibility of voice--more voices that feel like me." With more voices we gain more ways to say. With more ways to say, we are able to say more, to reach more readers, to grow a more common feeling, which makes us feel more empowered.

These students came to the class without knowing the language that every writer needs to find his/her voice. It is my contention that the time spent in the first half of the class where the students were given time and encouragement to develop their intrinsic voices both verbally in the classroom, and in writing on their small assignments, was crucial to their further development in the second half of the course, where they began to write fully developed essays in which they often showed a deeper understanding of the readings, and also were able to relate ideas to each other in the course. It was apparent in the second half of

the class, that the confidence they gained early on, led them to an active role in their own learning improvement. Their internal voices, once secured, led to external agency on their own behalf. "The pursuit of full humanity," Freire writes, "...cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed" (Freire, 66). Amy's course design, pedagogy and curriculum and her personal attention to each student as a person and as a writer, humanized the classroom in a way that allowed the writers to grow in confidence.

Amy seemed to instinctively understand what Stephen Brookfield has written in *Developing Critical Thinkers*, that personal relationships are in and of themselves a way to develop critical thinking (211). In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose describes a similar path to open dialogue through the close reading of stories. "A friend of mind recently suggested that education is one culture embracing another. It's interesting to think of the very different ways that metaphor plays out. Education can be a desperate, smothering embrace, an embrace that denies the needs of the other. But education can also be an encouraging, communal embrace—at its best an invitation, an opening" (225). Amy knew that to establish a classroom environment where what the students had to say would be respected, required her to establish a strong relationship to them as a thorough listener and attentive reader, regardless of what they had to say or write. "Writing is a transaction with yourself," Peter Elbow declares in *Writing Without Teachers*, before concluding, "...but writing is also a transaction with other people" (76). The core of Amy's teaching practice, and the perhaps unconscious core of her politics, was to make the "lonely and frustrating" writing process of her students more interactive (Elbow, 76). Perhaps for the first time in their lives, these student writers had found a reader—an audience—that took what they said seriously, focused

on it intensely, and critiqued it thoroughly. Amy relished this transaction between writer and reader. Though only teaching one course, she was constantly in her office. She often talked with me at length about what individual students had written. Her pedagogy was not born of political forces, but it had the effect of empowering her students. The best of them came to believe that reading and writing in the academy was a mutual exchange among equal partners, and for this they kept coming. Even those who did not have this level of situational analysis still found Amy's class as a refuge from their largely impersonal, commuter college experience.

In Amy's case, overcoming resistance took all semester, and then was only successful for some students. Amy encouraged students to take risks with the written and spoken word through her classroom demeanor (patient and open); her assignment structure (low stakes writing over the course of the semester leading to more formal, graded essays); her comments on students' papers (asking questions, giving compliments, suggesting ways to grow the work); and her grading system (credit for work done, and more credit for work done with care, thoughtfulness and energy). By devoting endless hours responding to their written work, and by forgoing a packed syllabus and a frenzied classroom pace, she wanted students to develop the comfort level and confidence necessary for sharing written and spoken words in a foreign academic setting. Amy perceived her class as an invitation to the students to join the conversation. In an interview where I asked Amy about whether she felt any resistance to her pedagogy and curriculum from the students, she responded by describing the difference between students like Eduardo and Carver. Carver, she said, had resisted all attempts to change his writing process. And while, he was a decent writer at the start of the class, his unwillingness to try out new processes, to believe in anything that she was presenting, meant

that he would not advance as a writer, she thought. And he hadn't. If anything his writing quality had diminished in complexity over the course of the semester. His process writing devolved into emptiness that he sometimes tried to cover by being funny. For example, he handed in a piece on Siddhartha where he concluded that the only mistake that Siddhartha had made was to give up wearing clothes and bathing because this made him "stinky." His work certainly decreased in effort, as he put less-and-less time into the course, and fell asleep more and more often in class. His Langston Hughes final paper barely reached onto the second typed page and makes the claim that "These poems would describe a negative or positive aspect of someone life...." And his final assignment, a mere page-and-a-half, he used Hemingway and Allende to conclude, "Men always seem to be the dominant party in a relationship. We are always in control. That's not fair, but it's reality."

On the other hand, according to Amy, a student like Eduardo "totally caught on." Like Carver, Eduardo resisted the freewriting and process assignments at first. They went against his beliefs that good writers simply wrote well the first time, as he described to me in an interview. But, about a month into the semester Eduardo gave himself over to Amy's ideas and watched as his pieces grew in length and sophistication (His final project is discussed at the end of this chapter). "He still has a lot of ESL issues," Amy said. "But his ideas have gotten so more interesting and complex. It's like he opened a door to something."

INSTITUTIONAL ABANDONMENT

Despite her natural talents and her engaged, reflective practice, Amy would be the first to admit that her rookie status in the classroom hindered her success in many ways.

- Since every class plan was new, and she was working from minimal previous

experience with the classroom methods she was using, each day was an experiment that could go awry at any moment. And, though she had excellent instincts, saving and salvaging a class that was not working is one of the more complex tasks a teacher has to do.

- She had tremendous difficulty evolving class discussions into more than question posing dialogue (Chapter 3). These conversations are crucial to her course, as to do her assignments well, the students need to further their understanding of the texts. She doesn't know how to move a dialogue along without relying on traditional teacher rhetoric of using questions, often-binary close-ended questions (see Classroom Discourse section below).
- Her choices of disparate, often full-length texts do not leave room for enough discussion of the craft of writing in general and the students' writing in particular.
- She had difficulty assigning writing, often failing to make explicit to the students what she was looking for, perhaps because she assumed they knew and understood the rhetoric of the traditional, humanities-based close reading form of the academic essay.
- When faced with the students' increased questions about the writing exam, she panicked and overturned the entire progression of the class—at a crucial stage—in order to squeeze in test preparation materials.

In retrospect, Amy could not have done much differently regarding these points, since there was so little institutional support for her work. She was a rookie teacher put in the impossible situation of teaching an institutionally driven writing course to an extremely

diverse set of students who had been grouped with a faulty placement instrument.

The lack of institutional support ranged from the practical (she has no office keys for the first three weeks of the semester and is given no guidelines about how to order books) to a lack of any formal mentoring or faculty development. She was not given a profile of the students, or told what to expect in terms of their needs. Her one meeting with the composition director was cut short because he had to do an observation of another classroom. She was observed for one class-hour by a full-time faculty member as part of a union contract obligation that limited the scope of the input and time commitment the faculty member could offer. Though the faculty member discussed the observation report with Amy, there is no subsequent or additional follow up. Her class, and her teaching life were largely unconnected to the English department, the full time faculty and the larger college and university life.

Here is a brief example of how Amy's strengths and weaknesses as a writing teacher operate within this atmosphere of abandonment. Early in the semester, she uses her understanding of how the English language works to identify particular students from the course who are limited because of their ESL backgrounds. She, rightly, believes that these students will make limited strides in her class because of their limited fluency. She, at first looks outside the classroom for institutional supports. Rather than go through the composition director she has only met once, when she was hired, she calls the ESL department on her own, eventually speaking to a full-time faculty member there who offers no specific help and little guidance for what to do in the classroom. She also contacts the ESL writing lab before discovering that it has been closed. Simultaneous to this institutional research, Amy encourages these writers to come to her office hours for additional help each week. One student in particular takes her up on this offer. She spends an hour outside of

class each week with Tsegu, much of that time devoted to error correction. But her knowledge of how to help ESL writers is limited, and her patience notwithstanding, he fails to make much progress and eventually stops coming.

In this example we see a talented, if novice, teacher recognizing a limitation to her teaching and attempting to solve it. However, she is thwarted by a lack of institutional support.

As described in Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals*, and in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, composition holds a low-status position within the academy, and is seen as a merely practical, skills-based set of courses with no intellectual rigor. Although largely unaware of the debates in composition about the status of the discipline, Amy acts out what Miller's claims are the consequences of the discipline's low status. She alternatively plays the role of the self-sacrificing servant, devoting endless hours of time to this group of 22 students, and alternatively establishes herself as a rebel instructor, using Shakespeare in her course, for example, even though a full time colleague suggests that the Basic Writing students will be unable to handle it. Amy, a gifted and talented novice teacher, working within an institutional system of benign neglect is, like the students, a victim of the political circumstances that have existed for years prior to when she takes the job.

CLASSROOM CULTURE AND STUDENT SILENCE

In a report based on a pilot program that mainstreamed remedial students into a two-semester composition sequence at City College in the early 1990s, researchers Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason suggest that CCNY students have a linguistic talent you cannot dismiss. "...City College students bring with them many linguistic strengths, e.g., speaking and often

reading and writing two or more languages, a heightened awareness of standard English as a second dialect, and proficiency in code-switching [moving between languages appropriate to the context]” (ii). The poet and writing teacher Adrienne Rich who taught at City College in the early 1970s also remarks on the students’ linguistic talents. “Many of our students wrote in the vernacular with force and wit; ...(and sometimes conned us with) dazzling raps in the classroom” (52).

Remedial students, like all students, bring distinct linguistic expertise to the classroom. Because they often come from diverse language backgrounds and a multilingual city of immigrants, City College students are often especially talented code switchers in many oral and written languages and dialects, able to manipulate vocabulary, change register, tone, style and syntax to meet their pragmatic needs on a daily basis.

Before you enter the room, or just after the class is over, the students talk freely and easily to each other. It is so clear from talking to them before and after class, and in the hallways and cafeteria that these students have loud, creative voices. During the semester in Amy’s classroom, there was certainly plenty of evidence of the students’ linguistic talents. Amy and I laughed about Ghazi’s jokester classroom presence; we were impressed and entertained by Saleem’s philosophical voice-filled musings; we were amazed at the “freetalking” the quiet student Charity would do in a one-on-one conference; impressed with the expanded critical eye Lewis brought to his Hemingway essay; and provoked by Leanna’s voicing of her new-found feminist understanding. Yet, these moments where linguistic ability fully revealed itself were infrequent, and limited to so few students. More often, we wondered why the students went so silent once they crossed the threshold into the barren orange classroom; we wondered why a students’ paper seemed so uninterested; we asked each other, “Why is it so quiet in here?”

The class conversation showed painful moments where no one would speak, even in response to the most open-ended of questions. The students seem to have come to believe that their freedom of creative expression is not appropriate, and so they silenced themselves and waited for direction, waited on Amy or on the students who have mastered the formal spoken English they perceive to be the right register for the classroom. Those who speak well are the students who speak the most in class, James and Lewis. The one exception is LaToya, her Black English Vernacular dialect clearly stands out against these other students.

Often, when they did speak, the students offered the simplest of commentaries (see Chapter 3). For most of the classes, they were unable to hold a sustained, evolving conversation; they simply waited for Amy to ask another question. Similarly, the students were also often silent in their writing. At the start of the class, their reaction papers were often a paragraph or less. In their more formal work, almost universally, they offered simple reporting in a flat tone; they summarized plots and paraphrased the explicit to perfection, but were unable to write with vigor about their response to a text, let alone connect a text to their experience, a world concern or another text. Their voices were often muted, a reader able to tell one paper from another only by its particular grammatical errors or format choices.

By the end of the course, some of the writers had begun to write with more energy and interest and with more risk in terms of the ideas they wanted to write about. But even in the final papers (see Chapter 4), students were holding on dearly to the tried and true: standard essay forms; particular style moves like rephrasing the question as part of the introduction; one word transitions (“secondly”); statements of obvious ideas from the readings; an avoidance of the personal; and a tendency to conclude in banal or overly dramatized ways. Class conversations did improve as the semester went along, but even at the end of the course, the students waited for

teacher direction, and never formed the true class circle, spontaneous conversation that Amy had envisioned.

Though she made an attempt to provide the safe environment where students could bring all of their linguistic skills to bare, and though the class offered some scaffolding for the attainment of the skills necessary to fully participate in the spoken and written discourse (collaboration, open discussion, steps in the writing process, no high stakes writing) the majority of the students resisted, partially or completely, full engagement with the discourse of the classroom. What accounts for this reticence? What were the barriers to their full participation in what we so casually term academic literacy?

There was very little outright rebellion in Amy's classroom. The students' attendance, completion of the overwhelming majority of the work, and interest level in topics that moved them (i.e. Isabel Allende), demonstrate that they were not lazy or apathetic. They wanted to be in class, came to conferences, read the assigned readings. This was not a course of malcontents or students who rebelled against their placement in the course. Though Amy talked about the rude behavior of Carver and LaToya, their inconsiderate classroom behavior held little influence over the class as a whole, never developing into the mode of sabotage or undermining rebellion as described in Ira Shor's *When Students have Power*.

As described in Chapter 2, Basic Writing classrooms at CCNY and elsewhere are places where one culture, language, identity chafes against another. Courses in remedial writing at public universities are one of the ultimate rhetorical borderland sites, as described by Gloria Anzaldua, or the ultimate "contact zone," as described by Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt defines contact zones as, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power relations" (34). The linguistic, cultural and social

complexity of Basic Writing classrooms has been established in numerous studies (Chiseri-Strater; Sternglass, *Time...*) As LuMing Mao describes in “Rhetorical Borderlands: Chinese American Rhetoric in the Making” such rhetorical borderlands “are vague and undetermined, not only because they are in transition, in movement, but also because there is always, for each discreet communicative act, an excess of meaning yet to be processed, yet to be fully grasped” (431).

Amy’s classroom was filled with moments like these where Amy would be looking for what she felt was straightforward analysis of a particular reading, but the students would falter, able to deliver only a fraction of what would constitute a full discussion of an idea about a text. Though there were plenty of examples of students, who, over time, were able to come to significant, fully grasped, analysis, on a daily basis the classroom felt like a site that was drowning in non-sequitor, unfinished thoughts and silence.

The social, cultural and linguistic gap between the discourses the students bring to the classroom, and the discourse they are required plays a crucial role in their silence. Tom Fox describes, “[S]tudents are sincerely uncertain, frequently guessing and mis-guessing what the academic game will be like” (“Basic Writing As...” 42). Such “mis-guessing” requires tremendous student risk, since they are used to existing in classrooms that seek right answers, and in this particular case, where classrooms seek a pre-established, “right” discourse.

In her article, Ming goes on to describes how in rhetorical borderlands, speakers from the non-established language and rhetorical tradition are in the position of creating an emergent discourse in relation to an already established discourse (426).

Ming suggests, “Once Academic Discourse is understood as ‘overlapping and conflicting’ dominance is less total. The requirement to join it requires the students to give up much less; total

deracination isn't necessary," (Mao, 431). But for the students to come to this realization, that their dialects, voices, insights and understandings will be valued in the classroom, takes a long time. This is especially true when the first step of such a recognition process by the students would require a dismissal of previous practice. As David Bartholomae describes in his seminal article "Inventing the University" because students believe (rightfully?) that they are entering a discourse world where they need to sound like experts—immediately—they choose content and voices that they believe are authoritative and academic. Their construction of these voices leads to the flat writing and the lack of participation due to intimidation described above. In other words, the students cannot even reach the "mis-guessing" stage until they are willing to make guesses using whatever linguistic skills they can bring to bare.

Simplifying the writing classroom into a classroom only concerned with learning skills based language dehumanizes the students by separating their language from their identity. Rich made the distinction between teaching writing and teaching writing students this way: "We were dealing not simply with dialect and syntax but with the imagery of lives, the anger and flare of urban youth... How does one teach order, coherence, the structure of ideas while respecting the student's experience of his or her thinking and perceiving?" (56).

Just as any classroom is filled with students, each with a distinct human identity, so too, each student has his/her own identity as revealed through and by language. Identity does not exist without language and vice versa; they inform and export each other. When you cross from one language to another, you are changing the way you see the world, and the way the world sees you (Rose, Gilyard, Villanueva). As Mary Soliday and Min-Zhan Lu have noted separately, for students who come to the university from such disparate worlds, "crossing" the borderland from one set of languages (the home discourse) to another distinct, and for many students significantly

unfamiliar language/dialect (academic discourse) continuously presents the students with tremendously difficult and complex identity questions. David Bartholomae states:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing and selecting and evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community (“Inventing...” 207).

The purpose of Basic Writing is often described as an initiation or acculturation model.

Indeed, the positioning of the Basic Writing classroom within the political structure of full admission to the college, establishes the course as a place where a disparate group of outsiders come to be wholly initiated into the academic community. But such a description wholly underestimates the diversity in culture and language among the students, a diversity that was radically seen in Amy’s classroom each day.

The Basic Writing classroom is not simply a matter of converting multiple perspectives into one dominant discourse, and it is not about the intertwining of one dominant discourse with another discourse. At City College, the fifteen weeks of the course was a complex space where multiple discourses intertwined with each other continuously, at the start of the course as well as at the end. The many miscommunications and silences were partly in response to this interactivity between languages and cultures. According to Ming, in a rhetorical borderland, a distinct discourse does not remain distinct, but quickly becomes intertwined “with other ethnic rhetorics and its voices may very well find resonance and

empathy in the chambers of other people's hearts" (429). What she doesn't describe is how long this takes, how it occurs on multiple planes in a classroom as diverse as Amy's and how maddeningly difficult it is for a teacher to wait for the resonance to take hold.

AN INVITATION TO LITERACY

The composition scholar Andrea Lunsford has described how she felt *invited* to join the profession of Composition through three serendipitous encounters: the reading of P.J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, and two conversations with composition veterans Lynn Quitman Troyka and Mina Shaughnessy. She concludes: "That I remember these two incidents (the meetings with Shaughnessy and Troika) so vividly is, of course, a mark of their importance in the story of my life in the profession. But they signify for me more than part of the *rites de passage* I underwent in joining a particular disciplinary community." Lunsford writes poignantly of the insecure space of the outsider who is looking in, but is unsure of how or whether to enter. Though an accomplished writer, Lunsford feels a great deal of trepidation as she begins her entry into a new level of discourse, among an unfamiliar community. She stresses the incredible importance of the invitation to join the conversation.

I think of how open and welcoming they were, of how carefully they listened to my tentative voice, my only partially articulated questions. I think also of their passionate engagement with writing as a subject of theoretical and practical inquiry and their equally passionate engagement with learners. A discipline with these values at its center was one I very much wanted to join-- or to help create (5).

In Lunsford's case, the invitation was personal, one-on-one and extended over time. Troika and Shaughnessy, through their attention and seriousness, reinforced Lunsford's desire to enter the community.

Similar to the open door Shaughnessy and Troika provided for Lunsford, Amy went out of her way to invite her students into a conversation where she made it clear she would listen to and respect their voices. It seems clear that Amy did create what Linda Flower calls an “apprenticeship” classroom, which she describes as “a supportive, motivating climate” or a collaborative social contest designed to motivate students and nurture writing” (293).

From their attendance and participation during class, it was obvious that the students wanted to be there and their conversations were sometimes inspired and energetic. Whether they were providing a mild critique Isabelle Allende’s feminist notions or giving shallow interpretations of the poetry of Langston Hughes, and even when they were grappling with scenes from Shakespeare, the students were rarely out of it or griping about the work. They made plenty of outrageous comments, and some truly inaccurate statements, but Amy never criticized or ridiculed. Her invitation to speak and write was without reservation, an important aspect of knowing and learning that John Dewey emphasizes in “Democracy and Education.”

In the thinking by which a conclusion is actually reached, observations are made that turn out to be aside from the point; false clues are followed; fruitless suggestions are entertained; superfluous moves are made. Just because you do not know the solution to your problem you have to grope toward it and grope in the

dark, or at least in the obscure light... (245).

That is in fact the best metaphor I can think of to describe Amy's classes. Presented with the open ended direction of the class, the students did spend a great deal of time groping in the dark, bumping into furniture, attempting to light even a single candle as guidance.

Amy's classes were filled with the messy non-sequiturs, hesitant speech and dulled-out discourse of students struggling to formulate academic-sounding sentences about ideas and issues they were contemplating for the first time, in front of an audience that would take what they had to say seriously and without ridicule. With her classroom practice, Amy seemed to be following through on her belief that these students were not limited by their intelligence or ideas, but were blocked by a lack of English language experience.

For example, Vladislav's immense struggle to find the English words to describe the distinction between author and character in the Isabel Allende's stories was deemed a success by Amy because he was struggling with the process of making sense. He may have constructed such complex literary critiques in his native Russian before, but this was undoubtedly his first attempt in a college-level American classroom, and he couldn't be expected to get it right the first time. When Charity was given two minutes of class time to construct an ultimately failed sentence about the ghost apparition in Hamlet, this was a crucial step in her development, according to Amy. She was given the room to struggle to make sense of ideas that were only half formulated, and completely unformed in Academic English.

It was Amy's blind hope that there was something to be gained in the process of that struggle. Amy provided the same sort of patience and listening ear that Lunsford claims was

crucial in her own tenuous entry into a new academic, language community.

Amy's decision to turn the class over to the students' hesitant and confused voices is supported by composition scholars Bartholomae and Petrosky who suggest that focusing the class wholeheartedly on the students has the appearance of a free for all, but to do otherwise, is to limit the students' potential. In *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*, they state, "...to those who would say that the problem with a course that turns meaning over to students is that 'anything goes,' we would answer that the problem with ones that don't is that nothing happens--or nothing that seems to us to be intellectually or educationally interesting" (14). Based on their attendance, their alertness in class, and the daily writing assignments they were handing in, the students in Amy's class were stimulated by her willingness to let them have the floor most of the time. They were becoming active participants in the classroom as opposed to the passive recipients of information that they described themselves as in other courses. This is a crucial step, according to Bartholomae and Petrosky, who suggest that giving meanings to students through lectures or leading questions, "does not enable students to imagine a reader who makes meanings and who finds herself caught between individual responses and public responsibilities" (14). Like Bartholomae and Petrosky, Amy's course offered "reading as an activity" which "centers itself on a general inquiry into the possible relations between a reader and a text" (14). As the semester progressed with room for more and more students provided interpretations of smaller and smaller texts, the students were becoming close readers. What became increasingly apparent during the semester, however, was the incredible investment of time it takes for such a relationship and awareness of writer, reader and text to take place. As the students struggled to come out with even a single line of academic prose, I found myself squirming in the seat with a mixture of exasperation and

desperation. As Lunsford's comments above highlight, the intimidation a writer/speaker can feel while entering an established community, and the personal connection that may be needed to overcome fears is great. To enter a language community, especially inside a classroom, is not only a linguistic and academic feat, but equally, a personal and emotional challenge connected to personal worth and identity (Cazden). The inherently personal act of speaking and writing is heightened in the college classroom at a public university where the invitation to join the community is issued in public, as students are asked to voice their "college-level" ideas in front of their peers.

In her attempt to decenter the classroom, Amy gave the students the chance to take control—even dominate—what happened in the classroom, but they had trouble figuring out what to do with that invitation to power. However, because they had so consistent an audience for their spoken and written words their motivation never waned. As the semester progressed, they worked harder in their attempts to say meaningful things. Merely speaking or writing to indicate that they read some portion of the book was not enough. In class and in their written assignments, they went beyond the surface as they struggled to connect class discussions of the text to their own lives, or to relate one classroom text to another, or to connect a text to a larger academic or public issue.

CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

During the first two months of the semester, I often left Amy's classroom frustrated and wondering whether anything had really happened at all. From their responses in class, it was obvious that most students had read the material on most days because they had copies of the text, sometimes with marginal notes and they easily volunteered plot summaries and

casual statements of like and dislike. However, though the students participated, during most of the classes I felt like we never reached any depth. I can see the critics who claim the standards are low at City College claiming that these basic conversations and freewriting sessions were just another example of City College “compromising its own commitments to excellence” (Traub viii). Certainly, anyone sitting in on this class during the first few weeks would have asked: are these college level conversations?

In an average one-hour class, six-to-ten students would speak, most of the others appeared to listen, but no one took notes. Cumulatively, Amy spoke perhaps 120 words during a typical discussion, and many of those words merely repeated-back what students had said or else provided a supporting comment with light praise, and a request for more. Once the discussion ground to a halt however, Amy resorted to direct questioning, often offering a binary question. (“Were the female characters weak or strong?”) Often, once the discussion was over, everyone had to write, but this writing was not collected or even read out loud. Is it good enough to just have Shakespeare wandering around the room like a flirt at a cocktail party, and then to have the students freewriting about it? Of course we don’t know if the long-dead bard even entered their freewrites at all, since, following the model of its creator, Peter Elbow, the freewrites were not shared; the writer was free to roam wherever his or her brain traveled. So it was hard to know what had transpired inside student heads during these classes. What did they understand from these conversations? Did they know that the Miss America essay was a parody? Did they see the metaphor and understand the subtlety of Shakespeare's language? Did they comprehend Langston Hughes' use of the tempo and sound of jazz music in his poems? Could they make thematic connections between poems?

At one point during a particularly excruciating stretch of silence, I wrote in my notes: "I can feel myself tightening up. The same way I feel if I am teaching. It is a month into the semester, but I still feel uncomfortable being inside a classroom where I am not in charge. She is still waiting for an answer. Would I have acted by now and jumped in?" In writing this comment I was simultaneously questioning Amy's use of long silence, and critiquing my own tendency to keep the class moving. What was happening during those silences? Was the silence wasted time, or a space for needed contemplation? Would a more experienced teacher have directed the conversation more, and with what result? Is continuous conversation the goal? Is a fluid classroom a successful classroom?

Amy made a conscious effort to overturn traditional teacher-student dialogue, the "question-response-evaluation" repetition that Shirley Brice Heath describes in her evaluation of teacher-student conversation and the one-way discourse, "teacher-talk," that Ira Shor describes in *When Students have Power*." Reaching a similar conclusion, Courtney B. Cazden, author of *Classroom Discourse* describes the familiar pattern of most classroom conversation: "three-part sequence of teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation (IRE) is the most common pattern of classroom discourse at all grade levels." Cazden reports that almost always, the teacher initiates the interaction by asking a question (29). Amy would begin discussions with questions, but they were open-ended questions such as: "Well, for the people who did get a chance to read them, what did you think?" Subsequently, she would do her best to have the students carry the conversation, without asking any additional questions. Though it was slow going, Amy tried to direct conversation, rather than simply asking questions and evaluating responses and asking more questions. When she did ask a question, Amy was willing to wait for an answer, and then wait again for another student to

follow up the answer. This proved crucial to the development of good conversations in the classroom. Researchers Brophy and Good have found that "increasing wait time leads to longer and higher-quality student responses and participation by a greater number of students" (377).

As we can tell from the slow pace of the transcript in Chapter 3, however, all of the classroom discussions labored and sometimes collapsed. Amy's attempt to subvert traditional IRE discourse floundered because the students seemed incapable of carrying the conversation on their own. Unwilling to contribute more than a line at a time to the discussion, despite Amy's requests for more: "What else?" Instead of going deeper at these moments, taking a risk and throwing something out there, they withdrew, looked down at their books, or stared blankly at Amy. Some statements they made seemed intriguing, even startling, yet after their initial launch, no other student would pick up the thread, and they would fall to the floor in the center of the circle like deflating balloons. Though they were given the opportunity to take control, the students did not know what to do with their authority. I felt like they were just not used to having their ideas taken seriously; they were not used to this non-traditional classroom where they had to direct the show. And so I wondered how much learning was going on? Didn't the students need additional direction?

In my own teaching, I often find a great deal of student resistance to non-traditional instructional approaches. I remember one particular moment where a student shouted out 'Just tell me what to do!' Amy's pedagogy was perhaps not radical enough to elicit such dramatic rebellion. However, one way to read the students' reticence, as described earlier, is that the students were unwilling to build on initial comments, is simply as a response to an uncertain classroom situation. Schooled in the right answer/wrong answer dialogue of

student teacher discourse, they were unable to carry a conversation beyond an initial foray. The students were so conditioned to the traditional teacher-directed discourse of classrooms, that when left to carry the conversation on their own--to create the "intellectually or educationally interesting conversation" as Bartholomae and Petrosky suggest--they did not know how to do it. An initial response that was not evaluated as a poor answer, was seen as the correct answer and so, "Wasn't that good enough?"

A second way to read the sputtering classroom discourse is that Amy did not have the expertise to facilitate the conversation. She was in a sense expecting them to rise to a complex level of discourse without giving them any guidance on how to do that (except for freewriting and other idea generation writing exercises). Because this type of classroom interaction was unfamiliar to them, they struggled with what to say next.

Amy expressed frustration in our interview sessions that these attempts at open discussion were so halting. What came natural to her, and to the students at Barnard that she remembered, was something that these students needed to learn how to do. Lev Vygotsky uses the term "scaffolding" to suggest that complex mental processes can be facilitated through supportive activities that enable learners to construct knowledge while feeling supported. Though Amy did not fall into the trap of asking the purely low-level knowledge questions so familiar to IRE discourse, she failed to provide activities that could engage more intermediate skills of comprehension and application, as well as the higher cognitive processes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Brophy and Good). As Sarah Hickman, a linguist at California State University has suggested, the IRE model which breaks down into a search for "the answer" does not encourage students to "volunteer new ideas, to connect relative experiences, to express critical viewpoints, or to take any risks which might lead to a

more comprehensive understanding of the concepts being taught.” But a non-IRE classroom like Amy’s where students were expected to not only participate in, but to create a new form of unstructured classroom discourse often proved too daunting a task for students who already had a lot to handle in terms of language and ways of knowing. In Amy’s case, the students needed smaller reading and writing activities that focused in on the text, before they were asked to focus on the more complex task of responding to the larger ideas that Amy wanted them to discuss.

A third way to read these troubled discussions would suggest that they succeeded, to a certain degree, despite the lack of scaffolding. Amy believed in them so strongly, and was willing to wait with them in silence so patiently that it is almost like the students (at least those who tried) willed their way to more complex thinking, because they had to do something. Because Amy allowed them the freedom to express ideas however slight, obvious or even misguided, they gained confidence, slowly, but astonishingly. Conjecture and outright guessing were privileged. In fact, one could say that in Amy’s course, silence was privileged. It was all right to spend the time getting it out. In listening to one tape of a thirty-five minute class discussion, the silence between student and teacher comments totaled eight full minutes. As Ira Shor suggests in *When Students Have Power*, too often classroom discussion does not give students the time to respond, and students are often made to feel that the goal of the discussion is to guess at what the instructor is thinking, and to present their ideas in an academic idiom. Clearly, by patiently awaiting replies, and by asking open ended, non-confrontational questions, Amy was allowing the students to practice their own “discursive authority” (78). The first steps, the training wheels of intellectual discourse can be a single obvious statement that is spoken out loud to the class and is not evaluated by the

instructor.

As the class moved past mid-semester, the students broke the silence earlier, and responded to each other more frequently. As Stephen Brookfield summarizes near the end of his text, *Developing Critical Thinkers*, "Critical thinking comprises two interrelated processes: identifying and challenging assumptions, and imagining and exploring alternatives" (229). Though fleeting, and all too infrequent, at least a few students would come up with relevant connections, or add a layer of meaning. The students were conscious of their ability to challenge the text, and even the teacher, and once they realized that the "right answer" was not forthcoming, they offered alternative, even contradictory readings. Such moments were indicative of the breakdown of the traditional IRE classroom. Although IRE classrooms help students become quite good at low cognitive level tasks of information recall, classroom discussions limited to IRE have little value for enabling students to think for themselves and to raise issues and concerns in response to the text, what we broadly call reading and thinking critically.

There is some evidence to indicate that Amy's strategy, however time consuming, was crucial to the later development of the students' essays (Chapter 4). Amy encouraged the habit of mind that James Moffet terms "inner speech," a crucial stage in the development of more complex written work.

Whatever eventuates as a piece of writing can begin only as some focusing on, narrowing of, tapping off of, and editing of that great ongoing inner panorama that William James dubbed the 'stream of consciousness.' What I will call here 'inner speech' is a version of that stream which has been verbally distilled and which hence can more directly serve as the well spring of writing (65).

In long painful silences, when Amy let a student's comment hang over the room like the last note of a blues song, the students would eventually offer up something, the early stages of an idea, that would then reappear, in expanded form in an essay.

It was evident then, throughout the class that the students needed the time to struggle. For many of them, this was the first time they had been consistently asked, and given this time to think for them selves, out loud, and to be responsible for their ideas.

IMPACT OF OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM EVALUATIONS

As described earlier, in the section titled Institutional Abandonment, the effectiveness of Basic Writing at City College is limited by the lack of certain institutional structures. But, perhaps the most important institutional impact on the Basic Writing course is a structure that does exist, the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT). A requirement to gain full matriculation, the test is administered to students after they are admitted. Though designed in the 1970s as a placement test with a 10-point scoring scale, by 1999, the test had devolved into mainly a pass-fail exam that divides the students into two groups: those who take freshmen composition and those who take Basic Writing 2.⁴

As Pat Belanoff describes in “The Myths of Basic Writing,” the evaluation of student writing relies on four unfounded principles: that we understand what we are testing for; that we know what it is we want to test; that we agree on how to judge writing and on whether certain pieces of writing meet those criteria; and that there is a universal standard of good writing. The Writing Assessment Test plays out each of these myths in harmful ways. It is an exam rooted in positivism, that tries to settle the turbulent and unpredictable complexity of writing with a single numbered score.

The test has the obvious flaws of a one-time impromptu exam in that it can trap a good writer having a bad day, or a good writer who has trouble with spontaneous creation. More problematically, the test is not precise enough to determine skill levels within the grouping of students that does not do well on the test. The category of students who receive a grade of “6” on the exam, just below passing becomes a virtual catch-all group that lands writers like James and Lewis in the same classroom as writers like Charity and Lawrence. But, most problematically, it is a test that does little to address the language identities of a main part of the CUNY student population: those students who have recently immigrated from a non-English-speaking country and attended a city high school, but whose English skills are well below fluent. Specifically, the test does not determine which writers are limited by their ESL backgrounds.⁵

Thus in Amy’s class, the students have a wide range of abilities in comprehending, speaking, reading and writing in English. The gap between the students is significant. A student like Tsegu enters the class unable to comprehend what is being spoken in the class or write a few coherent sentences in a half-hour; meanwhile, a student like Lewis can speak paragraphs and write pages of interesting ideas in English.

As the Soliday and Gleason mainstreaming project described in Chapter 1 showed, lower-achieving students can do well in a classroom with more talented students. However, they need in-the-classroom and out-of-the classroom supports in order to succeed, and they need an instructor with enough experience to design and facilitate activities that challenge all the students. In this case the placement of a wide range of students into the same remedial course was not the consequence of a well-planned program, but an invalid and outdated writing placement process and a writing program that operated under the principle of benign

neglect.

There is no explicit connection between the exam and the Basic Writing curriculum. The university administers the exam; the college English department administers the class. But in the absence of any curriculum guidelines, the test is a powerful motor that ends up conflicting with the drives the class.

As a novice to the college, Amy is not in position to do the test prep the students crave. (She doesn't know anything about the test.) Ideally, veteran teachers might know how to design a course that could cover the test as well as a different curriculum, and then be able to "sell" both concepts of writing to the students. But even for veteran teachers that is an unfair position, to have to teach within, where there is a built-in curricular conflict.

The resulting precarious position of the Basic Writing II teacher is that they are put at odds with the exam that they have no input over. There is a washback effect from the exam that compels Amy to bring the test into the curriculum, even though she had not intended to do so. By bringing the test into the room so forcefully, Amy reinscribes the beliefs the students had about writing when they entered the course, beliefs she had spent 10 weeks taking down (Chapter 5). The kind of writing and the writing process used for the exam supercedes what she has tried to have the students believe in for the course.

Though there are many rhetorical moves and craft operations that are common to the writing Amy wants from the students and the writing they have to do for the test (i.e. present a cohesive argument using examples), the test is also in conflict with Amy's course in many ways, but particularly in the way the writing process is presented (Chapter 5). With the introduction of the exam into Amy's course, the trajectory of the process of writing that she is trying to teach is upended. As a consequence of the weight it carries to the students'

academic progress, Amy loses her credibility to the exam.

Perhaps the difficulty of determining who belongs in college can be presented in a discussion of the course work of Leanna, a single student from Amy's course. Leanna had a lightbulb moment kind of semester. Because of the course materials, a switch was turned on, where she began to read beyond the literal in texts and started to use them to think about the world. Despite her breakthrough, however, her formal written products were unfinished and by any standard unacceptable as an indication of literate practice at the college level. On the other side, a writer like Lawrence who goes methodically through the steps and has made virtually no progress can produce a final product that is minimally acceptable. Leanna is the student who is thinking and coming to new understandings. A writer like Lawrence is writing dull platitudes, following the defined steps, the benchmarks of academic literacy, but still far from engaging fully in critical thinking. Who is academically literate then? Amy would agree with me that Leanna is the more literate, but an outside judge would choose Lawrence.

In my view, academic literacy should be based on an evaluation of process as well as product. None of these students made great strides in this 15-week semester. Some who were on the cusp had breakthrough moments. But when writing from the beginning of the semester is compared to that from the end, you can't clearly pin down the gains they have made. At the end of 15 weeks, it is impossible to determine who has crossed the line of academic literacy.

I argued earlier that the concept of academic literacy is an abstract, relative and site-specific concept, best determined through a holistic evaluation measure that occurs over time (Huot). Still, a writing program can choose to define certain explicit skills or benchmarks as

indicators of academic writing proficiency with a certain degree of success. But these markers need to be developed in synergy with the writing programs overall goals. To be fair, useful and ethical, any writing test must pass a validity standard that includes a strong correlation between the exam and the curriculum of a program. In addition to being an invalid measure of student performance, and an unsuccessful way to place students by skill level, the CUNY writing exam is unethical toward the students—and the instructor.

While we would like a system that can clearly define who belongs in college based on specific benchmarks of academic literacy, such a system is not possible. We need to eliminate the idea of a pass-fail in-out line as determined by a single test score, and look instead toward a system of evaluation that looks at student process over time.

¹ For a complete discussion of the methodology for this chapter, including how thematic strands are determined from ethnographic data, please see Chapter 1.

² As I said to Amy one day in her office, you tend to teach to the student you think you are.

³ For a further discussion of the influence of teachers' schooling on the choices they make in the classroom, see Beaumont.

⁴ In this semester the college is only offering two sections of Basic Writing I, in response to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the students who take the WAT score at the passing line, and so are placed in Basic Writing II

⁵ All New York City high school students take and are placed in the CUNY system by the WAT exam, regardless of their language identity.

“Here’s what we can take from this—a lesson in the importance of taking a stand. ...When you do your research, you will have looked closely at your students, your classroom, your school, and the social and political contexts in which you teach. You may discover that you have difficult things to say. I hope that you will think hard about what helps students learn and what gets in the way of learning. And in your writing, I hope you will speak with the full force of your own convictions.

Sondra Perl

On Austrian Soil: Teaching Those I Was Taught to Hate

EPILOGUE

In many ways the story of the public debate over remediation at the City University of New York in the late 1990s is a story of rhetorical incantation.

By the fall of 1999, what was once reported as a critique of CUNY as having low admissions standards had become the accepted perception in the media. On October 7, 1999, *The New York Times* ran a story asking if City College can “remake itself and its image” (A1). The school’s imminent demise was no longer attributed to critics or delivered with statistics or balance. It was simply stated as fact. And, remediation was placed as the cause.

Morale is low. Enrollment is sliding. The education program may be closed.

And despite a widely respected faculty and nationally ranked programs, a reputation is in tatters: the Harlem campus that was once lauded as the Harvard of the poor is now derided as a vast remedial factory” (A1).

The designation of a literacy crisis at CUNY had achieved the status of objective truth. In psychology this is called the validity effect: when something is seen or said so often that people no longer doubt it, even if they have no evidence to support it.

Within months of the media and public acceptance of the idea that CUNY was failing, and the subsequent changes to the admissions policies, CUNY would miraculously declare itself improved. Before the 2000 school year was in full swing, the CUNY administration and its new chancellor, Mathew Goldstein released a progress report that chronicled the university's 10 months of work to strengthen "academic standards, quality and access." Playing off the sub-title of the Schmidt Report, which had suggested that the university was "adrift," the progress report declared that CUNY was "A University on the Move."

Listed among the achievements were three items related to student writing at the university:

- Phase-out of remedial instruction at the senior colleges.
- Establishment of the first university-wide exit test from remediation.
- The implementation of a new proficiency examination to assess the progress of students as they advance towards graduation ("A University on the Move...").

Thus, the report declares victory over the literacy crisis based simply on ending a writing program and establishing two exams.¹ In the fall of 2000, the first year that the new policy was administered at some colleges, CUNY enrollment actually rose five percent. When the new enrollment figures were declared, the administration

again claimed victory, suggesting that the higher enrollment indicated that their predictions were right and that CUNY was now a place of more rigorous standards. CUNY's chancellor, Mathew Goldstein declared, "Not only have the campuses all raised their standards, but students are meeting those standards and are choosing to come to CUNY." (qtd. in Arenson, "Enrollment..."). The admission rate for Black students dropped two percentage points and for Hispanics three percentage points. But for proof of increased standards, it offers only that students now score 480 on the SAT (verbal and math) 75 on Regents exams in English and Math or pass the CUNY ACT exam.

By February 2002, the same *New York Times* reporter who had covered the entire crisis wrote a piece on City College that declares, at least, provisional success: "City College, the faded Jewel of CUNY, Is Recovering Its Luster." When the change in remedial policy came up for review by the New York State Board of Regents two years later, the successful updating of CUNY's standards had apparently been completed. In an article in the *New York Times* from November 2002, *The State* Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills declares, "The university has made a deliberate effort to strengthen standards. They've done what they promised." (as qtd in Arenson, "CUNY Maintains...").

The success story told in CUNY reports and seconded in the media, certainly did not match my own experiences teaching writing at CUNY. The situation and context for the teaching of writing had shifted institutions, perhaps, with almost all full-semester Basic Writing classes taking place at community colleges, but the difficulties and problems detailed

in this study, which limited Amy's and the students' ability to succeed remained the same as they ever were.

In the summer of 1999, I was in the midst of a personal crisis concerning my own beliefs about the benefits of remediation. I was fully ensconced in the public debate, participating in rallies, attending board meetings, and joining committees, when I wrote the proposal and set up the research for this project. In fact, much of the upheaval over remediation at CUNY occurred during the work of the semester, and so, I would often be teaching one day, attending a public hearing on remediation the next, and sitting in a classroom as a researcher the day after. At times, if student progress in my own writing classrooms ground to a halt that particular week, or if the classes I observed were particularly trying, some of the anti-remediation argument sounded right to me. Perhaps, for many CUNY students, the culture gap was too great to overcome; perhaps their linguistic and academic limitations made it impossible for them to succeed at the college level; perhaps there were better places to do remediation than on the college campus; perhaps these students were more inclined to succeed in a vocational rather than a liberal arts curriculum; perhaps, the end of the 20th century at CUNY was a crucial, watershed educational moment and deserved a radical solution; perhaps Open Admissions had failed; and perhaps, as Traub believes, the idea of equal opportunity had completely trumped any sort of meritocratic principle at CUNY, creating a CUNY degree as a worthless badge of equality given for perseverance rather than proficiency. As I read about my working life in the newspapers and watched on TV news programs, the public critique of remediation became a private crisis of my pedagogical, curricular and institutional role in the college, and even my personal motivation for teaching writing at all.

Certainly, as I sat poised over student portfolios at the end of an English 002 or 001 Basic Writing class, I would be lying if I said the “raise-the-standards octopus” was not in the room, one tentacle after another taking swipes at my hard-and-fast belief in the importance of access and my educational understanding that any major literacy step is a painfully slow process which cannot be documented in one, high-stakes writing product. Ultimately, in those close-call situations, my decision to pass or fail a student depended on my answer to this question: Does “Maggie” belong in college? Even when reduced to individual student cases, this question is exceedingly complex, and certainly not one that should have to be made while poised over the last batch of student writing from a course. Perhaps, when reduced to a decision about a single life, it is impossible to determine what college-level academic literacy is because the decision becomes so highly personal, and the consequences of the decision so dramatically direct. It sounds overly dramatic, but in some cases, with a pass or fail grade, a person’s education, their economic future, their well-being hangs in the balance. This concept gains unbearable weight when you change the scenario from “a person” to this student who you have seen in class twice or three times per week for the last four months, this student whose voice you heard in class and on paper, this student whose work you have poured over, this student whose life you have come to know.

Before we entered the Basic Writing classroom in the fall of 1999, the 22 students, one instructor and I (“the researcher”) passed through many “doors of influence.” Our ability and readiness to write/learn/teach/research, our ability to navigate the classroom space for our own intended purposes, and our ability to fulfill the roles intended by others were greatly affected by the social, cultural and political context outside the classroom. In many ways what occurred before the first day of class pre-determined what happened in it. Broad historical,

political, philosophical, socio-economic and institutional factors were at play. Equally as important, local, specific influences such as the instructor and students academic status, the physical space of the classroom and issues of personality and background had a profound influence on the potential of this classroom and its participants to evolve, and to achieve its expressed and hidden agendas. Though this classroom's story, as told here, is singular—closed in by the orange soda walls of the NAC building—the systems of influence and patterns of behavior that are detailed in this chapter are repeated each semester at City College, and in other Basic Writing courses throughout the nation.

This research project illuminated these larger patterns that make it impossible to simplify the debate over the usefulness and purpose of Basic Writing at a public college. It is a response to “the discourse of literacy crises [that] engages deep-seated cultural anxieties and attempts to solve them magically, ...by drawing lines between Standard English and popular vernaculars, ‘masters’ and ‘servants’” (Trimbur, *Literacy and...* 279). This project is an attempt to start defining the literacyscape of CUNY.

In his literacy narrative *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose describes the classroom position of the remedial student and the educational system that judges him or her. He concludes:

Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order. Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision--blind us to the logic of error and the ever-present stirring of language--and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, deficiency (Rose, 205).

Rose warns us to not base educational policy on misinformed judgments of cultural difference and errors of linguistic interpretation. In essence he is telling us to look carefully and critically at the politics involved when we designate spaces and divide cultures. By focusing on the borderland of entry we call the remedial writing classroom, this study heeds Rose's warning to look closely at places of hierarchy and division in the university, places usually divided by a literacy credentialing procedure.

At the close of Part I of his narrative about City College, James Traub poses the dilemma of public higher education this way, "Open Admissions was one of those fundamental questions about which, finally, you had to make an almost existential choice. Realism said: it doesn't work. Idealism said: It *must*" (his emphasis 80). But this is binary thinking of the worst kind. Is it possible to be an idealistic realist?

By concentrating on data, we may be able to move beyond a debate of simple accusations and ungrounded idealistic arguments and toward what composition researchers Hull and Rose call for in a study of the cognitive process of the remedial writer, "a deeper and richer representation of literacy instruction for under-prepared students..." (244). Only through a more complex, balanced and thorough reading of the space of Basic Writing will we be able to fully understand and work toward a meaningful resolution of the academic and political conflicts posed by the Basic Writing classroom.

The answer to combat this control of the image and reality of the writing classroom is for writing teachers to take control of their lives by conducting focused research on classroom learning. What I have created here, a literacyscape, is an attempt to define the space of Basic Writing as one possible way to dictate how the space should be allowed to work. By taking a different focal points and applying a different methodologies writing

teachers can further define the literacyscape provided here. By initiating a series of studies of similar cohorts of students over time, we can achieve some measure of overlapping data that can come close to representing the whole of something. I am suggesting that multiple studies of the same academic setting, by different researchers, using different methodologies, can in fact offer some sort of inter-study validity. As Lois Weis and Michelle Fine state, with qualitative research you cannot look for a clean and easy synthesis of data, but must look for understanding that can influence policy. “With a firm reliance on multiple methods, we sought to cross over, converse, and tap into the different kinds of data; we searched for the very contradictions between methods that would most powerfully inform policy” (51). By comparing the data from the different source points, researchers can confirm interpretations, provide a more complex understanding and avoid overstated assumptions. The term literacyscape is an attempt to define the thoroughness that multiple studies can provide. Rather than standing alone, this study must be read in consort with the CUNY remediation studies of the past and with those to come.

If writing instructors are able to pile up the data, we can define who we are and what we do and perhaps wrestle control of our discipline and its students away from the forces and fortunes of the university and the politics outside the university. Of course, any attempt at creating a research paradigm for writing teachers requires that the university address the ongoing issue of the marginalization of the adjunct writing teacher. Until these inequities are addressed there will be no stable, economically viable faculty to conduct such research.

¹ In fact, the university had established two university-wide vital programs in writing: Looking Both Ways paired high school and college teachers of writing in a developmental workshop; a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative that used graduate students to help professors incorporate writing into their classrooms.

APPENDIX A

STUDENT PROFILES

Note: Quotes are from the first day of class when students wrote in response to the prompt posed by the instructor: "Tell me three things about writing."

1. Abeni

Age: 19
 Country of Birth: Nigeria
 Country of Parent's Birth: Same
 Complicating Language or Dialect: None (Nigeria's official language is English as a consequence of its long history as an English colony; however, the native languages of Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo) and Fulani have influences.)*
 Work: NA
 College Status: First semester/full time.
 Family Education History: NA
 Living Address: Manhattan
 Note: NA
 Quote: NA

2. BEGUM

Age: 20
 Country of Birth: Bangladesh
 Country of Parent's Birth: Same
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Bangla
 Work: None
 College Status: Full time/first semester
 (Intended) Major: Computer Science
 Family Education History: 3 siblings: older sister finished college in Switzerland; two younger not college age.
 Living Address: Brooklyn
 Note: Does all the work; attends all the classes.
 Quote: "I can express really good my thoughts and feelings by writing. It's hard for me to write if I have a topic but nothing in mind or few idea about a topic (sic). Summaries are difficult for me to write, because everything seems important."

3. BEN

Age: 18
 Country of Birth: USA
 Country of Parent's Birth: Vietnam
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Cantonese
 Work: None
 College Status: First semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Computer Science
 Family Education History: 3 siblings, all younger.
 Living Address: Brooklyn
 Note: After good start, missed four assignments in a row.
 Quote: NA

4. CARVER

Age: 18

Country of Birth: Haiti
 Country of Parent's Birth: Same
 Complicating Language or Dialect: French Creole
 Work: 20 hrs. per week
 College Status: First semester/full time.
 (Intended) Major: Computer Science
 Family Education History: One brother and one sister, both in college.
 Living Address: Brooklyn
 Note: Considers French and Creole as separate languages. Claims Creole as first language, speaks all three at home, and English and Creole with friends.
 Quote: "I've been taught that writing is very important for someone that's trying to be successful in college/life? Writing is not the easiest thing [in the] world but if time is being put into it and learn the grammar and spelling, it becomes pretty simple. Writing is a little stressful but I like it."

5. CHARITY

Age: 18 (?)
 Country of Birth: U.S.
 Country of Parent's Birth: Ghana
 Complicating Language or Dialect: None
 Work: NA
 College Status: first semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Undecided
 Living Address: Bronx
 Note: Extremely shy in the classroom.
 Quote: "We write to express our thoughts and feelings. We write to entertain ourselves and our readers. We write to let others know how much we care about them."

6. GEETA

Age: 20
 Country of Birth: Guyana
 Country of Parent's Birth: Same
 Complicating Language or Dialect: None (Guyana was a British colony from 1815-1966; the English language spoken in Guyana is influenced by Hindi and Urdu. More than 50 percent of the population of Guyana is East Indian).
 Work: No
 College Status: First semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Computer Science
 Living Address: Brooklyn
 Family Education History: brother at City College; sister at Queens College.
 Note: Under language spoken at home, she wrote "Not standard English"
 Quote: "Writing to me is expressing your inner thoughts about something. That is letting the reader know how you feel or what you have to say by using pen and paper basically."

7. GHAZI

Age: 18
 Country of Birth: Saudi Arabia
 Country of Parent's Birth: Same
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Urdu
 Work: 10 hrs. per week at a sneaker store
 College Status: First semester/full time.
 (Intended) Major: Computer Science

Family Education History: Five younger siblings.

Living Address: Queens

Note: Urdu was his first language, but also speaks Punjalei, Arabic and Hindi.

Quote: "Writing can be something to express true feelings and thoughts. For Frederick Douglass, writing means the pathway to freedom from slavery. In today's society, writing is an essential skill to have."

8. EDUARDO

Age: 30

Country of Birth: Mexico

Country of Parent's Birth: Same

Complicating Language or Dialect: Spanish

Work: Restaurant 20-24

College Status: first semester/full time

(Intended) Major: Mechanical Engineering

Family Education History: 2 brothers and 2 sisters, no one past 9th grade

Living Address: Manhattan

Note: Married. Told me his wife wants to have children soon and if he wants to improve his status in life "for them" he needs a degree.

Quote: "Write Clear. Be specific about the topic you want to write. Write about things you know."

9. HOMER

Age: 47 (?)

Country of Birth: USA

Country of Parent's Birth: NA

Complicating Language or Dialect: None (Black English Vernacular)

Work: NA

College Status: First semester/full time

Intended Major: NA

Family Education History: NA

Living Address: Manhattan

Note: Was very defensive about participating in the study, and in the class for that matter. Left class after two weeks.

Quote: "Writing is used for expressing oneself (sic). Writing is used for showing if one understands the rules that govern the English language (sic). To respond to another person's letter (sic)."

10. JAMES

Age: 19

Country of Birth: USA

Country of Parent's Birth: England

Complicating Language or Dialect: None

Work: 4 hours per week at research facility

College Status: First semester/full time

(Intended) Major: Medicine

Family Education History: 3 siblings: two in college, one in high school

Living Address: Brooklyn

Note: Sophie Davis Biomed Student

Quote: "In today's society, writing is perceived to be an effective way of communication. Generally people have a difficult time expressing their ideas through speaking and the use of body language. More than often, there are misconceptions between what a person would like to say and an individual's interpretation of what is being said" (sic).

11. JUANITA

Age: 21

Country of Birth: U.S.

Country of Parent's Birth: El Salvador/Puerto Rico

Complicating Language or Dialect: Spanish

Work: Emigrant Savings Bank, 25 hours

College Status: First semester/full time

(Intended) Major: Biology

Family Education History: 3 siblings 2 left after 10th grade and one is in 10th grade

Living Address: Yonkers, NY (just north of the Bronx)

Note: Missed three out of first five assignments.

Quote: "I have been taught that when writing a paper your thoughts on a subject should be expressed clearly and to the point. I've written papers before and the most difficulty I've experienced is being unable to place my thoughts on paper clearly."

12. LATOYA

Age: 18

Country of Birth: U.S.

Country of Parent's Birth: Jamaica

Complicating Language or Dialect: Spanish

Work: At a hospital and a stationary store 30 hrs per week.

College Status: first semester/full time

(Intended) major: Mechanical Engineering

Family Education History: Five siblings, one in college, the rest in high school or younger.

Living Address: Bronx

Note: Told me she got into UCLA but could not afford to go. Is hoping to transfer after a year, pending scholarship.

Quote: "You shouldn't repeat the same thing over and over again. It doesn't really matter what you write in an essay. It really [is] the correct form that is looked for by teachers. Commas cannot go anywhere you want to put them when writing."

13. LAWRENCE

Age: 19

Country of Birth: US

Country of Parent's Birth: US

Complicating Language or Dialect: None (Black English Vernacular)*

Work: N/A

College Status: first semester/full time

(Intended) Major: Architecture

Family Education History: One sibling in 11th grade.

Living Address: Bronx

Note: Writes stories and poems.

Quote: "to give more info/more detail. When writing, make sure what you are writing is clear enough for the reader to understand."

14. LEANNA

Age: 20

Country of Birth: U.S.

Country of Parent's Birth: Ecuador

Complicating Language or Dialect: Spanish

Work: 18-25 hrs. per week

College Status: First semester/full time

(Intended) Major: Undecided

Family Education History: Has six sisters and three brothers. Only one is in college.

Living Address: Manhattan

Note: Has one child, but not married. Started college and then withdrew to have her son. Regrets that she only has "barely some spanish" left.

Quote: "Writing is written through the soul when writing a story or poem. [Writing is] another way of expression when one can not talk. [Writing] should always be correct and precise."

15. LEWIS

Age: 21

Country of Birth: U.S.

Country of Parent's Birth: China

Complicating Language or Dialect: Chinese (respondent did not provide particular dialect)

Work: 18 hrs. per week.

College Status: First semester/ part time

(Intended) Major: Mechanical Engineering

Family Education History: 1 brother; 2 sisters all in college. He failed out of Brooklyn polytech.

Living Address: Brooklyn

Note: Missed three of first four days of class.

Quote: "Personally, I've found myself writing mostly when I'm mad, angry or depressed. I believe that when someone writes, they are looking for an outlet to express negative thoughts or feelings. Outwardly and openly expressing depression is more painful and miserable than expressing happiness. Obviously, of course."

16. PIERRE

Age: 19

Country of Birth: Haiti

Country of Parent's Birth: Same

Complicating Language or Dialect: French Creole

Work: None

College Status: First semester/full time

(Intended) Major: Electrical Engineering

Family Education History: One brother in college

Living Address: Brooklyn

Note: Extremely quiet; sharply dressed.

Quote: "Writing is one way to express your feelings, emotions. It is your opinion on something for example: an article. It is also a way to communicate with others."

17. ROBERTO

Age: 19

Country of Birth: U.S.

Country of Parent's Birth: Dominican Republic

Complicating Language or Dialect: Spanish

Work: No

College Status: First semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: computer science
 Family Education History: One sister in high school.
 Living Address: Manhattan
 Note: Wheelchair-bound. An extremely “stuck” writer.
 Quote: “Have a thesis statement. Have four paragraphs. State reasons for thesis statement.”

18. ROSA

Age: 19 (?)
 Country of Birth: Mexico
 Country of Parent’s Birth: Same
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Spanish
 Work: Health Food Store 20 hours per week
 College Status: First semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Computer Science/Engineering
 Family College Education: Brother graduated highschool
 Living Address: Manahattan
 Note: Ofte writes in perfectly alligned printed, full caps.
 Quote: None

19. SHAFIQU

Age: 19
 Country of Birth: Bangladesh
 Country of Parent’s Birth: Bangladesh
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Bengali
 Work: None Listed
 College Status: first semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Biology
 Family Education History: NA
 Living Address: Brooklyn
 Note: In his autobiography assignment, he wrote how he stillmisses his friends in Bangladesh, though he has been in the U.S. for a number of years, he feels he will never replace his friends from home.
 Quote: None

20. SALEEM

Age: 19
 Country of Birth: US
 Country of Parent’s Birth: US
 Complicating Language or Dialect: None (Black English Vernacular)*
 Work: NA
 College Status: first semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Electrical Engineering.
 Family Education History: NA
 Living Address; Staten Island
 Note: Always sat next to the instructor from the first day. Often appears distant in class. Plays lacrosse.
 Quote: “Write what you feel and what others think. Confuse people to the point that it is real. Shock those, cause the unspoken words that are true they never knew” (sic).

21. TSEGU

Age: 23(?)

Country of Birth: Japan
 Country of Parent's Birth:
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Japanese
 Work: Did Not Answer
 College Status: First semester /full time
 (Intended) Major: International Studies
 Family Education History: NA
 Living Address: Queens
 Note: Has degree from native country. Wants to improve English for Grad. School. Always asking for extra help.
 Quote: "First of all, maybe I didn't understand your question. My feeling about writing is difficult because I'm foreign student. The way of writing or of expression is different from my language. Especially assessment test is big problem for me."

22. VLADISLAV

Age: 20(?)
 Country of Birth: Russia
 Country of Parent's Birth: NA
 Complicating Language or Dialect: Russian
 Work: NA
 College Status: First semester/full time
 (Intended) Major: Music
 Living Address: Brooklyn
 Family Education History: NA
 Note: Musician. Plays Piano and composes. Often approached me for help before/after class.
 Quote: "There are many ways for people to explain themselves. One thing is writing. In my opinion music is the first thing which helps people to explain themselves, and writing is the second."

KEY

(?): Indicates that there is some minor discrepancy about the students age.
 NA: Not Available. The respondent did not provide any information.
 * Though the respondent claims English as a first and only language, in reviewing the spoken and written English of this respondent, there is considerable evidence of a complicating language or dialect. My understanding of the complication is provided in the parentheses.



THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT TEST

FORM CC

DIRECTIONS

You will have 50 minutes to plan and write the essay assigned below. You may wish to use your 50 minutes in the following way: 10 minutes planning what you are going to write; 30 minutes writing; 10 minutes rereading and correcting what you have written.

You should express your thoughts clearly and organize your ideas so that they will make sense to a reader. Correct grammar and sentence structure are important.

Write your essay on the lined pages of your booklet. You may use the inside of the front cover of the booklet for preliminary notes.

You must write your essay on one of the following assignments. Read each one carefully and then choose either A or B.

- A. Because of continuous increases in college tuition costs, many students are not able to attend the college of their choice. Education should be a right, not a privilege, and if students are academically qualified for the college that they choose, the federal government should pay their college tuition.

Do you agree or disagree? Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observations of others, or your reading.

- B. People who are suffering from incurable illnesses or severe brain damage should be allowed to die if they or their families decide that a dignified death is better than the indignities of suffering. If these people could end their lives, it would eliminate much painful suffering for both the patients and their families, and it would also cut down on the enormous medical bills.

Do you agree or disagree? Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observations of others, or your reading.

GENERAL CLASS INFORMATION:

Books: These are the four main books we'll be using throughout the semester. Other readings will be placed in the reserve room or handed out in class. All books can be found at **Papyrus Book Store** (114th st and Broadway. Ph: 212-222-3350).

21st Century Grammar Handbook, edited by Princeton Language Institute. Dell publishing.

Stories of Eva Luna by Isabel Allende. Bantam publishing.

A Moveable Feast by Ernest Hemingway. Scribners publishing.

Siddhartha by Herman Hesse. Dover publishing.

Most of the reading for this course will be short. The main exception to this is **Siddhartha**. I suggest you start reading this as soon as possible.

JOURNAL WRITING: What better way to practice writing than to keep a journal? In your journal, you have the opportunity to write about anything you want in whatever way you want. You are asked to write at least two journal entries per week. In addition, in class writing exercises should be kept in your journal as well. Journals will be checked periodically.

TYPES OF ASSIGNMENTS:

While this is not an exhaustive list of assignments, it should give you a general idea of what to expect from this class.

1. **Freewriting/Open ended writing.** Write what comes to mind about any topic or in some cases a specific topic. We'll talk about the difference between these two types of writing.

2. **Paragraph Reactions:** Short responses to class discussion and readings. These will be handed back with my comments.

3. **Rewriting.** Few have the ability to write perfectly (or even clearly) the first time putting pen to paper. So you will have the chance to respond to my comments and rewrite your paragraph reactions.

4. **Grammar and spelling:** I have not made grammar and spelling a main focus of class discussions. Instead, each of you will work individually to improve your own mechanics. Assignments will be handed back to you with grammar and spelling issues

highlighted. You'll be asked to correct grammar and spelling when handing in rewrites.

5. **In-Class Essays:** Essay assignments are exactly like the writing test you were asked to take when entering CCNY. It is also like any other essay test you will have throughout your school days.

6. **Journal Entries.** Discussed above.

7. **Final Paper.** Throughout the semester we will discuss all aspects of writing a paper. You will use all we talk about to develop and complete one larger analytical

I've ordered books at both the CCNY books store and Papyrus Book Store (114th st and Broadway. Ph: 212-222-3350). Papyrus does not charge tax on course books.

21st Century Grammar Handbook, edited by Princeton Language Institute.
Dell publishing.

Stories of Eva Luna by Isabel Allende. Bantam publishing.

A Moveable Feast by Ernest Hemingway. Scribners publishing.

Siddhartha by Herman Hesse. Dover publishing.

Journals: In addition to in-class writing assignments and other specifically assigned topics, you are asked to write at least two journal entries a week. Journals will be checked periodically.

The work for this course is manageable as long as you do the work on time. If you fall behind, it will take far more effort to catch up. For this reason, **NO ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED LATE**. Also, all assignments must be given to me in class. Do not, I repeat, **DO NOT** put any assignments in my mailbox.

We will also be spending some classes outside the classroom. So be on time. If you arrive late, and the class is not here, you will be considered absent. Two absences are acceptable as long as you have good reason for not being in class. After that, your grade will be effected.

If you are having any problems, talk to me. I cannot understand your situation if you haven't told me about it.

9/7: **Due:** BAMN paragraph reaction

9/9 **Read:** Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (at reserve desk)
(p4. The Negro Speaks of Rivers, p13 My People, p63 Fulfilment, p67 Ardella, p77 Troubled Woman, p82 Garden, p84 Strange Hurt, p157 Daybreak In Alabama, p167 Roland Hayes Beaten)

9/13 **Read:** Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (at reserve desk)
(p3 Afro-American Fragment, p33 The Weary Blues, p114 The Trumpet Player, p121 Life is Fine, p150 Hard Daddy, p172 Song for a Dark Girl, p187 Mother to Son, p221 Dream Boogie, p250 Boogie lam., p261 Blues at Dawn)

9/14 **Read:** Charles Bukowski. *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. (at reserve desk)
(p77 Great Poets Die.... p89 The Stupid Christs, p145 I Shot a Man in Reno, p32 Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?)

9/16 Developing Your Topic
Bring journal and in-class writing assignments to class.
Due: Langston Hughes paragraph reaction

9/20 YOM KIPPUR -- no class

9/21 **Read:** Shakespeare. *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Pages to be announced.

Hemingway Paragraph Reaction #1

Carefully read the first two stories in Ernest Hemingway's **A Moveable Feast**. That is, *A Good Cafe on the Place de St.-Michel* and *Miss Stein Instructs*. Be sure to read the preface and introductory note as well.

1. Describe Paris as portrayed by Hemingway. Include the sights, sounds and smells of the city. What feelings does the city invoke? Is it beautiful? Ugly? What overall impression of Paris does Hemingway impart?
2. Who is the main character of these stories? Hemingway? A fictional character? A mixture? Or someone else entirely? Be sure to fully explain why you think the way you do. Include quotes from the book to illustrate your ideas.
3. How does the main character feel about Gertrude Stein and her friend? Why? Include quotes from the book.
4. The main character discusses his own writing process in these two stories and elsewhere in the book. Is his process similar to what we've been discussing in class? Is it different? Explain why you think the way you do, and as always, include quotes from the book.

Hemingway Paragraph Reaction #2 -- due in class Tuesday, 10/12

Read the next three stories of **A Moveable Feast** -- that is, *Un Generation Perdue*, *Shakespeare and Company* and *People of the Seine*.

1. Find 4 examples of the unspoken in these stories. (I have a different edition of the book, so quote the text, not the page number.) Explain what facts or ideas have been left out and why Hemingway might have wanted to exclude them.
2. Find 4 sections in these three stories that could use some revision. Explain why these sections should either be rewritten or cut altogether. And finally, rewrite the section for Hemingway.
1. Write a piece of your own autobiography. Here you have a chance to talk about yourself, so have some fun. There are no limits to what you write or how you write. Simply choose a part of your life that you think is interesting, funny, sad or what have you and tell a story.

Langston Hughes Rewrite -- due in class Monday, November 1, 1999

In writing this paper, follow the writing process we've discussed throughout the semester. Always begin with pre-writing, that is, freewriting, open-ended writing, brainstorming or any other method that helps you open up your thinking and develop your ideas.

Once you've finished pre-writing, reread all the writing you've done on the subject. In the case of the Hughes paper, you'll want to reread your first Hughes paragraph reaction, all new prewriting as well as any writing you've done in class.

Now develop your topic. You may already have a topic stated somewhere in your first Hughes assignment. Your job is to make sure the topic is a real topic, an arguable opinion.

Finally, write the paper. I noticed in the first paper, many of you had wonderful ideas in your freewriting, but those ideas never entered your final paper. Look back at all your Hughes writing to find ideas to support your topic.

You should follow this general process for every paper you write for the rest of the course. It may seem that all this is more effort than just sitting down to write a complete paper. In fact, writing a paper with this process is easier, takes less time and produces a better paper.

BAMN -- Draft II -- re-write

You will receive your BAMN paper with comments from me, comments from one of your classmates and checkmarks which correspond to grammar errors in the paper.

First, go through the grammar. Check the grammar handouts for specific instructions.

Next, read through your original paper. Follow the revision guidelines we discussed in class. Are there sections of your paper you would like to discuss further? Are there sections you would like to cut out? Does the order of your paragraphs make logical sense? Write your own revision questions in the margins of your paper.

You may find it helpful to return to freewriting or reread your journal in order to reacquaint yourself with your topic or further develop your topic or a specific idea in the paper.

Finally, rewrite your paper. Rewriting does not simply mean making grammar corrections and answering the questions written in the margin of your paper. You'll see what information is needed to strengthen your point. You will also find areas where you need to elaborate on what you already have. And finally, you'll choose the sections that must be cut in order to clarify your topic. Now is your chance to answer the questions you've asked. Remember, not all questions need to be answered. You will decide if the answer to the question supports the point you are making.

Finally, check your grammar. Use the grammar dictionary and a regular dictionary.

What you will hand in: 1) Your original BAMN paper. 2) The Grammar sheet with a list of your corrections. 3) The final draft after grammar checks. ***Once again, all papers should be typed, double-spaced and stapled.***

Appendix G

Sample ACT Question

The City Council has received a large grant from the federal government in order to improve transportation in the city. There are two proposals: The city can spend the money on upgrading the present subway and bus system or it can create a new subway line and additional bus routes. There is only enough money to fund one of the proposals. Write a letter to the city council stating whether you favor upgrading the present subway and bus system or expanding the subway lines and bus routes. Explain why the proposal that you favor will better improve transportation in the city. Begin your letter Dear City Council:

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