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AUTHOR Holbrook, Marcia  
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ABSTRACT

Teaching basic writing at an open-admissions, urban, commuter community college involves the instructor with a clientele of student writers with a wide variety and complexity of needs and abilities. According to much research, demands by some scholars for having students write more than just "themes" is inappropriate for such students. Many of these students are dependent learners who look to authority figures for guidelines and instructional support. Other research indicates that entry-level students are uncomfortable with writing on abstract levels. Furthermore, distinctions between the supposed "real" self and the author presented in writing is counterproductive and possibly harmful. In designing entry-level writing courses, then, teachers must recognize the needs and abilities of the students. In recognizing the limitations of student writers, however, the value of personal writing can be overstated, and which as a central aspect of writing courses often leads to problems for the writer and instructor. Workshop formats are useful for helping students complete written assignments, but some students are uncomfortable receiving advice from anyone except the recognized authority, the teacher. Providing a range of instructional strategies and allowing students to choose topics demonstrates a real concern for students as individuals. (HB)

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DECENTERING THE DECENTERED: CONSTRUCTING SELVES  
AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Marcia Holbrook

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

During the last twelve years, I have taught basic writing courses at an open-admissions, urban, commuter college. Brooke's views of students' relationship to their writing, their choices of topics, and effective instructional strategies is certainly more appropriate for my teaching situation than Coles' are, but even his views do not account for the complexity of my students' needs and abilities.

To begin with, Coles' demand that students write more than just "themes" is inappropriate for my students - and, according to a great deal of research, for most entry-level students. Several years ago, I conducted research on the learning styles of approximately 1800 students. Responses to the Grasha-Riechmann Student Learning Styles Questionnaire indicated that most students surveyed, regardless of age, race, major, class rank, or gender, had a dependent rather than an independent learning style. Dependent learners "see teacher and peers as sources of structure and support. They look to authority figures for guidelines and want to be told what to do" (Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 122).

Other research confirms many students' need for structured assignments, for the formulaic "themes" Coles despises. Based on the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory, "sensing types outnumber intuitives by almost three to one ... [but] about 90% of college composition teachers appear to prefer intuition (Jensen and DiTiberio, pp. 165-166). Being intuitive, most instructors are comfortable with abstractions, implications, and possibilities, but their students, being sensing, frequently "feel more comfortable when following a specific pattern ... such as the five-paragraph theme" (Jensen and DiTiberio, p. 173).

The work of Piaget and Perry further supports the idea that entry-level students are often uncomfortable with and possibly even incapable of the type of writing that Coles demands. "By the time students enter college only one-third of them have made the transition from concrete to formal operations" (Gere, p. 2), meaning it is difficult for them to develop and defend hypotheses on abstract topics. Similarly, most students enter college as "dualistic thinkers who see only right/wrong or black/white and are dependent upon authority to reinforce correct answers" (Jerit, p.3), meaning that they will have a great deal of trouble providing the complex approaches to topics Coles seeks.

This gap between the type of writing Coles believes students are capable of and the formulaic themes they actually produce may explain why he believes the student's "real" self and the author are not the same. Real as that distinction may seem to him, my students' writing suggests it may not always hold true. One student, for example, consistently turned his writing into rap lyrics with lines like "why is it women don't like to be call a Bitch?" Another student, writing about the Los Angeles riots, says that "if I was in LA when the stuff went down, I would probably have been in the front lines of the riot." These students are using their writing purely for self-expression, adapting neither their topics nor their language to the situation, a college writing class, or the audience, a white woman.

Besides not being entirely accurate, Coles' view that the "real" self and the author are distinct is counterproductive and possibly harmful. Believing that students are capable of writing very differently than they do leads to the righteous indignation

and exasperation apparent in Coles' calling students' writings "goddamned themes" and in his cruel reduction of an essay to a cartoon strip composed of stick figures. Appropriate though his responses may feel to him, Coles' reactions are bound to undermine the trust "underlying all significant learning" (Brookfield, p. 163).

Coles' indignation is also misdirected. Many entry-level students aren't yet able to write the way he wishes. Their inability to transform themselves into the types of writers he wants them to be is not due to obstinance or laziness but to the fact that, like all students, "they can change only as fast as they can change" (Claxton, p. 36). The students have done nothing "wrong." In fact, if anyone is to blame, it is Coles for having designed a course without considering the students' abilities.

Brooke seems to recognize the abilities and needs of students like mine more fully than Coles does. As Brooke suggests, students often do use writing to "negotiate an identity." One student wrote that by "writing her problems down, ... [she] came up with a lot of papers, solutions, and [had] been able to make a personal connection. The connection with myself, as well as, you." Although they have not stated their attitudes about writing as directly, many other students' choices of topics and uses of language reflect an attempt to use writing to clarify feelings and roles and an attempt to express those feelings in ways that are appropriate for the audience. One older woman, writing about returning to school, raising a family, and working, wrote that she "could sure use an Aunt Bea. Someone who wasn't happy unless she was cooking, cleaning, shopping, or baking pies." A black male,

writing about the Los Angeles riots, wrote that "the crowd of looters got caught up in their emotions .... To be sure there is white racism but there is also black racism." These students are using writing to try to understand their world and their place in it, and they are using neutral, non-blaming language to make the anger, frustration, and confusion they feel inoffensive to their audience. These students are very different from those described earlier who had no apparent awareness of the audience and no purpose for writing beyond describing their feelings, but both kinds of students were and usually are present in the same class. Consequently, Brooke's belief that all students use writing to the same end is only partly true.

Brooke's belief in the value of personal writing is overstated as well. Students usually do choose to write about personal topics, and understandably so. As one student wrote, she "noticed that when [she] pick[s] a topic [she] truly know[s] about or that [she] really is interested in - [her] papers are better." Since most of my students are urban, public-high school graduates; first-generation college students, and returning to education after a number of years away; the subject they "truly know about" is far more likely to be personal rather than academic.

These topics often do lead to better papers because students have the prerequisite background knowledge; however, they can also lead to problems for both the student and the instructor. One student wrote that I would "come to know more about [her] personally than most people ever do." She goes on to ask if I am "comfortable with that." To answer her question, no, I'm frequently not comfortable with the personal information she and

other students have often provided. Students have written about colleagues of mine who sold them test banks, sexually harassed them, or were guilty of other misconduct. Since writings are confidential, I can't discredit or verify these charges; I can only feel uncomfortable around my accused colleagues.

Personal writing can lead to other problems as well. It is "inappropriate to grade someone's feelings" (Swartzlander, Pace & Stamler, p. A22), yet emotionally charged topics often do influence grades. The emotional power of an event rather than the skillful use of the language may make a paper seem better than it really is, and it's simply very hard to give a low grade to an author describing great personal suffering. Far worse, such writing may "elicit a flood of excruciating memories" (Swartzlander, Pace & Stamler, p. A22). I am extremely unqualified to help should this occur.

To minimize these problems, I do not require that all students do personal writing. They choose their own subjects, allowing them to define topics with which they are comfortable and for which they have the necessary background knowledge. Using rhetorical modes provides some of the structure entry-level students are likely to need, while my not specifying the topic forces students to become less dependent on me to tell them what to do. As an added benefit, working with rhetorical modes familiarizes students with the organizational patterns, the formal schemata, necessary for reading comprehension.

The workshop format advocated by Brooke is useful for helping students to complete these assignments. Reading other students' papers critically gives students practice applying the skills they

ultimately need to internalize. Having students rather than the instructor identify problems begins to wean students away from their dependence on authority and to make the instructor's judgments seem less capricious. When problems are identified, students may be able to describe them and potential solutions to their peers more meaningfully than the instructor can.

Helpful as this process is, it is not sufficient to meet all students' needs. Many students, being used to and comfortable with seeing the instructor as the source of all answers, will be uncomfortable with this approach. "Students continually stress their desire to be in the presence of someone whose knowledge, skill, and expertise mean that they can help students come to grips with some of the contradictions, complexities, and dilemmas they are experiencing" (Brookfield, p. 164). As a result, a workshop format in which those qualities of the instructor are less evident may lead to resentment and frustration. Obviously, insuring students' comfort is not the sole or even the primary goal of an education, but too much discomfort, resentment, or frustration interferes with learning. Consequently, the workshop format should not be the sole instructional strategy; it should be balanced by strategies with which students are more familiar and comfortable.

An even stronger case against relying solely on a workshop format is presented in George Hillock's Research on Written Composition. He describes an instructional strategy he calls "environmental." "In this mode, the instructor plans and uses activities which result in high levels of student interaction concerning particular problems parallel to those they encounter in certain kinds of writing" (p. 247). Classes based on these



activities are more structured and less dependent on students' writing for their content than most classes described as "workshops." These classes also have greater success: "on pre-to-post measures, the environmental mode is over four times more effective than the traditional presentational mode and three times more effective than the natural process mode" (Hillocks, p. 247). Surely at least some of these activities should be included along with other strategies.

Providing a range of instructional strategies and allowing students to define their own topics demonstrate a concern for all students' needs and a belief that they all have something to say. Lack of concern for students is especially evident in Coles' disparaging remarks about students' papers and in Brooke's requiring students to reveal more than they may wish to. In addition, a lack of respect for students' individual differences is implicit in both Coles' and Brooke's apparent assumption that students write for the same reason and can and should learn in the same way. Concern and respect are essential for establishing the trust fundamental to writing honestly and to learning any subject. Thus Coles and Brooke's theories, while providing useful insights and vocabulary, provide no real answers about improving teaching and learning. For those, I must look to myself and, above all, to my students.

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