

DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE: SOME USES OF OVERSIMPLIFICATION BY BASIC WRITERS

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One of the frequent problems we see in beginning, or basic, writing—almost an identifying mark of basic writing, in fact—is oversimplification. David Bartholomae, in “Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills,” calls it “the heuristic of simplification” (95). Bartholomae explains it as follows:

Basic writers, because they equate thought with order, profundity with maxims, often look for the means of reducing a subject to its simplest or most obvious terms. Ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty—those qualities that are most attractive to academics—are simply ‘wrong’ in the minds of students whose primary goal is to produce controlled and safe essays. (95)

Mina P. Shaughnessy, too, noted: “The experienced writer characteristically reveals a much greater tolerance for what Dewey called ‘an attitude of suspended conclusion’ than the inexperienced writer, whose thought often seems to halt at the boundary of each sentence rather than move on, by gradations of subsequent comment, to an elaboration of the sentence” (227). In

these passages Bartholomae and Shaughnessy not only describe a type of writing we often see, they also pose explanations: that basic writers “equate thought with order, profundity with maxims”; that they have less “tolerance” for “ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty.”

But why? Do basic writers have some kind of cognitive deficiency or cognitive lack of development? If so, we must then ask ourselves why many basic writers do very well in other subjects and how so many of them have overcome poverty, poor schooling, low expectations, lack of peer reinforcement and sometimes even parental encouragement, and/or difficult immigrant backgrounds to make it to college in the first place—which would rather indicate superior cognitive abilities!

To understand better the writing processes of basic writers (and hence, following Mina Shaughnessy, to develop a pedagogy of error rather than a pedagogy based on error), Glenda Hull, Mike Rose, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Brian Reilly pose these guiding questions in “Seeing the Promise of the Underprepared”:

*What strategies, habits, rules, and assumptions tend to characterize the writing and reading skills of underprepared students?

*What personal, social, and historical forces might have influenced strategies, rules, and assumptions?

*What tends to happen to these strategies, rules, and assumptions during instruction? (13)

In other words, we need to abandon our unexamined assumptions about basic writers and do some qualitative research.

As I attempted to address the problem of oversimplification in the writing of my own students, my investigation into their strategies and assumptions led to some interesting discoveries.

Some Case Studies

Tracy¹ was a twenty-one year old Anglo E.O.P. (Economic Opportunity Program) freshman who had taken and passed Basic Writing 1 in a summer “Bridge” program, but had failed Basic Writing 2 in fall semester and was retaking it with me in the spring. She was cheerful and good-natured, but she had

¹All names of students have been changed to protect their privacy.

missed over half of the classes because of bouts with pneumonia and then mononucleosis. Besides going to school full-time, Tracy worked 32 hours a week in a plant nursery. She was an environmental studies major and told me that she was doing okay in her other classes, although she required extra tutoring in math. She told me she was getting at least a "B" in her Women's Studies course. She believed that her only problem in writing was grammar.

Following is Tracy's complete essay in response to this topic: *Explain how you have (or have not) been raised to fulfill certain gender role expectations. Conclude by making some generalizations about gender roles in our society today.* It is her second draft, written on computer (hence some of the sophisticated spelling along with incorrect punctuation and sentence structures), and she had over two weeks to work on it:

On February 28, 1971 in Redwood City at Sequoia hospital I was born. My mother was very happy that she had a girl since her first was a boy. My father was mad that my mother had a girl. He wanted another boy besides my brother. My father was the seventh child but, the sixth boy and he wanted at least two boys in age next to each other so he despised I was a girl.

When I was growing up my father had wished I was a boy. I can remember my dad telling me he hated me because I am not a boy. Since my mother never had a boy it made it worse in the long run since there in one boy Mark and three girls. Me being the oldest, Laura who is fourteen months younger than me, and Julie who is two years and six weeks younger than I am.

Before I was three years old many little boys from the neighborhood would come and ask if I wanted to play with them. At that age many boys thought I was a boy since I was just getting hair for the first time. At the beginning it was reddish-blond and very, very short. When I played with those boys, we played with and did things boys did, not what girls did it was to outgoing. We played trucks, cars, war, and also every sport until I was about fifteen years old. That was the time I got out of my tomboy stage.

When I was growing up my mother always let me do just about anything I wanted. I was not treated to be secure

of my parents when growing up. Compared to my friends I was able to go out when I wanted, date, party with friends, and work at a job if I wanted. Many of my friends still can not have a job while in college because there parents think it would interfere with there prioritites. I guess my sisters have it easier than I did, since my mother has already thing in her mind from what to tell me what the right thing to do. My parents, at least my mother has always trusted me and my judgment about the decision I make about my life.

In society many people have there different views of gender in the home, public and the work place. I have found no difference in my job as a woman but in growing up there were thing i just didn't understand since I was a tomboy until about fifteen when I went into high school. Many problem with gender get in court especially about women who are denied a job because they are female. But for myself gender discrimination has never been a problem for me or my family. I just hope some day my father will accept that I was a girl and not a boy he really wanted about twenty years ago.

This version is almost identical to a first draft which I had looked over and discussed with her in a conference, except that she changed a few minor words and added the final sentence. I had suggested she explain her relationship with her father more completely and make it central in the paper. "What he said is such a startling statement," I had said. "Surely that must have affected how you perceived yourself as a girl?" Tracy had responded, "Oh yeah, yeah, but that's another story." Still, I was surprised that the second draft had only the one additional sentence. Although indeed the addition provides some closure, it also underscores what to me is so glaringly undeveloped in her paper: her conflict with her father and its effects on her formation of identity. There are startling gaps in the paper; it raises many questions and answers none: Was she a tomboy in order to please her father? Was the freedom she experienced growing up really neglect? How did her sisters "have it easier" than she did? What were the things she didn't understand until she was about fifteen? Given what she has revealed, how can

she possibly state that gender discrimination had never been a problem for her or her family?

In a second conference with Tracy the following discussion took place:

Sheila: Now one thing that I was particularly—that particularly struck me about the paper and it's what struck me in the draft—when you wrote the draft—was the—uh—this section through here when you talk about how your father felt about you. It's so moving—you know—it's a very—it just makes a person sit up, and it's very moving and strong—and you did this time add a sentence in the end, you came back to that, which gives it some coherence and that was a very nice touch, but I was really wondering why you didn't make it even more of an issue than you did, you know, kind of make it—to me it's the central focus of that whole essay.

Tracy: One thing is because I don't like to talk about that—I mean, you know, I just don't like to talk about my Dad. I just kind of wish he doesn't exist.

Sheila: Uh huh. . .

Tracy: So you know I just you know try to think of something to write about so— I didn't think, you know, it was going to be you know make that much of a big deal you know—having to do in my writing—so-

Sheila: Yeah. You don't think that—um—writing about your—you mean you just want to not deal with those feelings at all or you don't want to write about them?

Tracy: I just don't want to write about them—not even—deal I mean dealing with them is yeah, it's fine, it's (mumble).

Sheila: It's too emotional to write about?

Tracy: Yeah, it's just you know, there's a lot of things in my family you know, especially him, so I don't know. . .

Sheila: Okay.

Tracy: So I don't know. . . I mean I just don't, I mean I could write about him and stuff but it's just harder and it's you know it takes a lot, it takes a lot longer to, to write it down, exactly how I feel because it's not just like one emotion, I mean there's many things—you know why he hates me and why I hate him and you know, I mean I

could write a book about it I mean—that long, that’s how long it could go on. So it’s just, I don’t know, it just, there’s so many hate things in my life with my father that—I didn’t think it was all that worth going into—in the paper—so. . . Sheila: I see, uh huh. . . okay.. (retreats into talking about a fragment).

Thus, in tackling the essay assignment Tracy resorted to the heuristic of simplification. She was faced with an overwhelming complexity of emotions in this writing task; she felt she “could write a book.” In suggesting the first time that she focus more on her father I only exacerbated the problem and gave her no help at all. After this second conference, however, she revised again, developing the piece into nine, rather than five paragraphs, adding considerable detail about her “freedom” growing up and what she didn’t understand until she was fifteen, and focusing this time more on her mother. She inserted a second paragraph which more clearly addressed the topic:

My mother, Janeen Irma Farley, was a waitress when she met my father, so when she married she never worked. My mother had four children and hated staying at home and not doing anything useful except for being a mother, so after my sister hit her second year of kindergarten my mother went to work. She went back to work to support her children since my parents had separated. That’s probably why I become to know what was best and what women needed should do to survive in society.

In another paragraph she added the sentence, “My father who supported us until my mother took us away; hated me for being a girl at birth,” thus raising the number of references to her father’s rejection of her from four to five, but still not developing any of them. She concluded her essay this time as follows:

Of the gender problem today I think it is much easier then when my mother was growing up, especially since my father wouldn’t let her work in a job because she was there to take care of the children. I admire my mother and what she has gone through in life with her children, family, and especially my father. My mother taught me that I have to

be tough to survive in the twentieth century. My mother biggest accomplishment is raising four children and setting a foundation for me and my sisters who love my mother as much as I do today.

Though Tracy chose to retain her original elliptical allusions to her father without further explanation or development, now they became subsumed in a larger picture with a more developed focus.

Another student who turned to the heuristic of simplification was Larissa, an eighteen year old African-American freshman who did not speak up in class much and who always presented a composed, unruffled exterior (that is, even when arriving halfway through class she would walk very calmly across the front of the room and to her seat—which I grudgingly admired). For somewhat less than 75 minutes she wrote directly on the computer in response to the topic: *Write a unified essay in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement. Give specific examples to support your position. Education helps reduce prejudice and improve understanding among people.* Following is her essay, essentially a first draft:

I agree with the following statement, about education helps our society by understanding among one another. Examples would be: going to college. The college life of students is that they are in a mixed enviornment. When people are in a mixed enviornment they learned about one another cultures. Some people have never been around another race a day in there life. Then you have those who has always been around a mixed enviornment.

Then you have people learning about one another personality on campus. Living in the dorms, can help you see who is a real good friend to have. Half of the time you have another race helping you out instead of your own race. Another example would be, this fall when school first started. I had more of the opposite race helping me out, more than my own race. This right here was a good example of how your race can also put you down also.

The fact of having an education, is one sense of intelligence. You can tell who has received there education, and

who has not received there education. In the U.S. to this day you can tell the ignorance of a person who has not yet fulfill there education. They still have there racial remarks, about each different culture, they still have there remarks, about how can a minority go to college? These are some of the things that runs into the minds of people lacking education.

I as and college student is exposed to different cultures everyday. Why should I make a difference about someone else not being the same color as myself? Why does it make a difference that minorities are attending college? If any knows the real true answer, it would be there is plenty of grants, loans and scholarships. These are some of the ways that you can help yourself through college. Education is a major role in everyones life. If it wasn't for education you would have alot of self ignorant people. All people are not ignorant to the fact that they get like the KKK down in the deep south. This is another great example of people lacking education. In the deep south they feel that every black, hispanic and asian are a disgrace to the world.

This is a struggle that each race has to go through. It seems that the Europeans came over to America, and thought they were high and mighty over everyone. More examples would be they made the blacks be there slaves, they paid the hispanics under there pay, and they put the asians in concentration camps. Why was all of this done by the Europeans? Where they afraid of the other races? Is there something that they lacked? Yes it was, they lacked education. The Europeans in the early days could pass on an eighth grade education. Where another race could not even receive there education. If another race was caught learning how to read, write or spell they where beat, or thy were killed.

In conclusion, education has a big part in todays world. Education has always had a big part in each and every individual. Education deals with the mind and the sense of the mind. There are a few people who realizes the importance of an education. Education has change alot of people sense of thoughts about other races.

I found this essay incoherent. I couldn't follow the thread of an argument and some sentences were completely mysterious:

what did she mean by the sentence “The fact of having an education, is one sense of intelligence,” for example? I had the impression of an invisible opponent in the fourth and fifth paragraphs, of a response to events or arguments we’re not made aware of. Here was classic writer-based writing.

In a follow-up conference it turned out that Larissa had a very deep and personal response to the topic. On the one hand, she had had some positive experiences at San Jose which she had only hinted at in her second paragraph:

S: . . . I think this little area here needs a lot of more detail, a more detailed explanation and some illustration. For instance, what do you mean by opposite race? You know, there’re a lot of different ethnic groups, you mean any race not your own is the opposite or—

L: Yeah. . . basically when I came up here I have met more white people than anything and they was helping me out you know, finding my classes you know on the campus, and they was telling me which professors to choose, and they—

S: Oh really—

L: (growing steadily more animated) Uh huh, because they had helped me out a lot because I came here, like the first day to move into the dorms because my mother wanted me to get acquainted with the campus and everything, and I had more white kids helping me than black kids, you know, they was looking at me with their nose stuck up in the air and—

S: Yeah? The black kids were looking at you with their nose stuck up in the air? Why do you think?

L: I don’t know, it’s like, like I’m coming back next semester and if I see a black kid that looks like a freshman or they’re lost, I’m gonna help them out, ‘cause I know that I had to go through the first day that they’re going through.

On the other hand, she was also recalling as she wrote some hurtful and extraordinary incidents: In high school, some other students had questioned her right to go to state university; more recently, her close friend had experienced terrifying racism:

S: Okay and then, this, this is a different thing—Uhhh, (reads) I am exposed to different cultures everyday..(pause)

I don't know what you're answering there. It's, uh, it's as if you're answering a voice I haven't heard there, or an accusation or something you're hearing around—that's not in your essay—

L: Okay

S: Is that—bear any—what, what was your reason for putting that?

L: I as a college student?

S: Yeah, before you got to the part about going-answering-uh responding to the um remarks that you mention at the top of the page you inserted this. I was wondering why you did that?

L: All because um (?) where you run into, you know, different things on the college campus sometimes..

S: Uh huh, yeah.

L: and all that stuff, racism a lot on college campuses, so-

S: Uh huh. Have you run into it?

L: Not here, not on this campus. I get along pretty well with everyone on this campus.

S: Uh huh, do you have friends or anything that you hear about that are having trouble in this situation?

L: Yeah, I have a friend that's down at Atlanta, Georgia that goes to Morehouse—and—the KKK, they marched.

S: Oh my God.

L: —through the university especially by Morehouse and Spellman is all right by each other, and the KKK they marched. So she was scared, she was ready to come home-

S: I bet.

L: Uh huh, 'cause she says she didn't want to go down there where she'd have to deal with all that. She said she might as well come back to LA.

S: Oh, that's scary. Did she stay or is she going to come back?

L: She's back here now.

S: Oh really?

L: Uh huh, that happened with her *all* semester.

S: Oh that's a shame.

L: Uh huh, so now she's at Northridge.

S: Uh huh. What a horrible thing.

L: So they were seriously marching. She said they waited till night to start marching.

S: Oh my God.

L: Yeah, so I don't know. I said I would've been like you, packing my bags ready to go home.

S: Yeah. Okay. All that all could be moved right below. . .etc.

Most of the conference was an attempt to clarify meaning. In hindsight, with some of the gaps in meaning filled in by Larissa's oral explanations, I think that the essay has more coherency than I had given it credit for. It begins with some specific examples of immediate experience and moves progressively, with each paragraph, away from the directly personal to more generalized analysis and explanation. This is, in overall form, a good duplication of academic writing. Furthermore, each paragraph reiterates the terms of the thesis, that education helps reduce prejudice. Lastly, it is clear that the topic is of concern to the author and there is a certain power and urgency in the writing. It illustrates what Mina Shaughnessy says: "Not only do BW students produce essays that are full of points but the points they make are often the same ones that more advanced writers make when writing on the same subject. The differences lie in the style and extent of elaboration" (226).

Yet because I had solidified an opinion about the essay *before* I talked with Larissa, I bumbled around in my conference, talking about "logic" and suggesting that she move this or that part here or there. (It is ironic that I myself was so incoherent in a conference addressing incoherency!) What she needed was some specific help in verbalizing more explicitly the images and ideas she already had and some compare and contrast structures (on the one hand/on the other hand) to develop the basic organization she had herself already provided. The result of my misguidance was that Larissa wrote a revision that reduced the essay from six to five paragraphs, expanding on her immediate college experiences with a little more detail but leaving out the fourth paragraph and its broadened frame of reference altogether. Thus, prompted by teacher interference, she resorted to the heuristic of simplification.

Other cases of teacher-induced simplification occur because of teacher demands for formulaic essays (the five paragraph

essay being the main culprit here) and because of instruction that privileges thesis and organization more than meaning. Recently I pointed out to one of my best students that though her writing was clear, thoughtful, and coherent, it failed to provide details in key places that would have made her points more penetrating. "Oh!" she said. "I can do that? My high school teacher used to say over and over that I had to 'stick to the point,' so I thought that that would be off the point. I thought I would be going on and on and boring people." Given the green light, she had no trouble after that in writing with colorful, relevant detail.

Most textbooks, also, emphasize thesis and organization primarily (see Tremmel on this point). In a questionnaire I gave students on the first day of class asking them to relate what they already knew about pre-writing, one student typically responded: "I've been taught always to write in a manner where I don't drift off and start talking about a different topic. *Always stay on the topic. . .*" [emphasis mine]. His own process was to outline *first*, then prewrite, then draft. Another wrote: "Pre-writing is the very first step of writing an essay, even before the rough draft. *In this step we sort out all the ideas or make an outline of what's the essay all about.* This can also be written in a brainstorm form" [emphasis mine]. Somewhere along the line these students have picked up the idea that prewriting is a tool for *organizing* ideas but not for *generating* ideas. It's easy to see why a heuristic of simplification would then seem "right" and logical. Having a "thesis" often means, to the student anyway, cutting out all ideas but one, and the problems of writing boil down to knowing what to cut. As one student puts it:

What types of prewriting have you been taught? I had been taught to use many kinds of prewriting such as brain storm, rough draft, and others. However, I never really use one of those prewriting before writing the final draft. Well, I did tried, but it never worked. The reason is because I came up with many ideas and not knowing which one to use.

The last cause of simplification that I will mention is a more obvious one: lack of fluency in English when it is a second language. Guadalupe had written an essay on "being a survivor."

In her rough draft, to support the point that “to be a survivor, we have to have knowledge to believe in ourselves and fight for our goals,” she discussed a novel about an immigrant, *Jasmine*, by Bharati Mukherjee, and she related her own difficulties in not knowing English when she first came to this country from Mexico and in having to fight racism. She further added:

Also people like me or Jasmine have a lot of problems to survive competition. We use have to work two or three times harder to accomplish our goals than a native American. For instance, when I wanted to get a ~~to do~~ job

The sentence remained uncompleted and was omitted from her final version, thus shortening and simplifying her support. In a conference she described her writing processes in this instance as follows:

G: You know the last part where you say—um—“that you dropped in the final copy some of your important points that were in the rough draft?”

S: Uh huh.

G: I was going to do it but—um—when I started to write in it, I don’t know it got just so hard, like my ideas, they were like I couldn’t put writing down in English, I could [guess?] in Spanish, but I could not write it in English, and I’m like, oh God. . . . I only did like half of it and I just couldn’t continue like trying to look some words up [—-?] it didn’t sound right, and I got so frustrated, oh God, I just could not keep on writing it. . . . Sometimes we have ideas and when we write it down it’s different because we cannot find exactly the word we want in English. So sometimes I like switch ideas so, like, that’s not exactly what I really mean, but— . . . I usually have like more things to say but I cannot. I [—-?] write it down but it doesn’t sound like the way I really want it, the picture that I really want to make.

Guadalupe’s drafts were heavily revised with cross-outs, arrows, notations in the margins, and word changes; clearly she was a thoughtful writer with many ideas, but the final typed copy would not by itself have revealed this.

Implications

My findings underscore the point made first by Mina P. Shaughnessy and later by Mike Rose and David Bartholomae (see Bartholomae, "Teaching Basic Writing" and "The Study of Error"; Rose, "Remedial Writing Courses," "Narrowing the Mind" and Rose et al, "Seeing the Promise") that "errors" are usually not the result of "laziness" or "deficiency" in learning but of applying a strategy, whether to a grammatical or rhetorical situation. Basic writers come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, backgrounds often very dissimilar to our own, and many of them have been exposed to aspects of the world that we might find overwhelming. Sometimes they have a hard time putting all those experiences into adequate words because of the fullness of what they know, not because of the paucity; their knowledge is "dangerous," to themselves, or, they sense, to the teacher. As Mike Rose, in "Narrowing the Mind and Page: Remedial Writers and Cognitive Reductionism," says:

Poor writers are not as a population cognitively egocentric; they are aware of the other, of 'audience' —some disenfranchised people acutely so. What they lack are the opportunities to develop both oral and written communicative facility in a range of settings. Or they may resist developing that facility out of anger or fear or as an act of identity. They may prefer one way of speaking, most of us do, and thus haven't developed a fluency of voices. But rather than being locked out of other registers, other linguistic roles, other points of view, they are more likely emotionally and politically barred from them. (293)

We need to find ways to help these students fully express what they know in acceptable public or academic discourse, not hide or repress what they know in order to write merely acceptable discourse.

I have shown how some of my methods, in fact, encouraged the latter, not the former. Writing notes all over the margins saying "develop this point," "add more details," and "explain!" usually does little good; much more helpful is providing the actual class time for lots of exploratory prewriting and drafting, lots of trial and error, lots of conferencing. When I assigned

more time to prewriting and when I finally stopped trying to second-guess the students' intentions in their writing and started doing more conferencing, asking, "Okay, what do you *want* to say here?" I had more success. After the students had time to gather their ideas and talk them out I could give them the vocabulary they often needed, or the grammatical structures, such as "on the one hand. . . on the other hand," which would have helped Larissa. Nor should we focus on form and organization until meaning has been *fully* explored, through prewriting, and perhaps we should not emphasize thesis so much. Our own heuristic of simplification is at work here. Real-world writing is apt to go off on tangents, raise questions, undermine closure, and most of these students have plenty of real-world experiences to write about. Basic writing students need to be exposed to the real complexity of the writing process if they are to learn how to handle complex ideas successfully (see, again, Tremmel).

My findings also call into question the widespread practice of concentrating on personal writing in basic writing classes, or asking for "personal" examples. Although some students definitely do find personal writing both rewarding in itself and a path to mastering academic discourse, others, particularly those from backgrounds where they may feel like outsiders in the academic community, may find personal writing too dangerous and difficult to handle. Topics need to be broad enough so that students always have a *choice*, therefore. And personal, reflexive writing can—and probably should—still be encouraged in the prewriting phases of drafting papers.

In understanding some of the causes of oversimplification and recognizing it as strategy, not as deficient thinking, we can address it more effectively. It's also a matter of acknowledging basic writers' voices. We need to recognize that these students *do* have something to say, and then we can help them to say it.

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