

3 / Riding the Literacy Roller Coaster in General Education and First-Year Composition

Here the emphasis is not on the traditional psychological processes of perception, motivation, thinking, and learning, but on their *content*—*what* is perceived, desired, feared, thought about, or acquired as knowledge, and how the nature of this psychological material changes as a function of a person's exposure to and interaction with the environment.

—Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*

Susanna wrote on a self-assessment that college “forces” students to change their writing. When I asked what she meant, she answered that her English I teacher was “really picky” and “I felt like I had to change the way I was writing in order to kind of fit the professor. I mean, I think that is true in English classes. Every professor is different and so you have to change however you’re writing for that professor.” This is a truth universally acknowledged and asserted by almost every student in our study. Whenever they are writing for grades, students, in order to be successful, must give professors what they want. Later in their college careers, students may come to see some of the demands of their professors not as idiosyncratic requirements but as conventions of particular academic and professional genres and believe that adapting to these conventions is necessary for becoming a journalist, a scientist, or a psychologist. But as a first step, they must abandon their “normal” ways of writing to adjust to the demands of a new environment and new roles.

Every student in our study produced work in their junior and senior years that indicated new ways of writing that were not

evident in their first year. When I discussed portfolios with students and examined major papers and projects from their senior year, I asked them if they could have completed these same projects when they began their college careers. Each student said no. To begin with, most reported that as first-year students sheer length, even five typed pages, intimidated them. Terri's senior history thesis on the Millerite religious movement in the 1840s was only 12 typed pages long, but it was packed with information. Terri explained how she gradually learned to break longer papers into subsections and work on one part at a time. More than mere length, however, students said that as first-year students, they simply did not have the knowledge and concepts to write more complexly and in-depth about specialized topics. Student writing over four years gets "better" according to Scardamalia's (1981) definition of cognitive development, which is "construed as taking progressively more variables into account during a single act of judgement" (p. 82). To complete the complex literacy tasks of their academic disciplines, the variables students must consider include: following appropriate genre and discourse conventions, locating and interpreting relevant sources, applying concepts from the discipline, developing evidence acceptable in the discipline, and organizing all of this information in a single coherent text. All of the students became more adept at juggling these variables; all were successful in earning "B's" and sometimes "A's" on at least some papers and projects in their major fields. However, in balancing all the demands of new ways of thinking and writing in addition to the complexity of their personal lives as maturing, young adults, students rarely were able to produce perfect work.

As they reflected on their own development, students themselves often pointed out that they could not say their writing had gotten "better" because it was difficult to compare senior science or marketing projects to papers written in first-year composition and because they still struggled with new assignments. They could, however, explain how their writing was different—more complex in content and more appropriate to the role of a scientist or business manager. It may seem obvious that, of course, any group of students

over a four-year period will come to know more and be able to do more. But this development is not always obvious to professors in individual courses. When professors assign only one paper in a course, they often see what the student cannot yet do, especially when compared to others in the class, and miss this larger picture of individual development. Nonetheless, one might ask if the development we see is simply the result of maturation and “seat time” spent in classes or if there is what my university likes to call true, “value added,” growth promoted by the efforts of the institution, professors, and students themselves.

In this chapter, I examine how students’ experiences in their first two years of college shape their development as writers. I look closely at some of the specific writing environments students encounter and demonstrate the sometimes painful process that students undergo as they attempt to meet the varying demands of different professors. Writing across the curriculum is a roller coaster with much writing in some semesters and little in others. In their introductory classes in general education, students especially value projects that mark points of transition, milestones in their learning in which they are able to make connections between their writing and their own developing interests and experiences. Some of the best of these literacy projects are supported by “hands-on” learning outside the classroom. Students have few opportunities to write in-depth or develop a particular type of writing over time. First-year writing provides intensive practice and a few basic insights about college literacy tasks that students often can express but may find difficult to apply. A four-semester sequence of Great Books courses offers one opportunity for sustained growth, though, again, the lessons learned do not necessarily carry over to writing in other courses or disciplines.

The experiences of the study students in their first two years of college demonstrate that composition specialists might well follow a dictum of the ecology movement, “think globally, act locally.” In the big picture of writing in college, first-year composition is only a small part of a much larger environment. Although it is difficult to make major changes in this global environment, we can most

usefully focus on the local, teachable moments of transition, Vygotsky's zones of proximal development, that students already experience and the additional kinds of support that would promote their learning at those moments.

Auditing Writing in Years One and Two

Students' first encounters with "college writing" come in their general education courses, which offer more homogenized versions of the academic discourses they will revisit in their major areas of study. Pepperdine University, a notably conservative institution, has maintained a fairly traditional general-education core curriculum. Students must complete required courses in a variety of disciplines, including English, speech, religion, Western heritage (humanities), non-Western heritage, American heritage, behavioral science, laboratory science, foreign language, mathematics, and a freshman seminar. Students may choose a four-course Great Books sequence that satisfies both the English and freshman seminar requirements and also substitutes for one required course in American heritage and one required course in religion. Pepperdine also offers a well-established program of international studies. Students can use scholarship monies and work-study to pay for these programs, and almost half of our students spend at least a semester studying abroad.

A review we conducted in 1995, when our research students had completed only their first year, revealed considerable variation in the amount and types of writing students did, even when they were enrolled in the same general education courses. For example, even though course guidelines and professors' syllabi indicate minimum requirements for edited, final drafts and an emphasis on academic writing in both English I and freshman seminar, student portfolios told a different story. Some teachers in different sections of these courses required less writing and emphasized more informal, personal responses from students. Students were not wrong in believing that professors' expectations varied widely both within and across disciplines.

While professors across the curriculum may blame students for not knowing already “how to write” or for not quickly becoming better writers, in fact, the number of opportunities, outside of composition courses, that students have to practice writing in response to complex literacy tasks is very inconsistent from semester to semester. Students’ writing abilities do not develop in a neat, linear progression from assignments in general education courses, including first-year composition, on to major projects in upper-division classes. Paradoxically, students’ rhetorical sophistication may grow because they often receive no consistent instruction in writing and must become adept at figuring out for themselves the expectations of their various academic audiences.

When they entered college, many of our study students, coming from economically advantaged or selective private and public schools, said they thought they were good writers in high school, that they actually liked to write, and several pointed to outstanding high school teachers who had helped them become better writers. In fact, in a survey of the 1994 entering class, 66% rated themselves as above-average writers. While, again, no one student can be representative of a whole group, Carolyn, the public relations major profiled in chapter 1, is a good example of a student with considerable experience in writing in high school, and her portfolio demonstrates the varying literacy tasks, topics, and quantity of writing she encountered during her first years of college.

In her first semester at Pepperdine, Carolyn included in her comprehensive portfolio, collected for our project, 79 pages of out-of-class writing in Biology 110, Speech 180, English 101, and a freshman seminar focused on intercultural communication. The topics she wrote about included: sickle-cell anemia, France, culture shock, a cruise vacation, speech codes on college campuses, President Clinton’s speech on Haiti, Ozzy Osbourne, gangs, the stigma of AIDS, and television shows that depict Southern California. Most of these papers required that she summarize or report on some information and offer her own response, analysis, or argument drawing on concepts from the class, the textbook, or personal experience.

In this early work, Carolyn was able to carve out an issue and begin to explore it, even begin to develop an argument, though, in general, she lacked the sophistication both rhetorically and in terms of content to deal with much complexity. For example, in October of her first semester, Carolyn tackled the issue of speech codes on college campuses in a three-and-a-half-page essay. She began by asking several rhetorical questions:

Political correctness, a figment of the media's hypersensitive imagination or is it truly an issue that should be ranked highly on our "things to take care of" agenda? Many major and minor universities across the nation, believe that political correctness is a problem that needs to be dealt with. Should we, the American public, calmly stand by while people of authority take away our Constitutional right to speak our mind? Our predecessors left their homelands to come to America for their freedom to speak. Are we going to give our rights up without a fight?

Carolyn immediately established a "we," those whose "predecessors left their homelands to come to America for their freedom to speak" as opposed to a "they" identified in a later paragraph as those "minorities, homosexuals, and other groups labeled oppressed" whom speech codes are supposed to protect. She appealed to the shared context of the university where, she argued, students ought to be able to speak freely and listen without censorship. In making her argument, Carolyn drew on articles from *The New York Times*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, *Dissent*, and *The Quill* as well as a group of articles reprinted in her textbook, *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* (Maasika & Solomon, 1994). This content supplied many examples and arguments that Carolyn measured against the theoretical concept of "freedom of speech."

Carolyn viewed this essay as a successful learning experience, which "helped me to take a stance on a topic that is very popular today." Carolyn did effectively take a stand and develop her argument.

Her view was limited, however, by an oversimplified opposition between “the oppressed” as “others” and the “American public” college student audience, which she assumed (at least for the purposes of this essay) shared her own cultural, sexual, and class values. While she recognized some conflicts in her argument and briefly struggled to separate “fighting words,” “harassment,” and “free speech,” she quickly moved back to her initial position and stuck to her thesis defending an abstract notion of “free speech,” avoiding the ambiguities of how speech actually plays out in social relationships. Her teacher, however, acknowledged what Carolyn did well in this essay and gave her 88 out of 100 on the paper. Carolyn’s essay was successful because it fulfilled both her own and the teacher’s expectations near the beginning of her first year.

Carolyn might be faulted for not thinking more critically in this essay, and critical thinking is supposedly an important goal of general education classes. But Carolyn scarcely had time to think in-depth about the myriad of topics she wrote about in her first semester, from speech codes and gangs to sickle-cell anemia and AIDS. Especially in “skills” classes like English composition and speech, students must write and speak without much opportunity to build the content knowledge that is required to write truly informed critical analysis. Professors who accuse students of being unable to “think critically” often overlook the crucial role of this content knowledge that students will continue to acquire in their more specialized areas of study.

As Carolyn moved into the second semester of her first year, the amount of writing she produced fell dramatically to only 21 pages written outside of class. In English 102, she wrote several analyses of literary works, a genre familiar from high school, and she composed a brief report in Sociology 200. Her Mass Communication 200 course required multiple choice and short-answer tests, and she wrote short compositions in French for French 251. Some general education courses, like Sociology 200, and introductory courses in the majors, like Mass Communication 200, focus on giving students a broad base of content knowledge but do not include much writing. These courses may be taught in large lecture formats

making assigning, supervising, and grading writing more difficult. With lots of content but little emphasis on how to read, write, or research in the discipline, these survey courses are the opposite of the skills courses. Presumably, at least in the individual academic majors, writing skills will reappear later when students can apply the knowledge base they have acquired.

Interestingly, Carolyn wrote more during the fall of her sophomore year, which she spent in our international program in London. There, classes tended to be smaller, and most of her courses were taught by British teachers who, like other faculty in our European programs, seemed less inclined to multiple choice tests. Essay tests were the norm. Each course—art history, management, religion, and history of England—fell into the pattern of one, two, or three essay tests and one final paper or project. Carolyn brought home 81 pages of writing, 32 pages written outside of class.

Back in Malibu for the winter semester, Carolyn's portfolio was again slender, only 22 pages, mostly written as in-class essays for Humanities 113. Communication 205 focused on many short grammar and style exercises. Economics 200 and Religion 102 required only objective tests and very short or optional papers.

Finally, in the fall of her junior year, Carolyn's writing turned more toward her major field and a career orientation in public relations. Carolyn's portfolio indicated three project reports and three in-class essays for Public Relations 355, and 33 short exercises and assignments in all mass media genres for Mass Communication 280. In her other classes, Business Administration 320, Personal Finance, required three objective tests and a personal financial plan, Religion 301 included three in-class essay tests, and even Physical Education 124, Beginning Ballet, required two objective tests. Again, the total of finished writing, both in and out of class, was close to 80 pages.

Faculty reviewing portfolios in workshops during the summers of 1995 and 1996 were concerned by the gaps in both the quantity and quality of writing expected from students across different courses. In general, students go from extensive writing in

English and speech courses to more varied experiences in freshman seminars and other general education or beginning major courses, with some courses requiring relatively complex literacy tasks, others asking for more informal, personal responses, and still others assessing students' mastery of course content through problem sets or objective tests. In our portfolio workshops, we rejected the proposition that more writing is automatically better and accepted the premise that courses might legitimately vary in their emphasis on different ways of knowing. Nonetheless, we suspect that the variations in courses that students experience are more by accident than by design. To the extent that students do not demonstrate the knowledge and critical literacy we believe they should have, we need to ask where in the curriculum they will be asked to take on challenging new roles as writers and develop more complex skills.

Writing That Works in General Education

General education by definition introduces students to college-level work in many disciplines outside their academic majors. As Carolyn's experience illustrates, students must learn to write differently but have few opportunities to develop one particular type of writing over any extended period of time. Nonetheless, students' literacy development does continue. When we asked our study students as seniors to review their portfolios and from each year select work that was the most significant or representative of their learning, students rarely had difficulty deciding which work to choose. Their choices from general education courses reflected their experience of a curriculum oriented to both the liberal arts tradition and the production of knowledgeable workers. The writing/literacy tasks that students selected as significant fell into the following different categories:

- major projects that helped students learn new skills
- challenging exams showing the students' integration of knowledge

- academic writing related to personal experience
- writing representing new knowledge and “hands-on” experiences

This writing in general education courses, though sometimes assessed by students as not their “best work,” was an important way of learning because it caused students to make connections between their growing skills, knowledge, and personal interests.

Kristen, the sports medicine major profiled in chapter 1, selected her freshman seminar research paper on scoliosis as significant because she said it represented a milestone, her first research paper in college. For Natalie, who majored in public relations, her rhetorical analysis in her speech class of Clinton’s 1995 State of the Union address marked a similar milestone in learning to research and write a critical analysis longer and more complex than anything she had written in high school. Several students chose for their final portfolios exams from humanities courses and from religion and culture courses because they also represented difficult tasks they had mastered successfully. Kristen, who spent much time learning to write like a scientist, added to her portfolio her in-class humanities essay on *Othello*, which demonstrated her understanding of a challenging literary work. Deborah, who was frustrated by the conflicting demands of some of her teachers, was proud of her final exam in a religion and culture course in which she was able to “put together everything you learned in the class.”

Writing about personal experiences in courses outside of speech or English composition was least represented in students’ final digital portfolios. Yet this partly depends on how “personal writing” is defined. Though students did, in their first two years, write about experiences as private as parents’ divorces or the deaths of friends or relatives and included these papers in their comprehensive portfolios, they rarely chose these for their final digital portfolios, perhaps because the digital portfolios are a more public forum and also because this kind of narrative or expressive writing, reviewed after a few years in college, seemed less of a milestone in their development. Allison, whose comprehensive portfolio consisted mostly of

problem sets from accounting, was an exception in selecting as significant work her speech about the murder of a friend and a eulogy for her grandfather. Other students, like Vanessa writing about her extended Mexican-German family and Bhakti recounting the history of her family's immigration from Pakistan, especially valued work that expressed their personal identities, their sense of who they are, especially in contrast to the more homogeneous student body at Pepperdine. Vanessa's family history was the result of a research project, and Bhakti's autobiography had gone through several drafts. These papers also represented milestones for these students because they were relatively complex analyses, going beyond expressive writing to present the writer's experience convincingly to an unfamiliar audience.

Ultimately, however, all of the writing in students' portfolios is personal because it represents the students' personal experiences with the curriculum. Students perhaps recognize this more clearly than professors. As students reviewed with me their work in general education courses, I was interested in their development as writers. But they could look through their written texts to see themselves making connections between old and new knowledge. Students teach us that student learning is not identical to the written text, a principle that professors are apt to forget. Professors tend to evaluate student papers as text and as representative of what students know or what they have learned in a course and representative of their ability as writers. In order to justify grades, teachers assess what appears on the page, though, of course, like all readers, they also read into the text what they expect to find there. Yet, students in our study repeatedly discussed papers that in the student's own assessment were not great writing but did represent significant learning. It may be comforting for professors to know that even mediocre papers can represent good learning. Leslie, for example, aiming toward a career in marketing, pointed out that her paper analyzing the political condition of the state of California is not "the exact pinnacle" of her writing; however, it demonstrated an important change in her thinking. Before the course, she was not really interested in politics, now she was. Paul explained that his response

paper on religion in Japan was not outstanding writing but illustrated his growing interest in Asian culture, an interest partly inherited from his parents, who lived for a time in Taiwan. Paul followed up on this interest by taking an additional art history course on non-Western art.

We will see that in their major fields students continue to look for connections between their own interests and academic learning, finding their own ways through the curriculum. Themes emerge as one reviews their portfolios. Paul from an early speech about his parents' divorce to a major paper describing his theoretical approach to psychotherapy showed a philosophical turn of mind and a strong interest in human relationships. Andrea, majoring in political science, took every course she could related to Africa and African American studies and wrote repeatedly about civil rights issues. Carolyn, negotiating the disparate writing tasks in general education courses, had a practical approach, always interested in how to do things better and more efficiently. For projects in communication, she drew on the extensive writing and speaking she did outside of class for her sorority. These lines of personal development are rarely visible in a single text in a single class.

Writing that brings together academic learning and "hands-on" experience seemed to rate especially highly with students. Nine students in our study independently selected the same type of art history paper as significant work to be included in their digital portfolios. This was the only assignment to appear repeatedly across the group, regardless of major. These papers tended to be relatively long (20 pages), illustrated with photocopied pictures or postcards of artwork, and, in most cases, reported on the work of a single artist chosen by the student—Botticelli, Pissarro, Renoir, and Klimt, among others. These reports of the artist's life and analyses of particular paintings seemed fairly straightforward; at first glance, they struck me as work that could easily be plagiarized, downloaded from the Internet. Significantly, however, seven of these reports were written while students were studying in Europe in either London or Florence, and the other two papers involved visits to local museums in Los Angeles.

Why was this one assignment so significant for students? To begin with, very simply, it looked good in a digital portfolio on a web page. It was one of the few examples of student work in general education classes that was not just straight text, that was interesting visually. Secondly, more importantly, it represented again the value that students placed on work that was challenging and that promoted new learning. In London, this art history paper was called a “dissertation,” and the professor required a minimum of 20 pages. Students said this sounded “scary,” so they had a solid sense of accomplishment when they completed the assignment successfully. Although the writing in these reports was not always outstanding, again, the texts alone cannot be taken as the only evidence of learning. Students who were not much interested in art or did not know much about it discovered a new interest, a new pleasure. Others had a chance to explore in-depth an artist significant to them.

However, most importantly, students said this assignment represented a “hands-on” experience. In one sense, this experience was the very large, life-changing process of living abroad for a semester or a school year. The art history paper illustrated again that texts represent student learning; they are not identical to it. Every student felt they became more mature and had a greater appreciation of other cultures after their international experience. They wanted something in their final portfolio to represent this developmental milestone, and the art history paper captured a small part of this.

On the other hand, it is not possible to send every college student abroad to experience firsthand all of world history and culture. But students pointed out that the art history paper was also “hands-on” because they went to see real pictures in real museums. Terri, who had struggled to earn “C’s” in first-year composition, traveled to several art galleries in London and to Cambridge to seek out work by Pissarro. However, Jeanette and Paul visited museums closer to home in Los Angeles. Students suggested that most classes could be enriched by such excursions into the “real” world or by speakers from the “outside.” Terri explained how a speaker from the board that rates movies in England made more concrete

for her political science class the issues involved in censorship. Terri worked at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles and suggested that history and political science students would be interested in attending the Skirball's series of lectures by former U.S. secretaries of state. Other students in our study rated highly the speakers from different religious groups in religion and culture courses and the service-learning projects they carried out at local churches. Such real world experiences may be time-consuming for professors to arrange and for students to complete and so initially meet with resistance. But they are more than just "fun" projects. Especially in general education, students do not necessarily aspire to join the communities to which their professors belong. The knowledge and literacy practices of these communities are represented in the classroom by one, necessarily idiosyncratic professor. "Hands-on" experiences and speakers open the window a little wider to the uses of art, political science, religion, and other specialized areas of study in the environment beyond the university. Students see "real" people who are not getting course credit going to art museums, taking an interest in politics, engaging in service to others. "Hands-on" experiences bring students into these worlds. In terms of literacy development, these experiences expand students' knowledge base, offer new environments and roles to play, and bring together academic and personal learning.

Students in general education courses are likely to remain novices in the types of writing and complex literacy tasks specific to each discipline. They may not understand the expectations of the professor and may need more fully developed assignments, guidelines for performance, models, specific feedback, and opportunities for improvement. Their writing gets better in that they do learn to write differently, but they do not fulfill the fantasy of mastering one kind of literacy, an idealized version of academic writing, which improves consistently over time. Many faculty members, however, assume that this generic form of writing could or should be mastered in first-year English courses and complain bitterly when students who have already completed their composition requirements "still can't write."

Don't They Learn That in English?

At Pepperdine, as in the majority of postsecondary institutions, the most writing intensive courses of students' first year are English Composition I and II. While Pepperdine's first-year writing program is small, from 30–35 sections a semester, and enjoys the benefits of limited class size and a strong writing center, the composition curriculum itself is not so different from that taught at hundreds of other institutions, large and small, around the country. In the two decades from 1980 to 2000, the program experienced all the mood swings and growing pains of the developing field of composition and rhetoric. Currently, all students at Pepperdine are required to complete a two-semester composition sequence unless they have advanced placement credit or choose to take the four-course Great Books option. Students for whom English is not a first language may also be required to complete a pre-English I class, English 100. Unlike many other institutions, we have no basic writing classes at Pepperdine.

Faculty like Professor X in chapter 1, who are faced with student writing that does not meet their expectations, ask why students who have completed English I and II, usually with good grades, still cannot “write.” Don't students learn to write in English? Compositionists have sometimes answered that we do not teach “service courses.” That is, the role of first-year composition is not to clean up every conceivable student writing problem before students take their presumably more lofty upper-division courses. Nor is there some simple set of “basics” that could quickly be “reviewed” to forestall errors in writing when students get to the real work in their majors. But, of course, this does not answer the legitimate question of what does go on in composition courses.

What is the role of first-year composition? What might students reasonably expect to learn about writing? As noted in chapter 2, the “experienced curriculum,” the day-to-day life that goes on in classrooms, is often different from the curriculum described by institutional programs and teachers' course syllabi. Yet that “official curriculum” does provide a blueprint for actual classes. I want to

sketch that institutional curriculum at Pepperdine before I describe the experience of our study students. This composition curriculum at Pepperdine was revised in the early 1990s shortly before our study group students began their course work in 1994 and mirrors the changes that were typical in many composition programs at that time. Earlier, in the 1980s, the catalog course description for English I read:

Intensive training in analytical reading and effective writing. Focus on basic composition with special emphasis on exposition and argumentation. Some training in general research techniques. Writing requirements: 8–10 essays (minimum 8,000 words). Grades given in this course are A, B, C, NC. Prerequisite: ENG 99 or satisfactory score on the English Placement Examination.

Additional requirements included reading “one book-length work and at least eight complete essay-length works.” Two essays could be written in class for a midterm and a final, the other six or seven were to be written “out of class.” English II followed the same requirements substituting literary readings for the nonfiction essays in English I. This was a fairly standard institutional curriculum in California based in part on something called the “Berkeley Guidelines,” requirements set by the University of California (UC) for composition courses that could transfer for credit among all California postsecondary institutions from community colleges to the UC system. It was also fairly enlightened in terms of then current composition/rhetoric theory and pedagogy. At least as described institutionally, students actually did a lot of writing. In English I, this writing was in genres other than literary analysis, the traditional staple of literature classes, and there was not an undue emphasis on grammar review and drill.

Although unusual for a small program, the English department during this period in the 1980s and early 1990s hired three full-time, tenure-track faculty with Ph.D.'s in composition and rhetoric

and a fourth tenured compositionist with a Ph.D. in educational psychology. Nonetheless, as tenured faculty have been drawn into administrative duties and upper-division courses, the majority of composition courses have continued to be taught by a few full-time lecturers and many more part-time, adjunct faculty. Because we have only limited graduate programs in the humanities, that additional source of under-remunerated labor often pressed into service to teach composition, graduate students, is not an option at Pepperdine.

Additional guidelines for composition courses continued to develop throughout the 1980s and early 1990s reflecting general trends in the field. For example, a nine page, in-house document, "Guidelines: English 101. English Composition I," emphasizes the writing process, critical thinking, writing for different purposes, and editing errors as part of the revision process. English 99, a remedial writing course, was eliminated. Pepperdine had become more selective in admissions. Composition faculty argued that placement criteria were often inaccurate and that all students could be mainstreamed in small composition classes (18 students) with the support of a well-staffed writing center. Because English I is graded A, B, C or NC (No Credit), students may repeat the course if necessary without injury to their GPA. As it has turned out, however, mainstreaming all students has been successful. We have had no increase in the number of students repeating English I and no calls to return to the English 99 system.

By the time our study group entered Pepperdine in 1994, new catalog descriptions of composition courses were in place. English I was now described as:

An intensive writing workshop. The emphasis is on reading and writing critically and developing effective writing processes including strategies for generating and researching ideas, drafting, revision, and editing. Students read extensively about current issues and produce portfolios demonstrating their ability to write for a variety of purposes, focusing particularly on academic writing.

English II, continued to be a somewhat conflicted course, supposedly furthering students' experience with "academic writing" but providing the only space in the general education curriculum for extended study of literature and, therefore, still leaning heavily toward literary analysis.

The calm language of the catalog description smooths over the miniculture wars in our small corner of academia. A 1992 memo reads, "Are radical, feminist, deconstructionist, cultural critics taking over English 102 (English II)? No, but we are making a few changes." Each word in the official catalog description of our composition courses could be deconstructed. A continuing emphasis on "process" means students today write fewer papers, are supposed to spend more time revising each one, and are supposed to get more specific feedback from peers, teacher, and the writing center about how each paper could be different, better. "Current issues" generally refers to controversial social issues—the language that shapes argument about diversity, social justice, ecology, political agendas. It might also mean taking action through service learning. "Academic writing" means students generally are not to be rewarded for unpolished narratives of their own experience or polemics expressing personal opinions. They are expected to mimic the supposed conventions of academia in which one responds to and incorporates into one's own text the work of others, constructs an analysis or argument, makes assertions and explicitly develops them. These complex literacy tasks require students to read challenging texts, locate and interpret relevant sources, apply appropriate knowledge and concepts, and ultimately produce coherent, edited written work.

Composition faculty are expected to embody this institutional curriculum in the assignments they construct, the texts they choose, and in their teaching methods. Faculty in workshops and meetings compare syllabi, assignments, books, methods, student papers, and final course portfolios to maintain a degree of uniformity, but we have never had at Pepperdine a common syllabus or a common exit exam for students. In practice, composition faculty, like most other

teachers, are independent practitioners once they close the classroom door.

Conflict and Resistance: Altering “Normal” Ways of Writing

To students, the generalized form of academic writing assigned in composition courses, writing that is not constrained by a particular course content to be learned, seems especially subjective and personal, and professors' judgments about what counts as good writing also seem more subjective than in other more fact-oriented courses. Students must change the “normal” ways of writing they learned in high school to meet the expectations of their individual teachers. Brooke and Hendricks' (1989) study of a first-year composition class at the University of Minnesota describes the frustrations of students trying to write for a composition teacher who, in turn, wanted them to imagine how to write for a variety of “real” audiences outside the composition classroom. The students' struggled to negotiate between the unfamiliar forms of writing that might suit these “real” audiences and the “real” teacher who would grade their work. Brooke, the instructor in the course, commendably wanted to teach his students about the concept of audience but seemed as frustrated as his students when he encountered strong resistance and repeated demands from students to know “what he wanted.” Students in a beginning ten-week course understandably found it difficult to construct not just persons outside the class who might serve as audiences but also the kinds of evidence, knowledge, forms, and styles of writing that could persuade those persons. During students' first semester in college, the composition teacher is a “real” audience. If students have mastered a “one-size-fits-all” five-paragraph essay in high school, they certainly need to experiment with ways that their writing could indeed be different. But they are likely to resist changing ways of writing that have worked in the past, and they are right to be wary of claims that the concerns emphasized by their particular composition teacher are representative of the concerns emphasized by other academic readers.

While some students are willing simply to accept or even find beneficial the changes they feel they are forced to make in their writing to suit their first-year composition teacher, for others it is a painful obstacle in their transition to college. Natalie, for example, a communication major, accepted that adjusting her style and cutting out extraneous material for her “picky” English I teacher was merely a matter of writing for the audience, something she said she learned in high school although, she added, most of the other students “didn’t get it.” Bhakti credited her composition teacher with helping her overcome her fear of writing and giving her permission to write from her own perspective as a Pakistani American, a perspective she continued to apply in her psychology classes. But, Allison, who said she went into accounting because she liked right and wrong answers, was simply willing to play the game of school even though, as she explained, some of the topics in her English I class seemed “random and dumb.” For example, she had to write on “Do men and women speak the same language?” Her answer was “yes, of course,” but she concluded that would not make a good paper. Instead she had to come up with what she called five pages of “fluff,” including quotes picked more or less at random from her textbook. Allison echoed the point, “You have to learn what each teacher wants from you,” and added that is especially hard for people who “don’t have a problem writing.”

Several demands made by professors seemed especially onerous. Though teachers maintain they want substantial development and support for ideas, students may feel they are merely adding what Carolyn calls “padding” and Allison calls “fluff.” Jeanette, an accounting major, picked for her digital portfolio a paper on the Getty Museum. She said she liked it even if her teacher didn’t. She included pictures in her essay instead of writing to the full page requirement. Jeanette said, “I got slapped for the pictures and not enough writing,” but writing more would have been “B.S’ing.”

More seriously, students complained about having to change their voice, style, and especially their ideas. Russell Durst (1999) in *Collision Course* follows students through two quarters of first-year composition at the University of Cincinnati and examines two

powerful sources of conflict between students and teachers. Students complain

that they are being force fed “a liberal ideology.” . . . They worry that the deck is unfairly stacked against them, that they lack the expertise and eloquence to argue effectively against the intellectuals, academics, and professional writers whose work, whose arguments they must respond to. (p. 128)

In addition, students resist the critical stance required in much academic work. They object to being asked to read “what seem to them as unnecessarily abstruse essays and [to] taking on the difficult task of forming and supporting interpretations of what they are finding out are surprisingly complex issues” (p. 128).

Deborah, one of our brightest students, entering with a 1240 SAT and a 3.8 high school GPA, exemplifies how students might reasonably be resistant to both the political and intellectual views of their teachers and the roles they, as students, are asked to play as cultural critics. We chose Deborah’s portfolio as one of several to be reviewed in an assessment workshop after the first year of the project. The reviewers, four professors from the humanities, mathematics, and science departments were struck by the contrast between work in Deborah’s freshman seminar and her English I class. The freshman seminar called mainly for personal-response writing, graded with few comments beyond “Good!” or “Excellent!” Deborah loved the class. English I, on the other hand, asked her to read books like Cornell West’s *Race Matters*. When she and several other students wrote a collaborative book review arguing that West promotes racist views of Whites, the professor probed their responses with what the portfolio reviewers saw as thoughtful and constructive questioning. The portfolio reviewers felt the class did a model job of challenging Deborah to think and write more critically. Yet Deborah titled her final portfolio for English I “Not Black or White,” and she included optical illusion drawings, such as an image that can look like either a vase or two faces in profile. In her

preface to the portfolio, she referred to all the readings in the course as “literature” and wrote:

As you journey through the collection, focus your mind not on whether you agree or disagree with my thoughts, but consider the ideas to be valid and valuable, supported opinions coming from the way I see things. Enjoy yourself and ponder your own ideas about the subjects that are dealt with in the collection. In deciphering literature there are no right answers. Everything depends on the point-of-view you take on. The illustrations are included so you can see there are many different ways to look at something. The answers in literature are *Not Black or White*.

In her year-end self-assessment, Deborah said she did not like this class because her professor was not able to consider her point of view. From Deborah’s perspective, the professor was a liberal and she was a conservative; he was biased and did not like her ideas. Though the portfolio reviewers, other professors, saw Deborah’s teacher as appropriately asking her to challenge her own basic assumptions, Deborah experienced this as unfair and as being “graded down” for her opinions.

It is easy to dismiss Deborah’s assessment as a type of relativism typical of young college students moving developmentally from believing there is one right answer to believing there are no right answers. We wondered if by the end of her senior year, Deborah would come to “appreciate” the emphasis on critical thinking in her English I class. But Deborah did not select any work from English I to include in her final, digital portfolio. She said this writing was not representative of her work at Pepperdine. Although she politely acknowledged that she did well enough in English I and learned something, she maintained it was “frustrating fighting between my own writing techniques and my own issues and the professor’s ideas . . . even if I argued something well, I found if he didn’t agree with my argument, it would get red all over my paper.” Looking back on the class, after three years as a telecommunications major, she said,

“[Now] I know more how to handle an English class. . . . I’d try to maybe find more evidence so he couldn’t attack me.” The lack of evidence or content to develop their arguments, perhaps, helps explain students’ real frustration when arguing against the views of their professors. Students are not wrong in supposing it is more difficult to convince an audience that disagrees with one’s position, even when that audience is supposedly “objective.” Students like Allison may just go along with what the professor wants to hear; others like Deborah try to construct their own opposing arguments but still must work with those random quotes from a text usually chosen by the professor.

Deborah was not simply averse to accepting criticism. She pointed to one of her telecommunications classes where she said the teacher, a professional with years of telecommunications experience, was very critical and even harsh in tone. Yet, Deborah felt this criticism was not personal but was based on what actually works in television news. She felt that having her student projects “torn apart” was supporting her goal of becoming a professional in telecommunications and that the teacher only wanted the students to be successful in getting jobs. Although standards of what “works” are also subject to opinion, students are more likely to see these as standards existing outside the student’s or teacher’s subjective experience. Students are more willing to adopt the literacy skills associated with the career roles they wish to play.

This is not to say that professors in first-year composition courses should avoid controversial topics, challenging students’ ideas, or invoking the sometimes abstract standards of academic, scholarly writing not intended for the business office, newsroom, or science lab. On the other hand, teachers need to accept that conflict is likely when writing concerns personal issues of race, gender, culture, and politics; when the “factual” content of the course is limited; when the professor’s worldview is quite different from the student’s; and when the student does not necessarily aspire to join the academic communities to which the professor belongs. Composition teachers need to take seriously students’ questions about “what the professor wants” as they continue to challenge students to grow

within their “zones of proximal development.” In the process, faculty need to negotiate with students as they resist and make often quite reasonable attempts to sort out the roles they are and are not willing to play.

Classroom conflict and resistance are especially painful for those students who see themselves as outside the mainstream campus culture. These students may find it even more difficult to make their case to the “expert” professor. Terri, after struggling throughout her first year to write about her own experience in her own voice, made a conscious choice to avoid personal topics for the rest of her college career. Although she originally wanted to be an English major, after receiving C’s in both English I and English II, she decided to switch from the “subjective” discipline of English to history where she felt interpretation was based more on facts. Terri, who graduated from a selective, public “magnet” high school in urban Los Angeles, began college enthusiastically and tackled for her freshman seminar a paper on the “Mass Media’s Role in the L.A. Riots.” Terri said that as a senior in college, she would never have chosen such a topic. It was too broad and, certainly, as a first-year student, she really didn’t know how to research it. But she had lived through the 1992 riots in Los Angeles and, as an African American, had objected to the way the media covered her community. She was excited to find many articles in the library that supported her own criticisms of the media. The professor, however, made no written comments on the content of Terri’s paper and corrected the style of sentences like the following, “What was omnisciently left out of the clip shown to the public, but shown to jurors in the trial, was the segment before the beating where King had taken no effect to stun guns,” which the teacher rewrote as “stun guns had no effect on King.” Terri accepted that the teacher’s corrections could have made the paper better but said that, even as a senior, “the way I write is the way I talk” and that she herself would not have known how to write her sentences in any other way. She was still proud of this first-year paper and included it in her digital portfolio.

Terri had more difficulty in her English classes. English I was

an example of end-of-the-semester portfolio grading gone wrong. She received no grades and mostly positive comments on her work all semester, so she was shocked by a “C” grade on her final portfolio of papers. But English II taught by an African American professor with a special focus on “The African American Dream” was a greater disappointment. Terri says,

I took this class because it was African American lit and when I got in there, it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. . . . I related stories in the book to my story. I thought this was good, but he (the professor) thought I didn't do enough about the story. . . . I thought by relating it to my life he would understand I knew about the book as well. . . . The writing was too personal. . . . I can identify . . . I make my experience part of it, but I think I did it too much.

Again, this is not to say the professor was wrong in asking Terri to go beyond her personal experience in her writing, but, Terri said, since then “I've tried to stay away from subjects I'm emotionally involved with.” For example, she considered taking an African American film class her senior year but thought “it's just going to bring up issues I don't necessarily want to talk about all the time.” Although ultimately successful as a history major, Terri explained that she struggled because she often did not understand what the professors wanted. Like other students, Terri experienced an ongoing conflict between her “normal” ways of writing and the demands of academic discourse, but additionally, she was constrained by those invisible boundaries described by Mike Rose (1989), Victor Villanueva (1993), and others. Terri was very soft-spoken, she worked long hours to earn money throughout her college years, and she did not always attend class regularly. In retrospect, she reflected that she rarely talked to her teachers about her writing or worked in study groups with other students and that she probably should have. She had to find her own way through the curriculum, at considerable personal cost.

What Composition Can/Not Teach

The impact of English I and English II is difficult to assess four years later when students seem barely able to remember their first-year courses. When they can recall first-year classes, students certainly do not see composition as the only influence on their literacy skills but also point to other general education courses, especially a required speech course, which provides a similar workshop setting for developing reading, research, and communication skills. As our study students struggled to meet the demands imposed by different teachers in these courses, they did indicate in their self-assessments that they valued work in which they could see their own growth as writers. This growth generally involved rather homely literacy skills such as using sources effectively, improving style, writing for an audience, and learning to organize and develop a complex analysis instead of, as one student put it, just “dumping out your brain.”

Despite a heavy emphasis on critical literacy and social consciousness by many of our composition teachers in their courses, it was particularly difficult to trace the later influence of such courses on students’ thinking about social issues. While composition teachers can produce student papers and evaluations that show how students change in their thinking as well as their writing over the course of a semester, by the time students are seniors, these changes in consciousness are subsumed in the much larger experience of having lived four years in a more diverse environment and being initiated into specific academic disciplines. Students’ worldviews certainly change over four years but a composition course is just one small point of transition that may or may not reinforce students’ previous beliefs or contribute to changing them.

A one or two semester composition course in the students’ first year cannot teach students to write as experts in specific disciplines or as expert social critics. Students can, however, write as informed nonspecialists and as adult citizens in a democracy, analyzing issues that affect their lives. Within this context, students in our study valued what they saw as improvements in their written texts and in a better understanding of writing strategies they could use in other

settings. For example, when Carolyn reviewed her portfolio as a senior, she pointed to her research paper on a speech by President Clinton about Haiti and an analysis of *The Great Gatsby* as two significant pieces of writing from her first year. Carolyn said that while she didn't exactly "plagiarize" in high school, she learned during her first year of college how to use sources and not just copy them with a few words switched around. In English II, Carolyn said that in order to sound intelligent and take up space, she wrote sentences like the following:

In researching the biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald, it is very apparent how the three of these areas are affiliated with one another. Fitzgerald was strongly affected by his society and the occurrences in his life; therefore these aspects carried on to his writings.

Although she had usually gotten "A's" on her writing in high school, Carolyn reported that the careful comments and corrections of her first-year composition teacher helped her realize that she still lacked what she called "basics" and that she needed to work on style.

When students pointed out changes in their writing, they most often mentioned learning from rewriting, a process that one student explained as "critiquing, redoing, and editing." Several students described working closely with the teacher and revising. In redoing her papers, Jeanette, an accounting major, said she was able to transform her good high school writing from "acceptable to excellent." Reviewing their portfolios as seniors, students recalled the "basics" they became aware of in composition courses. Most importantly, Julia, a business administration major said she learned that you have to show why something is important; "You can't just dump out your brain." Natalie, studying public relations, said her composition class emphasized writing for an audience and added, "You need to cut out extraneous material." Leslie, who had completed several group projects in her marketing major, reflected, "I learned how to set up the paper with transition sentences and to go

into details. . . . it's amazing, when I'm working in groups a lot of people don't really know how to set up their papers like that, so it's really helpful."

These "basics," related to research, style, audience, organization, and analysis, are the kinds of writing strategies that students see as most transferable to future writing tasks and, therefore, most useful to their development as writers. I believe that these writing "skills" should be explicitly addressed as part of the composition curriculum. But, paradoxically, these "basic skills" cannot be taught reductively. For students making the transition from their "normal" ways of writing in high school to more complicated literacy tasks, the challenge is to employ their "basic skills" at greater levels of complexity or, in Scardamalia's terms, "taking progressively more variables into account during a single act of judgement." This development can only take place in rich, sometimes messy, literacy environments that coax, or perhaps force, students to go beyond the kinds of reading, writing, and thinking with which they are already comfortable.

Ideally, composition teachers as experienced practitioners with a specialized knowledge of writing processes work within the student's zone of proximal development, helping the learner, in Vygotsky's (1978) terms, complete tasks that "with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (p. 87). Processes such as brainstorming; freewriting; examining models; planning with lists, outlines, or graphic organizers; writing multiple drafts; making use of peer and teacher response; revising; and editing are tools writers can use to work their way through complex literacy tasks. Do these processes transfer to future writing tasks? In chapter 4, students do mention using some of these strategies, but only in particular instances. Generating ideas and planning take on many different forms as students move into different methods of research and data collection. Students usually do not have time to seek peer review and write multiple drafts unless a course is structured to encourage a more extended writing process for challenging writing tasks. Editing is often last minute and frequently haphazard.

However, to ask if writing processes typically practiced in

composition transfer to other settings is perhaps the wrong question. To begin with, if these tools help the novice writer take on more difficult literacy tasks in the time and space of the first-year composition course, then these strategies have value in this setting even if students do not continue to use them in quite the same ways in the future. Secondly, it seems that students do internalize the concepts behind the specific tools. In their “normal” way of writing, beginning students might easily produce a one-draft essay based primarily on experience or opinion. But they come to understand that more difficult tasks in college require additional strategies for gathering information, planning, organizing, and meeting the expectations of readers. As students’ comments in chapter 4 will indicate, writers pick and choose and develop their own most efficient writing processes. Professors across the disciplines help when they design assignments with timelines that discourage last-minute writing, when they share their own “tips of the trade,” and when they “remind” students to use strategies they have previously learned. Students may continue to use general rhetorical strategies even though they have discarded a particular tool that helped them develop the strategy. For example, one of my students, Chris, in a recent composition course worked with me for two semesters writing papers that were very fluent in style but never quite convincing in content. For one assignment in my class, students experimented with making rhetorical outlines explaining how each section of their essay was meant to affect a reader. This was an “aha” moment for Chris. The rhetorical outline helped him more fully grasp the idea that writing was not only a vehicle for expressing his own thinking but that he could strategically structure his discourse to persuade readers to take his arguments seriously. Although Chris did not continue to make formal rhetorical outlines, he began to write more effectively, not simply lost in his own stylish prose but actually enjoying his ability to influence me and his peer readers. The rhetorical outline served as a tool to move him to a new level of development.

Beyond “basic” writing strategies and processes, students described learning in their composition courses a type of writing they

found more personal, more creative, and, unlike the writing in their academic majors, more suitable for a general audience. Surprisingly, despite the conflicts of the composition classroom, many students in retrospect also described this writing as more “fun.” These descriptive terms initially surprised me. Our composition courses supposedly emphasized analytical writing, not personal narrative, and assignments generally asked students to think critically about serious issues, often responding to readings or incorporating research, not simply reporting personal opinion. We had hoped to create the kind of rich literacy environments that would challenge our students and teach a generalized form of academic writing that students could adapt for their work in other courses. But, from the perspective of our study students, this generalized form of academic writing, not tied to a specific discipline, still seemed to be lacking in content and more subjective than work in their majors. Although Andrea did say that English II improved her writing in general, she contrasted English composition with more “factual” writing in her political science major. She said, “Freshman year was more creative writing. . . . You have more leeway when you first get here, in your writing. I mean, the professors, they want you to show your true voice. And then you work around that.” She added that she thought she was good in creative writing and that she tried to be descriptive and choose just the right words to get her point across. However, she continued, “In my major you just leave all that out and just want the facts. . . . They want specifics, so I had to pay more attention to specifics instead of trying to fit the whole picture.” Vanessa, a journalism major, reported,

I don't think English I and II did much for analytical . . . it's more self-attained knowledge. . . . you would come up with your own ideas and your own thesis and your own support. You would have to take it from yourself and your knowledge. But for journalism, you have to dig. . . . you have to have outside sources, outside quotes, outside interviews with people. . . . if it were my English paper, it would be my opinion and my theories and my thesis and with

journalism articles it's more like here are all the facts, this is why the story is important right now.

Nonetheless, some students saw value in this writing they perceived as more personal and subjective. Again, several said it was “fun,” a reason for writing that is, unfortunately, too rarely honored in academic circles. (Writing has to be painful, doesn't it?) They also explained it is a style of writing they “went back to” in writing for other general education classes or for nonacademic purposes. Andrea said about her English I class, “It was fun. It was like a breather. You get to write what you feel,” and “the content of the course [women's studies], yes, I think it was very helpful.” She added that when she wrote her personal statement for law school, she wanted to have “that frilly stuff” from English I and appeal to emotion. Randall explained how difficult it was, after two years as a science major, to write a comparison of Donatello's and Michelangelo's sculptures of David during a summer of study in Italy. He said, “It was using my mind in a different way. . . . I was so used to having a set schedule in mind of how a paper is written. . . . I needed to remember back to my freshman year and think how this English class was talking about critiquing and analysis.” Allison, majoring in accounting, pointed out that students rely more on their English composition experience when their majors, like hers, do not include much writing. Jeanette, also in accounting, noted that she was able to use her English I skills in her other general education classes because they required a similar format of introduction, thesis, and support. Susanna, also a science major, chose “Elvis and Madonna” from English I, and her paper on love poetry from English II to include in her digital portfolio. Her self-assessment noted that “Elvis and Madonna” was fun but also challenged her to go beyond the writing she did in high school because “college writing forces students to be more creative, to adjust their style, and to pay more attention to detail.” The poetry paper represented “like an advancement in literature almost just because I was like, oh, ok, poetry's not so bad. . . .”

Susanna and some of the other students seemed to equate the

more “creative” work in English with “real” writing or writing skills in general. Several of these students initially told me their “writing” had not improved much in college, despite evidence to the contrary in their portfolios, because, as Susanna said, “It’s been more this research-type stuff that I’ve been writing.” Susanna added, “So, if you told me to take English II again . . . there might be a slight regression from the end of taking that and right now.” Andrea also said her writing had not improved because writing in her political science major was more concrete. She gave an example, “You know, I had to write a brief, which is totally different than, you know, a paper that you would have to do.” Both Susanna and Andrea, when they reviewed the more complex assignments they had completed successfully in their majors, were reluctant to identify this as improvement. As Andrea said, “I really can’t say how my writing has improved because it’s on two different levels from when I first came here.” And Susanna agreed, “Yah. I guess I’m just separating the two kinds of writing.”

In fact, students’ recognition of different levels or different kinds of writing is in itself evidence of their growing rhetorical sophistication. There is no generalized, normal, one-size-fits-all type of writing. English I is most valuable, then, not in teaching one particular genre of writing but in creating situations in which students must consider different forms of writing for different, often complex, purposes and employ the kinds of writing strategies that enable them to complete challenging literacy tasks successfully. In addition to practicing writing, they can begin to think rhetorically about their performance as writers. As Bruner (1996) argues, “Achieving skill and accumulating knowledge are not enough. The learner can be helped to achieve full mastery by reflecting as well upon how she is going about her job and how her approach can be improved” (p. 64). This metacognitive awareness is central to development.

Composition courses, then, have value specifically because they provide a time and place in the curriculum where students can examine and practice new forms of literacy without the added requirement of learning a particular subject matter. At the same time,

however, composition courses that seek to develop critical literacy face the dilemma of asking students to analyze complex social issues without the body of information and concepts that underlie critiques from particular perspectives in the social sciences, natural sciences, the humanities, and other disciplines.

Examining writing in students' portfolios suggests that teachers need to find a balance between the "what" and the "how" of critical literacy. Students need information and concepts to think about and to think with but also need to focus explicitly on developing new literacy strategies. At Pepperdine, our current composition courses tend to mimic the complexity of academic literacy by choosing a particular theme as "content" for the course and asking students to engage complexity in their reading, writing, and thinking about these themes. The subtitles of English I and English II courses indicate the interests of teachers and the themes students can choose, such as "America on Film," "Writing for the Earth," "Women's Lives," "Civil Laws and Civil Rights," and "Writing and Citizenship." Linking writing and reading assignments to a single theme gives students a chance to choose topics related to their own interests and to build some knowledge about issues rather than randomly addressing a series of disparate subjects.

However, the most important "content" in the course remains the student's own writing. Composition can explicitly teach reading, research, and writing strategies for addressing complex literacy tasks, strategies that are often tacit in discipline-specific courses. These strategies can be practiced over time in a composition course with continuing feedback from a teacher who is an expert in showing novices how their reading, writing, thinking might be different, better. The required first-year speech course at Pepperdine also provides a similar workshop setting for practicing these new skills.

Of course, in the composition program, we, as teachers, experience our own conflicts and resistance. We have resisted pressure from, no doubt, well-meaning but uninformed faculty who think that what our students really need is a thorough review of grammar. We try to demonstrate, partly through the portfolio assessment project, that the real "basics" students must practice are much more

complicated. We have also resisted linking composition to freshman seminars or other courses, except when teachers have wanted to collaborate closely with each other and both teachers have the development of critical literacy as a primary goal. We have rejected offers of the “I’ll handle the content, and you handle the writing” variety as missing the point that knowing and ways of knowing are intimately connected. We fear separating these in students’ perception and practice, especially if the discipline-specific course, often taught by a more senior professor, is perceived as the “real” course and writing is just an “add-on.” Nonetheless, one program of linked courses on our campus does offer an alternative approach to literacy that illustrates from another perspective that writing does improve with practice but, again, always in context-bound ways that do not necessarily transfer directly to new setting.

Writing Development in a Great Books Program

Though simply linking courses together with concurrent enrollment does not insure collaboration or common goals, one might, of course, imagine a general education sequence that would give students much more consistent instruction in reading and writing. Such learning communities can focus on intellectual and personal development as well as on a particular content. At Pepperdine, this learning community approach is represented in a Great Books program that enrolls about fifteen percent of the first-year class. The Great Books Colloquium is a four-course sequence of seminars in which students read, discuss, and write about traditional Western classics from Homer and Plato to Nietzsche and Freud. Students receive credit for English I and II and three additional general education requirements. The Great Books Colloquium is located in the very heart of the conservative liberal arts tradition, in the past reserved for men of wealthy families who did not need to worry about career skills, but now marketed as cultural capital and an opportunity for personal growth to the daughters and sons of the middle and upper class.

While one might disagree, and I do, about what students read,

write, and discuss in seminars labeled “The Great Books,” as an example of writing development, it is instructive to examine the experience of the six students in our study who selected the Great Books option. The type of writing required in Great Books, with a few exceptions, is a highly text-based, thesis and support essay typical of English literature classes. The four-semester sequence of seminars works in that students definitely get better at writing what students call “Great Books papers.” Their writing in this format becomes increasingly more sophisticated and more complex over two years.

The Great Books Colloquium course-sequence illustrates several basic principles about the acquisition of literacy. First, students do best what they do most. Programs committed to developing particular ways of writing will provide guided practice over extended periods of time. Secondly, providing such practice with consistent feedback is generally expensive, requiring an extensive commitment from faculty and students. Such programs would be difficult to replicate on a large scale with underpaid, part-time adjunct teachers or graduate students. And finally, even though students become proficient in a particular type of writing in a well-structured program over several semesters, that type of writing is a specific genre necessarily shaped for a specific purpose and audience. Again, there is no universal form of academic writing. While the “Great Books paper” has value in itself as a way of writing and thinking, it is like all other genres not directly transferable to other writing situations.

Still, all of the students who chose Great Books, except Elizabeth, who felt unprepared and overwhelmed by the amount of reading, identified their participation in the colloquium as a highlight of their college experience, an opportunity to think critically about books and their own ideas. Julia, Paul, and Sarah described themselves as students who very much liked reading and were strong writers in high school. Nonetheless, these students too struggled with the perennial problem of giving professors what they want. Despite the general thesis-support format of the “Great Books paper,” each Great Books professor varied somewhat in how much

writing was expected and in preferences of topic, organization, and style, and Sarah especially struggled to compromise between her personal style and that of each professor.

Paul, however, pointed out how his writing in the Great Books format became more sophisticated over four semesters. An early paper in the first seminar, Great Books I, was a straightforward comparison and contrast essay that began:

Characters in Homer's *The Iliad* and characters in Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* both had to deal with divine intervention from the Greek gods. Gods in both books seemed to look out for mortals whom they cared for. In *The Iliad*, gods would often lend a helping hand to a soldier who they felt needed help, or would change the course of battle to their liking. An example of one such instance was when Zeus told Hector to keep close to the wall of Troy during Agamemnon's *aristeia*, for fear that Hector would be injured. The same holds true in *The Oresteia*, even though the methods the gods used were somewhat different. At one point during *The Eumenides*, Apollo defended Orestes, as he tried to escape The Furies in his (Apollo's) temple. This episode was different from a typical episode in *The Iliad* in that Apollo spoke to Orestes directly and in his true form. In *The Iliad*, gods would often disguise themselves, and trick mortals into doing what they wanted done. In *The Oresteia*, gods simply appeared in their true form to mortals, speaking to them directly.

This basically competent, prosaic paper continued with assertions about similarities and differences supported by examples from the texts. Paul's own assessment as a senior was "it's kind of shallow. It's kind of dry on some themes that were pretty clear in the text and kind of talking about them and, maybe, not a whole lot of analysis, some."

By the final seminar, Great Books IV, Paul said, "You're kind of allowed to put in your own ideas and interpret, maybe pull more

obscure themes out of what you read.” He chose as an example his essay entitled “Time Flies When You’re Having Fun” on Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. Near the end of this essay, after analyzing events and using quotes from the novel to raise questions of “man’s” (Paul’s usage) significance in the face of infinite time, Paul wrote:

Luckily for us, Mann does not seem to leave these questions unanswered. At the beginning of chapter seven, Mann discusses time once again. He states that “time is the medium of narration, as it is the medium of life” (Mann, p. 541). It would seem to follow from earlier assumptions of Mann’s that the eternity of time holds meaning in that it is the medium in which everything exists. All of those conceptions of distance and finite bodies in the universe hold meaning in that they help create the fabric of life that exists as time progresses. True, when compared to the grand scheme of things, one week on one small planet of the universe is hardly worth mentioning. If all of those weeks across the universe ceased to exist, however, there would be nothing worth mentioning or narrating about in the medium of time.

Paul continued this paragraph with a quote from Mann on narration and several more sentences discussing time and meaning before moving on to a rather abrupt conclusion. Though loosely structured and sometimes vague in style, Paul tackled greater complexity in this essay and was able to analyze in more detail the ambiguities of a challenging literary work. He had greater confidence in asserting his own perspectives on themes in the novel. He said this essay reflected his enjoyment of “thinking about my place in the universe.”

Having a four-course sequence focused on one kind of reading and writing certainly improves students’ skills with this type of reading and writing. In one way, Paul got almost too good at writing in the Great Books format. Saying he was getting “burned out” by the end of Great Books IV, he explained that he quit reading the

books and was able to write acceptable essays anyway by choosing a theme discussed in class and skimming the text for supporting quotes. For students, however, writing was only one element, and not the most important feature, of this course sequence. More importantly, they credited the seminars with challenging them to read difficult material, to discuss, and to think critically.

Did students' learning experiences in these classes carry over to work in their academic majors? For Sarah and Elizabeth, the approach to reading, thinking, and writing in Great Books was very similar to their work as English majors, though as I will explain in discussing writing in the academic disciplines, Elizabeth later learned more specific critical approaches to texts and Sarah, as a philosophy minor, discovered a more rigorous analytical method. Stephen found opportunities in Great Books to write about his concerns about religion. Paul, Julia, and George maintained that although their majors required very different kinds of writing, it was useful to know how to read carefully and interpret what texts said and to know how to state an idea and support it.

Several factors beyond "time on task" contribute to the efficacy of this program in developing a particular way of writing, reading, and thinking. Great Books seminars are taught by full-time faculty, usually highly experienced teachers, who meet in a retreat each year to discuss goals and teaching strategies. Although the program is described as interdisciplinary, the majority of teachers are like-minded professors in the humanities, especially English. Classes are small, limited to 16 students. The students who select the program make a commitment to extensive reading and discussion and, presumably, are people who find their own concerns adequately reflected in work primarily by Western, White, male writers. Although Great Books is open to any student, many faculty advisors in the humanities especially promote it for humanities majors.

This expensive seminar sequence is, in a sense, subsidized by composition and other general education courses taught by adjunct faculty and, in some cases, in large lecture halls. It enjoys the support of the senior faculty who prefer teaching Great Books to teaching first-year composition and of administrators who sell the program

to prospective students, parents, and conservative donors. The university has been unwilling to provide equal funding, especially in terms of salary for full-time faculty, in programs like composition and speech which serve larger constituencies.

Some features of the Great Books Colloquium, however, are worth replicating if programs are adequately planned and funded. Sequences of courses might be built around other areas of emphasis—ecology, social justice, the arts, alternative selections of “great books.” Such sequences would necessarily involve small groups of students and faculty since self-selection seems an important principle. Learning communities like these could again address the balance between “what” and “how,” integrating knowledge from several disciplines and providing more opportunities for “hands-on” learning while maintaining an emphasis on literacy development over a period of time more extended than the typical one semester course.

Teaching the Real Basics

In the quote that begins this chapter, Bronfenbrenner (1979) notes that the emphasis in a cultural/environmental view of development is not on traditional psychological processes but on the content of those processes, “*what* is perceived, desired, feared, thought about, or acquired as knowledge, and how the nature of this psychological material changes as a function of a person’s exposure to and interaction with the environment” (p. 9). The *what* of students’ writing development includes their perception of the conventions of “college writing,” their desire to produce writing that is at least “good enough” for success in their classes, their fear of losing their own beliefs and voices, their growing awareness of different types of writing, and their knowledge of different disciplines that is gradually acquired through their course work and out-of-class experiences.

In general education classes, the gap between students’ ideas of “normal” ways of writing and the expectations of professors representing specialized academic disciplines may be especially large.

Faculty may underestimate the complexity of the tasks they assign and have little idea of the kinds of writing students are, or are not, doing in other courses. Literacy tasks are especially difficult for students during their first two years of college because of the variety of new tasks they face and because students lack the basic disciplinary concepts necessary for developing in-depth critical analysis. Faculty may address this difficulty in several ways. Professor X simply continues to assign challenging assignments, provides little support in completing them, and, when students fail, blames the students for not knowing already “how to write.” Deborah’s freshman seminar teacher, on the other hand, assigns only expressive writing, responds only with supportive comments, and does foster Deborah’s personal growth but does not encourage a more critical literacy.

Students in the study, however, demonstrated that they did value challenging tasks when they could apply what they had learned in a course or through “hands-on” experience. They also valued instruction and support in learning “basic skills.” Students pointed to courses and projects in which they learned rather homely skills like how to use information resources or the idea that one generally needs to have a point or make some sort of argument in academic writing. Students recalled learning some new ways of organizing writing or improving their style through the patient efforts of a teacher willing to work with them in the process of “critiquing, re-doing, and editing.” A focus on these general skills need not be reductive. The conflicts engendered as faculty push their conceptions of appropriate ways of writing and critical thinking against students’ conceptions of what is “normal” can be a wedge to open discussion of what counts as “information,” “a point,” “evidence,” or “appropriate content and style” in a particular discipline. Conflicts can be addressed directly only if faculty work hard at being clear about what they do and why they do it, if they avoid dismissing students’ concerns about “what the professor wants” simply as ignorance or “resistance,” and if they accept that such conflicts may be painful and, often, unresolved. For students, grades symbolize the power of the teacher to “force” them to change their writing, and in this area especially, faculty need to be explicit about their criteria,

ideally supplying models of what it means in their course to “discuss” an issue or write a “well-organized” argument.

Even with instruction and support, the performance of these novice students varies from task to task in their transition from high school to college. First-year composition creates a space in the curriculum for students to think directly about conventions of writing and provides practice in needed “skills,” demonstrating ways to use libraries and technology, ways to construct texts and revise and edit. Theoretically, this knowledge about writing could be developed elsewhere in content-based courses across the curriculum and, in fact, much of what students know about writing must be developed in this way. However, first-year composition has value at the beginning of students’ college careers precisely because, in this course, they do not need to “cover” a specific content in addition to examining their own writing and knowledge of writing is more likely to be made explicit, rather than implied as in many courses in other disciplines.

This course, however, does not fulfill the fantasy that student writing can be “fixed” when they begin college, so that no further direct instruction will be necessary. No curriculum innovations in composition courses can alter the reality that student writing develops over time as students encounter a variety of new writing environments and acquire greater knowledge of concepts and content. While every college and university maintains that it values critical thinking, students scarcely have time to think very deeply about the many topics they are asked to consider in general education courses, and their opportunities to practice critical thinking in writing are highly inconsistent from semester to semester. Linking courses together is one way to achieve more coherence but this requires close cooperation between faculty, and even in two or three linked courses, students will not develop expert knowledge. The Great Books Colloquium, over four semesters, demonstrates that time and money spent in a well-thought-out program can help students perfect a particular genre of writing, while they engage in challenging discussions of important ideas, but may preclude the opportunity to study a more diverse curriculum. And, even, if students

do become relatively proficient in one form of academic writing, we will see in the next chapter that they still must learn new skills as they study biology, psychology, or other disciplines.

Ongoing assessment across disciplines would be one way of identifying exemplars of what sorts of writing and what indicators of critical thinking might reasonably be expected of first and second-year college students. Such assessments of general education would also note where students have opportunities to develop these writing abilities and consider how the environment of general education might be restructured to eliminate the roller-coaster effect of much writing and research some semesters and little in others.

Throughout their transition from high school to college, the written papers of our study students rarely demonstrated the full depth of their learning. Their writing was often just “good enough” to get the desired “B” or “A” grade before they moved on to the next task. Yet, their growing ability to comment on their own work indicated that they were developing greater metacognitive awareness and, in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) terms, “a more extended differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment” (p. 27). The next chapter shows that as they make the transition into the environments of their major areas of study, students continue to struggle with “what the professor wants” but also begin to internalize more complex disciplinary knowledge and conventions.