

Staging an Essay: Play and Playwriting for Redirecting Habits of Mind

David Ellis and Megan Murtha

ABSTRACT: Many first-year students struggle with the transition from high school writing to college writing as higher-order demands are made and new discipline-specific genres are added. Previous writing training can provide a “mental set effect,” old habits of mind, which inhibits growth. Additionally, students receive writing training in courses other than the composition class that may further interfere with development and the acquisition of the critical thinking needed for college writing. In this article, we argue that playwriting exercises, informed by Vygotsky’s theory of play, offer a mode to foster critical thinking common to writing practice across the academy and actuate Burke’s “parlor” of academic discourse. Writing-About-Writing (WAW) after playwriting exercises strengthens writer identity and facilitates the transfer of knowledge to other genres.

KEYWORDS: basic writers; playwriting; play; academic discourse; Vygotsky; Zone of Proximal Development; transfer.

We talk about ideas. And I know that I play with the ideas in order to understand them and fit them together.

-Gregory Bateson in “Metalogue: About Games and Being Serious”

We are failing at our jobs. Or so goes the story about English teachers and First Year Composition (FYC) instructors, fueled by anecdotal “media lament[s] that ‘Johnny or Jenny can’t write’” or by poor showings on standardized tests (Brockman and Taylor, “Threshold”42-43). As Doug Downs observes in “What Is First-Year Composition?” a prevailing sense has taken hold in the public that the charter for FYC to “teach the basic writing skills [such as grammar and punctuation] that employers seek” is not being met “because so many students just can’t write” (50). For Elizabeth Brockman

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and Marcy Taylor, the complaint that their students can’t write came from within their institution but outside the English department. In addition to noting students’ inability to write grammatically, professors from other departments remarked that students also failed to write with the level of logical, complex, and evaluative thought expected in academic discourse (Brockman and Taylor, “Threshold”42, “What Do Professors Really Say?” 76); these are the same features that tend to be dampened by a culture of high stakes writing testing (Frazier 108).

Yet, as our first-year composition students take their seats at the start of the term, we can imagine them as having some confidence in being successful, even if they are simultaneously nervous, as they have at least done well enough to graduate high school and enter college. These students bring with them all the habits, skills, and knowledge gained from varying cultural and formal educations into the college writing classroom. Many hold fast to the lessons of high school, which may have been geared toward strategies for passing high stakes exams, leaving many unprepared to satisfy the higher order demands of FYC as well as the demands made by our colleagues—like Brockman and Taylor’s—outside the English Department, or the expectations of the public charter that Downs identifies.

Recent findings from cognitive neuroscience suggest that once people develop singular and effective modes of tackling repeated tasks, such as the five-paragraph essay form frequently taught in American high schools, an efficient “mental set effect” arises (Crawford and Willhoff 74). The resulting mental efficiency inhibits insight that a novel approach might offer, as the neuroscientists Richard Chi and Allan Snyder report: “Once we have learned to solve problems by one method, we often have difficulties in generating solutions involving a different kind of insight” (qtd. in Crawford and Willhoff 74). Accordingly, previous writing experience and training, even for the most successful high school writers, may act as a mental set effect, preventing students from successfully meeting all the additional higher-order demands of college thinking and writing, and consigning many students to the status of “basic writer.” Additionally, David Russell and Arturo Yañez suggest that students familiar with limited genres of writing will feel alienated by new writing demands, particularly the more specialized and novel the demands are (334). A limited genre, such as the five-paragraph essay geared for an American high school student, or the impromptu standardized timed-writing assessment, can induce a mental set effect, which then leads to alienation as new forms and tasks are called for in college. We come to a kind of Catch-22: the singular mental set effect established in high school, or even in test-prep

workshops, limits insight while the introduction of new modes in college composition or other classes, contributes to alienation.

In these difficult moments, the pathways of transfer of prior knowledge into college writing competency, including FYC or basic writing, can be precarious. Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Yancey identify three main outcomes as students attempt to make use of their prior writing knowledge and practice: the nearly identical repetition of old writing habits; the reworking of former skills to fit new tasks; or the self-creation of new knowledge or practice after a “critical incident” or setback. Students’ skills or trained habits can become a crutch, utilized by some as tools which enable them to gain steadiness as they grow and learn as writers, or, more likely, as Chi and Snyder’s work suggests, they become debilitating implements, clutched at as the only means of support. What practices, then, can we implement that can mitigate—without a set-back—mere repetition of old habits, and encourage not just a re-working of former skills, but help generate new knowledge that reflects the complex, evaluative logic that professors across disciplines are clamoring for? In short, how do we disrupt mental set-effects in order to engage students in lively correspondences across genres?

These are developmental concerns as much as they are transfer concerns. Accordingly, they align with the familiar Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) schema, which serves as the basis for the teacher’s role as a guide who assists the student during learning activities until the student gains independent steadiness (*Mind in Society* 91; Dixon Krauss 18). The student, basic writer or otherwise, starts in what could be called the Comfort Zone, the space where she feels comfortable tackling familiar tasks as part of her mental set effect. For the basic writer, this Comfort Zone may consist of a series of stable rules about writing do’s and don’ts—for the five-paragraph form or standardized writing exams. Even if students struggle to implement them, these rules feel familiar. Alternately, new and challenging tasks are within the Anxiety Zone, a space where the student feels unprepared and temporarily unable to accomplish tasks without guidance, such as the seemingly vast, looming land of the higher-order requirements of college writing. At last, in between these two zones is the Proximal Zone, so key to basic writing theory, where with the aid of the instructor offering tools and assistance, the student can cross over into self-sufficiency.

For the many FYC and Basic Writing instructors influenced by ZPD principles, including us, it is tempting to see our classes as a type of boot camp where we train students for the writing battles they will encounter as they move into the intellectual rigors of college life. Unlike boot camp,

FYC—whether particularly designed for basic writers or a general population class with basic writers in it—usually doesn’t occur before what it is preparing its charges for—college life. Most students experience their composition course as just one class among several where writing instruction occurs. All new writing students, but especially basic writers, are thereby vulnerable to the sense of alienation that arises from the multitude of new writing genres and challenges that Russell and Yañez have identified.

Moreover, it is likely only a portion of the writing instruction in other courses will clearly echo the instruction students receive in FYC or BW simply because discipline-specific courses have their own primary concerns and vocabularies. The writing teacher is one voice among many, competing with not only the writing habits that students bring with them, but also a wealth of new instruction from other classes that may be in seeming conflict with what they receive in their writing classrooms. The student may bounce back and forth between a “writing to learn” approach encouraging inquiry in one class and in the next be “learning to write” within the confines of a particular discipline, where mastery over course content is expected to be displayed with all the rule-bound trappings of a discipline-specific paper. For the student who is unable to rapidly synthesize a limited pre-college writing education with the bewildering spectrum of new approaches, the varieties of writing in college can exacerbate the natural disorientation that comes with being a new student. As the looming Anxiety Zone widens in these fractures among the disciplines, the Comfort Zone of an acquired mental set effect offers an especially enticing retreat. The effect may be to see these students’ writing, both within and outside of writing courses, as lacking, as seen in the charges leveled against Brockman, Taylor, and their colleagues that students “can’t write” (42).

In what follows, we attend to the mental set effects of many of those entering FYC, with special attention paid to basic writers, and the unsatisfactory writing that results when students retreat to old habits. We turn to the classic developmental psychology work of Lev Vygotsky and play theory in search of methods that can disrupt these mental set effects, through which students open new avenues for “self-creation of new knowledge” without having to first face a “critical incident” (Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey). We then present a series of writing exercises that fall within Vygotsky’s theories, developed to promote the habits of mind necessary for college writing as defined by the 2011 “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” by the CWPA, NCTE, and NWP, as well as to prepare students for participation in the traditional modes of academic discourse (1). These exercises vary

in their design, some more tailored toward creative and critical thinking, others laying groundwork for discourse in the mode of the Burkean parlor. Still others are designed to foment writer identity and participation in the traditions of David Bartholomae and Roz Ivanic (Bird 62-63).

We don't want these exercises to operate only within a vacuum of isolated assignments, but rather to function as tools that develop fundamental features of writing that travel across projects. Accordingly, we then explore how coupling them with metacognitive writing assignments, which call for a reflective self-analysis of writing process (Downs and Wardle 561-62), can help bridge the gaps between the simpler "low road" transfer found in moving from a dialogue-driven writing exercise, to an academic-discourse-as-conversation model and a more complex "high road" transfer found in moving from FYC modes of inquiry to discipline-specific writing genres (Perkins and Salomon, qtd. in Donahue 149).

BACK TO THE COMFORT ZONE

In a recent issue of *JAEPL*, Ryan Crawford and Andreas Willhoff draw upon the latest neuroscience research based on fMRI scans of brains and other techniques during problem-solving activities to gain a clearer biological understanding of the processes of routinized thought and inhibited creativity (74). Researchers have found the brain returns to the old "mental templates of well-routinized representations and strategies" to form solutions as an efficient method of cutting through the noise of new information (Chi and Snyder, qtd. in Crawford and Willhoff 75). By artificially stimulating the brain—activating the right hemisphere while inhibiting activity in the left—researchers have shown that the mental set effect can be avoided (75). Crawford and Willhoff argue that similar positive effects can be achieved in the FYC classroom through the "stillness" and "incubation" (79) offered by meditation practices. What the studies suggest is that we seem to be hard-wired to resist novel thinking approaches when inundated with new and conflicting information and that the breaking down of old habits requires novel approaches that don't activate routine. Perhaps even the most dedicated first-year students, the ones most eager to become more advanced writers, may be working against natural cognitive patterns that keep them repeating old thinking and writing forms that need to be disrupted before they are able to become better writers.

In particular, Crawford and Willhof characterize the mental set effect that results from the writing training of most students who have come up

through American public schools: students have "overlearned" certain writing practices "taken as gospel during secondary education," such as "the five-paragraph theme, grammatical rules, sentence and paragraph exercises"; and of these, the first-year composition instructor "must disabuse students" to engage them more successfully (74). Many students, perhaps basic writers especially, seem to start out locked into these rules and practices even if they haven't yet mastered them, perhaps fearful that without these tricks of the trade, standardized writing tests will be impossible to pass.

Such overlearning of limited forms holds for students other than Americans fresh out of the public school system. At our institutions, a large, urban private university and a small, urban private college in the Catholic tradition, respectively, we also have growing populations of international and recently immigrated students who may have little to no exposure to American writing conventions yet whose cultural and educational backgrounds have already shaped their mental set effects. Many international students come from collectivist cultures like China and other East Asian countries² and bring with them a set of social-cultural values and writing conventions that may conflict with those of college composition in the U.S., including a mode of indirectness that counters our own strident individualism (Scollon 113).

In his article, "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition," Fan Shen chronicles the clashes which occurred between his Chinese cultural and formal educations and the requirements of American college writing as he navigated varying disciplines (459). He describes the ideological and logical conflicts that can occur when writing in English within an American college, noting his own conflicts with the social and cultural ideologies he acquired growing up in China (459). Ron and Suzanne Scollon identify such conflicts as a consequence of the two views of self in Western and East Asian cultures (113). American academic conventions can be seen as speaking "bluntly" or "immodestly" in many East Asian countries and they were difficult for Shen to adapt once in the U.S. Directives from his writing instructors to "just write what *you* think" left him befuddled (emphasis is Shen's). Shen writes, "I found that I had to reprogram my mind, to redefine some of the basic concepts and values that I had about myself, about society, and about the universe, values that had been imprinted and reinforced in my mind by my cultural background, and that had been part of me all my life" (460).

If Shen's experience and Scollon's assertions are at all representative, the task for student and teacher is substantial. The "reprogramming" that Shen speaks of becomes the directive for the students like him that Scollon

identifies. Without the redefinition of self in relation to the world at large, they may fall into the category of students that David Bartholomae identifies in “Inventing the University,” those basic writers that the university has “failed to involve” in “scholarly projects. . . that would allow them to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise” (11). While a student like Shen is culturally or ideologically shut out of participation, American-reared basic writers are likewise kept from participation by “overlearning” rules for a single form that does not invite them in as academic colleagues, and they may simply retreat to the Comfort Zone of what worked in the past, that is, by mimicking forms without a real consciousness of what is desired (Crawford and Willhoff 74; Bartholomae 11). Both ends of the spectrum—the hard-driving argumentation encouraged by standardized tests on one side and the subtle claims couched in the wisdom of experts on the other—may keep students from developing the critical reasoning and active participation in the academic enterprise when relied on too heavily in FYC, BW, or across the disciplines. When students operating under such mental set effects are asked to analyze and interpret source texts, the retreat into old habits keeps texts at a distance, encased in authority, rather than being seen as living documents with which the student can engage intellectually.

In exploring the intersections of social identity theory and basic writing pedagogy, Barbara Bird suggests that without a conversation between students, texts, and ideas, basic writers will be ill-equipped to join the discourse. As she says, “[a]pproaches to curriculum and pedagogy that only emphasize cognitive knowledge not only limit students’ understanding as whole beings, but they also reduce the impact of learning since students may not internalize the community understandings” (63). In many cases, the writing that results from such limited engagement remains merely practical, a prescribed arrangement of concepts lacking synthesis or inquiry. Bird warns, “If basic writing students do not understand academic writing purposes, their efforts will be focused on mimicking textual features instead of developing an authentic engagement with content” (65).

How, then, do we as writing teachers design work that will help the student—no matter the educational and cultural background—shed thinking and writing habits held in mental set effects and holding them back from developing more? How do we build upon and honor the needed formal and cultural educations they arrive with, while also helping them become ever more self-sufficient, autonomous, “truly human” questioning Freirian thinkers? Additionally, how do we help students discover writing and thinking principles that can more readily transfer to other college

writing tasks? These questions apply to all writers, yet become even more salient for students who are non-native speakers of English, or who come from historically marginalized communities.

VYGOTSKY, PLAY, AND PLAYWRITING

To address these questions, we turned to the still relevant human development classic *Mind in Society* to see what Vygotsky’s theories could tell us about the teaching of writing. We had seen that writing assignments with a playwriting component generated more critical engagement from students than other assignments. The writing itself improved along with the engagement, yet we didn’t have a clear understanding of why. Vygotsky’s work reveals fundamental features of thinking that can serve as a foundation for writing praxis. In addition to utilizing the ZPD framework from *Mind in Society*, we also borrow other related propositions, namely his ideas revolving symbolic action in play and inner-speech. The critical proposal of Vygotsky that revealed to us why these exercises worked was this: “the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge” (24). We see in this claim that the dialectical joining of practical, mostly physical, activity and the abstract, conceptual realm of what Vygotsky calls inner speech serves as the basis for human consciousness (25-27). Play is fundamental to cognitive development as it offers an arena for learners to combine speech and action intentionally: “play is imagination in action” (97). What we draw in particular from Vygotsky is that the physical and performative iterations of thought are disruptive to mental set effects, enabling the subject to break through stuck spots, old habits, and the Anxiety Zone of thinking.

Specifically for composition and rhetoric studies, play of this kind can fall under the rubric of semiotic remediation practices as put forward by Paul Prior, Julie Hengst, Kevin Roozen, and Jody Shipka (33). They propose that the multimodality of this sort of play—in activities like a family pretend game, a scripted dance performance arising out of work from a FYC classroom, or a comedy skit—go beyond play; rather, they are situated and remediated dialogic practices that demonstrate a complex weaving of “historical trajectories or (re)productions, reception, distribution, and representations” that rise to a level of meaning-making analogous to academic discourse (734). The authors draw from Erving Goffman’s notion of keying,

or “non-serious” activity, but not “unimportant” activity, that operates outside of a primary frame, such as an essay (738). Developed in line with the ideas of Gregory Bateson (738), Goffman’s practices of “keying” as semiotic remediation become not only “instances of communication (externalized exchanges), but also engines of distributed cognition and moments in the ongoing, historical, and dialogic production of people, societies, and environments” (762). In this sense, these types of activities, while playful, echo many of the properties of academic discourse. They more closely align with natural processes of socio-cultural genesis of individuals and societies as well as the habits of mind called for by the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” more so than the simplified writing of high-stakes testing as Frazier identifies.

If what Vygotsky proposes holds true—that “in play a child deals with things as having meaning” (Vygotsky 98)³—then writing exercises founded in these principles could provide a method for developing consciousness much as Prior and his co-authors have formulated. We are considering consciousness in an academic frame as an umbrella term that covers the crucial habits of mind of curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, flexibility, and metacognition (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP), and we imagined what the parallel of *play* might be in a college composition classroom of young adults. We wondered if this sort of conscious and intellectually developmental *playing* could be captured within a play, specifically, a stage play written out in a script utilizing ideas, concepts, characters, or authors drawn from source texts so that they could then be actively re-conceptualized by the student writer. We considered the imagined physicality that playwriting calls for to be analogous to the types of play scenarios that Vygotsky employed when investigating cognitive development in young learners.

The immediate rationale for playwriting is two-fold: firstly, the student is hard-pressed not to return to habits of a mental set effect (neither the five-paragraph nor any other traditionally academic form is an option) and, secondly, the student cannot complete the task without actively using her imagination to enact a “radically altered” relationship to reality and, hopefully, igniting “significant intellectual development” (Vygotsky 25). If source texts are used, these must be re-imagined in order to fit within the form, or as Bateson says, “play[ed]” with in order to “understand them and fit them together” (4). The necessary re-contextualization invites a deeper reading and discourages mere repetition, even as the playwriting form, in using source texts, invites students into what Douglas Hesse (noting com-

position and creative writing intersections) might call a “Burkean parlor constituted differently” (41).

THE TASKS AND THE STUDENTS

The exercises that follow promote our aim to disrupt returns to the Comfort Zone and overlearned forms, while encouraging student participation in the “academic enterprise” (Bartholomae 11). We use these exercises with generally equal success at our two home institutions in general population courses as well as ones designed for ESL students, or for students who have been placed in a developmental class because of an intake assessment, many of whom are also ESL. The exercises have a few variations with different objectives depending on desired outcomes or places they mark within the writing process. But generally, we have three categories: 1) generative writing for its own sake, 2) pre-writing before a scaffolded formal essay, or 3) revision writing as intervention for students who have produced unsatisfactory drafts of a formal essay. These exercises can also explicitly ask for students to include themselves as characters within the scene to foster “the affective and holistic personhood of the learner” and so promote writer identity of the kind that Bird advocates (63), though not every iteration makes that demand. The excerpts that follow come from the same class group, an ESL FYC section for speakers who all had six or fewer years of English language instruction and who could likely be categorized as basic writers (no formal writing assessment was administered). The course title “What is Thinking?” highlights the metacognitive and epistemological themes central to the class, which were specifically chosen to underline the role of critical thinking in writing. All the readings for the class—ranging from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, selections from Oliver Sacks, *Rhinoceros*, and the Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo—touch upon some aspect of thinking and its relationship to identity. In keeping with departmental guidelines, students are required to write three formal essays during the term after completing a series of exercises and multiple drafts. Each essay requires multiple sources.

For all of the exercises, students were asked to imagine a circumscribed space in which they could conceptualize new ideas in contact. Depending on the particular assignment, the characters conceived by each student could be embodiments of concepts, writers of source texts, characters borrowed from source texts or any number of iterations. Whatever the iteration, the students were invited to imagine a physical setting populated with embodied characters that they were then charged to give voice to.

CONCEPTS MEETING ON A BRIDGE: THE WRITING THAT RESULTED

As preparation for a short formal definition essay, students were asked to define “thinking.” The exercise did not require outside texts, though the ultimate essay did. To help with the definition work, students were asked to contrast “thinking” with other terms typically associated with it, such as “reflecting,” “analyzing,” “imagining,” and “daydreaming.” Students chose three terms, one of which had to be “thinking,” and were asked to personify and imagine the various concept terms as self-aware agents. (What would they wear? How would they react to or observe their surroundings? How are they different from each other? On what would they agree with each other? On what might they disagree?) Then they were to place the three characters in a location of their own choosing, which they were to draw before articulating in writing. After completing the drawing of the setting, they wrote a three-to-five page scene in which their chosen characters interact.

The following excerpt from Dingyi⁴, an intermediate ESL writer from China, illustrates his developing understanding of terms as he assumes each character’s perspective, an exploratory approach Dingyi continued when writing the formal definition essay. The bolded text in this and all following student excerpts signals writing that is echoed in the student’s subsequent assignments as well.

Three people on the Brooklyn Bridge, and they are facing the river, and talking about the bridge.

Imagining: How long I haven’t been here, my first time here was with my family, when I was about 5 or 6 years old.

Reflecting: Oh, I remember my first time here was because a class activity, we were here for draw of this bridge.

Thinking: Actually, I don’t remember the exactly time when I was first time here, probably when I was sitting in the train, and pass through here.

Imagining: It was really happy to be here, all my family mem-

bers had a delightful day, with smile on the face all the time.

Reflecting: Yes, me too, it was my first school activity outside. We were all so excited about being here.

Thinking: **What was my mood when I was first time saw this bridge. Probably normal, nothing as the calmly river. Maybe excited, or happy to see this scene.**

Imagining: I can still get the picture of the day with my family members on here in my head. We were just standing here, and took a wonderful family picture.

Reflecting: Not bad. I love this bridge, **when I see this bridge, it seems could bring me back to many years ago.**

Imagining: **Yes, close my eyes, I can see the bridge, river, smiley, sunshine, train, bench and different kind of people go through here in my brain.**

Thinking: **How many people? How many different kind of people? How happy they are?**

*Sun goes down, and three of them prepare to get home. **Thinking always thinking, always talk to his mind, Imagining create the pictures in his head like a film, and Reflecting is replying what Imagining talk about, and make a connection between his history and Reflecting history.***

Here, Dingyi writes from the perspectives of the content he analyzes. The practical activity, as Vygotsky would call it, is limited. That is, there isn’t a direct manipulation of the physical scene, yet the imagined physicality does call forth a type of inner dialogue within the student. The conjuring

of the bridge and river provokes a lived experience by the student and the recollected physical landscape lends itself to insight, as seen by the character “Thinking” who sees that thinking is much more active than a “calmly river.” We can see how Dingyi gently pits the concepts against each other, in order to see how they fit, creating a subtle argument along the way that is not burdened with having to be “proven.” In this way the student imitates Bateson’s notions of play, fitting ideas together, because the abstract concepts have taken “concrete” form in the manner Vygotsky calls a “stepping stone for developing abstract thinking” (81).

In “Metalogue: About Games and Being Serious,” Bateson presents an imagined meta-conversation between a young daughter and a father about playful debates they have, demonstrating how the “game” works:

I think of it as you and I playing together against the building blocks—the ideas. Sometimes competing a bit—but competing as to who can get the next idea into place. And sometimes we attack each other’s bit of building, or I will try to defend my built-up ideas from your criticism. But always in the end we are working together to build the ideas up so that they will stand. (4)

We see that the process is playful, but the aim is serious: to form ideas that stand. There is less room for the student to feel wrong while personifying allegorical characters standing on a bridge, as he is not hemmed in by dictionary definitions or by worries that he isn’t following the rigid rules of a particular form. He can discover. With this platform, Dingyi observes from within each character the distinct actions in the scene he creates and records those actions without any impinging formal language of traditional forms; he avoids the mental set effect. Inherent in his scene are a number of observations that distinguish multiple senses of the three terms in relation to need and context, such as the use of memory, reliance on visualization, and focus on internal questioning. Importantly, he also sees how the terms function together (as shown in the final stage direction). The characters Imagining, Reflecting, and Thinking implicitly contribute to an overarching experiential in distinct ways, creating and fusing a complete mental experience recorded in the writing. During the single event of standing in a familiar location, perception, connection to the past, and reaction to the present combine into “holistic” and “embodied ways of being” for the student writer in the way Bird advocates. The playwriting invites Dingyi to conceive of the terms as actors, as living, breathing identities, rather than

flat definitions. He views the “thing” itself, the signified, as opposed to the container of the “thing.” This mode invites an inductive and inquiry-based approach: the inner speech transitions into a dialogue, the characters speak to each other, prompting questions and responses as the student deepens his distinction of the abstract concepts in a concrete setting.

Dingyi composed a draft for the formal definition essay, using the same terms as he did in his play. For the essay, the students were required to independently find and then draw upon outside sources as well, so that they would also learn research practices necessary for academic discourse. Dingyi maintains the personification method of these terms in the essay (a practice he later explained in a reflection as a way to wrap his head around the abstract challenge of the assignment). The following is the introduction to his paper. As we have noted, many of the (bolded) concepts and language established in his play are echoed in this subsequent text:

My brain is an amazing container, it contains an infinite world made of knowledge. **There is a family live inside this world, they are “thinking,” “imagining,” and “reflecting,” and they having different jobs to help me to absorb more knowledge.** According to the theory of left-brain and right-brain by Kendra Cherry, “Our left-brain is good at thinking, logic, reasoning, language and numbers, and our right-brain is good at imagining, creating pictures, and colors” (Cherry). In other words, **“thinking” lives in the left brain, he is a curious man, so his jobs are asking questions and talking about ideas and solutions. “Imagining” lives in the right brain, and he likes pictures and he is really good at art, and his job is to create images. “Reflecting” is the modest one, he lives between them, and he likes memory a lot, and uses memory help me to absorb knowledge.** All of them are inside my brain, and helping me to get the knowledge and complete the world I have.

By imagining and embodying these terms, Dingyi conceptualizes them now with a more cohesive understanding than if he were considering them as isolated, external occurrences. The rich foundation of the student’s prewriting exercise eased his weaving in a source text that supports his observations but does not take the place of them. We can imagine a student without the scene-writing experience who is called upon to define the terms falling into a less critically robust five-paragraph form where each of the terms are dryly

defined, paragraph by paragraph. It is likely the terms would remain abstractions. In a ZPD schema, the playwriting supports the student outside the Comfort Zone, lending steadiness in the Anxiety Zone, and allowing him to complete the assignment independently of the scaffolded assistance that the play first provided.

At the end of the term, students were given a classification assignment, directing them to classify three characters from different works encountered over the semester according to each character's strength as a thinker (Who is the freest thinker? Who is a semi-restricted thinker? Who is the most controlled thinker?). For this, students first needed to identify what components of thinking they would focus their analysis on (e.g., clarity of thought, level of restrictions on thought by outside influences or emotions, or freedom or limitations of actions as evidence of thinking, and so on). Through this articulation of what thinking is and requires, students could then apply their definitions by placing characters of their choice along the spectrum of thinking they established.

As prewriting to the classification essay, students wrote three-to-five page plays, using at least two characters from different texts. The students placed the characters of their choice in a setting from yet another text we visited in the course readings. Through this prewriting assignment, students were encouraged to approach what they had been reading from a psychological angle, where they step inside each of their characters and write from that perspective. This created a more essence-driven understanding of the characters under discussion in their formal papers in a manner consistent again with Bateson, rather than just talking about them.

The following is an excerpt of a scene written by Klara, an immigrant student from Albania writing at an advanced level in English. She placed Randle Patrick McMurphy from Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Jean from Eugène Ionesco's play, *Rhinoceros*, in a psychiatric ward in World War II Germany (time and country were chosen based on the novel *Youth Without God* by Ödön von Horváth).

This scene takes place in Germany in a psychiatric ward during World War II. In this ward, McMurphy is sharing a room with Jean, who was sent to the institution after suffering from PTSD after turning back from a rhinoceros into a human.

McMurphy: What are you in here for, dear pal?

Jean: One of my so-called friends, Berenger, signed me up to be here. He thinks I've driven myself mad.

McMurphy: Well, we're all a little mad. What makes you so special?

Jean: How many people can say they've turned into a rhinoceros and come back to their original state of mind?

McMurphy: Wait just a damn second, are you bullshittin' me?

Jean: They say you only lie to the ones you fear. Why would I fear you?

McMurphy: Are you sayin' you lied to me?

Jean: No, my incompetent friend, I am saying that I was once a rhinoceros and now I am me again.

McMurphy: Well, what was the difference?

Jean: There is no difference. **I chose to become a rhinoceros and got bored with it, so I decided to come back.**

McMurphy: I'm no doctor or nothin', but I'm pretty sure you can't choose to make that kind of transformation for yourself.

Jean (louder): You can, when your willpower is as strong as mine is.

McMurphy: What the hell does this got to do with willpower?

Jean: **I chose to turn into a rhinoceros to symbolize my strong willpower and my smart state of mind.**

McMurphy: *(Placing his hand to his chin and softly rubbing it)*

Wait, you said you turned into a rhinoceros to show how strong your mind was.

Jean: Precisely.

McMurphy: So, **how can you be you again when the rhinoceros you were was also you?**

Jean: **Your words make no sense to me.**

McMurphy: **Well, your logic makes absolutely no sense to me.**

Jean: **That is why I am the strong thinker here and you are, well, you are you.**

McMurphy: **You, my friend, are in denial.**

In this scene, Klara creates tension between the two characters as informed by their varying awareness of reality. McMurphy is alert to Jean's distortion of the transformation that he has undergone, and his ability to confront Jean about his denial portrays McMurphy as the more mindful thinker, less bridled by confirmation biases. Here Jean's lack of self-awareness about his motive for transformation, which he casts as personal choice—not as buckling under the pressure to conform—shines through. This depiction reveals Jean to be the overly controlled thinker that he is, though he would never admit it.

Following, in her formal classification essay, Klara compares Jean and McMurphy's levels of thinking to further analyze the sociopolitical implications of restrictions on freethinking. Many of the qualities that she observes

about McMurphy in the excerpt below, for example, echo the mannerisms she gives him in the scene above:

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, McMurphy is the freest thinker because **he is confident in himself**. When McMurphy first arrives at the psychiatric ward, **he is outspoken and boisterous**. Unable to be tamed by Nurse Ratched or her evil minions, McMurphy walks around the ward without worrying about any consequences that may come to him. **He does not accept commands or information without first questioning and trying to find the reasoning behind them**. An example of this is when he is told by one of the aids that the patients have to wait until six thirty to brush their teeth, McMurphy is amazed at the illogic of the rule. Although the rest of the patients follow these irrelevant rules because they feel obliged to, McMurphy questions the reasoning behind them, and makes a point to the aid by brushing his teeth with soap powder instead (Kesey 84).

Similarly, in her discussion about Jean, Klara exposes the illogical nature of Jean's character with a rich analysis of his insistence that willpower shapes every aspect of his life, despite his inability to control his turning into a rhinoceros before Berenger's eyes:

In Act Two, Scene two, when Jean is turning into a rhinoceros, he has no control over it. **For a man who claims to have willpower, we notice in this scene that he is unable to control the transformation that has taken hold of him**. When Berenger visits Jean and notices his change in appearance, **Jean is in complete denial that he is morphing**. Instead, he tries to take the attention off of himself by telling Berenger that he is the one that is turning into a rhino. By trying to prove he is in control of his own body, and that the grunting noises he is making due to turning into a rhinoceros is on purpose, Jean says "I can puff if I want to, can't I? I've every right...I'm in my own house" (Ionesco 65). In addition, **once he notices that he is changing and there is nothing he can do, he begins saying that he is fine with turning into a rhinoceros: "What's wrong with being a rhinoceros? I'm all for change"** (Ionesco 68). Due to the lack of control over the situation, Jean is trying to put on a show for Berenger to prove that he is the one who chose to transform, and

it is not happening without his consent. **Instead of admitting the truth that he is powerless to the change, Jean finds excuses for himself because he refuses to admit he has no willpower over the situation.**

Through the scene, Klara creates a concrete arena (the imagined psychiatric ward, borrowed from *Cuckoo's Nest*) where the players may interact, and by manipulating their exchanges, their deep personal qualities emerge.

Klara plays, fits, and builds in the manner of Bateson (4). The progression of assignments creates scaffolding that fosters an inductive approach and emphasizes close reading. An imagined character dossier develops within the student, drawn from evidence in the source text, as characters are re-imagined and represented on the page. By assuming their roles, Klara conceives their behaviors and decision-making processes, while adding context for these by way of other sources. She avoids the problem of getting “inside a discourse [she] can only partially imagine” as she both invents and defines the discourse as part and parcel of the assignment (Bartholomae “Inventing” 19); the discourse is imagined from the inside. While there is, undoubtedly, a much larger discourse surrounding what Klara creates, her writing becomes a starting-point which confers authentic authority, a newly defined Comfort Zone free of any previous mental set effects. From here, she can expand as she transfers skills developed in the scene into the essay. In many ways, Klara's play is more imaginatively engaging than the resulting essay, while the essay is more traditionally “thoughtful.” The play form offered a broader platform for the student's mind to roam, even as the more formal essay required her to “scale back.” But if the objective is to encourage critical engagement and participation, the playwriting activity fulfills its purpose, while the essay provides the practice that is necessary for the kind of writing more likely called upon in other courses.

LOCKED-IN DRAFTS: INTERVENING WITH PLAYWRITING

In a different essay assignment that did not include playwriting, students were asked to use two expository sources as their primary evidence. Marta, an international student from Spain writing in an intermediate level in English, was asked to interpret the significance of repetition in Marina Abramovic's performance art piece, *Art must be beautiful*, *Artist must be beautiful* by drawing from Matthew Goulish's microlecture pertaining to repetition, “A Misunderstanding.” The following is the opening paragraph of her first draft:

As Goulish affirms there is no repetition to be made as **we are living within a continuously environment so we cannot avoid time and space modifications.** We need also make a reference to our inside world when talking about repetition. **Our inside being is also changing without us noticing.** In one second we can start feeling hungry, angry, happy, nervous, euphoric, sad[...]we can start or stop feeling ANY emotion. This is exactly the reason why the author thinks accurate repetition is not possible. **The only way we could repeat something is if we could own time and space** (feelings are implied within the time concept as if we were able to freeze time we would be able to freeze emotions). The best idea of thinking about the possibility of controlling such things as time and space is pretty pretentious. No one has been capable to control them before, why would we think we are going to be able to achieve that? Eventually, could time and space be an object of ownership?

Marta demonstrates inklings of comprehension within this paragraph, but she is not keeping herself entirely focused on responding to Goulish's argument. While her ruminations about time and space being “objects of ownership” are valid, they drift away from Goulish's meaning. Marta unintentionally misrepresents Goulish's meaning: she suggests time and space are the objects of ownership, whereas Goulish posits that a repeated action becomes familiar, and when we recognize the repetition, that familiarity causes us to feel that we own the moment. The cherry-picking of evidence endemic to the hard-driving arguments of the five-paragraph essay also emerges here, permitting Marta to avoid meaningful analysis. Instead, she drops in a mention of Goulish as unearned, stand-alone support before proceeding to her own ruminations, which are only loosely connected to the original text. As in this case, students like Marta, who have limited English vocabularies or who lack a full understanding of source material, may latch onto new terms and concepts as buzzwords, repeating these terms in inaccurate contexts.

Marta's misrepresentation of Goulish led her instructor to ask her to complete a playwriting exercise instead of the standard second draft in order to deepen her interpretation of both Abramovic and Goulish's perspectives as preparation for the final essay. The exercise would also reframe Marta's role to one of an active, focused participant within the conversation. Excerpted below is her scene where she, Goulish, and Abramovic discuss the nature of repetition, which she planned to analyze within her formal paper. She places

the scene in her home kitchen, an invention that helped her contextualize the ideas.

Marta: Okay. The most important thing about baking is to make sure you use exactly the same quantity of ingredients every time you make it. **You have to be very accurate and repeat the same recipe without any modifications.** If you can do that the final result will always be the same.

Goulish: Are you sure it's possible to repeat exactly the same recipe and get exactly the same results over and over again without any alterations?

Marta (very upset): Yes Goulish, I do.

Goulish: **According to that every single grain has to weigh the same every time, and the eggs have to be at the same biological state, and the butter melted in the exact same proportion, all the same in comparison to the first time your grandma make the pie, and even then it would not be possible.** Am I wrong?

Abramovic: I might agree with you. I think that repetition does not exist as a concrete and accurate concept. **The environment in which we live changes constantly. Time goes by. Emotions, the states of nature, locations...everything is changing within seconds and we barely notice it. Because of that, repeating the same song, sentence, recipe, gesture, is not possible. We cannot make sure we are using the same number of sugar grains when mixing a cake's dough for the second time. We can't expect the grains to weigh exactly**

the same either. We cannot melt the butter in the same proportion and expect it to be at the same temperature level when adding it to the mixture.

Here, Marta constructs her scene from an apt analogy she conceived in her first draft: the inability to bake the same pie twice. By placing the concept of repetition in a concrete realm, baking a pie, she inserts herself within the discussion alongside Goulish and Abramovic, where she not only directly responds to the conversation she enacts, but also assumes their perspectives. To use Goffman's terms, the student gains a "footing" within the conversation as an active speaking participant (qtd. in Goodwin and Goodwin 226). As such, a student like Marta is no longer a mere "hearer" of the words of others, but is constructing, along with the other "fully embodied actors," in a vein similar to Bateson's notion of playfully debating a topic with the intent of building ideas that stand (Goodwin and Goodwin 226; Bateson 4). At the same time, she models Vygotsky's "play [as] imagination in action" (97).

In her play, Marta takes the initial rich observations and ideas from the first draft, though disconnected from the source text, and grapples with them directly through dialogue writing. In her first draft, the line "we are living within a continuously environment so we cannot avoid time and space modifications ... Our inside being is also changing without us noticing," is clarified in her play: "The environment in which we live changes constantly. Time goes by. Emotions, the states of nature, locations ... everything is changing within seconds and we barely notice it. Because of that, repeating the same song, sentence, recipe, gesture, is not possible."

After writing the play, Marta returned to her draft ready to revise with a more grounded sense of how to utilize her sources. In her revision, she identifies the main arguments of Goulish, and pushes his ideas by considering why repetition is impossible:

For Matthew Goulish, repetition involves the experience of exactly the same thing, which for him, is not possible. As we all know, **we live within an environment, which is continuously changing.** People die and babies are born every single second no matter what. Time passes and we all get a bit older every minute. **The time is changing, our location is changing, we, as human beings, are physically and emotionally changing.** Even the rock standing on the mountain is changing because as

the wind blows, it is exposed to different atmospheric gasses that wear it down. **According to this fact of life, repetition is not possible unless we could stop this dynamic change** both inside and outside ourselves.

Without the loss of her initial ideas or voice, her observations are now more direct, executed with a clearer progression and shape. She distinguishes between her views and Goulish's. Rather than trying to make Goulish say something he does not, she delineates between his observations about repetition and her own that were grown in conversational response.

THE PLAYWRITING VOICE: ENTER THE PARLOR

In the now canonical *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke suggests that to enter discourse is to “[i]magine that you enter a parlor” where the conversationalists “answer” to each other (110). Tellingly, Burke conceives of discourse as an imagined physical space, where embodied writers or ideas can be placed in relation to one another. Whether in antithesis or synthesis, the important element is that a larger understanding can be achieved through a back and forth dialogue, and that any new entrant to the conversation—including the student writer—is expected to be just as present in this space as those who came before her.

If we apply Burke's analogy to the “literary forms” that are the backbone of many discipline-focused writing projects or even FYC classes, we see that writing becomes the space in which conversation takes place, the veritable parlor, where sources or ideas become speakers alongside the student. Playwriting operates under these same rules of imagined spaces, lending itself as a natural medium for students to explore ideas before attempting to tackle them in traditional modes of discourse.

In “Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills,” Bartholomae articulates his criticism of all skills-first thinking, that students must first “work on” sentences or paragraphs in order to gain steadiness before they can be “let loose” to write fuller essays (87). While Bartholomae attached this philosophy specifically to Basic Writing more than three decades ago, and the landscape has undoubtedly changed, for those outside FYC the charge still resonates. Brockman's survey of her colleagues shows that in many courses outside the FYC there is still an emphasis on mechanics and skill that the student is expected to master before entering the parlor. In order to counteract the skills-first pedagogy, Bartholomae promotes student-driven inquiry, where they “attempt new perspectives, re-formulate, re-see, and,

in general, develop a command of a subject” (86). Bartholomae's pedagogy could be an apt description of Burke's parlor, a space for the student to pursue inquiry on the page by playing with ideas to understand them and fit them together in the mode of Bateson, Vygotsky, and other play-friendly theorists.

Playwriting alone doesn't necessarily transfer into successful participation in academic discourse. It is useful to include “meta-writing” exercises, of the literacy narrative type advocated by Downs and Wardle, during the progression of assignments too (561-62). We often ask students to reflect in writing or through a class conversation what they learned by completing the playwriting exercise and/or how they could take what they have learned and utilize it in a formal essay (or vice-versa). For more advanced students, we might ask students to imagine a literature review for a research report in another class as a type of play. Meta-writing of this kind privileges, as Bird states, the *whys* of discourse practices over the *hows* of it, allowing students to “construct their academic affiliation...’positioned’ as insiders” (Bird, Ivancic qtd. in Bird 65). From this position of understanding, Bird continues, students have “power to choose how they want to negotiate their academic selves in connection with their non-academic lives” (65-66). It is through this negotiation of the academic self that creates a “holistic and *authentic* writer identity rather than a superficial, mimicked writer performance” (emphasis Bird's 66). This meta-writing underlines not just the discoveries made by the student, but the process of discovery. As we see in Marta's work, the switching of modes engages her in a particularly rich metacognitive space, which then fuels her understanding of the source texts and how to write about them. Consequently, the meta-writing encourages an awareness of high-road transfer of fundamental writing and thinking skills to other writing projects (Donahue 149).

Playwriting supplies Vygotsky's concrete “stepping-stone” into discourse, satisfying both those who value tradition-bound forms and those who place primacy on inquiry. Playwriting coupled with meta-writing both prepares the pathway for transfer and becomes it. For students who have come out of a Chinese educational system or a similar one, as with Fan Shen, playwriting offers space for the student, as character and author, to create a writing self more suited to the task of English composition. As Shen declares, “in order to write good English, I knew that I had to be myself...[and] had to create an English self” (461). By creating an “English self,” Shen adapts to rules that often curb entry into academic discourse, and in doing so conforms to the expectations of the gatekeepers to the conversation who decide who may participate and how, that is, by valuing “surface features of writing and

dialect features of edited American English” over substance (White, qtd. in Frazier 109). Keith Gilyard has a kindred term for the gatekeepers, *eradicationists* (90), a name he applies to those in the academy who wish to eradicate particular English dialects in college writing, ranging from African American English to invented Englishes of ESL learners (84-85).

While Gilyard is a staunch *pluralist*, one who feels that all English dialects should be treated with equanimity within the academy, and that SAE should not be privileged—he does present us with a third option: *bidialectualism* (90). A bidialectualist, in Gilyard’s eyes, is one who sees all English dialects as equal, who also pragmatically asserts that “in order to succeed in the mainstream” elements of SAE should be adopted for most academic tasks (90). We agree; however, a low stakes playwriting exercise can—perhaps should—be written in the student’s own words, without fear of reprisal so that they are able, as Bartholomae advocates, to “imagine themselves as writers writing” (85). Stressing SAE mechanics at the scene-writing stage may alienate enough to propel some students back into the comfort of a mental set effect wherein concern over form trumps inquiry or content. Only after the playwriting exercises (likely not until the very last drafts of the essays that follow) are they asked to seriously accommodate all the rules of genre and discipline-specific conventions in order to satisfy the gatekeepers. In this way, the fundamental elements of inquiry-based writing are privileged over the distracting “noise” of SAE “correctness” that drives some back into a mental set effect. While playwriting allows students to “imagine themselves as writers,” a follow-up meta-writing exercise permits them to look back at that writing self to discover truths about their individual writing practices and processes, inviting an awareness that can carry over into other writing projects.

CONCLUSIONS: PLAY AND UNDERSTANDING

As Bateson suggests, in the composition classroom and the academy at large, “we talk about ideas.” Yet, merely talking about ideas doesn’t seem to be enough for Bateson (or for us). The end goals are to first “understand them” and then “fit them together”; the ideas are inert unless we make something of them. For Bateson and us, “play” is not the object, but the tool for understanding and, then, for making something of that understanding. So far, we have been talking about playwriting and expository writing as if they are at least partly interchangeable when clearly they are not. While they are distinct from each other, if too much is made of these distinctions, unifying

principles can be lost, squeezing the “intellectual room” of the scholar, as Douglass Hesse intimates in “The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies.” Creative writing in the composition classroom does not need to be solely about “creating attention structures from the stuff of words” (Hesse 41) through the use of beautiful language as some see its role. While beautiful language can be the product of creative writing that can then engage the reader, the purpose of creative writing goes well beyond such concerns. We argue that the habits of mind identified in the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” are exercised, if not cemented, through the critical thinking enabled by creative writing. The central objectives are practice in the invention of logical structure that narrativity requires and, for dialogic playwriting in particular, exposure to the constituent conversational elements of academic discourse. Playwriting as pre-writing offers both an analogue to and concrete experience of academic discourse, a socio-cultural genesis that Prior and others point to, which lays a foundation to build from as students transfer to other genres. Just as importantly, if not more so for breaking through debilitating mental set effects formed in high school, playwriting is often seen as play by students. Play is not only appealing to the struggling student, fostering participation, but also offers a way to break from limited overlearned writing and thinking modes. Additionally, play of this kind calls upon natural features of intellectual development that Vygotsky identifies, features that may have been tamped down by well-meaning “rules of writing” enforcers.

Playwriting is not, of course, a panacea, but another effective tool among many that can help students as they transition from high school to college writing. Crawford and Willhoff’s writing on the use of stillness and meditation as a mode to quiet the “noise” of new information that often provokes a return to a mental set effect of old habits offers promise too. We see no reason why our two approaches, and others, couldn’t be used in conjunction to help students decrease the size of the Anxiety Zone in their work as they take up new genres and attempt to transfer skills from one mode to another. In our students’ work, we see that Comfort Zones are expanded to include many of the fundamentals of academic discourse and the habits of mind and skills “essential for success” (“Framework for Success”). Better writing is the product of rising consciousness within students, which, in turn, encourages them to be more “fully human,” as Friere believes, and promotes future participation in the academic enterprise or perhaps beyond. Ultimately, playwriting offers a structure for students to understand intel-

lectual problems in context—deeply and holistically—while also authorizing them to take a seat in the parlor and speak up.

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ENDNOTES

1. "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" identifies eight habits of mind, viewed as "essential" (1): curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Notably, the "Framework" privileges these habits over outcomes such as rhetorical knowledge and knowledge of conventions. An order of operations is implied: the development of these habits of mind first gives rise to acquiring writing skills and not the other way around.
2. Students from China and other East Asian countries now make up nearly 40% of all international students (Institute of International Higher Education)
3. Franca Garzotto explored and empirically confirmed the Vygotsky question in 2007 in the domain of complex developmental learning and computer games in "Was Vygotsky Right? Evaluating Learning Effects of Social Interaction in Children Internet Games."
4. All students were asked how they would like to be named in this article and chose to use their actual names.

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