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ABSTRACT

A basic writing course instructor attempted to facilitate her students' survival in the academy by demystifying writing conventions while teaching them how to analyze discourses about literacy, especially in relation to cultural and economic forces. Students were asked to design an ideal basic writing course as a final journal assignment. Instruction in the institutionalized definition of "good writing" was what they wanted most. The "empowering" assignments the instructor had considered successful (letters to the editor, demanding crackdowns on drug-infested housing projects, for example) had no place. Students' responses from the following semester helped the instructor to realize that her students felt that a mastery of sophisticated grammar constructions would guarantee their place in the middle class, while the "real world" writing she required, supported as it was by examples from their own lives, identified them as lower class economically, an identity they cared not to confront. Three student essays are attached. (RS)

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4 C's Presentation: April 2, 1998

Critical Literacy in "White Ethnic" Classrooms: When Empowered Writing Reveals Class

My paper this evening is an extension of an ongoing debate concerning one of the most crucial issues in the field of composition: the purpose of a composition course. Carol Severino, in a recent review essay, outlined the key differences of two dominant approaches in the field today:

> Is the purpose of a composition course to help students fit into society or to convince them to change it? Should composition be a professional course that facilitates survival in academic and corporate communities--an instrumentalist approach that fosters "cultural reproduction" or should it be a cultural studies course that teaches the critical skills and crucial facts necessary for political activism in an age of "information overload and ethical brownout"? (74).

In the context of Jeff Smith's "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics," I will be talking about two basic writing courses. In one, I attempted to facilitate my students' survival in the academy by demystifying writing conventions while teaching them how to analyze discourses about literacy, especially in relation to cultural and economic forces. In the other course that followed, I received the essay distributed to you ["Learning from a Mistake," Appendix A]. In the first course, I asked students to design an ideal basic writing course as a final journal assignment. Using my students' own words, I show that instruction in the institutionalized

definition of "good writing" was what they wanted most. In particular, they wanted to learn how to use punctuation (semicolons, for instance) not easily heard in oral discourse. The "empowering" assignments I had considered successful (letters to the editor, demanding crackdowns on drug-infested housing projects, for example) had no place. Perplexed by their responses then, the student's response from the following semester ("Learning from a Mistake") helped me to realize that my students felt that mastery of sophisticated grammar constructions would guarantee their place in the middle class, while the "real world" writing I required, supported as it was by examples from their own lives, identified them as lower class economically, an identity they cared not to confront.

But first, of course, a story.

"May I see you outside after class?" a young male student timidly asked, as he handed in the requisite diagnostic essay at the end of the first day of class.

"Of course, " I replied. I was ringed by late registrants and was hurriedly scribbling their names and social security numbers on my English 10000 (basic writing) preliminary class list. Five minutes later, laden with papers, syllabi, textbooks, and stapler, I stepped into the hall to find the student anxiously waiting.

"I think there's something you ought to know," he almost whispered. "I haven't been in school for four years."

"I think there's something you ought to know, too,"I replied. "You're the fifth student today to tell me that there's been quite a gap between high school and college. But you're the youngest one by far," I added. "Today's prize goes to the student who's been out over twenty years."

He smiled; relieved, I hoped.

George, as I came to know the student, had another secret to confess. Two weeks into the semester, George needed to speak with me again, inside the classroom this time. "Do you remember that you said that we didn't have to have our personal essay peer reviewed if it was too personal?"

In truth, I hadn't remembered saying that at all, but I had offered that accommodation to other classes where the assignment might produce more personally uncomfortable revelations than the topic George's class was writing in response to: "If I knew then, what I know now. . ." Feeling much like Nick Carraway, I wondered to which secrets locked in George's young heart I was about to become privy. Remembering confessions from other students in other places and other times, I mentally checked off the dreaded possibilities: Was he a drug abuser? A victim of child abuse? A murderer? No, George's source of embarrassment is found in the first paragraph of his essay: George was a Voc. Ed. Student.

George and Bunny and Eva, two other students you will hear from in this presentation, are typical of students in all of my courses at the Trumbull campus of Kent State. They're the "invisible" students Bruce Horner speaks of in "Discoursing Basic Writing," the whites of working class backgrounds, who "lack both academic preparation and interest in political activism" (202). Descendants of "downsized" automobile workers, anxious about their class status, they have come to college to secure higher-paying jobs. They're returning students, mostly, and the majority are women--more often than not, single mothers with long overdue child support payments. But my basic writing classes at Kent look nothing like the far more ethnically diverse classes in Florida or at the University of Las Vegas, Nevada, where I taught before

coming to Kent. Until George's class, I had never had a person of color enrolled in my basic writing course at Kent; nor had I, until this semester, ever faced a student whose first language was not English. Her language, unlike that of the "Marias" and "Aurelios" I taught in Florida and Nevada is Russian, not Spanish.

Distanced though my students at Kent may be in time and place from the original Basic Writers who arrived on CUNY's campus almost three decades ago, their work and mine, as Bruce Horner argues, is impacted by the conditions that follow Basic Writers into the classroom: "health problems, lack of child care, inadequate financial aid, and a history of inadequate schooling" (215). Yet while both my students and I are aware of the effects of such contstraints on the work they and I produce, "Basic Writing discourse gives little space to addressing such issues as intrinsic to teaching and learning" (Horner 215).

In this paper, I will give space to what remains even more silent in Basic Writing discourse: the deeprooted fears of unemployment and downward mobility and a sense of loss of control of their lives that my students bring to class and the silence that can result when their writing reveals their diminished class status. George's paper hints at a fear of downward mobility and clearly shows that he has come to school to gain the credentials to advance his future. Students like George, even more than those middle class students who are trying to join the elite, don't, to quote Smith, "consider the rules of English as mere arbitrary ways of sorting people by social class, rules like those that govern which fork to use, but instead would like to learn those rules and assume teachers are there to teach them" (304).

What I have come to believe from interacting with the students we'll hear from this evening is that "we *are* ethically bound by students' own aims, even if those aims seem

uncomfortably close to elite values. Our distrust of such values does not permit us to tell students what they 'really' want, or should want" (Smith 317).

That my students have arrived with a history of inadequate schooling is evidenced in letters and journal entries written early in the term. George's introductory letter, for example, begins:

> Dear Dr. Hourigan,
>
> Writing is my weak spot. I get really nervous and upset when I have to write an essay. I want to overcome this fear and want to be confident in my writing skills. My major is pharmacy, and I need to go all the way through English II. When I found out that I had to go that far in English to be a pharmacist, I almost changed majors. . . ."
>
> My problem is mainly punctuation. I get really confused where to put commas, periods, and semicolons. I cannot even remember what a semicolon is used for. In junior high, I was given bad grades in English, and I tried really hard. I would ask questions about punctuation and the answers I would get were: "We already went over that.: Or "You should have been listening."

George's feelings are not unusual. Both Eva and Bunny, two returning women students, demonstrated the same fears in their first journal entries in the spring of 1996. Bunny wrote:

> I didn't like reading or writing. I never really did. I could never write exactly what I am thinking or write what I want to say and have anyone understand it. I jump from subject to subject all in one paragraph. I write like I talk. If I take a breath then a comma goes there. If I ask a question the question mark is put in. If

> I'm done then a period. . . .I was never really taught how to write essays, so I never did write any essays. . . .Besides all of this I never thought I would go to College.

Eva's experiences were, in part, more positive::

> I enjoy to write when it is for my own personal use or enjoyment. I like writing letters to friends. When I am asked to write a paper for a class then feelings of failure overwhelm me. I have very little concept of how to set up a research or essay paper. . . .Punctuation and spelling need to be put in at the right places. . . .With these feelings how can I possibly do it and get a good grade.

And all three students were just as clear about their goals: George wrote: "My goal is to write without fear and to be confident in what I am writing. I want to learn about punctuation marks and the best way to use them. I would like to participate in class sessions without feeling stupid because I should have known something and did not. I am also hoping to have perfect attendance. In his midterm letter evaluation letter, George noted, "Commas are still very confusing for me, as well as semicolons. I would like to have more training in that area so I could feel more confident in my work. I would like to learn when to use a hyphen or a dash between words properly such as "teen-age." What is the purpose of having a hyphen between those two words?"

Bunny and Eva were returning students who lived on the same street and came to class together, at least when Eva's car worked. I didn't learn of Bunny's and Eva's goals until the end of the semester, when I had them design an ideal Basic Writing course in a journal entry. They were students in the course where I attempted to demystify writing conventions in the process of

analyzing discourses of literacy. Listen to Bunny, the student who could not write an essay, in a paper I considered successful ["Do They Serve and Protect," Appendix B]:

Bunny had identified a problem and called on her community to join together to solve it. I advised Bunny to send the letter to the editor of the local paper.

In her essay, Eva is addressing an audience of professionals interested in improving American schools. After a model summary of an article by Gerald Leinwald in which he debunks *A Nation at Risk* she concludes:

> I do agree with Leinwand's statistic on why children become dropouts, he says that if children felt they were achieving some success by being in school, they would stay. My son Peter is in ninth grade and attends Warren Western Reserve High School. I was recently informed that he has failed Algebra, therefore his teacher would prefer that he be sent to D-Hall, a study hall where the child can do whatever the child would like instead of getting the proper education he is suppose to be receiving. I feel that they should of foreseen Peter was having a problem earlier on in the school year. They could have prevented this outcome and placed him in an easier math class or gave him a tutor to help him through the Algebra. By placing Peter in a D-Hall class it only prevents him from seeing the importance of his education and gives him the message that the next class he comes up against and has a problem with that he can solve it himself by getting F's so he will be sent to a D-Hall where he is not learning anything. He will never achieve that sense of achievement or success by just being looked over and set aside.

At the end of this Eva's paper, I had written, "I've fixed some of your mechanical errors that

come from trying more sophisticated sentence patterns. I hope that you will write a letter to the principal arguing against D-Hall. Try not to let the school fast track your son into the dropout lane." Knowing that Eva lived on the same street as Bunny, I believed Eva's son might be just the sort of student a school in a lower class neighborhood would track into vocational education, and I was pleased to see Eva analyze a discourse of literacy not only in relation to cultural and economic forces in general but especially in relation to the cultural and economic forces in her own life.

It was after Bunny and Eva had written these papers that I asked students in their class to design an ideal Basic Writing course. Imagine my surprise when I saw Eva's and Bunny's journal entries, especially in light of what I considered successful essays (and considering I was expecting then to construct a mirror images of the pedagogy I had employed):

[Eva's Journal Appendix C]

Note how seriously Eva accepted the assignment, setting up her response as a proposal worthy of a Curriculum and Instruction Committee. Note, too, her goals--quite removed, indeed, from the goals I had outlined for the course.

Bunny's response, while less formal, was clear about appropriate goals:

> I believe English 10000 should be actual English not writing. We should be learning about subjects, subject-verb, irregular verbs, verbs, pronouns, nouns, compound subjects, conjunctions, prepositions, and many different punctuations. From there, we should learn about thesis, phrases, clauses, sentence fragments, and etc. . . Writing if any, should be the last few weeks of the semester. Colleges offer courses for writing such as technical writing, and creative writing. If writing

is what you want to do, then these two classes are the courses you should take.

It was in analyzing the silence that George's response to the "If I Knew Then What I Know Now" essay effected that I was able to read Eva's and Bunny's surprising (to me) constructions of an ideal Basic Writing course. That George considers his message an important one is apparent in the final two paragraphs of his essay, but until this evening, it has had an audience of three: George, a tutor in the writing center, and me. Interviewing George a couple of months after the completion of the course, I asked him why he had not wanted to share so important a message with his classmates who, like Eva, might have children who could be tracked into vocational education and could benefit from his experience. He was shy, he said, although that was not my reading of George's demeanor in class. When I suggested that he could publish his letter anonymously as a letter to the editor, he replied that he didn't want to do that because it would hurt the feelings of his vocational education teachers who had been so supportive of him. That I believe. I also believe that he did not share his essay with his classmates because he was reluctant to be identified as a Voc. Ed. Student, with all of the attendant negative connotations Mike Rose has so eloquently defined. A key to his reluctance might be found in the letter where he outlined a desire to "participate in class sessions *without feeling stupid because I should have known something and did not.*" [Emphasis added]. Perhaps George felt stupid for thinking "being an auto mechanic was a good idea because I thought they made a lot of money" and for not realizing that he "would probably never make over twenty-five thousand dollars in a year." Some day, if George's earnings as a pharmacist position him comfortably in the middle class, I suspect he will be proud to acknowledge his vocational education background, but until then, deep-rooted fears of "not making it" have resulted not in a potentially powerful discourse of action but in an

essentially unheard discourse confined to teacher, student, and tutor.

But let us return to Bunny and Eva. Had they not been paired as peer editors, perhaps they too, like George, would have asked not to share their papers with their classmates. In retrospect, I am certain that neither Bunny nor Eva sent the letters as I had suggested. Look at what Bunny has revealed about herself in her letter: a neighborhood filled with whorehouses, guns, and drugs. When have any of us here, with the possible exception of when we were in graduate school, lived in such a place? Is this the world of the middle class? If we lived or live in places like Bunny's neighborhood, would we want our colleagues to know? Is it any wonder, then, that Bunny did not want to write in a basic writing course if these revelations were what "real world" writing forced her to uncover?

Bunny's and Eva's desires to be schooled in the institutionalized definition of "good writing" are explained partly, I believe, by their desires to help their school-aged children with their English homework, to help them succeed in school. While both women were comfortably literate in oral discourse, they wanted to learn how to use sophisticated grammar constructions, constructions they identify as badges of the middle class. For them, mastery of semicolons and sentence constructions was an important preparation for the kind of literacy they desired: "literacy of the kind that leads to certification, access . . . to college, the middle class" (Villanueva 633).

Through George's and Eva's and Bunny's letters, papers, and journal entries, I have learned much about my basic writing students' goals in returning to school. While I am no fan of grammar instruction, my students would like to learn the rules of English. Perhaps more reluctantly than Jeff Smith, I, too, have come to believe is that "we *are* ethically bound by students' own aims, even if those aims seem uncomfortably close to elite values. Our distrust of

such values does not permit us to tell students what they 'really' want, or should want" (317).

And so I spend more time with grammar in my Basic Writing course these days, and I try to construct writing assignments that will empower without silencing students who have returned to school to obtain the tools to qualify for "middle class" occupations. Forever sensitized to what writing can reveal, whenever I hand out an assignment, I look carefully at students, trying to read their reactions, alert for an unspoken, "Do you remember that you said that we didn't have to have our personal essay peer reviewed if it was too personal?"

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Appendix A

George Heck

Intro. to English

Dr. Hourigan

September 22 1997

LEARNING FROM A MISTAKE

My junior and senior years were taken at Trumbull County Joint Vocational School (T.C.J.V.S.), and my course of study was Auto Technology. At the time I thought being a mechanic was a good idea because I thought they made a lot of money. During those two years, I learned everything about a car that I needed to know. My grades were really good, and I was very smart when it came to working on cars. I became one of the best students in the class. My teacher would often comment, "If I did not know any better, I would swear that you were born with a wrench in your hand." Comments like that kept me pushing towards my goal: to be a great mechanic. Neither did I know that I was making the worse mistake in my life by going to school there, nor did I know that someday I would regret it.

My parents always encouraged me to do the best that I could, and they wanted me to attend an automotive college, as soon as I graduated from high school. During my last year of high school I got a job at Midas Muffler in Warren, Ohio. I liked my job because it was a lot of fun, and the people I worked with were great because they accepted me even though I was young. I was only working part time because I went to school. In the summer of 1993 I graduated high school; I thought school would never end. I went to work at Midas full-time (fifty hours a

week), making about ten dollars an hour, which I thought was good money. My job varied : repairing brakes, fixing exhaust systems, doing front end repairs, and fixing alignments. I knew my job really well and it was not very long until I started hearing my boss say,"You do really nice work and you make my customers happy." He also told me that I was his best mechanic. After I was there for three years I discovered that I would probably never make over twenty-five thousand dollars in a year. By this time, I was beginning to get annoyed with my job. The work seemed to be picking up and we were busy all of the time, yet our pay never increased. I began to get an attitude with my boss, so I started looking for other work. I could not find another job that paid more money without experience, and the only thing I knew was how to work on a car. There were other garages looking for mechanics to work on cars but they were not paying enough. I began to realize that I had made a mistake in only learning automotive skills. I continued to work at Midas for another year so I could save some money before I quit. Finally I left Midas for another job that paid much better: Local 411 I.B.E.W. (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers).

I would love to go back and change those years in my life. If I had a chance to do it over again, I would have stayed at Chalker High School so I could prepare for college. Back when I graduated from high school and received my diploma, I should have immediately gone to college and worked on my future. If I knew then what I know now, I would not have hesitated for

a second to continue my academics. By now I would have been almost ready to graduate from the College of Pharmacy and would have been on my way to a great future. Instead of spending five years of my life working on a job that was going nowhere, I could have been working on my future.

I would like many of the students who are thinking about going to vocational schools, to read my revision of my life. I think that it could make a big difference to many of the students and their goals in life. At that age, if I had read something like this about someone else, then maybe I would have thought twice before entering the automotive field.

Appendix B

Do They Serve and Protect

In my neighborhood there is a crack house two doors down, and there used to be a whorehouse at the other end of the street. I have complained to the police about it several times. They want me to take care of the problem, before they do anything. I don't feel this is a problem I should be dealing with. However, I have been dealing with this for five years now. I don't feel that the police are doing their job.

I have seen dealers and addicts going to the crack house every day, but when I saw guns fall out of their pockets, I thought something should be done. I called the police and they told me, "There is nothing we can do, unless you take down the license plate numbers of every car that goes over there for a month. Then we can have the house put under surveillance." So I am to get all this information for them and hope I don't get caught. If the drug dealers were to catch me, my family would be in danger.

The last call I made to the police, I felt like I was the criminal. They told me, "If you are scare then move." I should not have to sell my home because they won't do anything about it.

The police say they need the people of our town to help them keep our streets and homes safe. Well when we do, they don't do anything. The people of this town can only do so much without endangering themselves and others. The police should have to do the investigating not the people outside of the police force. The police choose their jobs, so let's see to it they do it. I feel that any call to the police should be answered to the fullest. If the police get more than two calls about the same thing, they should fine the person and/or the persons the complaint was made about. Like some communities let's fight for our rights. Make the police know we did out job and now it's their turn.

Appendix C

Eva's Journal # 12

English 1000: An introductory course designed to teach basic concepts and writing ability needed for entrance to English 10001.

Main Objective: We have students who have been out of school for a long period of time. We will start with a clean late as if knowing nothing or very little.

Goals: (1) learning and usage of Noun, Verb, Adverb, Adjective, Pronoun, Prepositions, Conjunctions: Subordinating and Coordinating, Capitalization, Commas, Apostrophes, Colon and Semi-Colon, and comma splices. When to use a Period, Question Mark, Quotation Mark, Parentheses, and Exclamation Point.

(2) Writing a Paper: To learn the different types and formats to writing a paper, paragraph development, focusing sentences, using facts and opinions, subject and verb agreement, combining sentences, and to learn what a thesis driven paper consists of.

Class Work: a journal: At least two paragraphs written on the material you learned that week in class explaining how to use it using your own examples
Two Written papers: a rough draft consisting of two of the different types and formats of a writing paper and all material learned to date. These papers will be turned in and given a letter grade. It will be up to you whether you want to keep this grade or revise the same piece to try to receive a higher grade.

Mid term and Exit Exams: (1) Midterm exam will be a rough draft of any formatted type and topic chosen by the student using the tools learned in English 1000.

(2) Exit exam will be a revision of the mid term paper written.

Entrance to English 10001 will be based on the performance and grades received for your journal work, your two written papers, and midterm exam and the final exit exam.

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