FROM ALIENATION TO AUTHORSHIP: CREATING A WRITING COMMUNITY FOR HIGH SCHOOL BASIC WRITERS

Dawn Abt-Perkins

> In trying to find new ways to teach students who might find themselves at risk both in the classroom and in the worlds that surround it, we are trying to find ways to encourage agency, to find sources for its exercise, to give latitude for its development....We are, quite deliberately, trying to fashion in the classroom an inhabitable world for students, one in which they might safely raise such voices as they have to make meanings for themselves and others, voices that will be valued for such agency as they can manage.
>
> Jay Robinson
> University of Michigan, Professor

> I never got any help last year in English and I never said anything. I was just there. I never read anything and I faked the reports. I did enough to pass. Last year, (when my writing) was bad, I just kept on going. This year I try to make it perfect and that's where the frustration now comes from.

Dominic
Ninth Grade Basic Writer

He got a "C" on a report because he didn't put the title in the right place. The teacher didn't even talk to him about it. He tore it up and put it in the wastebasket. Then he started a quiet rebellion.

Dominic's Mother

Voices for student literacy and agency, like those of Jay Robinson, Dominic, and Dominic's mother, challenge me as a teacher of high school basic writers to reconsider traditional skills-based instructional approaches. They ask me, instead, to create a space in my classroom where basic writers can begin to make their school writing experiences matter. Jay Robinson, Dominic, and his mother address in a personal way the literacy needs of the diverse population of students typically found in writing courses labeled as basic.

The Problem

The basic writing courses I have taught in high schools have been typically viewed as dumping grounds for all sorts of "problem" students. My classes have often been composed of students who were emotionally troubled, those who were former "druggies" just out of rehabilitation programs, and pregnant teens struggling to keep up with the demands of school as they faced the imminent demands of motherhood. For example, in 1989 my class included one student who later committed suicide, another whose step-father was arrested for holding his family hostage at gunpoint, and another who frequently ran away from home and was often absent from school for extended periods of time. My class also included several students who had such difficulty communicating with written language, they were officially classified as learning disabled. These represent only a few of the 50 diverse basic writers I taught that year.

From the perspective of writing development, these students usually had little in common except the fact that they had been labeled as "basic" by an evaluator on some measure. And as the basic writing teacher, I was given very little information about the writing and reading abilities or experiences of my students aside from an occasional set of standardized test scores. The only curriculum guide for the course was a list of adolescent novels available in class sets. Instead of a curriculum, I was given advice from my colleagues designed to limit my expectations and shelter me from disappointment.

1. Make your classroom very structured. They appreciate structure and, in fact, do not know how to function when given choice and freedom.

2. Give them plenty of worksheets on skills and have them complete these in class. They need practice in writing skills. Do not expect them to do homework. Their lives outside of school do not lend themselves to study time.

3. Avoid small group work. They have short attention spans and get off task too easily if you are not watching them every minute.

4. They need very clear instructions and step-by-step task analysis because they are incapable of higher order thinking and decision making.

5. Do not expect them to write more than a paragraph. Start working with parts of speech, spelling, sentence structure and, then, try building paragraphs.

My colleagues were trying to be helpful; they cautioned me to be realistic. The picture they painted of a "remedial" high school writer and writing course typifies the limited expectations teachers hold for the basic writer's development and portrays an image of the basic writer as deficient, not capable of writing well, difficult to teach.

This deficit model or remedial approach is grounded in assumptions about the instructional needs and literacy capabilities of basic writers. Jeannie Oakes, in her study of 299 English and math high school classrooms, characterized different students' perceptions of what they learned about writing in high-track vs. low-track high school English classrooms. The following comments made by students illustrate the differences in what students learn about writing in these different tracks (79-83):

High Track, Senior High, English:

"The thing we did in class that I enjoyed the most was writing poetry, expressing my ideas."

"To know how to communicate with my teachers like friends and as teachers at the same time. To have confidence in myself other than my skills and class work."

"I have learned to be creative and free in writing things."

Low Track, Senior High, English:

"I learned that English is boring."

"Behave in class."

"To be a better listener in class."

In the English classes Oakes studied, high-track classes required more writing where students were encouraged to write in particular genres and styles. On the other hand, the curricular goals of low-track composition courses consisted of learning to write simple, short narrative paragraphs and acquiring standard English usage and functional literacy skills (filling out forms, applying for jobs).

Mike Rose, an educator of basic writers and former basic writer himself, made the following commentary after teaching a writing course designed for low-tracked elementary students:

> But can we really say that kids like those I taught have equal access to America's educational resources? Consider not only the economic and political barriers they

> face, but the fact, too, that judgments about their ability are made at a very young age, and those judgments, accurate or not, affect the curriculum they receive, their place in the school, the way they're defined institutionally. The insidious part of this drama is that, in the observance or the breach, students unwittingly play right into the assessments. Even as they rebel, they confirm the school's decision. They turn off or distance themselves or clam up or daydream, they deny or lash out, acquiesce or subvert for, finally, they are powerless to stand outside the definition and challenge it head on (128).

Dominic had tried to fight the image of being a remedial writer, but found that rebellion was an easier and more rewarding way to deal with the writing tasks assigned to him.

> In most classes I'm not given any choice, Most of the time the work is just answering questions out of the book. I don't see the purpose in it. I don't try. Concentrating on something I don't really want to do is hard. I want to pass. I want to make it somewhere in life. But I never get any help, and I never say anything. Most of the time I'm just there.

Dominic recognized that school success is important, but he also couldn't bring himself to value the kinds of assignments given to him as reading and writing tasks. To Dominic it made more sense to just get by or not do the work at all than to invest himself in work that seemed meaningless. He spoke of "faking" book reports in his earlier English classes, and he "just kept on going" even when he knew he had misunderstood a writing assignment or sensed that the piece of writing was not turning out as intended.

I spent the beginning of the school year in 1989 trying to fight against the attitude Dominic had about school writing. At first, he would come into my class and put his head down on the desk and sleep. When he wasn't sleeping, he was drawing on the desk or on his notebook covers. He was willing to show up in class, but he wasn't willing to participate. In order for his writing skills to improve, he needed to be convinced that involving himself in his writing could mean more than just the probability of failure.

The skills-based composition instruction that Dominic was accustomed to in his low-track courses provides basic writers with a vision of themselves as failures. In her ethnographic study of school language learning, Shirley Brice Heath found that "basic level classes which slowed down and broke into smaller fragments the steps of the mainstream patterns of unilinear skill development had not seemed to enable these students to break their pattern of failure" (270).

Mina Shaughnessy, in her work with college-level basic writers, describes how these students view themselves as language learners:

> They have lost all confidence in the very faculties that serve all language learners: their abilities to draw analogies between what they knew of language when they began school and what they learned produced mistakes; and such was the quality of their instruction that no one saw the intelligence of their mistakes or thought to harness that intelligence in the service of learning (10-11).

Dominic and other basic writers like him have been taught that language use is about correctness, not making meaning. What seems to be missing in most basic writing classrooms is a context for writing tasks that honors meaning over form, expressive use of language over correctness, and communication over teaching judgment. Dominic and his peers needed to see writing acts as functioning in meaningful ways in their lives. The concept of meaningfulness cannot be taken for granted in composition instruction. When researchers at the Institute for Research on Teaching set out to address the question of why students do not write, they discovered that the problem had to do with the meaningfulness of school writing tasks (Florio 55). In her case studies of three ESL (English as a Second Language) writers, Vivian Zamel argues for the importance of classroom context as a function of "what students do and do not do as writers and how they come to view themselves as writers" (96).

When working with Dominic and other basic writers in my ninth grade composition course, I found that a workshop context for writing instruction is one way teachers can create opportunities for basic writers to write and share their writing in an environment where they will be heard and valued for what they have to say. In a classroom where teacher and peers worked together to support the student writer, school writing tasks became, in Dominic's words, "real and exciting."

The Writing Workshop

Dominic and the other basic writers in his class had been taught that English class and writing in school focused on filling out worksheets and writing short essay responses on tests. (See Applebee for a survey of the kinds of writing tasks found in high schools.) They had seldom engaged in any extended writing tasks found in high school. The 1980 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that students like mine "are poor writers, so they seldom write; and, because they seldom write, they are poor writers" (47). Likewise they were inexperienced with finding ideas to write about since most of the writing they had done previously was in response to teacher-generated topics designed to test skill acquisition. (See Farr and Daniels for an argument regarding the lack of student-centered instruction in low-tracked writing courses.) I recognized that I needed to begin instruction by establishing that students would control the purpose and the content of their writing.

I introduced the writing workshop by conducting freewriting and journal writing exercises. These were designed to demonstrate that a writer can always find something to write about if freed from inhibitions associated with concerns about correctness. (See Moffett for a further description of freewriting and journal keeping exercises to aid fluidity. See Elbow for an argument concerning the need to "close one's eyes to audience" in the initial stages of the writing process.) Dominic once commented on how important he thought these exercises were to his progress. He mentioned that he had done journal writing in previous classes, but always on teacher-prescribed topics. "I couldn't write. Now I write out of my brain and I find lots to write about."

I would always write with my students and begin the sharing time afterwards. During one such exercise, I wrote about my memory of orchestrating a plan to throw thirty dictionaries out of the window while my eighth grade English teacher slept at his desk. This draft demonstrated that I, too, struggled as a writer and that, like a majority of my students, I had been a bit of a rebel. Dominic and his classmates laughed aloud at my escapade. A writing community began to form.

Following freewriting and sharing, the students would draft pieces. For example, following the memory freewrite, my students and I wrote narratives. My directions were to create a "finished piece of writing." As the project unfolded, the students requested more specific instructions concerning length and form. I avoided setting these criteria and instead used a piece a former student had written to show how one can move from the prewriting to the drafting stage.

During this demonstration, the students were surprised to find that I had saved the work of my former students. They had never seen student writing, like their own, used as a model. I used this opportunity to explain that their work should be written with an audience of their peers in mind as these would be shared in some way with other students.

Next, we shared our drafts by reading them aloud to a partner. I avoided using checklists or worksheets to guide the process. Before the first peer-writing groups met over the memory narratives, I encouraged the students to talk to each other rather than share written comments about their work. To facilitate "writing talk," I modeled the kind of conversation I was looking for by sharing a draft I was working on about a childhood experience with my father. We discussed what was effective about the piece and shared helpful ideas for revision.

I also used an overhead to show writing done by a former student. The piece was competent writing in terms of content and organization, but was riddled with mechanical errors. When I asked students to comment on the quality of the piece, Dominic began by criticizing the spelling and punctuation errors. I then asked the class to comment on the author's message and technique. All of the students were able to make comments about the writer's use of description and sentence structure. I explained that it is relatively easy to correct a piece of writing and far more difficult to help a peer improve the ideas, description or organization of a piece.

Following this discussion, students met with their peer editing groups over their memory narratives. Many were concerned about saying the "right" things to their fellow writers. They felt uncomfortable taking responsibility for helping other students with their writing. I told them that there was no way they could do it "wrong" if they were responding as interested readers.

Later in the writing process, I would meet with students and hold one-on-one conferences while other writers were working on revisions or meeting with their peers to obtain more feedback. These writing conferences focused on helping the writers with whatever problems they identified in their work. In conferences during the initial stages of writing projects, students would often need someone to talk with them over drafts to help them "find out what I was trying to say."

During one such conference concerning a character sketch about his friend, Dominic discovered that he was giving a faulty description of Al. Dominic had mistakenly led us to believe Al was a happy, carefree person. During the conference when we told Dominic our reading of Al based on what he had written, Dominic related that Al was recently hospitalized for drug abuse. Dominic realized, through having readers react to his writing, that he needed to add some new information about Al in order to communicate what he had intended.

In conferences held after the initial drafting stage, students and I would discuss structural concerns, organization, and, as their pieces moved toward completion, error analyses and developing strategies for improving mechanical problems. Each student met with me at least twice during each writing project. Students were also required to meet with their peers before they met with me. I then used peer comments as a way to guide my comments. In this way, students learned to respect the expertise of their writing "answers." In part, I believe my students learned to write better by responding to the writings of others.

When students were satisfied that a piece was "finished," we held class readings where writers read their work aloud to the entire class. They told how their idea came to be, the difficult decisions they had to make as they were written, and their favorite parts of the pieces. Then, they responded to questions and comments from their peers.

In an interview I audiotaped with Dominic in June, 1989, he said that sharing his writing and listening to others share their work was a turning point for him as a writer. He started to care about his writing.

> Worksheets are easy. Half the time I forget I have them and forget to do and don't do them. My writing needs to make sense in this class because we talk about it as a class. I don't forget about these writing assignments because I think about them after I leave the class.

Dominic's piece on Al was published in a class book along with other students' favorite works of the semester. The book was titled *Inside of Fresh Minds* and was distributed to other freshmen classes and to parents. When another student commented that he wasn't completely satisfied with the piece he had authored for the magazine, Dominic responded, "How could you not like your own writing? That's like not liking a part of yourself."

Response

The effects of this program are best illustrated through the stories of these students as writers. The following is a closer look at the students who shared my classroom with Dominic. These profiles include descriptions of their needs as learners and writers and their individual responses to the workshop approach. The students described are not the only students in the class. Rather, these particular cases are representative of various "problem writers" I encountered throughout my years of teaching high school to basic writers. These descriptions do not include test scores, grades, or comments from their cumulative folders. These students and their educational needs are far more complex than test scores illustrate. Their cumulative folders all read very much alike: poor grades, low reading scores, and comments from teachers concerning missing assignments, lack of motivation and independent work habits. Yet, each of these students had different learning needs, different expectations of the teacher, varied attitudes toward learning and different experiences with language outside of school. All responded well to the workshop model.

David: A "Learning Disabled" Writer

David had a difficult time adjusting to a regular writing class after participating in special English programs for the learning disabled for years. He was determined to be successful in the regular curriculum. Both David and his mother expressed their frustrations with his former program, claiming it was too worksheet-based. The flexibility of the workshop approach allowed me to address his writing needs on a more individual basis than I could have in a traditional composition program while still maintaining standards that applied to all my students.

David benefitted from the classroom atmosphere which rewarded students for participating and supporting one another. "I feel I'm in control of my own learning. In this class we get to do things independently, but still work as a group." David understood that writing is a difficult struggle for everyone. He articulated this well when he said, "I feel more comfortable with the class now. I can see other people have trouble too."

Mark: A "Paralyzed" Writer

Mark was a very shy student whose main problem was trying to communicate in school settings. Initially, he had a difficult time with both oral and written language use in classroom. His parents, who had not been successful English students themselves, did not feel comfortable helping him with his problems.

Mark viewed school as a series of assignments and endless homework. He struggled throughout the semester with trying to understand how to be an independent thinker. Mark was always looking for me to give him the "answer," mostly because he was concerned with failing if he worked independently.

Mark believed handwriting and spelling were the two most important components of good writing skills. This belief was supported by his step-mother who responded to a question about his writing habits with, "He is a sloppy writer," meaning his handwriting was difficult to read. As a result, Mark was so worried about getting the mechanics right, he wasn't a very fluent writer.

The writing journal helped Mark overcome his concerns about handwriting and spelling. By engaging in sustained writing for specified periods of time, he began to realize that he could write more than three sentences. This sustained writing time helped him find ideas for writing. Most importantly, journals helped free him of worrying that everything he wrote would be negatively judged and lead to failure.

Sean: The "Unmotivated" Writer

Sean had received poor grades in English in the past due to what were labelled by his former teachers as motivation problems. He was placed in my basic writing class because he was "lazy," and his parents were afraid he would fail in the regular ninth grade class.

As it turned out, Sean liked to write when given the opportunity to do it *his* way. Sean learned to enjoy revision. After his first major writing project, he wrote, "As a writer I've learned that the first thing you write down isn't perfect. It takes a lot of changing. The thing that surprised me the most was how much revision I did. I didn't expect the ending to turn out like it did, but the ending I had before isn't as good as this one is." Sean learned the difference between good and bad writing and began to understand how to improve his own writing.

Sean responded to the workshop because he enjoyed having his peers comment on his writing. Their comments motivated him to make his writing better the next time. The social interaction of the writing process in the workshop was important for Sean, who was uninterested in writing well simply to get good grades. More importantly, his writing reflected on him and his highly valued relationships with his peers.

Helen: A Writer from a "Troubled Home"

Helen's home was not a literate one in the school sense: it did not contain many books, and reading was not encouraged at home. But Helen's family members were good storytellers and joke tellers. She chose to use her writing opportunities to share some of these stories. These included a friendly family beer/milk fight that spontaneously broke out at the dinner table one evening as well as the story of a time when Helen was depressed and her mother put men's underwear over her head to make Helen laugh.

Helen once wrote, "When I write a story, I have to relate to it in some way or write about some event that happened at a period of time in my life." Helen was able to do this because we were also sharing stories of our lives. I had read a piece I wrote about my father and his past drinking problems. Other students shared writing about fights they had had with gang members or about teachers who adversely affected them. In this atmosphere of honesty and sharing, Helen felt comfortable sharing her stories. Helen once wrote about her development as a writer, "I try to attempt new things more. I think on my work. I participate in class discussions. Before, I would just sit and listen."

While Helen felt she had a respected voice in my classroom, she also walked embarrassed down high school hallways where she encountered the gossip of students and faculty about her previously jailed step-father. Helen required a community which would allow her to tell about her family without ridicule.

Helen needed to write about her family in order to make school writing meaningful in her life. I wanted her to obtain the writing practice she so desperately needed. The writing workshop fulfilled her needs as a student writer and my goals as a writing teacher.

The Writing Workshop and Basic Writers

The workshop approach to writing instruction is especially valuable to basic writers at the high school level because it improves their self-images as writers and as students. The following is a list of components of the writing workshop method which are especially important for meeting the needs of the high school basic writer:

1. *Writing Practice*: Basic writers are given many opportunities to write whole pieces of discourse. Writing is not taught in bits and pieces through isolated skill-based exercises, but as meaningful forms of communication.

2. *Models*: Through examining student models of different stages of the writing process, basic writers can begin to see themselves as part of a community of writers who struggle with having their words make sense to readers. Teacher-produced writing models that illustrate risk-taking either in subject or form are important to share with these writers. They need to see the teacher as part of the writing community as well. This builds the necessary trusting relationship these writers need to feel comfortable investing themselves personally in their writing projects.

3. *Audience*: Many basic writers at the high school level lack respect for school and teachers because they have been treated as failures and misfits by the school system. This anger prevents them from being interested in responding to a teacher audience. With a peer audience, the student writer can feel free to discuss the problems in his/her writing.

4. *Support*: Since many of these techniques and skills are new for basic writers, a great deal of procedural, strategical and emotional support needs to be given at every stage of teaching. Students cannot be expected to embrace this approach initially since it is foreign to their experience as school writers.

5. *Skills*: Rather than simply "red-lining" errors and sending students back to their desks to correct their work, editing conferences require students to tell how and why they made certain editing decisions, working at correcting logic while searching for logical patterns in their mechanical errors. Students analyse and attend to their own grammatical, spelling and punctuation problems as part of their role as writers.

6. *Students as Authors*: When students write for many audiences and publish their work, they need to attend to spelling, punctuation and form issues to a degree that traditional classroom writing exercises do not require. The writing folders my students kept in class contained all drafts of their writing pieces and these were shared, on occasion, with parents. I used student writings from previous classes as models of various assignments so the students realized that their writings had value over time. I also used their writing as models for my other average and above average ninth grade English classes to show that their writing was not "below standard." Most importantly, I paused at the end of each writing project to have a class period to share and celebrate their work with classmates. They were respected authors.

7. *Personalized Instruction*: The writing workshop approach builds an atmosphere of trust and support for each individual student through the one-on-one conference, drafting in class, and peer response. Because each basic writer comes to the writing experience with different needs and experiences with language, the flexibility of the workshop model provides the teacher with the opportunity to know each student as a writer and design instruction accordingly.

Conclusion

Often teachers in high school settings assume that basic writers lack the maturity, work habits or drive to experience success in a writing workshop model of instruction. And there is no question that basic writers feel challenged by any instruction other than the familiar skills-based model. In fact, teachers who try to enact new process, student-centered methods inherent in the workshop model will encounter initial resistance from basic writers who will call out for worksheets and decontextualized writing practice. Students who lack confidence as learners always feel more comfortable and content with the familiar. I know that having a workbook on my students' desks would have made them feel quite at home.

I chose instead to take risks and to be patient as I watched my students grow to be active communicators. I survived the time and paper load by finding ways to have students operate as sources of support for each other.

In listening to Dominic, and the other students in my basic writing class, I have come to realize the potential a workshop model has for creating a community of authors in a high school basic writing class. I hope that my story will remind other teachers of what is indeed possible with these learners.

Works Cited

Applebee, Arthur. *Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas.* (Research Reports No. 21) Urbana: NCTE, 1981.

Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *College English* 49 (1987): 50-68.

Farr, Marcia and Harvey Daniels. *Language Diversity and Writing Instruction.* New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 1986.

Florio, Susan. "The Problem of Dead Letters: Social Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing." *Elementary School Journal* 80 (1979): 1-7.

Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms.* Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1983.

Moffett, James. *Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum K-12.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. Writing Achievement, 1969-79. Results from the third writing assessment (Vols. 1-3). Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1980.

Oakes, Jeannie. *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality.* New Haven: Yale U P, 1985.

Robinson, Jay. *Conversations on the Written Word: Essays on Language and Literacy.* Portsmouth; N.H.: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1990.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary.* New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing.* New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

Zamel, Vivian. "Through Students' Eyes: The Experiences of Three ESL Writers." *Journal of Basic Writing* 9 (1990): 83-89.