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ABSTRACT

Two interviews, one with an experienced instructor of General Education Development (GED) classes and another with a student working towards a GED, provided a neophyte instructor with insight into the similarities and the differences between the composition teaching techniques learned in college and those which seem to be effective in teaching GED students. Among teaching strategies that work for GED are daily student journal or notebook entries, the five-paragraph essay, and a review of grammar rules. Students' social, educational, personal, and educational identities shape their needs in the classroom and, thus, the teaching methods required. This teaching experience suggests questions about the validity of the GED test in terms of its grammar-plus-essay format, its time limits, and its lack of feedback. Researchers should concentrate on how college composition and adult education are related. (CR)

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CCCC
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Paradigm Paradox in Adult Education

During the 1994-95 school year, I taught composition to students who were preparing for the General Education Development Test. Although I had taught college composition for five previous semesters, I found myself in a different universe. The methods I had learned, the paradigm I had adopted seemed irrelevant. The discrepancies between techniques espoused by college composition and adult education compelled me to write this paper.

For this presentation I interviewed two individuals with whom I had a professional relationship for one year. The first, whom I'll call Jean, is fellow instructor who has taught GED classes for eight years. We taught GED together at the same campus location: her students had 10-12th grade reading skills, and my students had seven to eighth grade reading skills. We both taught composition.

I also interviewed a student, whom I will call Annie. Annie studied composition with both Jean and myself. She is still working towards her GED. Although Jean's participation is more prominent in this paper, Annie's participation helped me to focus on the specific needs of specific students, an idea that hovers over this entire topic.

The two interviews and my year-long teaching experience led me to notice both similarities and differences between the techniques I learned to teach composition and what seemed to be effective for GED students.

First of all, I was relieved to find that one of my teaching strategies seemed to be helpful to the adult learners. I insisted that each student start each day with a journal or notebook entry. Usually I would write a question or prompt on the board, and they would reply to that prompt in their notebooks. I read their entries only if they wanted me to. I would also comment on them, striving to begin a written conversation in their notebooks. I would not correct spelling or grammar because I was using the journal writing as a way to build their confidence and comfort in writing. Down the hall, Jean also gave her students daily journal topics; however, she read and corrected each entry. The students would then review her corrections and comments, and if the students had time, they would rewrite the entry. Jean was focusing on correct writing. Without suggesting that one method was "better," I would like to suggest that we used these journals for different purposes. These different purposes made me wonder how to effectively balance my students' need for confidence with their need to learn grammar.

Essay writing also required me to face another theoretical question: what of the immortalized five paragraph essay? Is it a blight or a blessing? One of the first techniques I learned when teaching college composition was to identify my student's five-paragraph essays and try to convince them that this format, although highly useful for essay tests, can be very stifling. Scholars have pointed out how the five paragraph essay can be useful to teach beginning writers because, as Thomas Nunnally points out, it "provides for the effective inculcation of concepts such as unity, coherence, and development" (67). Many college composition instructors would agree with Nunnally's description, as well as his comment that

> "[s]tudents need to understand that they practice on the [five-paragraph essay] to learn the principles of effective composition, principles that can be aplied to any writing task, not to master a single format that will answer all their writing needs" (70).

The five-paragraph essay seems to mark a developmental stage in writing skills, a stage that I was supposed to help my students transcend by learning different organizational strategies.

My new adult learners were not at the same place on this developmental timeline, so my teaching could not be the same. As basic writers, many adult education students find the five-paragraph format extremely helpful in preparing for the GED exam. In fact, Jean, the longtime GED instructor who participated in this case study, openly teaches this format to her students, except that she bills it as the "at least four paragraph essay." When assigning essays, Jean sits down with the students and starts with a review of basic grammar rules. Then she explains the format she would like the students to use, the standard five-paragraph essay, although she requires only four paragraphs, which translates as only two main points/main paragraphs in the body of the essay. Then she gives the students the topic she wants them to write. The students produce a first draft, which Jean corrects, comments on, and returns to the students to revise. Jean requires students to produce one essay per week. Usually one day is set aside as the essay day; thus, the student usually only had time to revise the paper once because of time constraints; however, our mutual student Annie recalled usually producing four drafts for Jean. This essay format seems to effectively prepare the students for the forty-five minute impromptu essay test on the GED. Annie suggests that Jean's methods have stuck with

her: she usually tries to, in her words, "write something," whether a letter, diary entry, story or essay, every day.

Along with essay writing, perhaps the ultimate composition controversy is grammar instruction. The GED test requires students to pass a 55-question grammar section in which the student has to select the grammatically correct sentence out of a series of choices. Obviously, if the adult learner is going to pass the current form of the GED test, they are going to have to know their grammar rules. This aspect of the GED test and students' preparation compelled me to ask another earth-shaking question: what is the role of grammar instruction, in college composition and in adult education?

Another "rule" I had learned in graduate school is that traditional grammar instruction without direct application to students writing is not effective. An article by Janice Neulieb and Irene Brosnahan suggests that the current paradigm in composition instruction provides three effective methods to teach grammar. The first two methods go together; they are sentence combining and essay writing. Daiker, Kerek, and Morenburg's 1979 research supports the use of these two activities (Neulieb and Brosnahan 30). The third method is Shaughnessy's error analysis, in which the students work on the errors in their own writing (Neulieb and Brosnahan 30). Current theories do not recommend workbook activities.

Of course, the grammar instruction in the adult education class proved just as baffling to me as my encounter with the still-kicking five-paragraph essay. Jean's teaching style combines aspects of both the current and current-traditional methods. As I mentioned earlier, before Jean introduces the assigned essay topic, and even before she reveals the format of the star-studded five-paragraph essay, she reviews grammar rules,

such as "compound sentences, capital letters, and paragraph indentations." She practices her own sort of "error analysis" when she corrects the students' essays. Yet Jean also defies the current paradigm by assigning textbook grammar exercises. Sometimes these exercises directly relate to the errors the students have made in their writing, but as a rule this is just a coincidence. So, as with journal assignments and essay assignments, the grammar assignments in Jean's adult education classroom seem to break the rules of the current composition paradigm.

While Jean's teaching style is difficult to label, it is effective. According to her, she is successful—even highly successful. Without the benefit of hard statistics, she estimates her students' success rate with the writing section of the GED as well above 50 percent. In fact, she estimates it to be as high as 80 or 90 percent. If this self report is correct, then we as college teachers perhaps need to pay closer attention to what is going on in the far-off reaches of adult education.

I am not suggesting that Jean's patented use of corrected journals, five-paragraph essays, and grammar exercises should be adopted in the college composition classroom. The General Education Development Test is not a college entrance exam; it is supposed to indicate a competence that is the equivalent of a high school graduate. Therefore, the teaching methods of the adult education classroom in which I taught might be best compared with secondary school classrooms. In fact, Jean stated quite bluntly, "High schools could learn a lot from the GED test." Yet many of the basic writers in college classrooms might benefit from methods adult learners use in GED classrooms.

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is how varied different writing classrooms can be, and how students' social, educational, personal, and educational

identities shape their needs in the classroom. This discussion of teaching methods merely skims the surface of composition theory; however, it does suggest to me that the different goals of writing classes will produced different discourse conventions. While students preparing for the GED test are learning the discourse conventions needed to pass the test, in the college classroom our discourse conventions are different. What shocked me is how the specific goals of the classrooms seem to dictate different strategies. Do both the GED classroom and the college composition classroom have the same basic goal in mind: competent written communication, or does the GED test and its required preparation speak to different educational goals? If so, what are the ramifications of these goals in terms of theory and practice?

This project has produced more questions than answers, and that was my intended purpose. In addition, none of this information may be new to you. As a neophyte in composition instruction, though, I found myself stunned by the different requirements of teaching writing to college students and adult learners. The experience suggests several questions about the validity of the GED test in terms of its grammar-plus-essay format, its time limits, and its lack of feedback. On a larger scale, I do think this subject points researchers that needs further study: namely, how are college composition and adult education related? Where do the theories and practice converge? The research should lead to some answers, and more importantly, more questions.

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