

STOLEN IDENTITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

Students' previous experiences have contributed to their loss of voice in writing. Through the examination of historical events that occurred within the basic reading and writing classroom, a significant separation between students and what is deemed as academically appropriate writing is apparent. By exploring the dynamics of students and the established curriculum, the argument can be made that through a multigenre project students are able to reconnect with writing and rediscover their voice.

## STRUGGLING TO FIND THEIR SURFACE

Jeff

As I sat at my desk creating programs and assigning worksheets that were “guaranteed” to improve struggling readers’ reading abilities, Jeff came through the door. He hesitantly walked into my office and asked if “I c-c-c-ould h-h-help him?” “Of course. Do you have a child that you would like to talk about?” I asked with a smile. “C-c-can you help me?” he responded reluctantly. Him? I knew nothing about helping a grown auto mechanic, and I was certain that the programs I worked with knew nothing either. I quickly escorted him to the assessment room and passed off a clip-board with multiple pages for Jeff to sign and fill in the blanks. As I was closing the door behind me, Jeff appeared with the clipboard in hand. “Are you finished?” I asked. “I can’t read,” was Jeff’s reply. I sat down and went through the handouts with Jeff, assisting him with the necessary signatures. I asked Jeff if he had time to go through the assessment today, which would take approximately three hours and would give the center an indication as to the level of his reading ability and where we would start the program. With reluctance, he agreed. I sat down with Jeff at the computer and explained the process we would be going through. On the computer screen flashed the words “a,” “at,” and “cat”. By the time Jeff sounded out the word “cat,” he had run out of time, placing him at the first

grade level. We then went on to the next section of words. He worked his way through “it,” “sit,” and “this,” once again running out of time. This excruciating process continued on for hours until I knew Jeff had had all he could take. The results were consistent: he was reading at the first grade level, and his comprehension of the texts was at the kindergarten level. When I asked Jeff to write a short response to an essay question, I was further shocked at the results. The question asked Jeff to respond to his feelings about writing. His response was “I hav not to sae.”

### Jefferey “Jeff” Wallace

Jeffery Hendrix Wallace, known by his friends and family as Jeff, lost his will to speak sometime in his academic years.

He was born on March 16, 1984, and was a graduate of Fletcher County High School. He was attending the local Vo-tech school at the time of noticeable loss

He was an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed fishing and hiking and hanging out with friends. He especially loved his dog Fletcher.

When Jeff was in middle school he began to notice that he was struggling with

reading and writing. He spent a great deal of time in the back of the room as a mediocre student, completing the assignments to the satisfactory level.<sup>1</sup>

Many teachers commented on his reluctance to write and expressed his inadequacies when it came to reading. Mrs. Smith explained that “he wasn’t a very good student, but he was such a nice kid. I couldn’t help but give him a B. He never needed additional help and he always attended class.”

As his academic career advanced he began to dread sharing his work and began to see himself as a poor writer without anything

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<sup>1</sup> Each semester I ask my students to share their personal experience with reading, writing, and English courses. Their answers hold consistent to what research points out about basic reading and writing students: they are not interested in the material, nor are they looking to be educated; they are completing the work at a level that will guarantee they pass the class. In *Lives on the Boundary* Mike Rose confirms this observation by sharing his experience as a basic reading and writing student.

I was an erratic student. I was undisciplined. [We were] kids who were scuttling along at the bottom of the pond. It wasn’t just that I didn’t know things...but that I had developed various faulty and inadequate ways of doing...and making sense...Worse yet, the years of defensive tuning out in elementary school had given me a way to escape quickly while seeming at least half alert...I developed further into a mediocre student...[and] I did what I had to do to get by, and I did it with half a mind. (26-27)

good to say. “Everything has already been said, why would I want to recreate the wheel?”

This was a famous line Jeff used regularly.

This saddened those who knew how much Jeff had to say. Somewhere along the line he lost his confidence and voice in writing.

He questioned his authority and will leave behind many open ears waiting to hear what he had to say.

#### Lost Item: Voice

Last seen sometime between September 2000 and May of 2004. Unique to individual. Holds value, courage, and strength. May have run away. Needs an audience. Be gentle-very reluctant. Listen closely.

May come at own will.

Spring, 1970<sup>2</sup>

Today in remediation, the college has a special for you!  
 just take the writing test before entering and you will receive a  
 a special gift. If you succeed in failing the requirements you will  
 have the opportunity to meet well-respected Vice President of the  
 United States Spiro Theodore Agnew<sup>3</sup>. Not only will he shake at

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<sup>2</sup> The teaching of basic reading and writing plays a crucial roll in the history of composition. James Slevin “identifies the period as the time of Composition’s ‘rise,’ a ‘writing movement’ addressing ‘broad questions about the aims of education and the shape of various educational institutions’ and having as its focus ‘the revitalizing of the teaching of writing’” (Horner 3). It is said to be the period or “movement for cultural democracy” (3). On July 9, 1969, the New York City Board of Higher Education “adopted a policy of open admissions for the senior and community colleges making up the City University of New York system” (5). Educational administrators, city or state government, faculty, college and high school students, parents, organizations, and the media were questioning what would happen to the reputation of CUNY if they allowed all students into the institution. The policy attracted national attention, and the association of the policy with campus violence, and the magnitude of the demands which the implementation of the policy made on existing faculty and facilities, had the effect of polarizing the debate on open admissions...For example, because those opposed to Open Admissions frequently raised questions about the material demands of implementing the policy- who was going to pay, how much, where would the many new classes be held, who would teach them (Horner 7)

<sup>3</sup> The debate on open admissions was seen as a response to specific political, budgetary, and labor pressure on CUNY. It was estimated that the minimum increase would cost \$35.5 million and it was unclear where the additional fourteen thousand students would go and who would teach them. CUNY administration and the faculty were concerned about the increased workloads.

In a widely publicized speech, Vice President Agnew went so far as to claim that the intrusion into universities of ‘those unqualified for the traditional [university] curriculum’ was ‘a major cause of campus...unrest’. Such lumping of student activism with lack of academic preparation is further exemplified by frequent references to such students as the “new barbarians,” a

the unrest you are causing the university system, but he will gladly rename you barbarian, outsider, and illiterate. And remember, your job is to replace the intellectually deserving. Stand tall. But remember to keep your voice down- you may scare the faculty, students, and community.

Open Admissions, July 9, 1969

Why not?

Shouldn't we try?

Is it really that bad?

accommodation- the new frontier

the role maintained

“academic excellence” would prevail

the tower would still stand

the only problem being...

the other, the different

the remedial

all students welcome

high school graduates included

supportive services available

---

phrase with links difference in language...with a threat to the (the speaker's own) civilization. (Horner 8)

mobility, integration, opportunity

active members of society<sup>4</sup>

### Character Sketch

Physical Description: middle-class white female age 23<sup>5</sup>

What the Character Says: I hate writing. It's boring, and I have much better things to do than read a book. The last time I read an entire book was in fourth grade. I am smarter than my teachers; they don't even know. <sup>6</sup>

What the Character Does: perpetual daydreamer<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The goals of open admissions claimed to “maintain the role of the university in preserving and reproducing “academic excellence” but to add to that a different role for the university accommodating different kind of student (Horner 10).

<sup>5</sup> Research was conducted by the National Center for Developmental Education on the demographic profile, academic profile, and the enrollment status of remedial students at the college level to generalize the dynamics of these individuals.

Studies found that the percentage of remedial students is slightly higher in females than males and the average age is 23. The majority of students taking remedial courses are Caucasian. It is estimated that the average high school grade point average is 2.40 and the mean cumulative grade point average for these students leaving college was 2.28. This grade point average reflected both remedial and non-remedial courses. Although all colleges do not require SAT scores, 50% of remedial students scored less than 800. A national survey suggested that 68% of remedial students were taking a full course load, and most of them were enrolled with the intent of receiving a degree. It is also apparent that poverty correlates strongly with struggling students (Boylan).

<sup>6</sup> Before teaching basic reading and writing students I had not encountered this attitude towards reading and writing at this level of magnitude. The majority, if not all of my students, feel this way about reading and writing at the beginning of each semester. They do not read and write and if they are asked to do so in their classes they take what ever measure necessary to cut their work load; they are in class because it is expected of them. Mike Rose recounts his experience as a basic writer at St. Regina, “all the hours in class tend to blend into one long, vague stretch of time...I would hide by slumping down in my seat and page through my reader...She would test us, and I would dread that, for I always got Cs and Ds...I couldn't keep up and started daydreaming to avoid my inadequacy. This was a strategy I would rely on as I grew older” (19).

What the Character Thinks: “I don’t care about this shit fuck this shit”<sup>8</sup> (*Tidy* 314).

What Others Say About the Character: They don’t know how to write. “Simple reading is beyond them” (Rose 201).

Brand

At-risk

Under-prepared

Low-achieving

Intellectually underdeveloped

Disadvantaged

Non-traditional

Skill-deficient

Remedial

Basic

Undeserving

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<sup>7</sup> Rose continues by saying “the teacher is faceless and seems very far away. The voice is faint...It is raining, and I am watching the streams of water form patterns on the windows...I got very good at watching the blackboard with minimum awareness. And I drifted more and more into a variety of protective fantasies” (19).

<sup>8</sup> This was a response from a student of David Bartholomae’s freshman composition course in 1973 to an essay by Jean Paul Sartre. “I was not prepared for this paper. In a sense, I did not know how to read it...I knew enough to know that the paper was, in a sense, a very skillful performance in words. I knew that it was written for me; I knew that it was probably wrong to read it as simply expressive...the...paper was a written document of some considerable skill and force- more skill and force, for example, than I saw in many of the ‘normal’ and acceptable papers I read” (314). Although this is a harsh account, the majority of the students that I teach for the College of Technology feel exactly this way. They struggle with finding meaning and purpose in reading and writing and feel and struggle to find the audience in their readers.

Barbarian

Outsiders

Illiterate

Handicapped English<sup>9</sup>

Mental Notes from a Deaf Teacher

10:32 pm Sunday

Hmmm...let's see. Tomorrow's grammar lesson will consist of commas and introductory clauses. This should be interesting. The students can work through the lessons on pages 90-98 and read their answers out loud.

Maybe I should bring treats and hand them out for correct answers.

This is going to be so much fun, and everyone can play along.

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to examine what happens when we label students in basic reading and writing courses. From the time these students take the initial assessment to enter college and don't meet the necessary requirements, they are placed in courses that are generally separate from the four-year university system. They are then labeled anywhere from remedial to basic to handicapped. This labeling creates a separation between the students on campus, further frustrating struggling students. The administrators that I teach for at the College of Technology reference our students as remedial, insinuating that we, educators, will fix the problem of the students. This is misleading to the public, institution, and students. This is frustrating to basic reading and writing students when they realize that they are generally not at the same level as other students entering freshman composition courses. Not only are we requiring basic reading and writing students to take additional course work; we are also insinuating that we will fix their problems. Another reason this labeling is detrimental to the students is it further creates the separation between the academically prepared and the struggling student. The institution requires basic reading and writing students to take additional course work as well as provide them a label to identify them. This is insulting and demeaning and can create long term effects. The odds are high that these students are high achievers in one academic area or another. By placing them into a category or giving them a label the institution is under-minding their academic ability.

Locals are up in arms: What exactly are the schools doing?

The Writing Proficiency<sup>10</sup> test results are in. Students are scoring lower in reading and writing, and some administrators guess fifty percent of students are not at the level they should be.

“What are the schools teaching our students? When I went to school we learned arithmetic and reading,” responded concerned parent James L. Burch.

Some parents are concerned as to what these test results<sup>11</sup> mean for their children, and how this will affect their future college careers.

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<sup>10</sup> In November of 2005, the Montana Board of Regents unanimously passed a Writing Proficiency Standard. Beginning in 2007, students seeking full admission to a four-year degree program in a Montana University must meet specific writing standards based on minimum scores from the ACT Optional Writing Test, the SAT Essay or Writing Section, the Montana University System Writing Assessment, or the AP or CLEP writing tests. Students who do not meet the requirements may be admitted to a two-year program or to a four-year degree program with a provisional until they have met certain criteria. One way to meet the requirement would be to take a remedial course in English and score a C- or better. Since the policy goes into effect in 2007, it directly applies to students who are currently high school juniors. The policy will let students know if they are on target to take a composition course that is developmental or counts toward their core credit. The policy would ensure that students take the developmental course necessary their first year of college and help identify students who need additional help as high school seniors to ensure they graduate at the proficient level.

<sup>11</sup> Many high school graduates and their parents are shocked when they realize that the high school diploma they received is not enough to get them into the courses required at a four-year university. Although these students had been admitted into college, they scored too low on the entrance exam requiring them to take remedial courses in math or English. Because their scores are low, some question whether their acceptance is merely dollar based or because the student is a good candidate in to the university, further questioning the validity of remediation. An estimated one-third of students leave high school under prepared for college (Vashinav). What does this mean for the student? Remedial courses can be defined as “courses in reading, writing, and mathematics for college students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work at the level required by the institution” (Boylan). Remedial courses vary between universities and the courses are

“My son has a future. He is going to be a professional football player and you are going to tell me that my son is going to have to red-shirt for a season to take classes for the dumb” was the response from Jack Larsen.

“Reading and writing is over-rated. I ain’t ever read a book and look at me. I was the star football player in high school and I now operate my own business,” replied Ed Large.

Many parents are concerned as to why their children never received additional help in the first place and if there is a better way to help their children. Are we waiting too long to test students’ abilities to read and write? Should we be testing them during their sophomore year, which would provide more time to remedy the problem? And how long have these classes been around? <sup>12</sup>

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intended to address deficiencies and to help students achieve success in order to move on with their college careers. Overall, the average student taking remedial courses does not spend longer than one year doing so (Bettinger 3).

<sup>12</sup> With the influx of basic reading and writing courses parents, administrators, and students question how long the courses have been around and how they will improve their child’s/student’s reading and writing ability. “The reports claimed that remedial courses were a new and alarming phenomenon, the flooding of the ivy halls with the intellectually unwashed. If anything sparked fear in the general public, these numbers did. But, in fact, courses and programs that we could call remedial are older than fight songs and cheerleaders” (Rose 200). Remedial education has been a part of higher education since colonial days. Tutors in Greek and Latin were provided for under prepared students at Harvard College in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, land-grant colleges were established to teach agriculture and mechanical courses and designed classes for students who were weak in reading, writing and math. The first remedial program was offered in 1849 at the University of Wisconsin, and, in 1894, more than 40% of college freshmen enrolled in developmental education classes. During the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the G.I. Bill was established allowing war veterans to enroll in college. With the open admissions law during the 1960s to the 1980s, thousands of under prepared students enrolled in colleges and universities. Statistics show that there has

“If I would have known that my son was struggling his teachers could have helped fix the problem so that he could score good on the test,” commented Shar Ovaren.

The question shared by the community is what is happening in the schools and what does this all mean? Are basic reading and writing courses new to college institutions? <sup>13</sup> How will this affect our schools in the long run?

### Verbs: What Every College Student Should Know

Title: Verbs- An Overview

Course: College Entrance English

Time Frame: 3- 50 minute class periods

Overview/Purpose: Many students are required to complete a writing assignment at the college level, and in order to do so they must be able to identify verbs. The purpose of this lesson is to help students become comfortable and confident with identifying parts of speech (verbs) which will drastically improve their writing ability.

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been little change to the policies through the 90s and on a 1995 poll by the National Center for Education, 78% of higher education institutions provided at least one remedial course in reading, writing, or math resulting in 29% of freshman enrolling in at least one of these courses (Phipps). Thus, these statistics demonstrate that the need to help struggling students has existed in the higher education system for at least three centuries. Unfortunately, there has never really been a time in American history when all students who entered college were prepared.

<sup>13</sup> In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose quotes social historians David Cohen and Barbara Neufeld as saying, “the schools are a great theater in which we play out [the] conflicts of culture” (7). Rose suggests that “the literacy crisis has been with us for some time, that our schools have always been populated with students who don’t meet some academic standard. It seems that whenever we let ourselves realize that, we do so with a hard or fearful heart. ...Our purpose is to root out disease- and, too often, to punish. We write reductive prescriptions for excellence...[and] what gets lost in all of this are the real needs of children and adults working to make written language their own” (8).

Objectives: Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify a verb
2. Provide the correct definition of a verb
3. Identify all twelve tenses in the English language
4. Add the correct ending onto the end of a verb
5. Master difficult verbs: be, have, do
6. Write complete and thoughtful essays

Procedure:

1. Prior to this class period we will have discussed nouns.
2. I will begin the lesson by providing the definition of a verb.
3. The students will then watch me write sentences on the board. They will underline the verbs in their notebooks and discuss their answers with their partners.

For example: I will become a good writer with more grammar instruction.

4. We will then discuss the twelve tenses in the English language and why they are important in helping them become better writers.

For example: Present Progressive: For actions that are still in progress.

They are writing lovely sentences about verbs.

- a. I will explain to them that understanding the tenses should make them appreciate their instinctive sense of grammar- assuming they are native speakers.

- b. I will then explain that they must use the correct endings with verbs. They cannot use a plural ending with a singular subject, or a singular ending with a plural subject.

For example: I would write the examples on the chalk board.

I walk. I walks. I would then point out the correct way to write the verb.

- c. Before moving on I will ask the students to review what they already know.
- d. The students will then complete a worksheet that asks them to underline the correct form of the verb.

For example: She (be, has been) studying without proper lighting.

I will collect and grade the worksheets.

#### Day 2:

1. Today, we will go through difficult verbs: be, have, do
2. I will first provide the different ways to use the verb to be.
3. As a class, we will read through sentences and identify the correct use of the verb to be.
4. I will then move on to the verb to *have*.
5. Once again we will read through a paragraph that contains multiple errors of the verb to *have*. The students will come to the board and make the changes.
6. The process will continue for the verb *to do*.

7. At the end of class, I will pass out a worksheet that will ask the students to rewrite sentences with the correct use of the verbs *to be*, *to have*, *to do*. I will collect and grade these.

Day 3:

1. Today, we will take a final test on verbs. This will take the entire class period and will be multiple choice.

Day 4:

1. Today, we will start discussing subject-verb agreement.<sup>14</sup>

### Jeff: Part Two

Today was Jeff's first day of class. As I anticipated his arrival, I dreaded the curriculum I was going to teach him and the response the younger students would have when he entered the room. I didn't know Jeff, and I had no idea how he would respond to the process of learning to read. I wasn't going to be able to fix him today, or tomorrow, or even next week. He would have to spend a great deal of time at the center working with students that were half his age and reading at a higher level. I worried about Jeff

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<sup>14</sup> Each semester, in my current teaching position, I dread the required curriculum and text books; the ever-dreaded grammar workbook always finds its way into my mailbox. I dislike teaching grammar for multiple reasons. First, it is demeaning to have adults sit in their desks and be taught what a verb is and what it does in a sentence. They have been exposed to this for at least the past 15 years and are familiar with the concept- obviously this is not why they are in a basic reading and writing class. Second, the research as well as my experience demonstrates that further grammar instruction does not improve writing. The level of writing stays consistent with workbook instruction. What truly works is writing and little time is spent doing this when fill-in-the-blank worksheets are required. "Writing should be offered as writing- not as sentence practice or paragraph practice- if the goal of the program is to produce writers" (*Facts* 29).

and I wished there was some way I could “fix” him. When Jeff entered the waiting room, the students became silent. He had just gotten off of work and was covered from head to toe in motor grease. I could see the reluctance in his eyes as he approached my office and sat down. I explained the process and explained where we would be sitting. The center was full, so we had no choice but to sit with the other students. This made the curriculum more bothersome. Multiple workbooks with teddy bears and dragonflies were stacked before Jeff and me, as well as word games. For the first time I questioned my ability as a teacher, my profession, and the facility I was supporting. Reluctantly, I began the lesson with a workbook page focusing on the short vowel a. Jeff stuttered his way through words such as cat, hat, and sat that clearly labeled corresponding pictures. I would point to the picture of the brown and white kitty, and Jeff would say the word cat. We continued this process until we had completed six workbook pages. I then asked him to make flashcards with the words that were challenging or that he did not recognize on first glance. I continued on with the curriculum because it was approved by the center even though I felt as ridiculed as Jeff. I did not know how to help him, and I could not continue with this process. As time passed and through personal research, I allotted five to ten minutes a lesson to outside reading and writing. I brought in music, newspaper clippings, Tom Clancy novels, race car magazines, and we searched the internet. I knew I had better catch his attention and fast if I was ever going to help Jeff read. Jeff would read the texts aloud, with moderate assistance, and would respond to the material when finished. It was truly amazing to see how his reading level drastically improved with the

help of a little encouragement and built confidence. This is when I realized what Jeff needed to improve his reading- he needed to read.

## TAKING BACK WHAT IS THEIRS

Against the Odds: Establishing Voice- The Essay

“I hate writing.” “This sucks.” “My English teachers hate me.” “Why should I write for you?” These are all common complaints from the mouths of students who are forced to take English courses. And worse yet are the phrases by teachers and fellow classmates that are commonly voiced at these students. “Your writing sucks.” “You suck.” “No one wants to hear what you have to say, let alone read your writing.” Unfortunately, these are comments that are addressed at students, frustrating them to the point that they lose all interest in reading and writing. As educators, we have all worked with students who struggle with the correct use of the word there, their, and they’re or horse versus hoarse and for one reason or another they can’t seem to “get it right”.

David Bartholomae suggests that the majority of these students had ...never read a book. They had crammed from books for tests or strip-mined books for term papers or class reports, but they had never sat down on their own and read a book from beginning to end. Most of the students were apprehensive about reading, and this was often linked to someone telling them, at some point in high school, that they had a ‘reading problem’. (*Facts* 22)

These are the commonalities of students entering college basic reading and writing courses. Basic reading and writing college students can be successful if given an opportunity to develop their voice in writing and in the classroom.

Although basic reading and writing students may be considered at risk, many have overcome the odds and appear to be more like other college students than one may first realize. Their characteristics are not much different than that of their fellow classmates. What does this mean to educators, and how do we teach these students effectively? Is there truly a large enough deficit to change an entire approach to teaching and treat these students as if they are different? As educators, how do we teach to basic readers and writers, ensuring that they feel confident in their voice and understand that what they have to say is important? In order to establish voice within a basic reading and writing classroom, a trusting relationship must be established between teacher and student, collaborative learning must take place, and teacher passion must be present within the classroom.

A student-centered approach to teaching is vital to establish trust within the classroom. Although this may be difficult for some teachers, it is necessary for them to step back and allow students “in part [to] claim it for themselves” (Branch 2007). The students have been taught at for the past so many years of their lives that it is time for them to take responsibility for their education and learning. Generally speaking, students are comfortable with the teacher leading discussion and them being the recipient of the information. This is the fundamental mold that needs to be broken. Simply arranging the classroom in a circular fashion allows the students to feel equal with their counterparts and vital to the dynamics of the discussion. It is evident that this may cause some discomfort on the students’ and teachers’ part. The focal point will be removed from the educator and readdressed at the student. Some teachers may feel that they have

lost all authority within the classroom, but, in actuality, they have gained a more beneficial form. Through a little coaxing and reassurance, the students will find the benefit and learning opportunity that exists in the circle-seating formation. In time students will feel empowered by their new-found authority within the classroom.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire believes that it is critical for dialogue to exist within the classroom. By creating a “problem-posing” educational setting within the classroom, the students will take an active role in their education. Within this dialogue the authority figure of the teacher is diminished, and the students and educator are equal. This allows for the students to be taught by the teacher and the teacher to be taught by the students (80). It is evident that this openness is vital to the success of the class and the dynamics of the conversation. It takes away the intimidation of learning and allows the students to demonstrate what they know and take responsibility for their education. The students will have a choice on where the discussion will go with the guidance of the teacher. This will allow the instructor plenty of opportunities to praise and build the confidence that may otherwise be lacking. When dialogue is approached in a non-threatening manner, it can be very empowering for students and can lead to new perspectives and ideas on topics they may not have previously thought about.

As previously stated, these students may be considered at risk and less likely to graduate from a four-year institution. Common sense leads us to believe that they have some kind of apprehension towards education and feel inadequate in the educational setting. According to Ira Shor, by establishing “new speech communities...where teachers and students work to promote educational equity and cultural diversity” (29) a

significant transformation occurs within the classroom. One way to develop this atmosphere is for the teacher to step back and invite students to take an active role in curriculum development and establishing their own language. By empowering students, basic reading and writing educators may help students see their true possibility within the classroom and help them to realize that they are not destined to fail.

Formal education does not provide democratic mechanisms for students to propose their own courses, themes, or syllabi. They have no institutional power to plan courses; curriculum is made for them by others, by teachers and academics... when people are not consulted about policy and process in their experience, they are denied citizen status as members of democracy (Shor 31)

No wonder students struggle. As educators, we expect them to take part in their education, but we decide how they will learn, what they will learn, and when they will learn the material. Through “shared authority” a democracy within the classroom can be established (Shor 62). By “negotiating” the syllabus and curriculum, students and teachers will develop “alternative social development, alternative ways of being, knowing, speaking, relating, and feeling, beyond and against traditional classroom arrangements” (Shor 62).

According to Dewey, in order to establish democracy within the classroom, collaboration is necessary. “Without formal participation in decision-making, students develop as authority-dependent subordinates, not as independent citizens” (Shor 31). Ultimately, educators should strive to assist their students in becoming active participants in their education. In doing so, students must be engaged through conversation in the development of the fundamental dynamics of the classroom.

In Kenneth Bruffee's essay "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind," he discusses the idea of establishing a particular kind of conversation within an educational setting and a knowledge-based community amongst peers. He suggests that students can learn more through a collaborative environment. Not only will students learn to have an educated discussion, but more importantly they will learn how to work amongst a community of people with their same knowledge base. Students collaborate with peers and become comfortable working in a setting that will more than likely be similar to the groups they will work with in their everyday lives and jobs. It is evident that once these relationships are established many things can happen within the educational setting.

For example, by providing students the occasion to discuss critical questions concerning a text, the teacher is allowing them the opportunity to converse about a story in a more in-depth approach than a 50-minute class period would allow. The students are able to question others' views and opinions while offering the opportunity for peers to hear opposing viewpoints. This is the relationship that forms the dynamics of the collaborative learning environment in the classroom.

Bruffee also addresses the idea of collaborative learning within the context of writing. Writing is usually considered an individual activity rather than a collaborative one. Bruffee says that "what students do when working collaboratively on their writing is not write or edit or, least of all, read proof. What they do is converse" (425). The students will talk about the topic of the paper and the assignment. This is similar to the role of the writing center. By allowing students to discuss their papers at an early stage

there is a good chance that the papers will be more coherent and organized in the final stage. Students will have the opportunity to hear other ideas that relate to their topics and possibly sort through the muddle of subject matter. Allowing students to “take a hand in what is going on by joining the conversation of mankind” (428) provides a multitude of opportunities for growth within the context of writing.

For one reason or another, basic reading and writing students are being required to take additional courses to “freshen” up their skills and add time to their college careers. As previously stated, these students may be considered at risk and less likely to graduate from a four-year institution. Common sense can lead us to believe that these students have some kind of resilience towards education and feel as if they are inadequate in the educational setting. As educators, it is our responsibility to rid our students of this attitude by approaching all of our classes with the same dedication, commitment, passion and creativity.

In “Search of a Critical Pedagogy,” Maxine Greene refers to the poet as being “exceptional and passionate; and passion has been called the power of possibility” (97). Although the majority of educators do not refer to themselves as poets, it is vital to all students that educators are passionate about their subject area and take the time to identify and recognize their students’ potentials. By characterizing basic reading and writing students “at risk,” the assumption can be made that it is even more crucial for the teacher to tap into their interests in order to keep them engaged and learning. This will require the educator to learn about his/her students’ interests and areas of focus.

In establishing this relationship, the educator should take into account how they view the student as writer. In “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone,” Min-Zhan Lu discusses the idea of what is expected of students and their writing. She specifically focuses on the difference, or lack there of, between “real” writers, and “student” writers. She makes the argument that by separating our students from what we consider “real” writers we are not allowing them to grow and become “responsible authors” (492). This argument is fascinating. The majority of educators are guilty of creating this separation. It is hard not to as an educator. As teachers, it is vital to take into account the following questions: How do we make the separation of correcting errors and letting the writing flow? Can we continue to correct errors, yet treat students as “real” writers at the same time? At what point do we step back and let the process work itself out?

What kind of relationship do we need to establish with our students in order to make them feel like “writers”? Lu expresses that the majority of her students’ anxiety exists in trying to “reproduce the conventions of ‘educated’ English” (491). Why do English instructors create this fear? Is it in the way we walk or talk? Or better yet, the way we grade. Somewhere along the line students have been put into a position to defend their ability level through their writing and how well they do so.

It is vital to the success of these students, as writers, to establish some form of confidence within their writing. David Bartholomae suggests that the most effective way to learn to write is through the reading of classmates’ writing. The majority of writing is taught through revision and editing. Each week, students would be assigned a writing

assignment in response to a specific reading or topic. The students would generate a piece of work that could possibly be viewed by their peers. The students' work would be rotated throughout the semester and classmates would work on analyzing the actual written piece. For example, "we don't discuss 'the family,' ... but what X has said about families...[the students] begin to make decisions about what is interesting and what is banal, what passes as an idea and what does not, what forms of argument work and what don't" (30). This provides a workshop environment "where students learn to read and write in an academic setting" (*Facts* 30). Students learn "how to become (and imagine) both audience and participants in such a discussion" (*Facts* 31).

There is an abundance of ideas circulating through the field of education on how to "fix" students who are not "quite making it." The odds are against these students from the time they step foot into the educational realm. They are considered inadequate by their teachers and peers and view themselves as being "stupid." It is inevitable that if educators take the time to establish voice and create an inviting learning environment basic reading and writing students can and will be successful within the educational setting.

September 28, 2006

Today was different. I went to my English class and my teacher sat in the back of the room. She said that she wanted to hear what we thought about the story and she wasn't going to say a word. It was really fun. This one student said he thought it was stupid. I couldn't believe he would say that in front of our teacher. And then I like agreed with him. It was stupid and I said why. It felt good to speak up. I might talk

again tomorrow. The teacher said she was going to change the way the class worked. I wonder what she will do?

English 1001: Basic Reading and Writing Seminar

"The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say."

*Anais Nin*

Welcome to English 1001. This course is developed around complex writing and reading assignments. You will be asked to complete multiple assignments that will be challenging, intensive, engaging, and at times frustrating. As a class, we will work through the pieces to help you think and write critically about the reading assignments. This class is student centered so be prepared to engage in the work and class discussion.

This class is designed to help you do the following:

- Learn to actively read complex texts, and become comfortable doing so, even if you may not understand everything in them;
- Learn to express in writing and class discussions the connections you make between the text and your personal experiences;
- Become better writers: use your voice to express ideas;<sup>15</sup>
- Feel comfortable with taking risks;
- Find voice and meaning in what you read.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In "The First Day of Class: Passing the Test," Ira Shor discusses his experience with working with basic reading and writing students. "Basically, I said that they had powerful voices...They had much to say" (56).

What is expected of you as a student and classmate:

- Engage in critical thinking in your writing and class discussions
- Participate in class dialogue
- Come prepared with the assigned readings and homework
- Turn in papers on time, in class
- Respect other students and myself. An important dynamic of this course is group work and you must be patient of those around you. Understand that we are all here to learn.

A key component to this class is collaborative work on reading and writing assignments.

It is crucial to your success, as a writer, to be able to read, discuss, and critique your work as well as your classmates' work in a productive manner. All students will have their work read by other students and shared with the class. The purpose of this is not to embarrass you but to learn writing techniques and different ways of thinking from your peers. I do understand that at times you may not feel comfortable sharing your work and I would be happy to talk to you about this.

Course Texts: We will read six texts of teacher choosing and you will choose two texts of your choice. Each week, we will read two or three student papers will provide additional reading material.

Grading: I will read everything that you write, but I will not place an individual grade on assignments. At the end of the semester, you will choose the three assignments that you

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<sup>16</sup> “These are students whom we found could read through an essay like those found in freshman readers but who seemed powerless to make any response to the reading. When they were done reading, they literally had nothing to say” (*Facts* 43).

would like me to grade. In addition to those three assignments, your grade will be based on your overall performance throughout the class.

Assignments:<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the semester, each student will write 12-15 linked assignments with extensive revision and editing. All work is cumulative- building on the previous assignment.

Journals: You will need to purchase a journal to use in class.<sup>18</sup>

Participation: You will get out of this class what you put into it; I suggest you attend on a regular basis.

Attendance: You are responsible to be in class at all times. The discussion relies on your input.

### Establishing Voice Through a Multigenre Project

By: Inspired Basic Reading and Writing Instructor

Over the course of my teaching career, I spent a great deal of time working with students who were reluctant to write, speak, share, and express their ideas in written form. On a daily basis I asked numerous students to share ideas and read to the class various writing assignments. The majority of the writing reflected a safe approach that lacked passion and their beliefs. They were merely writing for the instructor and institution. I knew that

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<sup>17</sup> The majority of the ideas for class assignments are designed around David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky in *Facts Artifacts and Counterfactuals Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course*.

<sup>18</sup> Bartholomae and Petrosky suggest that the journal should be divided up into three sections. The journal will be set up as a reading journal with a section to respond to the assigned reading, the reading of their choice, and the last section will serve for common editing problems (*Facts* 49).

if I did not change my approach to teaching my career would be short lived. That is what inspired the multigenre project and this book.

It is my belief that through a multigenre project ‘voice’ can be re-established within a basic reading and writing classroom. In *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing*

*Multigenre Papers* Tom Romano reflects and examines the use of multigenre projects at a multitude of levels within the English classroom. He supplies the following definition of a multigenre project to his students:

A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monolog nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author’s. The trick is to make such a paper hang together (xi).

Multigenre projects provide an opportunity for students to understand the multiple levels of writing in such a way that has previously been blurred. Multigenre projects generally are “complex, multilayered, multivoiced blend of genres, each revealing information about his topic, each self-contained making a point of its own, unconnected to other genres by conventional transitional devices (4). I believe, as educators, we spend too much time on writing essays and not enough time exploring the many levels of writing that exist.

This brings me to the question: why have institutions deemed essay writing as what constitutes expertise and left other genres for creative writing courses? Why have educational systems abandoned poetry in elementary school and deprived our students of opportunities to experiment with voice through dialogue? What happens when we tell

the story of 9/11 in a non-fictional graphic novel, or express our grandparents' hardships through journal writing? Do we lose the credibility of the text? I argue the contrary, and in all reality, we gain something from the reader that we otherwise would not-we gain voice.

### Just a Memo

Hello Teachers,

Wow! You are all exceptional. Thank you for your hard work.

Just wanted to remind you all what we are working for. Try and find a way to “convey something meaningful, communicat[e] information, creat[e] narratives, shap[e] what we see and feel and believe into written language” (Rose 109) all within the established curriculum. You Rock!

Your Boss

### It's a Party

You're Invited<sup>19</sup>

What: Come join a community of writers in the magic of

writing<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “You can command writing but you can't command good writing. Good writing-writing that surprises the writer and reader- comes only by invitation, and many more invitations are mailed than accepted” (Murray 83).

<sup>20</sup> The key to a successful basic reading and writing classroom is reading and writing. In a *Writer Teaches Writing* by Donald Murray he provides suggestions to make the academic

Where: Beverly Auditorium

When: June 26, 2007 at 2:00pm

Why: Because it is time that you are heard<sup>21</sup>

Change

S1: Hey, do you know what we are supposed to do with this book?

S2: I think we are supposed to read it and find an inner meaning.<sup>22</sup>

S1: Hmm...that sounds interesting. How do you do that?

S2: I think we have to discuss the text in class and come up with some personal idea.

S1: Do you think we will all have to talk?

S2: Yah, unless you want to look stupid.

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atmosphere inviting to basic reading and writing students. He suggests that “there is little worth saying about writing in advance” (75) and the best way to begin class is to start writing. Writing should be about the process and the community that is established through the process. The “students should write and read what they have written aloud” (75), thus forming a community of writers within the classroom.

<sup>21</sup> Murray continues, “teaching writing is fun” and it is time that we step out from “behind the wailing wall created by literature faculties which have complained about the burdens and frustrations of teaching composition” (1) and teach writing. “Professional composition teachers do not look at teaching Freshman English, advanced composition, or even remedial writing as a chore, but as an opportunity” (2).

<sup>22</sup> According to David Bartholomae “most BRW students have never read a book from cover to cover; those who have, clearly have not been educated to think of reading as a ‘dialogue’ that gives ‘voice’ to an otherwise ‘mute’ text, a dialogue that ‘interprets’ the text and in the process yields ‘understanding of that text and of its reader’ (137).

S1: I am stupid, I hang out with you. I can tell you one thing I do not want to talk in front of the class.

S2: It ain't so bad. Remember the teacher said she is a student too. She ain't going to judge us.<sup>23</sup>

S1: Do you think she wants to hear what I have to say?

S2: Yah, if it means something.<sup>24</sup> Maybe you should sing her a song or read some of your poetry.

S1: Funny.

### I Am

I am a writer forever changed.

I don't have to hesitate.

Or question my beliefs.

I have purpose and meaning

otherwise untouched.

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<sup>23</sup> It is essential as an instructor of basic reading and writing students to participate in the class. "We invite our students to talk about how and what they think they learned when they read a book, wrote about it, and discussed it in class, when we define ourselves as participants in their learning process, as facilitators of knowledge rather than distributors of information" (*Facts* 138).

<sup>24</sup> As educators this should be exactly what we are striving for; the point when students realize what they have to say means something. "The classroom then becomes the center of everything, the place where teachers continuously discover, test, and modify ways of stimulating students' intellectual resources, and where students learn to understand and to assess the roles they have and can come to take in their own education. The remedial approach is replaced by one of mediation as both teachers and students learn to ask and to answer questions that make texts speak, and speak away silences with 'voices'" (Bartholomae 139).

I am the text.

Covering the page  
indication and insight.

I am the future.

Opinions and certainty resurfaced.

I am voice.

Loud and clear  
shaking the ground that I touch.

I am a writer forever changed.

Because someone cared to listen.

### Jeff: Part Three

Although my time with Jeff was short-lived- he only stayed at the center for two months-I appreciate him daily. He helped me find my passion in education and led me to explore the capabilities of a vast range of students. To some, Jeff may appear to be another failed statistic that slipped through the cracks and will never attend college. To me, he was something more. Because of Jeff, I am inspired. I want to help struggling students find voice and authority in the academic setting. I want them to have something they have never had before. I want them to reclaim what is theirs.

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