

SEEING IS BELIEVING:
Writing Studies with “Basic Writing” Students

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Sé el cambio que quieres ver en el mundo.
Be the change you want to see in the world.

—Gandhi

To believe you can be the change, sometimes you have to see it.

When I entered the room, an outside observer for the day, it was the second hour of class. The students were already circled up and talking about where they were in their research processes. They each talked about their research questions, how the questions had evolved as they researched, read, and thought about them, and they shared the challenges they faced in pursuing answers to their questions.

*Izzy*¹. Izzy, a graduate of one of the more successful charter schools in Texas’ Rio Grande Valley, hasn’t done much with her project, so her turn begins with a number of excuses for why she isn’t further along. When she started her project, she was confident about her question, something about whether AP classes prepare students for college. As a student who had taken a number of AP classes herself in high school, she seems convinced of their value, and her plan is to interview a couple of students, one who had had AP classes, one who didn’t. But she is having trouble finding additional information. So, Marlene, her teacher, turns the conversation over to the class. Did her peers have any questions/comments for Izzy? A couple of students begin to question her about the purpose of her surveys, what data she would collect and how she could sort it and use it, and within a few minutes, they and Marlene have convinced Izzy that she should be focusing on *English AP* classes, and her survey participants should be college students since they are the ones who would know for sure if their high school AP classes had any impact on their success in their college classes. Izzy realizes she had a perfect survey group in her own classmates as they fit her profile, and they brainstorm ways that AP English classes for them were different than “regular” ones. Marlene suggests she do some research into AP materials online to see if the stated goals of the AP English classes correspond to their own first-year writing class goals. Her turn ends with students suggesting specific databases for Izzy to continue her research with, and then it’s on to another student.

Vanessa. Vanessa’s research question has evolved from “Does having an ability to read music affect the ability to read rhetorically?” to “Is there a connection between learning how to read music and learning how to read texts?” She claims that her one success in the project thus

far has been changing her question to something she can find sources for. Before this class, she says research was like a foreign language to her. She didn't know what to look for or what would be useful, so she just used whatever sources she could find quickly. Most of her peers in the class seem to have had the same experience. Now, she says, she realizes she needs patience to do research, that you should take the time to look for the right sources rather than using any old thing. She has learned a new way of reading research, as a way to see if the sources are reliable and relevant. She thinks she can finish her project in two to three weeks, and she has an answer to her question.

César. César began his project by trying to find out whether employers have a better perception of a college graduate than they do of a high school graduate with years of experience. A returning student with a full-time job, César is having a really hard time squeezing in even a few minutes a day for his research. He now wants to know what the influence of a parent's educational level is on his/her children going to college. Jorge, from across the circle, jumps in with a suggestion for doing more efficient research: "When you pull up a source, do a CTRL-F and use a key word from your research to see how many times it shows up in the article. For me, I use 'parents' because my research is about parents helping their kids to write. Read through some of the sentences where the key word is found and if it's not pertaining to what you're interested in or it doesn't show up enough, throw that source out." He then goes on to offer a source he found that wasn't quite right for his research, but sounds like it fits really well with César's. Another student, sensing César's unease with where he is in focusing his project, asks him specific questions to help him clarify and further explain why he's interested in it. He wants to interview students who dropped out (like him, it turns out) and find out why they did. Cynthia, who had been relatively quiet until now, suggests that everyone put their research question on the class blog and then, if anyone might be able to help by offering a source or potential survey/interview subject, they can add a comment there.

Background. Two years ago, I began my graduate course on teaching first-year writing with an article which had just been published in the summer *CCC*: Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle's "Teaching About Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" I did so as part of a grander scheme to disrupt common assumptions about the purpose(s) of first-year writing classes and to make the familiar—in this case, the almost universally required first-year writing course—strange again. My students were a microcosm of almost any English department in the country. Many of them had primarily a literature background, a fair number were creative writers, and a smaller percentage were rhetoric and composition students. About half wanted to be TAs in our writing program and were thus required to take the course. Class discussion of this article, generally speaking, elicited more favorable responses than I imagined. Most read a "writing about writing" approach as legitimate, even mildly intriguing, though they had serious concerns about how it might be enacted and what they might lose by teaching it. Some, for instance, clearly valued a cultural studies approach to teaching FYC. Such a curriculum allowed them to teach what they loved, and cultural studies' focus on critical reading and analysis fit well with many of the goals and outcomes we shared for FYC courses. They worried, legitimately, about where students would be taught to in-

terrogate cultural assumptions and think critically about issues of gender, ethnicity, etc. But there were two bigger concerns shared by some teachers in our program. First, the curriculum described in the “Introduction to Writing Studies” approach in Downs and Wardle’s article asked students to read scholarly articles from the discipline of rhetoric and composition—some of the same articles, in fact, that I was asking the graduate students to read. Many are long, hard, and students are clearly not the audience for them, so there was some question of how much sense the average freshman could make of them. And getting students to read *anything* was already hard enough. Second, few of the graduate students and faculty could believe that first-year students would be engaged by such work either. Most students hate writing anyway—who in their right mind would want to ask them to read, research, and write about the very thing they hate? They thought surely the students would revolt.

When I asked one of our lecturers in the program, a woman with a literature background, but solid grounding in rhetoric and composition as well, what her original ideas about the approach were, she recalled thinking that “the entire idea of using articles written by and for professional compositionists in FYC was wrongheaded . . . [T]he length, complexity, and the background needed in order to be an engaged reader was suited to grad school, not freshmen.” But, perhaps more interestingly, she was “suspicious of the motives of Downs and Wardle . . . wonder[ing] if the approach would benefit students or if it was a way to carve out a new niche in a department.” “Empire building to gain academic capital” is how she described it.

At that point in my tenure as WPA, I was trying to build a program, a sense of shared values and vision for the first-year writing program at UTPA, and I wasn’t interested in trying to convince anyone to use what many of my faculty would probably consider a pretty radical approach to teaching FYC. We are an Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) located in the Rio Grande Valley, home to the poorest county in America, and most of our students come from the area. Just over fifty-three percent of the freshman class of 2009 graduated in the bottom 75% of their high school class (Office 17), and it is common to hear faculty, administrators, and others describe our student population as under-prepared and at-risk. So, I knew it would be a hard sell to get faculty to bring thirty-plus page articles written for scholarly journals into their classrooms, particularly with freshmen. Particularly with *our* freshmen.

But it wasn’t long before one of my TAs who had been in my graduate class the year before decided to give the writing studies approach a try. I gave her a lot of leeway to develop her own syllabus, and she actually drew heavily on the readings we had done for our graduate class to design the course. She asked students to develop their own writing-related research questions, which they pursued both through primary and secondary means, and they ended the semester by taking their work public, transforming their traditional research papers into projects in a variety of forms, with meaningful purposes, and for real audiences. Over the course of the semester, I could see that the other TAs were a little shocked by her success. Students were engaged and were developing research questions and projects that rivaled my own senior-level composition theory class, both in terms of complexity and overall quality of finished products. Eventually, I

saw the other TAs incorporating a few writing studies articles into their own classes. I think they wanted to know if it was just her or whether there was something to this particular approach. Last summer, a couple of our faculty tried teaching the curriculum, and they had great success as well, and, as word spread, four or five more took it on, including some of our new lecturers (with a 5/5 load). So, when we completely re-designed our developmental program this last fall, we decided to take a chance and use the very same writing studies curriculum that we use with our first-semester FYC class with our developmental writing students.

And it has worked better than we ever imagined.

The Redesign. For the past few years, we had been offering the top-scoring, developmentally-placed writing students the opportunity to take what we called a fast-track developmental writing course. Students would sign up for both English 1320-Basic Writing (the non-credit-bearing developmental writing course) and 1301 (the first-semester credit-bearing writing course) in the same semester. (On the books, 1320 would run the first half of the semester while 1301 would run the last half.) Students would meet every day of the week for an hour, do the work of a 1301, and, hopefully, at the end of the semester, pass both 1320 and 1301. This program had been a success—more students passed the developmental course than normal and, in our English 1302, end-of-year program assessment, fast-track students usually performed better than “regular” students who hadn’t taken developmental writing. But Colin, the developmental coordinator, and I believed that these results weren’t just limited to the fact that they were the best testers of the developmentally placed students. We knew that the intensity of the course (meeting, in essence, twice as often as other developmental students), the pedagogy and curriculum being employed, and the students’ investment in the course (knowing they would get credit for a “real” college course at the end of the semester) were key factors in these students’ successes.

We wanted to go further, and last fall we got the opportunity to make some changes that would affect the entire developmental program. We allowed any developmental writing student to take both English 1320 and 1301, meeting for two class periods back to back two or three times a week. We use the same writing studies curriculum that we use for regular 1301 classes, and the extra hours each week are dedicated to a studio environment with more one-on-one and small group conferencing, peer response groups, and time to write/revise with the teacher close by.

The Curriculum. Our developmental writing students read the following:

- Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies’”
- Christina Haas and Linda Flower’s “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning”

- Luis Moll and Norma Gonzalez’s “Lessons from Research with Language-Minority Children”
- Gloria Beubert and Sally McNelis’ “Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Strategies”
- Alice Gillam’s “Research in the Classroom: Learning through Response”
- Margaret Kantz’s “Helping Students Use Textual Sources Persuasively”
- Nancy Sommers’ “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers”

Instructors could add pieces of their own choosing, some about gender or specific second language/bilingual issues, sometimes additional readings about inquiry-based research. Regardless of the resulting mix, the number, length, and complexity of the readings is daunting, particularly in light of the fact that these are students who, in many cases, have felt left out of or uninterested in academic work. But there are important reasons why this set of readings works really well:

- *Because students read Downs and Wardle first, they begin the class with a philosophical overview of why their teachers are asking them to do the work they are.* Most of our students are used to teachers telling them to do stuff, and they do it—or don’t, as is the case with many developmental students—without ever knowing why. Each assignment or task is another in a long line of (to them) useless busy work, which usually reveals their flaws and reinforces their ideas that good writing ability is a gift few possess. But when they read about Jack, a student in the Downs and Wardle piece, they begin to realize that (1) there are people out there who study students like them, which they think is pretty cool and buys our discipline a little cultural capital, and (2) they realize that they, like Jack, can learn something about writing even if they’ve never been very good at it.
- *Embedded in the readings are tools students can use to get through the work.* When they read Sommers’ piece on revision, they see their own ideas about revision reflected in the language of the “inexperienced” writers. The Gillam article offers a brief, but important, rationale for why peer response work matters, what students can *learn* and how they can *benefit* from doing it well. Neubert and McNelis argue for and gives real examples of feedback of varying quality. Kantz shows them how and why to incorporate source material into their writing. And they do so in ways that don’t water the concepts down into bold-able key terms whose complexities have been erased.

The strength of the curriculum for our developmental students has been, however ironic this might seem, its *rigorous, academic nature*. Students have never been asked to do anything like it, and that's a good thing given most of their past relationships with education in general and "school writing" in particular.

A Testing Culture. It is now commonplace to note that our educational institutions are shaped by a test-obsessed culture. In the Valley, this is particularly true in many, if not most, school districts. In the years when writing is tested on the state-mandated exams, you'll see students practicing often in the genre of that exam, writing narratives in response to prompts like "Write about a time you were surprised" (readers might also be interested in the fact that those prompts change very little from fourth to eleventh grade). In the years when there is no writing exam, attention is shifted elsewhere. They're asked to read, but mostly literary texts, and not necessarily in ways that are useful to them when applied to other reading situations. And the testing culture, as it is wont to do, breeds a find-the-right-answer mentality that too often stifles inventive, creative approaches to thinking through problems. It doesn't help that students are tracked into pre-AP classes starting in sixth grade. Those who don't look like they can cut it are shifted to the side *very* early on.

So, when students enter our classroom, the kind and amount of reading, thinking, and writing we ask them to do seems radically at odds with their past experiences, and many of them develop research questions designed to help them (1) make sense of their past experiences in high school, and (2) understand how they can relate to their current and future learning experiences. As I said earlier, that's a good thing.

The Difference a Curriculum Can Make. Marlene recently passed out a survey to her developmental students, asking them to reflect on their experiences in the class. All of them said the class was fast-paced, more so than any class they'd ever taken, but one student said something very telling: "Usually when I'm asked to do this much work this fast, I give up. But, I didn't this time." And the question is, why not? Part of the answer is *confidence*. We have confidence in their ability to do rigorous work, and they begin to have confidence in their own abilities to do it, not just in our classes, but in their other academic work as well.

I asked the teachers who use the writing studies approach in my program what was different for their students in this curriculum versus others, and a few of their comments bear repeating:

- "Writing studies changes the dynamic of the classroom in the sense that the instructor is not an authoritative figure telling students what to do, but a facilitator helping students make sense of what's going on in college and in their brains as they read and write, a process they never considered" (Regine).
- "The idea that I was left with was that dealing with the articles gave them more confidence, because of the points made by the authors about students owning their work,

and I think, also because they were able to get into the articles and discuss them—this was not high school work” (Mary Anne).

- “Students can clearly see a correlation between the work they’re doing in the classroom and how it relates to larger conversations taking place amongst scholars When they read writing studies articles (although they’re lengthy) it’s easier to understand the concepts in terms of how it relates to them as FYC students. When I taught ENG 1302 [the second-semester FYC course] with a non-writing studies approach, I don’t think that at the end of the semester any of my students were able to clearly define rhetoric or rhetorical awareness. My English 1320/1301 students this semester use the terms rhetorical reading and rhetorical writing almost daily. They’re comfortable with these terms. And as the semester progresses, I can see their confidence grow in their abilities to actually perform this type of reading and writing” (Marlene).
- “The writing studies approach asks a lot from students, but it gets a lot from students When I ask them to reflect on things they are proud of, the most common answers are that they’re proud they read a thirty page article (some of them even read it twice, even if it took them two or three days), they’re proud they wrote a four-page essay for Project 1, they’re amazed when they go beyond the six to eight page requirement for Project 2 and it still feels unfinished to them. Generally, they’re proud they survive the course” (Marlene).

We’re really proud, too.

The Take-Aways. Beatrice Mendez Newman writes in “Teaching Writing at Hispanic-Serving Institutions” that “[t]he composition classroom, potentially one of the most student-centered, social sites in the students’ early academic experience, could figure prominently in the HSI students’ decision to persist or drop out, to cross the ‘threshold’ or to retreat from the institution” (23). That, of course, is true for the FYC classroom in most institutions and for the developmental writing classroom especially. We have had the opportunity to radically alter the content and delivery of our “basic writing” curriculum to facilitate our students’ abilities to cross that threshold, and our students have risen to our admittedly high expectations. Here’s how we think they did it.

- ***Immersion.*** Because students met for two hours each class day, they were immersed in the work of the class for long enough periods of time that they could try out ideas, get feedback, revise, and try them out again—all before leaving for the day. As they were trying to become more effective and efficient writers and readers, they were reading, writing, and reflecting on their own experiences doing those activities. They came to see how their past experiences with these activities affected their current challenges as readers and writers, and they learned that they can take some measure of control over becoming better at it. What they were reading and researching directly applied to them and what they were trying to do for class.

- *An Enriched Knowledge Base.* Asking students to become researchers from the moment they enter a college writing classroom (as opposed to waiting until the second-semester writing course to introduce research), and asking them to focus that inquiry on meaningful questions about writing that impact them, has led the majority of our students to produce work that is informed, engaged, rhetorical, and not just bland evidence of information-gathering.
- *Networks.* What I see in the opening scene of this article is a class that has built a network that rivals any graduate student cohort. Those students are asking questions of one another, almost everyone is talking and contributing in ways that go well beyond the superficial comment, and they help each other further their thinking, research, and writing.
- *Engagement.* Those networks emerged not just because the students needed one another's support (which they did, of course), but because they were engaged with their work and knew enough about their issues that they could share sources and ask relevant questions. With this approach, our students seem to have more control over and connection to their problems with reading and writing, and they see ways to do something about them.

Some of our students do give up, though most of the time it has nothing to do with the rigor of the work we ask them to do. I was so excited when I visited Marlene's class and heard Izzy, Vanessa, Cesar, and their peers talking. I wanted to stand up and say, "Do you have any idea how fantastic this is?" None of these students will be English majors, and they may never read another article in rhetoric, composition, or literacy studies again, but the ways they see writing, reading, and researching are fundamentally changed, the familiar strange and the strange now more familiar. For these students and teachers, for myself, and hopefully for others who try to work with this type of curriculum, lasting change is possible. And seeing the differences in student engagement, confidence, and writing is certainly believing.

Notes

1. All the names of real students have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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