

Newsletter

Conference on Basic Writing

A special interest group of CCCC



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From the Chair

As I write, I'm enjoying a thunderstorm clamoring through central Ohio, and I'm resting on a sense of accomplishment because yesterday my staff and I completed a two hundred page handbook for incoming graduate teachers. Yet, I'm simultaneously reeling from the absurdities of bureaucratic life because I've just learned that one-third of our first-year students will have no seats available in writing classes next year. (That's roughly two thousand students.) This setting is one you each probably know well--different local details, perhaps, but along the same general lines. In this setting, let me spin a story that apparently focuses on something besides CBW and academic life.

In June, I read family stories to a crowd gathered around me--a dozen Duffey cousins my age and the generations of relatives before and after ours. It was small town Americana: a warm summer day, a backyard stretching into a wooded ravine beyond the garden, patio tables loaded with food. And my reading.

Feeling a pull toward family over the last several years, I've begun to collect our stories. At reunions, I prompt the memories of my aunts and cousins, engage
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Negotiating a Cultural Borderland

Teaching Writing in a Bicultural Classroom at Minnesota State University, Akita, Japan

Donna R. Casella

Previously in this column I have read of teachers living and working in isolated regions where books and papers are in short supply and where the classroom environment is not conducive to learning. Well, I could recount such experiences, but not in an account teaching at the Akita campus of Minnesota State University. During my time at this campus in northern Japan I had plenty of books, supplies, a fax machine and, yes, a VCR. The challenge of teaching at MSU-Akita was of a different variety--negotiating a cultural borderland rather than a hinterland.

MSU-Akita is a joint U.S.-Japanese venture, an American campus on Japanese soil. Japanese students who require language instruction study English from one quarter to two years, after which they are placed in university content classes taught in English by U.S. professors; students take up to two years of course work with the intention of transferring at
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From the Chair

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the family to collaborate (sometimes in a chaotic chorus around the dinner table) construct remembered stories, and make notes about events of the moment. I then re-compose the stories and turn them into oral performances for our next annual reunion, a two-day slumber party affair with lots of confusion and laughter.

But the stories I compose are of course fabrications, sometimes tall tales, sometimes less overt exaggerations. And the "stories" I read are sometimes not narratives at all, but fragments of my thoughts on why people tell stories at all, what functions stories serve in families, and what narrative "truth" is.

This year, as I organized my notes after the reunion, I wrote myself into a surprising place: an essay for the highly literate academic community began to emerge from the notes of an Ohio family. Folklore, language philosophy, and literacy theory intersected with middle America. And so I write now, of thunderstorms and family reunions to continue interweaving the personal and the professional and to place my words about CBW in a human context, an interpersonal one that academic, professional communities often ignore.

At our CBW meeting last March, I saw what seemed to be familiar faces (but not ones I knew well enough to attach names to). And so, I began to think that CBW is becoming, as the board members hope it will, a forum at CCCC, a momentary family room in which teachers and others interested in basic writing can connect with each other in as direct a way as possible. I anticipate, at next year's

CCCC, a CBW open forum for our considerably various members: teachers from community colleges, scholars from research institutions, experts in assessment, cultural critics, teachers who are marginalized as part-timers or in programs outside English departments, administrators who teach without faculty status, first-time teachers. And You. Especially if you do not fit into any of the categories above.

I hope that at CCCC you will introduce yourself to me, to each other, and the CBW Board. And if our paths cross at other professional gatherings, I hope you will do the same. Acquaint me and the Board with the conditions of your working life, with the reasons you teach the students you do, with the constraints you face in your jobs. Help us, all of you, to know who you are, and in knowing one another, to learn and grow.

Suellyn Duffy
The Ohio State University

Cultural Borderland

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any time to one of the Minnesota state campuses. MSU-Akita is also a co-operative university; American students are studying Japanese while also taking content classes. The freshman composition classroom, then, is a bicultural one: a mixture of Japanese and American students. I taught writing on this campus for one year, trying to meet the needs of two groups, American and Japanese. While the American students were accustomed to the American style of education, the Japanese students had to deal with differing views on education, classroom expectations, and teacher/student and student/student relationships; at the same time they were studying rhetorical styles different from those in their own culture.

The challenges in teaching a bicultural writing class rest not only in pedagogical choices but in the social and psychological atmosphere of the classroom; as I met those challenges, I discovered that the solution to the difficulties rested in the very nature of this classroom. Since it was bicultural, the classroom offered the Japanese students an environment where educational acculturation was possible. The presence of the American students helped create an atmosphere that minimized the social and psychological impediments of adapting to a different classroom experience.

One fact you learn early when you teach abroad is that the classroom is a

cultural unit, a social unit with its own speech activities and patterns. As a cultural unit, it includes socially transmitted patterns of behavior and values, a language system shaped by the parameters of the classroom. Many second language researchers have argued that the classroom itself must be recognized as a cultural unit in order to facilitate learning for the second language student, both in language and content classes. The American students at Akita are part of that cultural unit; they provide a model for classroom behavior through responses to teacher expectations, modes of classroom speech communication, and interactions with other students.

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Japanese students, like many second language students in university content classes, may need such models because these students bring

to the second language classroom a whole different set of educational expectations rooted in their native culture, which can result in learning difficulties. Because of the widely different philosophies that underlie them, American and Japanese educational environments are almost polar opposites. U.S. educational philosophy is rooted in the belief that natural ability is an important factor in success. By contrast the Japanese educational philosophy is centered on the "gambaru": to persist, hang on, do one's best; the Japanese believe that anyone who puts their mind to school can succeed. As a result, Japanese classes are not stratified by ability; there is a more democratic

focus. Such characteristics promote group identity among Japanese students and a drive to succeed that, for the high school student, leads to "crash courses" in rote learning and memorization in order to be admitted to the prestigious universities. In effect, a ticket into a university in Japan is the student's advance ticket out and into a good job. The university education is merely a rite of passage; the major educational commitment has already taken place in the high schools.

Very simply, Japanese and American students have different classroom expectations, especially at the university level, despite the fact that the Japanese students at Akita have been exposed to American style education in their Level 5, English as a Second Language class: English for Academic Purposes. That class, however,

is nothing more than a simulation of an American classroom. I found it was still necessary for my Akita students to learn that they could not arrive late or skip class if they wanted a chance at succeeding in the course. This they quickly did; specifically, they came to realize that what went on in the classroom directly affected success in the course and, in the long run, success in graduating. Although these students had chosen MSU-Akita over other Japanese schools, reflecting their desire for a "different" learning experience, few had realized the exact nature of that learning experience at the university level.

As the teacher/classroom facilitator,

I was integral to the classroom model. My goal was to create an American-style educational experience without subtracting from the Japanese culture. Research has shown that second language learners achieve better in situations where their culture is not threatened. I began by tapping into the bicultural environment. All writing assignments were bicultural in nature. For example, in one assignment students had to interview someone from a different culture about studying another language/culture: Japanese students interviewed Americans, Americans interviewed Japanese. For their persuasion paper, Japanese students were

required to focus on American culture, American students on Japanese culture. All reading assignments were divided between American and Japanese authors in English translations;

and workshop groups were bicultural. The classroom and course became an opportunity for students to learn about each other's cultures.

Sounds good? Almost. Other problems arose as a result of different classroom expectations. I quickly discovered that Asian students are generally reluctant to speak in class, taking fewer speaking turns than non-Asians. When I asked a question, they would often respond with silence. Whereas American teachers may associate silence with lack of understanding, in Japan silence is the preferred response when the student is not completely sure of the

Head nods among Japanese students may indicate they are politely listening, but not necessarily understanding. I learned that my silent students often understood the material, and those who were nodding often did not.

answer or simply does not want to speak. And head nodding, which I had always assumed signalled student understanding, has other meanings in Japanese culture. Head nods among Japanese students may

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indicate they are politely listening, but not necessarily understanding. I learned that my silent students often understood the material, and those who were nodding often did not. I used the Americans and the more talkative Japanese students (who, by the way, were usually those who had attended some part of their high school in the States) to draw out the others. I called on students, rather than waiting for volunteers (a viable option only in a classroom with an atmosphere of low anxiety) and paid particular attention to the head nodders.

Another area of difference was in teacher/student and student/student relationships. Japanese students expect a teacher-dominated classroom, reflecting the Japanese regard for authority and formality--an expectation confirmed by a number of second language researchers. My attempt, then, to utilize a strong workshop component with student feedback, as I do in all my writing classes, resulted in some initial problems. Students met weekly in workshop groups, either to monitor each other's progress or to review final drafts. I handed out a

workshop checklist that moved from content to discourse and sentence-level style. My Japanese students at first had difficulty seeing the value of receiving feedback from their classmates; most of the early feedback came from the American students and was promptly ignored. In fact, the workshop groups became opportunities for the Japanese students to relate with each other on a social, non-academic level. It often took half the quarter before the writing workshops became a functional part of the course. Although the suggested areas of feedback in the workshop checklist did help to keep them focused, I nevertheless had to convince them that learning to give feedback was an important part of the process of learning to write. Another approach that proved successful was to give them five minutes at the beginning of each workshop to warm up, chat about any subject, and get the gossip out of the

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way.

As teachers in a bicultural classroom, we are faced with minimizing the negative impact on of differences in socio-cultural classroom expectations. Equally challenging is the presentation of the discipline itself. Differences between Japanese and English rhetorical styles can pose problems for the Japanese student in the writing class. Studies by John Hinds and Robert Kaplan point to differences in

thought patterns and rhetorical styles across cultures. Kaplan, for example, talks about some Asian writing that is marked by an approach that he calls "indirection." The writer circles around the subject looking at it from a number of different viewpoints. By contrast, English rhetorical style in the twentieth century tends to be linear, proceeding from a focused thesis. Hinds' work looks at cross-cultural differences in writer vs. reader responsibility in writing; he points out that in Japan it is the responsibility of the listener/reader to understand the speaker/author's intention; in English, the speaker is responsible for communicating the message.

Linguists and rhetoricians continue to debate the issue of cross cultural rhetorical differences, and whether we can identify a country by a single rhetorical pattern; however, my experiences teaching writing in Turkey, Japan and in U.S. classrooms with representative second language students seems to bear out these differences. I remember my first set of interview papers from my Japanese students; they were stylistically polished and quite consistent in their logic, but I had to consciously work on tracking the circular thinking. Larger discourse units like the paragraph, groupings of paragraphs and the entire paper were shaped in ways I had never considered. I found myself specifically teaching English rhetorical patterns, using our bicultural reading assignments as examples. I also talked about a partnership between reader and writer; the writer is responsible for communicating and the reader for negotiating meaning. The American students helped me out enormously in

conveying aspects of writing and reading that native speakers of English take for granted. To say my Japanese students became better writers would be culturally insensitive; I suspect that in their own language they were already successful writers. They did, however, eventually embrace English rhetorical styles and became better written communicators of English.

Teaching writing in college classrooms abroad is always about more than teaching our students to write. Among other things, it is about creating a culturally sensitive linguistic environment.

The hardest task is to celebrate both cultures while realizing that the focus in your writing class belongs to only one. Teaching in a bicultural classroom makes this task so much easier. Native speakers, comfortable with the learning environment, in effect reaffirm the American style of education. In addition, such speakers can provide what researchers call "meaningful" communication with second language speakers in the classroom. Learning a target language does not end when students enter content classes taught in the target language. Learning in such content courses is part of a larger interlanguage continuum that begins in the early stages of second language instruction. As writing teachers we need to remember that learning to write for the second language student is still about learning another language *and* another culture.

Donna Casella is an indomitable traveler and a student of the world's cultures and cuisines. When not traveling she teaches at Mankato State University in Minnesota.

R * E * V * I * E * W * S**Recent Articles on Basic Writing**

Sally Harrold

The articles I've chosen to review this time discuss academic politics, theoretical issues, and pedagogical strategies. Most are from familiar journals; all speak to the breadth and depth of concerns necessary and common to basic writing teachers.

Shaughnessy, Mina. "The English Professor's Malady." *Journal of Basic Writing* (Spring 1994): 117-124.

I chose Mina Shaughnessy's "The English Professor's Malady", originally presented at an ADE conference in 1977, because it represents our field's work at its best--cogent, compelling, and beautifully written. Reprinted in the Spring 1994 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (13. 1), the article is part of a section commemorating Shaughnessy and her work. To read Shaughnessy's analysis of our profession's malady is to examine the issues writing teachers have struggled with for the past two decades--a narrow conception of writing, of the abilities of basic writing students, and of the "proper" activities of faculty and academia itself. It is also to see how badly English departments needed composition to come of age as a discipline. For some teachers of basic writing, the article will be a benchmark of progress; for others, it will serve as a reminder of how far we still have to go to make basic writing instruction respectable academic work. For all of us, however,

Shaughnessy's concluding statement confirms our resolve "... [to] ... learn to want to do the work that waits to be done" (124).

The "theory" articles focus on the connections between spirituality and writing. The May 1994 CCC (45:21) devoted "Interchanges" to "Spiritual Sites of Composing", which included Ann E. Berthoff's "Introductory Remarks" and essays by four composition/rhetoric researchers. Berthoff indicates that all want to provide "... [an] articulat[ion] [of] the spiritual and political aspects of all that we do in teaching reading and writing" (237). The four writers discuss their rationales for including spirituality in their work and the specific ways they have done so. Beth Daniell, for instance, in "Composing as Power" argues that not to discuss spiritual issues is to avoid topics that touch our lives deeply and to divorce language from emotional response (240). She reports on how six women in Al-Anon make "... meaning out of human experience, using both spoken and written language to name and claim their lives" (245).

JoAnn Campbell's "Writing to Heal: Using Meditation in the Writing Process" reviews research on using meditation in writing instruction, examines objections to such use, and suggests ways meditation can resolve writer's block.

C. Jan Swearingen's "Women's Ways of Writing, or Images, Self-Images, and Graven Images" argues that our canonical adherence to analysis and skepticism keeps us from asking (or answering) how "spirituality... function[s] in our creative lives as makers and

searchers" (252). She discusses five weeklong workshops on spirituality and creativity she and two others have held. Aimed to help women develop strong self-images, the workshops presented exercises addressing the cultural and personal inhibitions constraining female creativity. Swearingen established a context for women's creativity and intellectuality by focusing on historical communities of women who connected the two. Creating this context, Swearingen argues, enables women to "connect the spiritual and the intellectual, . . . the quest for meaning and the will to make it (258).

James Moffett's "Responses" addresses the academic discomfort with "writing to heal and to grow" (258). Moffett argues for using writing for moral growth and for incorporating meditation in writing instruction. The university should foster these activities, he asserts, because it also needs spirituality. "Unhealed wounds and undeveloped souls will thwart the smartest curriculum" (261).

I found these articles compelling, but troubling. All of us have probably experienced the emotional/spiritual poverty of much academic writing. The work of Coles, Macrorie, and Elbow, among others, has addressed this aridity. And repeatedly (and rightly) we have praised the voices of basic writers whose writing--whatever its surface errors--is "alive". The "Interchanges" writers argue not only for recognizing the

disconnectedness of much academic writing from emotion and deeper meaning, but also for naming one source of this disconnectedness an avoidance of spirituality. Hence their efforts to recover the connections of spirituality and writing and spiritual practices in our profession. I share their frustrations and am persuaded that we need to include spiritual writing in our work.

Why, then, my trouble? These writers' respect for students' autonomy is evident, amply so. But I need to have the very real issues of invasion of students' privacy and of both uninformed and damaging coercion of students' spiritual lives seriously addressed, foregrounded. For the history of religion and of teaching shows us again and again that abuse of power is only too common. That we are

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sensitive to this abuse is evident from the number of recent articles on the power relationships of students and teachers in the basic writing classroom. Because I know only too well--as both teacher and student--how easily such abuse happens, I think that as we explore the connection of spirituality and writing, we need to keep foremost one rule: do not violate students' spiritual autonomy. And we need to take that rule seriously enough to develop procedures, as well as a professional posture, to ensure that it not be violated. For if meditation--Zen practices in particular--tells us anything, it is that spiritual growth is necessarily a lifelong,

often solitary journey, in which humility is essential.

(For ways others have incorporated Zen theories into teacher-education see the following article: Tremmel, Robert. "Zen and the Art of Reflective Practice in Teacher Education." *Harvard Educational Review* 3:6 (Winter 1993): 434-58; it contains references to other articles and a bibliography.)

The final three articles, all from the *Spring 1994 Journal of Basic Writing* (13:1), suggest pedagogical strategies we can use in teaching basic writing. The first, John Creed and Susan B. Andrews' "Publication Project in Alaska Offers Ways to Open New Worlds to Basic Writing Students" (3-13), describes the workings and benefits of publishing student writing. The benefits--students' development of audience, revision, and accuracy--are possible, they argue, not only in well-developed programs like theirs, but also in *Foxfire*-like and class publication projects. Creed and Andrews also suggest ways to adapt their program to other communities. Practical and persuasive, the article shows us how to provide basic writers with a powerful new learning experience.

Pamela D. Dykstra's "Say It, Don't Write It: Oral Structures as Framework for Teaching Writing" (41-49) argues that we need to show students the structure of their oral language in order to teach them how the conventions of written language work. Helpful because it clarifies the structure of oral language, Dykstra's article provides us a way to teach the conventions of written language--a way that respects students' abilities and moves

from what they know to the less familiar. She mentions a manual she has developed using her approach but provides no information on how to get a copy of it. Because I think such a manual would provide the bridge between theory and practice that many of us need, I'll write for information and report on it in the next newsletter.

"Giving Voice to Women in the Basic Writing and Language Minority Classroom" (78-90) by Effie Papatzikou Cochran also offers us practical information, this time to enable us to address sexism in the classroom. Thoroughly researched, clearly written, and balanced in its approach, Cochran's article would also be useful in persuading colleagues and administrators that addressing sexism in our classes is both important and possible.

Sally Harrold adds:

While reading articles to prepare for this edition's review, I was struck (again) by the range of issues basic writing teachers must know about. Because there are so many issues, I'd welcome suggestions about topics you want reviewed. Send suggestions to Sally Harrold, Southwestern Oregon Community College, Coos Bay, Oregon 97420.

BULLETIN BOARD

April 17-19, 1995: The Regional Language Center (RELC) will hold its Regional Seminar, "Exploring Language, Culture and Literature in Language Learning," in Singapore, hosted by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO). The Seminar aims to examine how approaches to language, culture, and literature are reflected in language classrooms; to survey recent developments in the areas of language, culture, and literature, and consider their relevance to language learning; and to report on and discuss research into the roles that language, culture and literature play in language learning. Unfortunately the deadline for proposals is already past, but for more information contact The Director (Attention SEMINAR SECRETARIAT), SEAMEO Regional Language Center, 30 Orange Grove Rd., Singapore 1025, Republic of Singapore. Phone (65) 737-2753, Telex: RS 55598 RELC, Cable: RELCENTRE SINGAPORE, E-mail GBORELC@NUSVM.

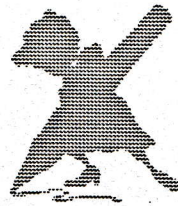
New Journal: *Assessing Writing*, that appeared in May 1994, is described as "A bi-annual Journal for educators, administrators, researchers, and writing assessment professionals. . . . the first publication to offer focused, consistent coverage of all writing assessment issues--in classrooms, theory, research, and professional contexts." Annual subscription rates are \$29 for individuals and \$45 for institutions. For information

contact Diana Walsh, Ablex Publishing Corp., 355 Chestnut Street, Norwood, NJ 07648, (612) 829-0708.

The *CBW Newsletter* invites your contributions. Book reviews and submissions for the column on different kinds of teaching situations, such as this

issue's column about teaching in Japan, are especially welcome. The column is a regular feature dealing with the day-to-day experience of teaching in widely varying situations in the United States and abroad. Please contact the editor,

Kay Puttock, phone (507) 389-2117 weekdays, (507) 388-2187 evenings, or (515) 292-2298 weekends, if you are interested. Let us know about your unique situation!



The CBW Newsletter is published twice a year by the Conference on Basic Writing, a Special Interest Group of CCCC. The editor is Kay Puttock of the English Department, Mankato State University, Minnesota. Opinions expressed in these pages are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor, the officers of CBW, or CCCC.

Membership in the Conference on Basic Writing is \$5 for one year, \$9 for two years and \$12 for three years, and includes a subscription to the CBW Newsletter. Subscription address: Sally Fitzgerald, Div. of Language Arts, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian, Hayward, CA 94545.