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ABSTRACT

The most serious approaches to teaching basic writing in the last 20 years have been framed by the competing metaphors of growth and metaphors of initiation. The growth model pulled attention away from the forms of academic discourse and toward what students could and could not do as writers, and encouraged teachers to respect and work with the skills which students brought to the classroom. Recent metaphors of initiation have often seemed to exaggerate conflicts and differences, in equating learning with assimilation or conversion. At times, in attempting to balance the two competing genres of everyday discourse and academic discourse, the student seems more "written by" than the '"writer of" his text. A basic writing course should freely admit and build upon conflicts and permit students to draw upon their full histories as persons as much as they can. In doing so, they might begin to gain a sense of why an individual works and writes at a university and of the sorts of power and insight an individual can gain there. (SG)

GROWTH AND CONFLICT IN BASIC WRITING

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Our aim in this panel is to question the sorts of language commonly used to describe the work of a course in basic writing. In the papers that follow, Min-zhan Lu looks at a troubling conflict in the ways Mina Shaugnessy tries to describe what it is that a basic writer needs to learn, while Bruce Horner shows how many of our practices as teachers can be traced to the varying ways we define what counts as an "error" in a piece of writing. I'd like to begin our talk here by quickly offering a historical and theoretical context for Min's reading of Shaugnessy and Bruce's critique of approaches to error.

In particular, I want to argue that most serious approaches to teaching basic writing in the last 20 years have been framed by the competing metaphors of *growth* and *initiation*. (And by *serious* I mean those approaches which reject or move beyond a simple mechanical drilling of so-called "basic skills.") Talk about learning has of course long been suffused by metaphors of growth. The strong effect these metaphors have had on the current teaching of writing in American colleges, though, stems largely from the work of the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, where many Americans were introduced to the thinking of British theorists like John Dixon and James Britton. Rather than seeing the goal of the English lesson as the transmitting of knowledge *about* language or literature, Dixon and Britton proposed a "growth model" of teaching and learning that centered on the attempts of students to find increasingly rich and complex ways of putting experience into words.[1]

But while they were skeptical of attempts to ground the teaching of English on the structure of literature or linguistics, the growth theorists based many of their own methods on a fairly uncritical reading of developmental psychology. The curriculum ought to reflect a natural pattern of growth that one sees as a child increases her mastery over language, they argued, and so they elaborated schemes of teaching that began with students using language in informal and expressive ways, and then gradually led them towards more complex and public kinds of discourse.[2]

Much of the pioneering work on basic writing in the 1970s built on these notions of growth. Growth metaphors offered a view of basic writers as inexperienced or immature users of language, and defined the task of teachers as one of helping them develop their nascent skills in writing. A continuum was set up between what such writers could already do and what they would be asked to do at a university. Academic discourse was presented not as something different from the sorts of writing and speech students were already familiar with, but as simply a more complex and powerful way of using words. The task set for basic writers, then, was not so much to learn something new as to get better at what they could already do, to grow as users of language.

The growth model pulled attention away from the forms of academic discourse and towards what students could and could not do as writers. It also encouraged teachers to respect and work with the skills students brought to the classroom. Implicit in this view, though, was the notion that basic writers were somehow stuck in an early stage of language development, their growth as language users stalled. Their writing was seen as "concrete-operational" rather than "formal," or "egocentric" rather than "reader-based," or "dualistic" rather than "relativistic."[3] However it was phrased, basic writers ended up at the low end of some scale of conceptual or linguistic development—as children in a world of adult discourse.

Yet this conclusion, forced by the metaphor of growth, ran counter to what many teachers felt they knew about their students—many of whom were returning to school after years at work, most of whom were voluble and bright in conversation, and almost all of whom seemed at least as adept as their teachers in dealing with the ordinary vicissitudes of life. What sense did it make to call these adults "egocentric"? What if the troubles these students had with writing at college was not a sign of some general failing in their thought or language, but simply of their unfamiliarity with the workings of a specific sort of (academic) discourse? If this were so, then what teachers needed to do was not to help students grow into more complex uses of language, but to introduce them to the peculiar ways in which texts get read and written at a university. And so by the mid-80s theorists like Pat Bizzell and Mike Rose had begun to argue for a new metaphor of *initiation* to take the place of the old one of growth.[4]

These theorists argued that what basic writers needed to learn was how to *shift* from using one form of discourse to another. In coming to the university students confront discourses that draw on and make use of rules, conventions, commonplaces, values, and beliefs that can be quite separate from (and sometimes in conflict with) those they already know or hold. These new forms of speech and writing are not only often more complex and refined than their own, they are *different* from their own—which means that many of the issues students face are not only intellectual but political and ethical as well. For instance, how does a working class student enter into a discourse that rejects many of the beliefs and aphorisms of his culture, that tells him statements like "look out for number one" or "work hard and you'll get ahead" just won't do, that he must somehow learn to do more than simply restate "what everybody knows"? Or how does a devout Christian find a place to speak within an aggressively skeptical and secular discourse? In order to speak and write at a university such students must come to terms with a set of conflicting demands and allegiances.

But if metaphors of growth tended to gloss over such conflicts and differences, recent metaphors of initiation have often seemed to exaggerate them. It has become commonplace now to argue that one masters a discourse by entering into the community that uses it, by accepting the practices and values of that community as one's own. But this can in turn lead to a transmission metaphor for learning in which experts lead novices into the beliefs and practices of the community. In acquiring a new discourse the student is seen as moving from one community to another, as leaving behind old ways of interpreting in order to take on new forms of organizing experience. Learning is thus equated with assimilation, acculturation, conversion. You need to get inside to get heard, but to get in you may have to give up much of who you used to be. As Pat Bizzell put it in an often cited essay on "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College": "Upon entering the academic community, [students are] asked to learn a new dialect and new discourse conventions, but the outcome of such learning is the acquisition of a whole new world view" (297).

Such views can seem to offer students no choice at all. They are either to take on the roles and voices allowed them by academic writing or to remain outsiders at the university. I believe that this is not the case, that the metaphor of initiation—with its split between insiders and outsiders—misrepresents not only the task faced by basic writers but the conditions that give rise to much good writing. To suggest why, let me turn to the essay on your handout. It is a piece composed at the beginning of the term by a student in basic writing at Pitt, in answer to an assignment that asked students to draw on their own experiences as readers and writers in forming a "thoughtful response" to a "friend" who argues, in part, that "of course I have no problem understanding why someone ought to be *able* to read and write, but I don't see why they are as important to work at as people make out. . . . Why should reading and writing be pushed so much?" This is what one basic writer had to say:

The need for proficiency in reading and writing comes into play every day of one's life. Things which you must read to get ahead in life like newspapers, bus schedules, directions, voter registration cards all take some degree of reading ability. Reading and writing touches especially every college students's life, like it or not. During most students' dreaded time of filling out applications many times the written essay part made or broke that person chance to attend the college of their choice.

The abilities and need for writers and those people who read the works have been around for generations and generations. The written word, not the spoken, has communicated ideas throughout time. Hey, I don't enjoy writing, but then again the more important things in life are neither for or easy to master. Without the written word or the ability to decipher those words, this world would contain even more ignorance towards all the issues of life facing people today. In our society today it has become to easy to get away without using our reading and writing skills with the increasing role of television.

I myself have fallen prey to the television syndrome, I find it much easier to sit in front of the T.V. and vegitate, than to read a newspaper or especially write a letter to the editor. I have difficulty in organizing and starting the writing process and unfortunately lean towards the quicker and easier sources of information and entertainment. I realize, even though it may be difficult, that I greatly need to improve my writing and reading comprehension skills to perform better in later life. The ability to read or write has great consequences in life, even socially; if a person can not read or write they are often doomed to fail in their jobs if they could get one. People also suffer of socializing like communicating with others in the personals, writing letters, and even being able to carry on a conversation past,"Hey Babe, what's you sign." A lonely uncommunicative person can only harm society not help it.

The written word is and must be here to stay. It ties us to committments our words cannot. For instance, I am now involved in apartment hunting and without the written word of signatures and such there would be no legal binding to an apartment. If myself or some other person could not read the would have great difficulty understand the provisions and responsibilities in a lease which renters must sign. I now realize that writing and reading abilities are not only for composition or English classes.

Certainly this student is more fluent than many basic writers. He also spells fairly well and generally uses punctuation in standard ways. He tries to use examples to back up his claims, and he pays some attention to the demand that he make use of his own experiences in responding to the question. He has even heard of something called the "writing process." So he doesn't seem too much of a stranger to the ways texts get read and written at a university, and there is nothing about this text to suggest that his thinking is "egocentric." Yet this still seems clearly the work of a basic writer. His writing responds

not to the question as phrased but attempts instead to prove the easy and trivial claim that one should be *able* to read and write. And even then his response wanders erratically from talk about application forms and apartment leases to comments on effective pick-up lines and a tirade against tv. So while he seems able to come up with a good bit of what looks and sounds like acceptable prose for an undergraduate, he is not really equal to the demands of the assignment. He cannot form a strong or persuasive response to the question being asked—which is not why people should be *able* to write but why students should be required to continue to"work at" writing at the university level.

I want to use this text to stand for the problems faced by basic writers for two reasons: First, I believe that the focus of many teachers and theorists of basic writing on students who are either very disfluent or prone to making certain kinds of surface-level mistakes hides the simple fact that what many basic writers need most to work on is *not* correcting errors. Rather, as Dave Bartholomae has argued eloquently in "Inventing the University," students need first to find a way of imagining themselves as having something to say on a subject that might actually interest a teacher or classmate. When confronted with a question like: "Why should reading and writing be pushed so much?" many basic writers seem to hope at best to offer a response that is simply not wrong, that passes, that looks and sounds okay (assuming of course that what they have to say isn't looked at or listened to very closely). By defining basic writers as people whose main problems are with forming this sort of minimally acceptable texts, we defer the far more pressing problem of how to help them gain a hearing for what they have to say.

Second, I think his text shows this student caught, in a way that basic writers often are, between two competing voices or discourses—a colloquial one that lets him say things like "Hey, I don't enjoy writing," and another mock-scholastic one that leads to sentences like "The need for proficiency in reading and writing comes into play every day of one's life." Alternating wildly between these two voices, the student seems more "written by" than the

writer of his text—as when, for instance, the mere mention of television at the close of one paragraph is enough to bring on a familiar polemic against couch potatoes in the next, while the move toward an end for the piece precipitates a whole set of thudding moralisms ("I now realize that . . ."). As a result, the text offers us a picture of a writer who is trying to bring one set of phrasings and insights (from college life, dating, apartment hunting) to bear on a situation ("Write a thoughtful response to . . .") that usually calls for different kinds of languages and examples—and who is almost but not quite able to carry it off.

But, paradoxically, while it is the presence of these two competing discourses that makes this writer's text so uneven, it also the tension between them that lend it interest. What this writer needs to learn to do, I think, is not how to make his prose either more colloquial or more safely academic, but to try forge a style in which those two voices can work with rather than against each other. Along with Min Lu, I would argue that it is often precisely when a writer feels part of several discourses at once, when she experiences not a sense of belonging but a sense of conflict or struggle, that she is in a position to do interesting work. One contributes to the work of a community not by saying the same thing as others in it but by saying something different. This difference often stems, I believe, from a writer's ability to bring the insights and practices of one discourse to bear on another. Certainly, many of the writers I admire and would have my students in some ways imitate—Barthes, Freud, Raymond Williams, Kenneth Burke, Clifford Geertz—do not typify the "normal discourse" of their fields, but rather "actively seek out the margins and poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship" with a number of competing languages—which is what Dave Bartholomae and Tony Petrosky ask their students to do in *Facts, Artifacts* (41).

Both the metaphors of growth and initiation view the basic writer as a kind of special case: The first sees her as an adult whose uses of language are mysteriously immmature, the second as someone who has found her way into the university and yet somehow

remained an outsider to it. I suggest that we instead think of the basic writer as dramatizing a problem that all of us face—that of finding a place to speak within the university that does not seem to ignore or leave behind the person you are outside of it. Let me close, then, by offering a third metaphor of *negotiation* for basic writing. What a basic writer must do is not to shift from one discourse to another. Rather she must take things that are ususally kept apart and bring them together, negotiate the gaps and conflicts between several competing discourses (of home, school, church, work, media, and so on).

And so the sort of basic writing course I want to see would be one that freely admits to and builds upon the conflicts between our own discourses, those of the university, and those which our students bring with them to class. The task set for a student in this course would be to form a stance as a writer that acknowledges and draws upon as much as she can of her full history as a person. To begin to do so, it seems to me, students need the chance to write on something they know well and care about (on rock music or movies or fashion, for instance, or on the rites and difficulties of adolescence). But they also need to be pushed to write about these things in new ways, to reconsider what they think they already know. We need, that is, to put students in a position where they both hold a certain authority (as, say, rock music fans) and lack it (as students in a basic writing class). Their task would then be to negotiate between these two positions, to use what they know as rock fans to gain credibility as writers in the university, and to appropriate the methods and language of the university to say new things about rock. In doing so, they might begin to gain a sense of why one works and writes at a university, of the sorts of power and insight one can gain there.

NOTES

1. For different versions of this growth model, see Dixon's *Growth through English*, Britton's *Language and Learning*, and James Moffett's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Moffett of course has had a particularly strong effect on the teaching of writing in American colleges.

2. See, for instance, Britton's chapter on "Now That You Go to School" in *Language*, and Moffett's "Kinds and Orders of Discourse" in *Teaching*.

3. These terms and oppositions are taken from the work (in order) of Andrea Lunsford, Linda Flower, and Janice Hays.

4. See Bizzell's "College Composition" and "What Happens," and Rose's "Language of Exclusion."

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Growth and Conflict in Basic Writing
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ASSIGNMENT

. . . . Imagine someone—not a parent or teacher now, but a friend, a fellow student that you are on decent terms with—imagine this someone saying something like this to you:

> Look, of course I have no problem understanding why someone ought to be *able* to read and write, but I don't see why they are as important to work at as people make out. Oh, I know I have to do it if I want to make good grades and all that, but that doesn't answer my question. There are plenty of good jobs in which you don't have to read or write much at all. And If I've got something to say to somebody, I'll just call them on the phone. So why should reading and writing be pushed so much?

Write a paper in which you give as thoughtful a response to that statement as you can. . . . Try as much as you can to stay with your own reading and writing experience in confronting whatever you think is the issue here.

RESPONSE

The need for proficiency in reading and writing comes into play every day of one's life. Things which you must read to get ahead in life like newspapers, bus schedules, directions, voter registration cards all take some degree of reading ability. Reading and writing touches especially every college students's life, like it or not. During most students' dreaded time of filling out applications many times the written essay part made or broke that person chance to attend the college of their choice.

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