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AUTHOR Roberts, Claudette
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ABSTRACT

The degree to which process writing deconstructs traditional notions about a fixed final product came to the attention of a high school instructor and her students when they attempted to select their best "essays" for a contest the school was holding. The students in this class found that some of their best writing occurred not in their "final essays" but in the descriptive pieces they wrote about those "final essays"; or rather, no single piece of writing represented the culmination of their work. For them, the process of learning and discovery was continual, not complete as of the paper's due date. One student who had waited over 20 years to go to college, for instance, continued to revise her view of why she did not go to college when she was younger. Other students found that through a dialogue with each other on the computer screen they were forced to confront the opposition's evidence; as a consequence their own views changed radically. Dialogues of this sort along with small group work and various exercises that emphasize writing processes help students to take responsibility for their own learning and development. Collage essays, essays that ask students to piece together bits of their writing completed over the semester, offer a further means of allowing students to reflect on their own development. (Includes two figures, an example of a collage essay and a cartoon.) (TB)

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Where's the Essay?

Claudette Roberts, Ph.D.

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Where's the Essay?

In response to an increased awareness of the need to foster critical thinking, we're teaching students to take more responsibility for their own learning. In composition classrooms these changes become visible in our workshop configurations—chairs in circles or small groups, the absence of a defined front of the room. Often our syllabi reflect the same shift with an increased use of portfolio or deferred assessment, with emphasis on problem–posing, instead of problem–solving, and with extended explanations of our own teaching philosophies. In these settings, students become teachers for each other; the teacher becomes a coordinator, an assistant, and a learner as he or she moves among the other learners or stands to the side.

However, at the same time that we are shifting away from earlier methods of teaching, we seem to be holding onto traditional assumptions about the essays students write for us. This was called to my attention by the writing contest my department sponsors for student writers campus wide which values traditional writings—single writings with well defined and developed paragraphs. They represent a writer's attempt to explain an experience or concept or to argue a position clearly and logically and are the last paper produced for an assignment, the one students typically turn in for a grade. Last year, however, when I tried to help students select writings they could submit, I realized that my students and I had already moved beyond that perception. We couldn't locate a final writing, a single piece, which could stand as a student's essay. Although that experience with contests is not the reason for my remarks today, it did suggest possible inconsistencies and prompted a closer examination of my shift from a traditional to a modern composition pedagogy.

When I began analyzing my methodology and expectations, I found that this subversion of the "English" essay had come about gradually, subtly through journal articles, conference presentations, and workshops, and at both national–and local–level assessment programs where teachers were advised to give students the responsibility for their own learning development.

In a CCCC Writing Workshop, Dixie Goswami told participants to involve students more in their total writing process, asking them to describe, interpret, reflect on, and evaluate their writings and the process which generated those writings.

Years earlier in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, Young, Becker, and Pike warned us that rapidly changing forms of communication had already begun to challenge the primacy of the written word and were threatening the familiar traditional essay, that staple of many college classrooms. Because the familiar essay seemed "less relevant as a means of communication," they found it imperative that we "develop a rhetoric that has as its goal not skillful verbal coercion but discussion and exchange of ideas" (8). Their text supports a shift from the traditional single–authority classroom to classrooms in which multiple authorities work, in which students develop both the content and the form of their writings.

But what happens to the English essay when we and our students make that kind of shift? Well, some writings will look as essays have. These are single authored and have introductory paragraphs followed by developmental ones. But, when we follow advice such as that of Goswami, mentioned above, all of these "essays" become the source of additional texts—of writings produced *after* the completion of the final draft. In these last pieces—the description or cover sheets—students talk about the twists and turns of the paper's topic. They may begin at the paper's end and never get to its beginning. They may discuss the essay's topic or a marginalized idea that is never developed. However, they always give insights into the writers' minds and into their writing of the assignment.

One woman used twelve drafts analyzing her educational goals. Part of that analysis meant coming to terms with why she had waited over twenty years to go to college. Her final writing, dated 20 October 1992, recognized that she hadn't attended college earlier because of her parents:

> My parents were very interested in my school work and encouraged me to do my best at whatever I attempted, but they had no education beyond high school and didn't encourage me to go on to college. This greatly influenced the goals that I set for myself.

This final (or twelfth) draft became a primary source for the paper's description sheet written over a month later and dated 30 November. 1992. In that piece, the writer explained:

> I noticed that as I revised the paper...I found myself focusing on why I didn't go to college—what prompted my decision. At first, I felt it was because my parents didn't encourage me, but I realize that if I had wanted to go, my parents would never have stopped me. I've had to face the fact that I was scared—afraid I couldn't make it in college and afraid of being away from home.

This excerpt demonstrates part of the ongoing process of thinking and learning through writing. The piece itself narrated a woman's circuitous journey from business courses in high school, to marriage, the birth of a son, divorce, working to take care of a family, and finally the return to education for control of her life; it should have become a public text. Yet she and I couldn't focus on any single writing that would accommodate the requirements for a traditional essay and, at the same time, reveal what she had learned as a result of writing, revising, reflecting, and evaluating. Her use of the final draft as a text for the description sheet had collapsed the notion of that 20 October 1992 paper as the final essay. It wasn't final, after all—yet the last paper wasn't complete. Her "essay" was located somewhere in two different documents—the paper's twelfth draft and its description sheet.

In another sample—neither the best nor the worst of its kind—Mike Brannon and Jason Haught talk about the drinking age, introducing all the familiar arguments for lowering or raising the legal age. Finally they lose patience with each other. One suddenly exclaims: "All my statements have been good and true, so how in the hell can you still disagree?" They argue for some time and then the speaker above blurts out: "Why must you be so immature. I refuse to continue this conversation until you decide to keep an open mind and compare both sides equally." Several weeks later they put together their last draft of the dialogue. In this writing, Brannon asserts that there are statistics to support leaving the legal drinking age at 21. When his partner Haught resists, Brannon explains them and the two continue discussing their issue. Instead of the previous deadlock—"I guess the result is going to be the same as when we first started this conversation,"—Haught now says: "After thinking about what you've said, Mike, I have to change my opinion. I can't argue with your reasons.... Leaving the drinking age at 21 won't solve all the alcohol related problems, but now I think it's for the best."

In his description sheet written several weeks after the completion of that dialogue essay, Haught explains his position shift:

> As we started this paper, I had my mind set on a certain way that I felt.... Throughout this assignment I was often stubborn and would not admit that my partner's side was much stronger than mine....as we revised, I started to think differently....

Brannon, his collaborator, offers additional insight into this shift.

> Jason Haught, my partner, might be the most stubborn person in the class. He had me so frustrated at times because he just would not listen to me. Finally, I got fed up with it and decided to go to the library and get something that nobody could argue with—statistics....When I told Jason about that decrease in fatal crashes involving 18, 19, and 20 year–olds, the look on his face was worth the time that I spent in the library.

Later, in this same description sheet, Brannon verifies the responsibility he is assuming for his learning development: "I learned alot [sic] from writing this paper. Not only in the classroom, but in the library. While doing this research I learned how to use microfilm. It was the first time that I had to use it...."

For some readers, this may not appear to be significant information, not enough to complicate the notion of a final text. Yet the belief that the essay is the last draft written before the description sheet represents a focus that privileges the writing done to develop a topic and ignores the reflection and writing done after that first part of the assignment is put aside. Furthermore, after reading description sheets, there's a decided leanness to "final" papers, for those cover sheets add marginalized information, that which conventional forms of writing can't or don't expose. It's somewhat like reading a book without reading the endnotes. We can do it, but we lose the richness, the fullness, the completeness—and I'm not convinced we can call the book final with the end notes omitted.

It's true that these description sheets accompanying full–process writings demonstrate student empowerment, yet they also represent a loss of power, for they undermine our traditional concept of an essay. When students use their own writings as texts to generate additional texts, they

subvert the notion of a final product. Like the deconstructive turn which uncovers a disjunct relationship, description sheets put into question any writing we may want to call "final"; they blur the essay's seams. Whatever movement they take, description or cover sheets function as supplements. In a traditional sense, they provide additional information, thus enriching our reading of student essays. In the Derridean sense of the supplement, however, description or cover sheets are both an addition to essays traditionally considered final and that final writing which helps make the essays final and complete. Thus, as students engage their own learning process and evaluate their work, they produce a significant text which defies easy classification.

In addition to the difficulty of locating a final writing because of description sheets, there also is a problem when we introduce innovative assignments designed to challenge students and compel them to question untested opinions. For example, I was dismayed with the persuasive pieces I received from capable student writers. Instead of reading widely, trying to understand an issue fully, students more likely read only to build stronger support for their own opinions. When they recognized their opposition during the development of a piece, they did so perfunctorily and then wrote without any serious challenge to their original ideas. I saw that process as too pat, the final writing too protected. I wanted to complicate the smugness I noticed when they finished writing. I wanted to see them struggling mentally, weighing multiple possibilities and perspectives. In short, I wanted to implant conflict in their writing and thinking process which they couldn't avoid... and I wanted them working collaboratively.

Finding support in Young, Becker, and Pike's advice to incorporate "discussion and exchange of ideas," and drawing on dialogic theory and assumptions from M. M. Bakhtin, I developed an issue dialogue. In this version of persuasive writing, students choose their topics and their positions. However, instead of writing alone and imagining the opposition to whom they're talking, they select a classmate who disagrees, and the two sit face to face (actually screen to screen) dialoguing their way through the issue's development.

This is an electronic discussion, for students generate draft after draft of their papers at the computer. In all instances, the writing must be an accurate reflection of the discussion or argument. That is, all discussion has to take place through the Aspects network each pair creates. I've found that I have to teach them how to argue (or discuss) critically, how to value an idea that sounds

reasonable or one which they can't refute. I encourage them to be open to new ideas, to new interpretations, explaining that I value this level of thinking, writing, and learning.

These writing assignments are popular in my composition classes. Students are proud of points they've learned how to make by the final drafts; they become willing to admit that they don't yet know enough to persuade others to agree with them, that they have to read and think more about the issue. Many actually realize that their opinions are at what Paulo Freire calls a *naive* stage of development, values or concepts they've received intact through their cultures and have never questioned. Thus students have much invested in these dialogues, yet they are unable to perceive these writings as essays. One student approached me after a class session in which we had generated the criteria for this assignment's evaluation. He was upset. "Where's the essay, Dr. Roberts?" I didn't understand his question. "Well, where's the *essay*?" he repeated.

Like many in my department, the student knew what an essay should look like; it should be a writing with a thesis and multiple paragraphs hooked together. He couldn't find those five or seven paragraphs which developed his opinion. Instead, because of the dialogue, his paper looked more like several pages out of a Ray Bradbury work. He thought he hadn't written the essay yet.

However, the writing which complicates the standard essay form most radically is a "genre" I heard Peter Elbow describe in a Florida CCCC workshop. Because of my background in art, I saw great possibilities in Elbow's idea of a writing collage, in letting students select chunks of their writings and then arrange those pieces in some kind of a whole. I didn't expect students to do much with this concept at first, because, to them, "collage" would mean cutting and pasting magazine pictures on poster board. So this assignment began as a kind of tradeoff: write for me during the semester, and I'll give you a break for the final exam—a take-home collage essay. A year later, however, these had become serious writings.

A collage essay submitted by Lynn Darnell, Fall 1993 (Fig. 1), traces her thinking during the semester. Her paper's main focus is a staple of literacy development, a fat yellow pencil which unifies this piece's structure and content. It spans the text's upper foreground, structurally guiding us into the work and bumping us up against one of her earliest memories of a world created by words and writing. Near the pencil's point, Darnell remembers that "[b]ooks were really important to me while growing up. I still...cannot part from those old story books. Reading was a very big

factor then and it has carried over into my adulthood." An edge from this electronic text works with the pencil's point to "write" the W of "We are taught that their [sic] is a right and wrong answer to everything; therefore many don't venture into creativity in fear of being wrong." Thus, we see that this essay uses the pencil and a printed text about the power of the printed word to blend writing and the written, form and content. But, at the same time, it juxtaposes an opposite and controlling concern which echoes throughout the essay: in addition to the pleasure and power promised through learning to read, this student has experienced a loss.

Her text goes on to explain and support its claim about that promise and loss. Underneath the pencil, a nurturing green field becomes the background for a strip of electronic text: "I explored many fantastic lands. I was Brer Rabbit in the tar patch. I flew over the rainbow to find the good wizard with three friends. Sounds ridiculous," she comments from today's perspective, "but it is true...There is some kind of magic that occurred when I read a book as a child. I was living it." At the left end of the pencil, however, the text articulates the negation of that "magic." This handwritten confession whispers its dilemma in flesh-tinted strokes that are subdued—even concealed—by the glare of the large white strip pasted beside it: "My main problem is that I've never found writing very exciting. I've always looked at it as a task for a grade." These words haven't been pasted or written here casually; they articulate Darnell's perception of writing in traditional classes. The words echo what we hear endlessly—Is this what you want? Will this be part of the grade? Why did you give me this C?—questions which indicate students' lack of control of and responsibility for their own learning.

Although this represents only a partial reading of Darnell's text, it shows how collage essays can be subtle, thought-provoking pieces of writing that integrate form and content smoothly and creatively. These aren't assignments copied from friends; nor are they created the night before or out in the corridor just before class begins. And yet, in spite of the evidence of hours of work, in spite of the tight connections students weave into their writing collages, and in spite of the artistic beauty of some of them, I conceal these writings from most of my colleagues. They would be indignant, some outraged, that I label this type of work "essay," that I give credit for such "bits of fluff" in a college English class.

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A "Shoe" cartoon by Jeff MacNelly reveals an awareness of essays which we need to notice. A slightly altered version shows Skyler sitting alone in a classroom, struggling to write an assignment. "Math is such a drag," he mutters to himself. "Every question has a precise, exact answer. What good is that?' he asks; "real life isn't precise." In the next square Skyler pinpoints the trouble: "Math is all black or white, right or wrong." And, then, he realizes: "there aren't any precise answers in real life—just a series of gray areas and to deal with the gray areas in life, you have to be flexible...you have to be able to roll with the punches and know how to wing it.... Good grief," he finally mutters. "I think life is an essay" (*Charleston Daily Mail*, 2/25/90).

I've often wished my colleagues and my students shared Skyler's awareness that essays—like life— don't come in one form only, right or wrong, black or white, thesis first, two to three paragraphs per page, a minimum of five paragraphs for each essay with transitional devices arranged strategically. Rather, essay writing grew out of a need for flexibility, a need to accommodate a mass of information in plain, unadorned English—instead of in Latin. We should remember its roots and its need for flexibility.

In "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy" (*CCC* October 1992), Lillian Bridwell-Bowles expresses her belief that "teaching students to write involves teaching them ways to critique not only their material and their potential readers' needs, but also the rhetorical conventions that they are expected to employ within the academy" (349). Although she views teachers' changing the forms of student writings (e.g., the essay) as "tinkering on the surface" (350) and would have us making deep structure changes in the social and political view of language and the creation of texts (349), this "tinkering on the surface" is a necessary first step. This isn't to say that we should abandon the traditional English essay, but we do need new forms "if," as she says, "we are to express ways of thinking that have been outside the dominant culture" (349). If we want to empower our students, to give them the responsibility of critically describing and assessing what they write, if we want to build that passive—and imagined—audience into students' writings (as the dialogue essay does), we must question our notion of a final essay and expand it. How can we support an assumption that we can shift to a modern pedagogy for teaching writing, that we can introduce innovative writing experiences and, at the same time, carry with us traditional assumptions about the shape of that writing?

Figure 1

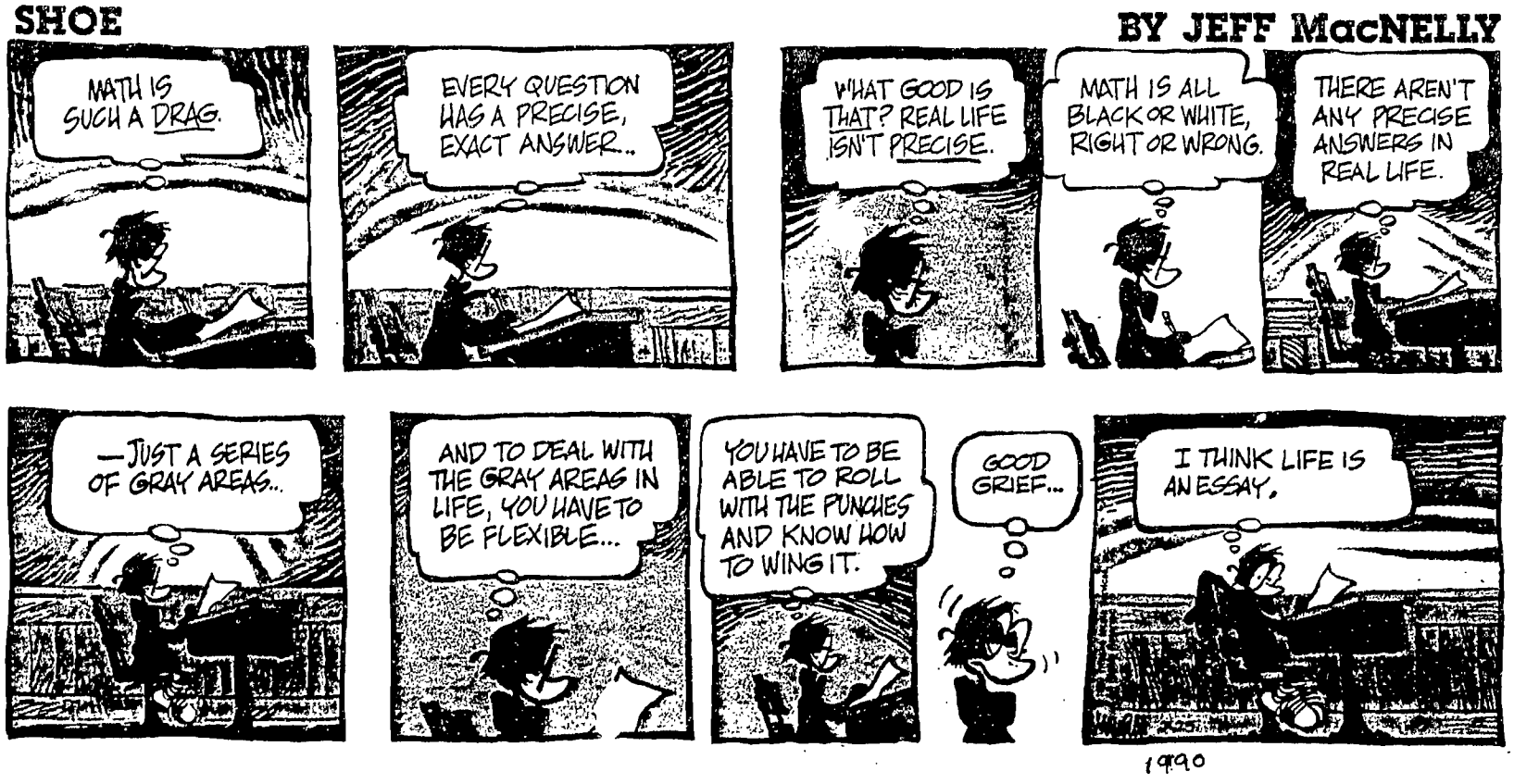

Figure 2