

UNDERSTANDING BASIC WRITERS: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO BASIC
WRITING INSTRUCTION

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Understanding Basic Writers: An Integrated Approach to the Teaching of Basic Writing

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Abstract

“An Integrated Approach to the Teaching of Basic Writing” is a course based on a compilation of research performed by professionals in a variety of disciplines. It is based on the premise that the act of writing involves many different yet interrelated systems. For the basic writer, one who struggles unsuccessfully with the skills and conventions of written communication, using techniques that exploit the organic nature of writing promotes the cognitive connections necessary for success.

The course offered here acknowledges the dual function of writing in the classroom. Writing’s relationship to learning is one of expression and design. It is a way to demonstrate knowledge as well as a way to learn. Students stand to gain the most when asked to use writing as a way to find meaning and as a way to express what they know. This study also examines the nature of the basic writer and focuses on contributing factors such as egocentricity and cultural influences. This related approach to writing instruction recognizes the unique nature of the learner and maintains an optimistic persistence in applying theory to successful classroom strategies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“The powerful and beautiful explanations for how and why persons write reside in many disciplines, as do the methods for inquiring into that vast phenomenon” (Emig 155). This multi-disciplined approach to studying the complexities of language involves linguists as well as teachers, literary researchers and biologists, rhetoricians as well as philosophers. What this integrated approach to the inquiry of writing suggests is that the act of writing involves many different yet interrelated systems. To teach writing as an isolated act is to deny what research indicates writing to be “literally organic” (Emig 109). Instead of being more rigorous in our approach to composition instruction we need to be more responsive to the way students learn.

Part of what complicates our understanding of where writing comes from and how it is produced lies in its relationship to cognition. Cognition, for our purposes, can be thought of as a way to learn how to learn. Writing serves a similar function for the student. It is, at once, a mode of learning and an expression of what is learned.

What we understand about the diverse processes of cognition and language and about the interactive or hierarchical structure of those processes is based on the research of cognitive-developmental psychologists like Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, Lev Semenivich Vygotsky, and Benjamin S. Bloom. Their research, covering a fifteen year span beginning in the 1960s through the early 1980s, sets the theoretical bases for

composition researchers. Cognitive-developmentalists' theories are particularly relevant to the teaching of composition since studying them calls into question long-accepted theories about the way writing is generally taught. Current-traditionalists base instruction on the assumption that students of the same age learn the same way: through lecture, grammar drills without the context of student writing, or other standardized lessons that approach writing instruction as if it were a foreign language, not an innate process.

In contrast, teachers who understand learning as a process look to the cognitive developmentalists in support of a flexible environment, allowing individual student-driven encounters with language to guide learning. Teachers who base instruction on the theories of cognitive developmentalists recognize students as unique learners functioning on a variety of levels and stages. They also understand that optimum learning situations integrate visual art, music, literature, personal experiences, manipulatives, and social interaction to facilitate the writing process.

Understanding the basic controlling principles in cognitive developmental theory is important if one is to apply the concepts to writing instruction. What follows is an introduction to the major cognitivists and an attempt to illustrate how their theories apply to writing instruction.

Piaget—Swiss biologist, philosopher, psychologist, and genetic epistemologist—has greatly influenced cognitive developmental theory. Education professionals know him best for his stages of intellectual development wherein he posits that students prove

ready to learn only when they are at appropriate and specific stages. Although there is no consensus as to which concepts are applicable to the various levels of learning, (or even if all students are able to attain the highest levels of abstract thought), virtually all accept the concept that the process model of stages of development exists and is important to learning. The developmental concept is also directly applicable to teaching writing; the student's developing abilities are the central focus. It is the student writing that signals what has been learned and what concepts need attention.

Another of Piaget's tenets of learning, as described by Joyce Carroll, addresses the learner as an integrator. Piaget describes four factors influencing cognitive development:

Maturation refers to the physical structures; *experience* refers to contact with objects; *social transmission* describes interactions with others; and *equilibration* coordinates the other three, none of which is sufficient by itself for mental growth. Piaget believes that these factors repeat in a spiral to construct knowledge (Carroll, Wilson 308). (Italics are mine.)

It is this recognition of the interactive learner that most clearly speaks to the students' role in learning. When students choose their own topics and frame them within their own social context, they take ownership of their writing. Not only is this important for motivation, but control over what is written and how it is arranged is necessary to the learning process. As students struggle with meaning (what to say and how to say it) the brain undergoes physical changes as it makes connections to prior learning and adjusts to

social feedback. Contrast this to the current traditional method of presenting students with a topic, thesis statement, and a structure. The higher level thinking skills are not needed and therefore not activated. Authentic writing is not taking place.

Students must do the learning themselves; there is no short cut around this fact. Benjamin Levin, in his article “Improving Educational Productivity: Putting Students at the Center” uses a factory analogy of education and asks, “Are students raw materials being processed or workers doing the producing?” (759). Students play a far more complicated role than that of raw materials. Whatever teachers provide or do, in the end it is the student who must use the resources to acquire skills and knowledge. Education is, as Levin asserts, a unique kind of production, because it requires learners to create knowledge and meaning in the context of their own lives (759). When we give students a formula for writing, a fill-in-the-blanks template so often used to make writing “assessable” to students and improve composition scores on state tests, we disengage our students and ruin the cognitive processes that must take place for future authentic writing. Students are constantly making decisions about the amount of effort, attention and interest they will put into their schoolwork. They decide to come to school or not, to pay attention in class or not, or to take the material seriously or not. If what students do and think is central to the way they learn, then it is central to the writing process, and it must also be central to the way we teach writing (Doyal 32).

Process is, indeed, the central concern for the innovative Russian cognitive developmentalist, Vygotsky, whose learning theories generally correspond with Piaget's. Vygotsky continually focuses on the process involved in the formation of a concept, maintaining that word and thought are related in a continual ebb and flow (Vygotsky 98-99). This process of concept development parallels the writing process. Invention, drafting, arrangement, and editing occur in a recursive setting. While many teachers recognize these elements of the writing process, they fail to put them in the context of a recursive setting unique to the individual writer. In studies of first language writing classes, composition researchers Jensen and DiTiberio have used the Myers-Briggs type indicator with writers at various levels of proficiency and concluded that individual students' personality types influence their approach to writing tasks and responses to instruction. They suggest that different students engage in different writing processes, not one uniform writing process (287). But too often this process appears in a teacher's lesson plan as: Monday we all prewrite, Tuesday we all draft, Wednesday we all revise and so forth. This lock step approach to writing as a process is a factory-era solution to problems of the new paradigm. What would happen if the teacher handed out the assignment on Monday and conferenced with students until it was completed? One result would be that she would have nothing to write down on her lesson plans. Other more serious problems arise as some students complete their compositions on Tuesday while others are still revising on Friday. Grades and standards, E.D. Hirsch style, are an

American obsession. In a culture conditioned to be competitive, as Hirsch's popular bookstore bestsellers seem to advocate, how could elementary school children compete for honor roll bumper stickers if learning were treated as an organic, natural, inherent ability that needed nurturing instead of competition? While teachers limit and constrict the notion of process to fit the classroom schema, composition theorists call for a much more comprehensive view of the writing process. James Kinneavy, writing in "Process of Writing: A Philosophical Base in Hermeneutics" draws on Martin Heidegger's concept of interpretation to include in the writing process the writer's life experiences, reading, and thinking, all of which take place in a recursive environment. He contends that because "the writing process has been very narrowly conceived" (8) it forsakes invention over organization and style. He also admonishes that "[p]rocess so enthroned and separated from any relation to a final product can be as meaningless as grammar or vocabulary taught in isolation from the actual writing" (8).

This trust in process as a method for producing reliable writing is akin to faith in mass production to produce reliable automobiles. Each produces a generally reliable but soulless result. The factory model of organizing schools is part of the reason teachers teach the way they do. Teachers, enlightened and inspired in summer writing workshops, return to the confinement of compartments and departments, bell schedules and grading standards, relics of the out-dated model. Instead, it would be more conducive to learning and hence more beneficial for the students if we consider the lessons gleaned from

learning research and what it has to say about the importance of process. It is difficult to dress a new concept in an old package and expect fundamental change to occur. This is the problem many writing programs are experiencing today. Yet even within these confines, progress is being made.

Mark Hallenbeck conducted a study that adapted the Cognitive Strategy in Writing (CSIW) program, which had been effectively used with learning disabled elementary students, to an older population of learning disabled students. CSIW embodies three guiding principles: (1) effective writing is seen as a holistic enterprise involving the processes of planning, organizing, writing, editing, and revising; (2) teachers scaffold students' use of specific writing strategies, effectively raising performance with the use of a peer tutor or teacher; and (3) students write for authentic purposes. Although basic writers experience some but not all of the same difficulties in writing as LD writers, they can benefit from the learning strategies supported by learning research and applied to the writing process (Danoff 317). Much of what teachers do to accommodate students with learning disabilities is no more than applying cognitive learning theory to instructional methods.

No discussion of cognitive developmentalists would be complete without the mention of Benjamin Bloom. Best known for the *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, published in 1956, Bloom differs from Piaget and Vygotsky in that his taxonomy adds another dimension to cognition—the

pedagogical dimension of student behavior coupled with teacher goals. Just as biology classifies plants and animals according to their natural relationships, so Bloom ordered the levels of thinking in a way consistent with the cognitive theories so that the order would reveal relationships among the levels (20). In Bloom's hierarchy, the objectives and behaviors of one class build on the preceding classes. Bloom's taxonomy contains six classes: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These categories fit nicely into an invention strategy for writers. The knowledge and comprehension levels require the gathering and understanding of information. Application and analysis make use of the newly acquired information. And the evaluation level prods the writer to come to some conclusions. Writing in this sense holds an epistemological function. Writing helps the writer define and understand concepts in a continual flow of thinking, writing, and processing what has been written. This model is very different from the "brain as computer model" favored in recent discussions.

Jerome Bruner, in his most recent book, *Acts of Meaning*, traces the cognitive revolution from its beginnings to its present-day preoccupation with computers. As the book jacket asserts, Bruner argues that the cognitive revolution has been diverted into technical issues that are not central to understanding the mind as a creator of meanings and instead obsesses about the mind as information processor. This thesis is the basis for Bruner's "Cultural Psychology" theory.

Central to the support of this issue is the chapter “Autobiography and Self” where Bruner explores the cultural nature of knowledge acquisition in a way reminiscent of Piaget’s social transmission. In both theories, cognition has a social element often ignored in current traditional classrooms. Applied to writing instruction, it may take form as collaborative groups, talking as a form of invention, or at the minimum, class discussion somewhere during the writing process. The social element plays a positive and necessary role in cognition.

In *Toward a Theory of Instruction* Bruner also notes that intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards motivate learning (114). He explains that extrinsic rewards more likely inhibit a learner’s innate curiosity to learn (128). However, when students write for authentic purposes, are allowed to take ownership over the content, and have a hand in developing the thesis, the intrinsic rewards begin to take effect and help the student grow beyond the extrinsic motivation of receiving a grade.

Of the four intrinsic motives for learning—curiosity, drive to achieve competence, aspiration to emulate, and commitment to the web of social reciprocity—it is the latter that has the most to offer the learning process. As social beings, having compulsive cravings to engage with others, humans learn best in groups where intelligence shapes interaction with others as group members justify reasons, resolve differences, actively listen to another person’s point of view, achieve consensus, and receive feed-back. Bruner also warns that social reciprocity “requires recognition of one critically important matter:

you cannot have both reciprocity and demand that everybody learn the same thing or be completely well-rounded in the same way.” (127).

These findings, based on learning theory, seem to suggest an expanded approach to composition instruction is needed, one that takes into consideration the unique requirements of each learner’s writing process. Cognitive developmental theory posits that social interaction proves a necessary component in cognition, and recent findings in brain research suggest also that an integrating art, music, literature, and personal context enables the brain to function optimally as an integrator of information.

Recent brain research shows that our brains are shaped at the biochemical level by what we learn, and how we learn helps educational psychologists plan learning strategies for learning disabled students. These physiological principles of brain growth and their implications for learning are outlined by Rita Smilkstein in “Acquiring Knowledge and Using It.” She explains that new brain structures grow during learning and that they grow precisely and exclusively for what is practiced (17). Applied to composition these implications explain why grammar skill drills do not necessarily transfer to a writer’s composing process. Asking a student to identify errors in another’s writing requires completely different structures from those necessary for generating a grammatically correct sentence or recognizing errors in one’s own writing. Applied to the modes of writing this would indicate that skills learned for narrative/descriptive compositions, for example, offer little help when the student writes in persuasive modes, and it accounts for

the teacher's perception that students have "unlearned" their ability to write over the summer. If one goal of a writing program is to develop competent academic writers, teachers must prepare students specifically for that mode. The ideal writing program delves into many modes, each one presented with its own set of conventions.

A second principle of brain growth applicable to instruction is that "each person has her own unique pattern of brain structures" and "new brain structures grow off old ones" (Smilkstein 43). Relating a new concept to prior knowledge or personal experience will facilitate learning. How we learn programs us to some extent to become unique types of learners.

For example, the standard practice of applying red ink on grammar errors does nothing to address students' needs to identify their own errors. The result is a more correct product, but the students' cognition has not been affected. Teachers are dismayed at the number of times they can identify, for example, a spelling error of t-h-e-r-e offered in place of t-h-e-i-r only to find it again on subsequent compositions. The students repeat such errors because they do not understand the conceptual difference between "their" and "there" and need specific instruction in that area or they are not at the cognitive stage of development to comprehend the difference and no amount of instruction or red ink will make a difference.

This second principle when applied to error analysis also suggests that students need to make their own abstract rules of grammar concrete before applying them to their

own writing. If the concept is not learned, it cannot be applied. Translating these concepts to the classroom, we find that teachers become very efficient at spotting errors while students continue to make errors until they internalize the concept that addresses the particular problem. When this epiphany finally does occur it has more to do with the students' readiness to learn and less to do with the teacher's efforts than we would like to think.

If in fact writing is a natural, intrinsic ability, why is it that so many students are having difficulty? Is it because, as these theories imply, learning has been presented out of its natural sequence? Has our educational system in some way disturbed the natural sequence of learning and replaced it with an artificial sense of what writing is? In our efforts to make writing a systematic, fill in the blank, worksheet guide for students to follow as they practice for yet another state standardized test, have we rendered artificial what research claims is innate? Conrad F. Toepfer, writing in "Brain Growth Periodization: Implications for Middle Grades Education" cites studies by Herman Epstein, a prominent biophysicist, that raise serious questions about teachers' efforts to teach concepts for which students are not developmentally ready. This, Toepfer suggests, may be the cause of what he calls "turned-off syndrome" (4). Students who experience frustration may disengage themselves from the learning process, or worse, the out-of-sequence tasks may somehow subvert their cognitive abilities.

Cognitive developmental theory offers a number of theories which will help us answer questions surrounding classroom organization and the creation of effective assignments for students struggling with writing. Before we delve into the “how to” of basic writing instruction, it is necessary to investigate the “who” and the “why.” What are some of the distinguishing characteristics of basic writing? Who are basic writers? Why do their numbers seem to be growing?

CHAPTER II

THE BASIC WRITER PHENOMENON

Who are Basic Writers?

Research and experience tells us that basic writers are a diverse group coming from a diverse background (Troyka 12). They are found at every economic and social level in school districts across America. They are the students Mina Shaughnessy taught us to look at not “as writers that are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence but as beginners [who] must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes” (Shaughnessy 5). In fact, the origin of the term *basic writing* is attributed to Shaughnessy who proposed it as a semantic reform for the confidence destroying remedial and developmental labels.

This expanded image of basic writers reveals a number of often interrelated reasons for under-achievement in writing. Patricia McAlexander, writing in “Mina Shaughnessy in the 1990s: Some Changing Answers in Basic Writing” asserts that this beginner’s relationship to literacy is in part “the effect of our increasingly oral American culture (5).

As technology becomes more and more sophisticated and accessible—the cable networks, VCRs, cellular phones, video games, and multi-media computers—students are even more likely to hear rather than to see language; and the written language they do

read (in ads or newspapers) is often close to being a transcription of oral dialect. Often the most challenging text a student reads regularly is on the level of *TV Guide*.

The effects of oral influences cannot be overestimated. “Our children spend more time watching television than they do attending school” (Considine 48), and while the influence of television on reading and writing skills has only been minimally researched, it stands to reason that the more television watching one does, the less time is spent reading. Over the years, the cumulative effects are devastating. Students who are poor readers remain poor readers. If students spend more time reading than watching television, their vocabulary and general knowledge develop at a faster rate. Further, their reading comprehension skills grow accordingly. Lynn Troyka, in her article “Defining Basic Writing in Context” asserts strongly the need to teach writing through reading. She states, “Unless basic writers read widely, they will never learn to make reading from their writing” (13).

Two negative effects of prolonged television viewing include “passivity . . . one does not have to do anything other than watch and listen” and exposure to unfortunate examples of social interaction (Michael F. Shaughnessy 3). In 1989 the Nielson survey reported that most people watch television 7.2 hours per day, their sets tuned primarily to sitcoms (Considine 48). Of these sitcoms, Michael Shaughnessy commented that the “social interaction between most characters is shallow, inane and non-intimate. People are portrayed in extremes—either as fully competent individuals who manage all of their difficulties with ease, or as incompetent idiots who muddle through life beset by a

plethora of problems” (3). Both effects of prolonged television viewing are detrimental to effective communication.

Related to the accessibility of technology is the choice that some underachieving writers make: simply not to write. Because of advances in technology, students find that they can “get by” with a lower level of literacy. Icons guide many operations that previously required text only data. Audio commands are the next wave in computer operation and voice-to-text programs are already on the market. Little wonder that popular science fiction, such as *Star Trek*, depicts the manual act of writing as obsolete. Future communication will relegate the laborious and tedious act of inscribing by hand—as with all other menial tasks—to computers.

As a basic writing instructor at a medium size university in Texas, I found a substantial number of students entering the basic writing program after leaving short yet apparently successful careers in the military or health care professions. Even students entering directly from high school found for the most part that they could “get by” with minimal writing competency. They did not view their parents as writing role models or see a need for writing competence. Having chosen a minimal level of literacy as the path of least resistance up to a certain point in their careers, they found that ambition for promotion sparked a renewed interest in writing. As entry level workers, they found they could not advance readily without a relatively high degree of writing proficiency. Low SAT scores or failing grades on the entrance writing competency exam then forced them into the introductory level course.

To the growing number of basic writers add the increased numbers of students identified as having biochemical irregularities (hyperactivity, hypoactivity, attention deficit) and students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Through effective use of medication and new information and learning strategies, many of these students are successfully mainstreamed yet still require special consideration. Functioning with dyslexia, for example, is a matter of finding what works. Colored paper, larger print, flexible due dates, and use of tape recorders in the composing process are all strategies students have used in the classroom to facilitate writing.

How to Identify a Basic Writer

When called upon to do so, teachers of composition can, with a confident degree of certainty and accuracy, identify a basic writer. But what exactly do basic writers do with language that compels their placement in a special program? Mina Shaughnessy helped us understand that the writing of basic writers is not simply garbled syntax or full of ‘accidental’ errors. Rather, their writing strategies often reflect misguided attempts at what they believe academic discourse to be, as they desperately seek to view themselves as members of the academic community. Yet, the oral culture that formed their communication skills precludes even a passing familiarity with the printed word, not to mention mastery of those hard-to-define conventions of academic discourse, conventions that by their very nature are learned through use. A frame of reference is simply not in place. This absence of meaningful reading and writing experiences places basic writers at a dire disadvantage. Mindful of the causes and contributions to this multi-layered

phenomenon, we can use a descriptive prose style analysis of the writings of a diverse group of basic writing students to determine characteristic problems. What do basic writers do that results in the label of basic?

One easily recognizable feature of basic writers is their inability to manage a lengthy sentence, something skilled writers do easily. We can measure this ability by what is called T-units or terminal units, a descriptor coined by Kellogg W. Hunt. The T-unit measures a writer's syntactic maturity; that is, it measures the ability to write sentences with sophisticated levels of thought (94). As one might expect, the sentences of basic writers fall appreciably short of the classroom average due in part to the writer's inability to subordinate meaning within a sentence. The basic writer's inability to order events in a hierarchy limits sentence formations to simple subject /verb or subject/verb/object constructions. When basic writers do venture beyond the simple sentence constructions, sentences begin to break down into run-ons or comma splices, or we see an increase in fragments.

That basic writing is unelaborated or not satisfactorily developed is undisputed. Why this occurs despite hours of drills and attention brought specifically to this problem is less so. Some answers certainly depend on our understanding the game plan of the writer. Elaboration beyond an adjective or adverb often proves too structurally complex for the basic writer to manage. Many times teachers see lack of elaboration as an expression of laziness and while this may be true for some on-level writers, for the basic writer it is not. Elaboration can just be too tough to manage. Sentences break down and

meaning gets lost. In an effort to retain meaning and complete the assignment, basic writers will opt for simple constructions with little elaboration. Further, organizing several sentences on the same topic can be overwhelming if the basic writer relies solely on memory. Viewing prewriting as redundant and unnecessary, basic writers do not employ it effectively.

For any inexperienced writer, the complex construction of a periodic sentence can be difficult since it requires remembering and relating a variety of elements before committing them to paper. Similarly, embedding a group of subordinated ideas can be daunting. Sentences beginning with because or since often result in incomplete thoughts instead of the embedded ideas originally planned. The ability to manage such constructions is not innate; it must be learned and practiced until it becomes easier and take less conscious effort. As a result, basic writers rely on a variety of strategies they have learned to get the job done. Yet some teachers, seeing what they believe to be brick walls in development, dismiss basic writers as cognitively inferior. Based on his error analysis research, David Bartholomae describes basic writing as “a variety of writing and not writing with fewer parts or more rudimentary constituents” (253). Using a linguistic technique devised to study second language acquisition and theory of error, Bartholomae explores the basic writer’s sequence of development and suggests that the unconventional features in basic writing are evidence of intent and that the writer’s choices are systematic strategies. Often these choices rely on the familiar oral rules of communication.

A dependence on oral structures may also explain the proliferation of fragments and run-ons. One feature of explicit text is that the grammatical subject is usually a precise entity, often expressed by a single word (Flower 31). By contrast basic writers refer to complex events or abstract notions as subjects and trail predicates after it. The result can be either a series of fragments or a run-on sentence. For example:

I decided I wanted to be a coach when I was in the ninth grade. After I realized that my talents and hard work could get me a degree. I want to be just like them. To be able to work with athletes. Maybe go to state.

These sentences are in error in part because they fail to establish the grammatical relationship between the predicate and the subject. The trailing fragments address the topic instead of the subject as we would expect. In basic writing they are persistent because the writer intends the predicate fragments to modify the abstract (larger) topic, not the subject of the immediate sentence to which the fragment is closest. This is a verbal trick easily managed in speech, but unsuccessful when carried over to writing where readers rely on structural expectations. Instead of employing structures with which they are unfamiliar, basic writers make stylistic decisions based on familiar oral structures because they lack experience with formal writing. Understanding how these choices manifest themselves as elements of style can help teachers when explaining the difference between oral and written conventions. Writing is not, after all, speech written down.

“Clear writing does not simply express thoughts but transforms them in complex ways for the needs of the readers. Part of the ineffectiveness of basic writers lies in their attempts to communicate by offering an under-processed version of their own thoughts” (Flower 27). Basic writers, working from an oral strategy, fail to transform thoughts into public discourse, a phenomenon Linda Flower terms “Writer-Based” prose. Structurally, writer-based prose reflects the associative, narrative path of the writer’s own confrontations with the subject (21-22). It is fundamentally egocentric (25). As both a style of writing and a style of thought, writer-based prose is natural and logical for writers writing to themselves . The trouble comes when an audience is introduced. When the reader must do most of the inferring by drawing ideas out of a collection of details, the reader’s task becomes more difficult.

As Flower explains it, under-processed egocentric sentences force the reader to fill in the blanks. Other researchers see egocentrism as an inability to move from Piaget’s concrete-operational stage to the abstract. Andrea Lunsford observes that basic writers have not attained the ability to assimilate information and arrive at abstract concepts from learning. For example, in a composition entitled “Television Today” a basic writer’s response would most likely focus on the writer’s own television (concrete) and personal viewing habits, seldom venturing to address the abstract concepts of influence or commercialism. Lunsford points out that Vygotsky distinguishes “between ‘spontaneous’ concepts, those which are formed as a result of ordinary day-to-day experiences, and ‘scientific’ concepts, which are formed largely in conjunction with instruction” (450).

Lunsford believes basic writers are “able to formulate spontaneous concepts, but not able to remove themselves from such concepts, to abstract from them, or to define them into the scientific concepts necessary for successful college work” (450). She also supports her conclusion with the work of Jean Piaget and Lee Odell. Both have studied child development noting that very young children first comprehend only the concrete. As children mature, they move towards “the de-centering process” (450). Odell calls this “getting outside one’s own framework of reference, understanding the thoughts, values, feelings of another person . . . projecting oneself into unfamiliar circumstances.” Further, the work of both Piaget and Vygotsky strongly indicates that cognitive development moves from “doing” to “conscious doing,” and only then to formal conceptualization (450). Ultimately, Lunsford believes that most basic writers “are operating well below the . . . true-concept formation stage of cognitive development, and hence they have great difficulty in ‘de-centering’ and performing tasks which require analysis and synthesis” (452).

Composition literature reveals conflicting views of the capabilities of basic writers. One view asserts that they are cognitively under-developed or intellectually inferior. Teachers with this view believe basic writing instruction should focus on sentence level grammar drill and simple writing tasks because challenging writing tasks might cognitively overload these students, frustrating them and preventing them from learning.

Another view asserts these students have the capacity to write well in response to challenging tasks but have not had the opportunity to acquire the skills and fluency needed to do so. In a study investigating the sentence-writing capabilities of basic writers, researchers compared the sentences composed in response to both simple and challenging writing tasks. They found basic writers wrote more complex and more mature sentences in response to the more challenging task (Smilkstein 1995). This study suggests that instead of simplifying assignments, teachers need to present authentic writing experiences that present higher level challenges.

Wide-ranging research in cognitive styles, learning modalities, learning styles, cultural differences, language differences and communication styles across cultures, and, more recently, multiple intelligences has focused on how different people perceive, transform, and convey concepts. Understanding tendencies in learning styles and the writing process and focusing attention on the individual learner should result in productive teaching strategies. In general, as Bartholomae and Shaughnessy suggest, the errors basic writers make should be viewed as decisions made to get the job done. The role of the teacher, then, is to help the basic writer make better decisions and build the bridge from the subjective to the objective and the concrete to the abstract—in short to act as a facilitator, coach, and collaborator.

CHAPTER III

RATIONALE FOR THE COURSE

Philosophy

This course presumes that all students are capable of learning and succeeding. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to maintain high expectations and intellectual standards which will challenge students to achieve their fullest potential. These instructional methods emphasize four cognitive abilities: thinking independently, reading critically, writing clearly, and solving problems logically. While the cognitive development of each student is necessary for success, students' emotional needs cannot be ignored in a balanced education. Affective awareness of the worth of each student as an individual, then, becomes equally important.

An integrated approach to basic writing instruction assumes that basic writers are not cognitively inferior to their mainstream counterparts; rather they are, for a variety of reasons, novice writers who bring to the classroom unique learning experiences shaped by their predominantly oral and visual culture. Instructional methods can be used to engage these oral and visual competencies as springboards to better writing.

Portfolios as a Means of Assessment

Traditional methods of evaluating students' writing (in particular, the timed essay) are designed to measure a specific facet of writing ability—how well students can write on an assigned topic under timed conditions. They are not designed to capture the range

and depth of the writing process. Using the writing that students produce as they engage in the class establishes an immediate connection between the assessment and the writing process curriculum. One way of establishing a stronger connection between assessment methods and writing as a process is to use writing portfolios.

While the ways students create portfolios differ from classroom to classroom, they usually share key characteristics. During the school year, as part of a class assignment, students collect their written work in folders. At specific points in the semester, they review their work by engaging in a process of reflection and description and then select items to include in the portfolio (Education Commission). The reflection and selection stages are guided by a set of criteria developed by teachers and/or students. These criteria focus on the depth of student writing (writing that demonstrates the use of process strategies and writing that shows growth over time) and on the breadth of student writing (writing that illustrates the range of activities in which students engage).

A central element of these portfolios is the letters or statements students write explaining their selections and how their choices meet the selected criteria. This process of reviewing and evaluating one's own writing and then articulating one's decision is considered central to the portfolio experience because it fosters students' development as writers (Education Commission). The classroom teacher assists students throughout this process and also evaluates the portfolios. Other students, friends, and family read and comment on students' portfolios. Students may collect portfolios for part of the year, the whole year, or over their entire academic careers, for one class or all classes.

Collaboration and Evaluation

When classroom activities are performed collaboratively, one student's confusion can be masked easily if the group as a whole solves the problem or produces a credible product. To ensure that each student is understanding and participating in a group project, teachers need to monitor and document each student's performance. Teachers can keep track of student progress through periodic interaction with individual students, and through portfolio inspections. Interactions can be in the form of question and answer sessions, observations, or formal written responses.

Why Integrate Visual Strategies into Writing Instruction?

The use of visuals in instruction is not to deny the power of language. Language is our most sophisticated form of communication and the betterment of written expression is, after all, the *métier* of English teachers. However, visuals in combination with the written word, explode meaning and multiply understanding. Language is, after all, based on abstract concepts reflected in categories of words and phrases such as nouns and verbs or phrases and clauses. Pictures can be thought of as metaphors in much the same way as words are symbols of ideas. Visual material is today an integral part of instruction as a way of knowing and as a way of understanding concepts.

Considerable evidence shows that representational pictures that are integrally related to the target content facilitate learning. This is especially true in the case of school age children (Levin, J.R. "Pictorial" 123). Pictures use prior experience or knowledge to help the learner interpret new information by connecting old information to new (or

example shapes as extensions of other shapes). They are also decorative and so capture students' attention; they aid interpretation, and they enhance concepts by transforming them to more mnemonically powerful forms. (J.R. Levin, Perspective 10).

This research also has support from biology. Educational psychologists claim that knowledge is remembered in webs of interconnected pieces of information referred to as schemata. These schemata reflect the ways that learning promotes the growth of new structures in the brain. New dendrites and synapses construct increasingly elaborate neural networks (Smilkstein, Acquiring 18). The more connections that are made in a web, the more readily the information it contains may be recalled from memory. Learning through visual imagery enables the growth of a higher number of these networks, facilitating connections that enable the learner to relate the new information to prior experiences faster and more accurately (Glover 16).

The use of visuals in instruction does not have to be expensive or require high tech, sophisticated computer graphics to be beneficial. Levin used simple pictures and graphic sources such as pie charts and bar graphs. Nevertheless, this research does support the move toward multimedia in the classroom. David M. Considine and Gail E. Haley have significantly expanded the concept of visuals, incorporating a wide variety of multi-media sources, advertising, political ads, cartoons, and movies. Although they focus on media literacy, their aim is still similar to that of composition teachers: "If we are to provide students with communication skills for today and tomorrow we must help

them to comprehend and communicate through both traditional and emerging technologies of communication” (12).

This ability to secure meaning from a wide range of forms takes language beyond its literal use. According to Considine “central to media education is recognizing and helping students understand that media mediate, which means the media do much more than record reality and reflect it” (12). Media, including film, television, advertising, and the news, create representations of reality. Objectives in media literacy direct the student to be able to analyze and evaluate media messages, to recognize the way form and style affect content and influence audience, and to examine sources in an attempt to understand where messages come from and how the source might affect the message (13). These objectives have immediate application to the student’s life, application that makes learning authentic and relevant. The competencies gained have positive effects on the cognitive processes needed in concept formation.

Visual literacy, as defined by Considine, is “the ability to comprehend and create information that is carried and conveyed through imagery (14). He cites Robert McKim’s landmark book *Experiences in Visual Thinking* in listing advantages in education that develop thinking skills through visualization: It vitalizes sensory and imaginative abilities often ignored by traditional education. It provides vehicles that are often more suitable to the thinkers’ needs than are language symbols. It encourages flexibility in thinking. It encourages the thinker to utilize operations that are not within the realm of language thinking (15).

Deeply rooted in constructivist theory, David Hyerle offers yet another insight into the use of what he refers to as “visual tools.” These tools include but are not restricted to brainstorming webs, task-specific organizers, thinking-process maps, and a common visual language. For the student they offer a nonlinear, student-centered, developmental, interactive approach to learning and serve as a vital technology link. Visual tools acknowledge different ways of knowing, make classrooms inclusive instead of exclusive, and make teaching, learning, and assessing available to all members of the class (4).

Verbalizing and writing out ideas are only one way of representing thinking, and often this is a thin, linear veneer of students’ thinking about content. With visual tools, students begin to visually integrate their own holistic forms with the tightly wound structures of information and thus interpret text. They begin to identify and they integrate their forms with the text as they naturally link information. Visual brainstorming webs, task specific organizers, and thinking-process maps thus provide a bridge between their own forms and the structures that are embodied in the text but hidden in the guise of linear strings of words (15).

Building on basic writers’ tendency toward the visual, Hope Parisi uses drawing as a metacognitive intervention that enables students not only to understand composing in the abstract but to appreciate their important roles in managing its complexities. Students are asked to diagram their processes and, in doing so, turn their attention to the moments in between writing tasks in which they planned, questioned, and self-evaluated. The effect is to get students to realize themselves as writers handling complex tasks competently and confidently.

The close association of art therapy and the teaching of writing is discussed in “Art Therapy: What Does it Have to Say to Writing Teachers?” In this essay Anne Whitney parallels the writing process with the process of making art. Both are a process of self discovery and consciousness, whether in a writing classroom or in the art classroom. She maintains that “art and writing are a means to access material hidden deep within us. It can be a source of understanding. It can be motivating and powerful” (1).

From a motivational viewpoint, visuals seem natural. We live in a visual culture. From the television screen to the computer screen to the icon-driven McDonald’s cash register, pictures are replacing words at a rapid rate. Pictures are also a means of evoking emotion and personal connections (keys to cognition). As various as the needs of basic writers are, the use of visuals in teaching writing captures their attention, inspires creativity, and fosters a clarity of perception.

Oral Strategies in the Classroom

Based on the discussion in chapter one on Piaget’s tenets of learning, Vygotsky’s learning spiral, and Bruner’s motives of learning, a case could be made for introducing talk at every stage of the writing process. These three cognitive developmentalists agree that social interaction proves vital in the construction of meaning. A majority of basic writers prove to be extroverts on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Jensen 288-89) which means that as learners they will process information best from outside themselves, orally. And as further proof for the necessity of integrating oral strategies, a prose analysis of basic writers reminds us that familiar oral structures form the basis of written expression

for many basic writers. Harnessing the strength of their oral abilities to improve their writing skills is an effective approach for some learners.

Pamela Dykstra, instructor of Developmental English at South Suburban College in South Holland, Illinois includes oral methodologies “not only because it is a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar, but because it is a framework for presenting the structures of writing” (48). In using both oral and written communication, students learn that both are valuable, but different. By examining the nature of oral language (which may be perceived as non-threatening), Dykstra is then able to branch out to written language to compare genres and forms.

Recording rough drafts and then transcribing them is a technique James Deem uses to illustrate the differences between speech and writing and suggest specific areas for revision, i.e., word choice, word variety, more explicit references. Students can also see how oral errors creep into writing. When his students transcribed recordings of their compositions, Deem found that their listening comprehension and consequently their writing improved (361). One technique he uses is to have students first record a monologue into the recorder and then play it back, transcribing it word for word. While he acknowledges that the students were still not truly authoring a piece of writing as much as reproducing speech, progress had been made in being able to write what they heard. He claims this is a necessary initial step in a writer’s development (362). This technique could be especially helpful for students having trouble getting started or for students with low fluency skills.

Many studies have investigated the use of tape recorders in aiding basic writers. Positive results have spurred a great deal of interest and experimentation. In my own secondary classroom I have stumbled onto the use of videotaping as a means of sending writers back into their drafts to make revisions. One Friday when students were to present their compositions to the class, half of the students were unexpectedly called to the cafeteria for career testing. Because they were disappointed that they would miss the reading, I tried to compensate by promising to tape the readings of the handful of students that remained in class that day. On the following Monday, while we viewed the tape, another unexpected thing happened. The authors transformed themselves into an objective audience of critics. Back to their writing folders they went to rework those subtle nuances of diction and syntax that they detected when viewing the videotape. Certain kinds of revision the writers made were very sophisticated: words changed to enhance alliteration, punctuation added to aid the flow, points elaborated to clarify meaning, and word order changed for a more poetic sound.

These new insights into revision were obvious to the writers because of a shift in perspective; they moved from writers to audience. As Donald Murray states in *Writers Inc.*, “the first task of revision is vision. The writer must stand back from the work the way any craftsman does to see what has been done” (14). The video camera allowed the students the opportunity to “stand back.” This new perspective also emphasized the importance of simplifying the task. When a writer reads her manuscript to an audience, she is in part involved in performing, in part involved in the mechanics of reading, while

also keeping a critical ear tuned to revision. What my students found out that day was that it is easier and perhaps more effective to do one thing at a time.

Even if teachers are not so fortunate as to have the time and equipment to videotape, they can still use oral learning opportunities in the classroom. These can be as low technology as regular use of group work, conferences, peer tutoring, and teacher modeling. These collaborative (and oral) activities are well served by what Vygotsky calls Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD). “The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 86). An intellectual “hand up” can be exactly what a learner needs to make it to the next level.

CHAPTER IV

PROCEDURES, APPLICATIONS, AND ASSIGNMENTS

Fluency

Part of what basic writers lack is a rich background of varied reading and writing experiences. In the opening weeks of the class, the students will write for many purposes and in many modes with the over-riding goal of becoming fluent (able to transform ideas into writing). Watching students as they write can perhaps tell more about them as writers than reading the rough drafts of a diagnostic essay. Such observations can reveal the following: How fluent are they at getting their thoughts arranged on paper? Do they use prewriting, and how comfortable do they seem while engaged in the act of writing? When students are having trouble getting their ideas down on paper, it is very difficult to improve in other areas. Fluency is the first goal of the writing class.

Helping students become fluent involves knocking down barriers to writing by creating an environment that invites writing, is accepting of cultural diversity, and allows students to take risks. Offering feedback with positive solutions to problems in the writing helps students feel less inhibited and more encouraged to be themselves. Timed writing, trigger words, and student interviews are quick techniques to get the juices flowing. Throughout the course teachers can challenge the students with a series of enjoyable, intense, writing exercises that last from one to five minutes. For example, timed writing: “For the next sixty seconds write as much as you can as fast as you can, on

the topic of ____.” At the end of the minute students count the number of words and try to increase their score in the next round. This game-like activity draws upon the natural competitiveness of adolescents while also allowing them to measure the increased fluency of their writing. The more they engage in these short bursts of writing, the easier it becomes to get words on paper.

In order for students to successfully write for the academic community, first they need to realize their own voice. In this fluency phase I strive for two outcomes: 1) the student learns to put the thoughts flowing from the brain onto paper as quickly as possible, and 2) the student places content before mechanics, punctuation and spelling at this point in the process.

Metacognition

After fluency is attained writers are then better able to develop a metacognitive understanding of their writing processes. As writers we will talk and write about writing. A written statement such as the following which introduces the student to the goals and methods of the course can form the basis of this dialogue, and, this dialogue, started early in the course, becomes a touchstone throughout the year. Basic writers need to recognize their own substantial change and growth as writers and they need to see themselves as writers. In this course they will learn the words and concepts to record their observations about their own development. Prewriting, writing, postwriting, editing, and publishing are common to all writers, yet they look different for different writers. It is important for writers to understand their own processes.

Student's Introduction to the Course:

“An Integrated Approach to Basic Writing” is a course meant to help you learn to use the English language to create the kinds of written and oral communications that will serve whatever situation you may encounter. The course emphasizes the idea that you have many voices; that is, you have many different ways to express yourself. In this course you can expect to develop those voices. You will also read and hear the voices of others—your classmates and published writers from many places and times—and you will have the opportunity to encounter writing in many different forms. You will read and hear the words of film makers, journalists, and other media specialists. Using your own work and other people’s work as a basis for asking and answering questions, you will explore what motivates and influences writers and speakers, yourself included. You will explore the message and the medium people choose for communicating.

In this course you will use the process approach to writing as a way of becoming an effective communicator. You will write major texts over extended periods of time, and engage in a range of interrelated activities at every stage of the writing process. As part of this process you will consult with peers, teachers, and parents. The aim of these methods is to enable you to produce richer, more developed pieces of writing.

Expect to be a thinking, active learner. While you will be a thinking reader, writer, speaker, and listener, you will also be a questioner, a recorder of your own reactions, and a speculator. You will investigate other people’s ideas, the background of a novel, the meaning that develops when a dramatic scene is acted out. You may have a variety of

responsibilities as you work independently and in small groups, and you will become experienced in evaluating your own work and that of your classmates.

Assessment (evaluation) in this course is meant to help you learn at the same time that you are developing a record of your learning. Think of assessment as a broad concept, including more than just quizzes and tests. You will look at your work as evidence of your learning, and you will have occasions to present your evidence.

Journals

Often journals are used at the beginning of a course as a place for writers to practice fluency. But as students' needs change, the purpose of the journal must change to meet those needs. Journals, in this course, can be used 1) to process new concepts and to serve as "a place to exercise intellectual independence away from the class" (Romano 13). 2) to record personal responses to the readings, and 3) to debrief, review, or simply blow off steam. The purposeful use of journals offers students an arena for saying things in a unique and powerful way. When students feel safe to use language freely, they often use the journal as a seed bed for new words, personas, or half-formed ideas. Further, it provides students with a written record of their intellectual development through the year.

Writing Groups and the Social Element

Writing groups benefit instruction and alter the traditional classroom environment by placing students at the center. Peer interaction in class as well as planned interchanges with life outside the classroom help make concepts concrete. Rather than expecting each student to do what every other student does, in collaborative environments students work

together synergistically. Relationships, teamwork, cooperation, and partnerships replace isolated, competitive work: the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. But students do not arrive on the first day of class with the sophisticated skills required for successful collaboration. Along with the skills involved in writing, these skills must be taught, often times at the most fundamental level. Having the opportunity to cooperate does not guarantee that students will know the procedures and have the skills required for doing so. Instructing students in how to be effective leaders, communicate clearly, trust, make team decisions, and resolve conflicts becomes part of the daily objectives.

Basic writing students are often short changed when teachers believe that these students have nothing to offer each other in the way of writing communities. They do and they must. Peter Elbow expounds on the importance of writing groups and asserts that writing is not just getting things down on paper; it is getting things inside someone else's head (76). For that function alone writing groups are important because the other students in a writer's group act as a willing audience for the writer. Also, groups increase the amount of attention each writer's work receives. Given the amount of writing the students will be generating, the teacher alone might be able to read it all but cannot possibly respond to it all thoughtfully. Emerging writers, then, get much more feedback by working in groups than if the teacher alone saw their work. Collaboration is an important skill needed not only for the success of writing groups but for the twenty-first century as well. It is a necessary component of this course and lessons specifically addressed to these objectives will be taught.

Error Identification

Teachers help students most when they help them get their meaning down and then help them re-enter the writing to reformulate, revise, and correct it. As hard as it is to resist the temptation to “red pen” errors, students benefit most from identifying their own errors. It has been my experience that when I start making those kinds of corrections for them, they stop thinking critically about their writing and go on to think that text not marked must be correct. Teachers fall into the trap of believing that, if they do not point out every error they are not doing their job. Rather than taking over for the student as editor, teachers can make students responsible for finding their own grammar errors—a more student-active method.

Almost always, a few students are not ready to grasp certain grammatical concepts, and in these cases pointing them out only serves a cosmetic purpose, or worse, detracts from meaning and divorces the student from the writing. How much time is spent on error identification really depends on the readiness of the writer. Therefore, grammar in this course will be addressed in a series of mini-lessons, ten to fifteen minutes in length, moving from the concrete use (or misuse) to the abstract “rule.” After the lesson students are sent back to their own writing to identify and correct errors.

Writing Conferences and Writing Time

Because room for improvement is great and expectations (both from the teacher and the student) are high, students need as much individual attention as possible. Conference time becomes a weekly routine. Students sign up for conferences during

designated writing times. Limiting them to one question keeps the conference brief and to the point, and it forces the writer to focus on one aspect of the work. If students need more help, they place their names at the bottom of the list. In-class conferences allow the instructor to be available when writers most need direction: while work is in progress. Close involvement in the early drafts keeps students on track and the teacher involved in the critical early stages.

Implementation

Rather than offering a static semester course outline, it seems more productive to show how this approach works using specific units and lessons to demonstrate how an integrated approach to basic writing instruction applies in structuring a unit or a particular lesson. Teachers can then use this approach to create their own units and individual lessons, adjusting for their own preferences and the needs of a particular class of students.

Unit: The Holocaust

A unit on the Holocaust can be covered in as little as three weeks or can last as long as a semester, depending on the instructor's motivation and the students' interest. For most basic writing classes, however, thematic units spanning beyond six weeks are not recommended. Furthermore, if a long unit is planned, include mental breaks away from the material, as this grave subject matter can have a depressing effect on classroom climate. The vast store of literature, resources, and writing opportunities makes this subject nearly inexhaustible, but consideration must be given to balancing the richness of the topic with the stress of its emotional impact.

The nature of the subject lends itself to reflection, debate, reverence, and investigation. It is also a wonderful way to tap into the affective domain and teach social tolerance at the same time. Prejudice, hate crimes, and genocide are grand issues that affect students on a personal level. These issues receive national media attention and have become a focus of the youth culture. Students immediately identify with the compelling subject matter and feel from the beginning that they can make contributions to class discussion, if only at first by way of opinions or comments.

Beyond emotional responses, chances are that students have basic knowledge about Hitler, the Nazis, concentration camps, and specifically about various atrocities suffered by the Jews. Working from this base of knowledge is the first place to start. To begin the unit, teachers might first ask the class to write down facts about the Holocaust. This is also a good time to encourage students to bring in related information about World War II, including the role of the United States, or personal stories from family members. Next, a class discussion can follow up allowing students to share their understanding about the Holocaust and read aloud selected portions of their writing. Inviting students to make comments about the readings helps to foster an atmosphere of respect for writing and for the knowledge that the students bring to the classroom. As peers show respect for each other's ideas, writers will individually gain confidence and start believing that what they think and write will be taken seriously. Further, when students write about ideas they deem personally important, they will work harder to be more precise with their language and will pay more attention to revision. Creating an

atmosphere of respect for individual ideas encourages students to write, because it is through writing that they can find the place and time to craft their thoughts.

After finding out what the class knows about the Holocaust, the next step is to ask them to write down what they want to learn. This gives them a direction and makes apparent to them the gaps in their knowledge. Asking students what it is they want to know is also a way to empower them. The implication is that during this unit they will have some control over what they learn. But control also implies responsibility. Making students responsible for what they learn must be built into the curriculum in small steps like this. It cannot be mandated from the lectern.

After the class has determined what they know and what they want to know, they are asked to brainstorm to develop a definition for the Holocaust. Every contribution is listed on the board. The list is pared down and a statement is written. Next, have students consult authoritative texts and compare them to the working definition. Revise, edit, and finally come to a consensus on a class definition. A typical class definition will look something like this:

Holocaust: The systematic extermination due to intolerance of six million Jews in Europe, from 1933 to 1945, by the Nazi Party, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler.

Such activities allow the class members to become their own models for the collaborative writing process. These controlled measures are important experiences for the students to work through because later they will be asked to function successfully in small group sessions. Skills they witness and participate in as the class struggles with

writing tasks will influence how they perform in small groups. Here the teacher's behavior is extremely important. Thinking out loud to demonstrate the cognitive processes writers go through when making decisions is vital to helping students learn how to write. During this session the teacher validates and extends thoughts, questions, clarifies, and models writing behavior.

A unit on the Holocaust lends itself to an integrated approach. Opportunities for both extensive and reflexive writing present themselves throughout the unit. Factual reports as well personal writings can fit into a weekly routine. Poetry, plays, short stories, newspaper articles, novels, and letters are easily incorporated into the reading material as well. Listening to music by Jewish composers or discussing the role music played at the concentration camps will sharpen the experience for students. Anita Arnold, an English teacher at Jefferson High School in San Antonio, Texas uses *Man's Search for Meaning* in her Holocaust unit. As part of her unit she places small items mentioned in the novel into individual paper sacks and asks the students to write about the significance of each item. A small stone, a twisted piece of wire, a string, a scrap of yellow cloth become tactile reminders of significant events of the survivor's tale. Photographic images on liberation day speak volumes and leave lasting impressions. The more integrating that is done means more cognitive connections are created.

An example in outline form of a complete thematic unit appropriate at the middle school level follows. This has been developed by Beverly J. Handy, a teacher from Cary Middle School in Dallas, Texas. The emphasis is on providing repeated writing

opportunities in three different modes: fictional diary entries, summaries, and personal reactions.

The Holocaust Unit Outline

- I. What do I know—What do I want to know about the Holocaust
followed by class discussion
- II. Letter to parents
- III. Class definition of Holocaust
- IV. Jewish Name
 - A. Using a baby name book, have students select a Jewish name
 1. Hebrew, Slavic, Polish or German names
 - B. Have students write a diary entry explaining the following:
 1. the meaning of their name
 2. the reason their parents gave them their name
- V. Videos and Diary entries
 - A. “Nightmare: The Immigration of Joachim and Rachel”
 1. Reaction Paper #1
 - a. students write a summary of the video followed by their
reaction
 - B. “Daniel’s Story” (video)
 1. Diary Entry # 2

a. Possible Entry:

Dear Diary,

A man named Hitler has taken over Germany and . . .

C. “Forget Me Not “(Video on *The Story of Ann Frank*)

1. Reaction Paper #2

D. Ambulance (video)

1. Diary Entry

a. Possible Entry:

Dear Diary,

My cousin, _____ told me about . . .(have
students use sequencing words)

VI. Class Novels

A. Night (reading level 9th grade and above)

B. Friedrich (reading level 7th and 8th)

C. Twenty and Ten (reading level 4th to 6th)

VII. Paired Reading

A. Allow time for students to read to each other in small groups of two for
15 to 20 minutes three times per week

B. Allow 5 to 10 minutes for students to share their books with the rest of
the class

VIII. Newspaper

- A. Have students write newspaper summaries on racism, prejudice or articles related to the Holocaust
- B. Make newspaper collage on racism, prejudice or articles related to the Holocaust

IX. Us and Them

- A. Allow students to read the stories of their choice from the book
- B. Allow time for students to share what they have read

X. Conclusion / Special Project

A. 10 diary entries

1. Diary Entry #10 - the student (Jewish character) dies. Writer makes the following choices
 - a. ghetto
 - b. concentration camp
 1. starvation
 2. gas chamber
 3. shooting
 4. disease
 5. over-worked
 6. cremation (the ovens)

7. medical experiments

8. buried alive

9. hanged

10. stoned

B. 3 reaction papers (revised, edited, and peer conferenced)

C. “What I learned” paper

This unit works well with students because it asks them to become emotionally involved with the subject, provides creative opportunities, and requires them to be thinking, active partners in learning. The novels are targeted to individual reading levels and students are afforded time to share and interact socially.

Unit Theme: Growing Up

In this high-school-level unit developed by Valerie Taylor from Westlake High School in Austin, Texas, students explore what it means to grow up. Throughout the year the class focuses on various aspects of the experience. During the first segment students might explore what it means to grow up and when and how people grow up. The second segment might consist of an exploration of how growing up usually involves some kind of outcast experience. During the third segment, examining how most people work to find a place to fit as they are growing up is an appropriate focus. During the final segment students can explore the idea that self-improvement plays a role in growing up.

In the first days of the unit focusing on the theme of self-improvement, introduce activities which will help students achieve the following initial objectives:

1. to define self-improvement individually
2. to develop a class definition of self-improvement
3. to identify questions they would like to explore in relation to self-improvement

The Lesson

First, ask the students to write about an experience that involved self-improvement—either something they had tried to improve about themselves or something they had watched others try. After describing that experience, they are ready to be asked to write their own definitions of self-improvement. During the next class ask the students to share their examples and definitions with each other and then to work together to develop a consensus definition for their group. (Before attempting this, work with consensus building skills.) Students share stories of their own attempts at self-improvement and sometimes their parents' or friends attempts. They may become animated as they relate stories of trying to lose weight, control tempers, or procrastinate less and work harder on their grades. This discussion then leads students to reach some consensus in developing their group definition. These group definitions are then used the next class period to arrive at a class definition. The next activity is to read Alice Walker's story "Everyday Use" and consider what the theme of self-improvement has to do with that story. Ask the students to write a response to a character's actions in their response journals.

Follow this activity by having students discuss their definitions again in light of having read “Everyday Use.” (This story is about an African-American family and is told from a mother’s point of view. She and her younger daughter Maggie, who had been disfigured in a fire, live together. An older daughter, Dee, has left home to attend college and is returning to visit. When Dee arrives with her boyfriend Hakeem-a-barber, she informs her mother that she has changed her name to Wangero so that she will no longer be known by a name that was given to her family by their oppressors.)

Divide the class into six groups, ideally with three or four students in each group. Each group is assigned a character and is asked to discuss what happens in the story from that character’s point of view. Two groups discuss the story from Maggie’s point of view, two from Dee’s point of view, and two from Hakeem-a-barber’s point of view. All groups focus on the following question: How did this character see Dee’s attempt at self-improvement? After the groups discuss the story, ask them to share their impressions with the class. Invariably the groups will disagree. The groups who share Maggie’s point of view challenge Dee’s “self-improvement” and claim she did not appreciate her immediate heritage. The groups who share Dee’s and Hakeem’s points of view, however, defend Dee for not allowing herself to remain trapped in a society that had oppressed her people. It may be profitable then to discuss as a class why these characters saw the situation differently and how self-improvement may also affect others. At this point, students can revisit their definitions to see if they would add or delete anything based on this new discussion.

Another day, ask students to share their group definitions with the rest of the class, and write their definitions on the overhead as they read them aloud. As the definitions are shared, students will begin to notice that they have identified some of the same elements, such as determination, and some different ideas, such as whether or not self-improvement is something that has to be accomplished alone.

Teachers might also hand each group a typed copy of the groups' definitions. As they examine these definitions for commonalities and important key words and phrases, they can call them out, and the instructor or a designated student can write them on the board. From those words and phrases, working collaboratively, the students can develop a class definition; however, stress that this is a working definition that may be subject to revision as the class continues the study of self-improvement. Next, in groups, students can look at their own attempts and at the attempts of others to begin developing a list of questions for exploring the self-improvement topic.

Following these introductory days of the unit, students explore the following ideas in their writing portfolios:

- 1) What things would you like to improve about yourself?
- 2) What are three goals you would set for yourself?
- 3) What is a piece of advice someone has given you?
- 4) What is the relationship among attitudes, goals and self-improvement?
- 5) What and who motivates you?

The students also interview a parent or other adult role-model about self-improvement, and in class readings examine characters' attitudes and goals. The study can be continued by reading, responding to, and discussing selections from Emerson and Thoreau, from Faulkner's "The Bear", Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own", and poems by Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Sylvia Plath. Watching, responding to, and discussing films, and writing and sharing poems, short stories, or essays dealing with the theme are also fruitful activities.

These lessons emphasize the skills of formulating questions, refining questions, clarifying ideas, and drawing conclusions. Applied to Bloom's taxonomy, these skills require students to operate on three levels: comprehension—using background knowledge to connect to text, establish a purpose, and recognize cultural elements in relation to self and others; analysis—considering the relevance of setting and the nature of conflict; and evaluation—questioning the credibility of sources. The social element in the lesson requires students to ask clear questions, provide relevant contributions, and address an audience that is appropriate to purpose and task. To accomplish this they have to be active listeners.

Integrating Visual Art

To keep students involved and intellectually stimulated it is important to engage both the creative and the analytical functions of the brain. Visual art serves this purpose. The artists and activities presented here are examples of how art can be integrated into writing instruction.

Frieda Kahlo, a Mexican artist, communicated the story of her life through her self-portraits, depicting individual events and the emotions they invoked. Her life was full of complications, including injuries and hardships which she expressed on canvas. Her work also depicts her love for her husband Diego Rivera and the struggles that the couple encountered. Simultaneously, Mexican culture is pervasive in Kahlo's work. Placed in such an integrated context, Kahlo's work becomes a powerful teaching tool. Upon viewing selected videos on the Kahlo's life, students create their own self-portraits to include various icons. Later they write about the significance of their self-portraits and the hidden meaning behind the icons they have used. Students can also write personal responses to Kahlo's life and work. Poetry can be gleaned from the personal responses as well.

Vincent van Gogh's art encourages students to focus on painted skies and the many moods skies can express. Procedures might include taking the students outside to observe the sky, asking them to name and describe colors and tell how colors are mixed for painting. Have students mix paint for a sky painting of their own that expresses mood or feeling, using the primary hues and black and white tempera paints. View several van Gogh landscapes with students, encouraging discussion of his uses of color, brush strokes, and mood in the skies. Emphasize color. Discuss how the paintings evoke feelings about the skies, and assist students to interpret moods. Writing opportunities include writing about the mood of a particular van Gogh sky, writing about the mood in

student paintings as expressed by color, motion, and so on. Students may write a “Sky Story” or identify sky descriptions in literature as symbolic or mood setting.

Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* is a recognizable painting that students often see incorporated in other contexts. Understanding the original can contribute to interpretation of works that borrow from the past. In a mini-unit based around the *Mona Lisa*, students will first observe the painting closely, describe it, analyze it, and offer interpretations of the meaning of the work. Students then conduct historical inquiries about the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci, and the contexts of its origin in the Renaissance. Since contemporary artists sometimes appropriate well-known artworks from the past, examine as a class contemporary uses and meanings of borrowed images of the *Mona Lisa* in art and popular culture. Finally, students will write a critical response and interpretation of a contemporary work of art that includes the *Mona Lisa* image.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

An increasing number of educators are calling for higher standards and more intellectually challenging learning activities for students. An integrated approach can meet that challenge and provide meaningful learning experiences for all students, especially those labeled basic. Programs that capitalize on the interrelationship of learning will help students to develop higher order thinking skills and to function effectively in the world beyond the classroom. Achieving such fundamental change, however, requires a transformation of not only the underlying pedagogy (basic assumptions about the teaching and learning process) but also the kinds of methods typically used when serving basic students.

Stimulating classrooms structured around student involvement in challenging projects and focused on meaningful, engaged learning are important for all students. Yet because schools have traditionally had lower expectations for basic writers, such a change in practice would be especially dramatic for those students. Although teachers have long emphasized the acquisition of basic skills for students lacking proficiency in written communication, school factors such as narrow curricula, rigid instructional strategies, tracking, and pull-out programs hinder the academic achievement of many of these students (Hixson and Tinzmann).

In the new vision of challenging learning activities, the curriculum for all students would emphasize the integration of learning activities that are authentic. Keen observations of learners, their attitudes, and processes help gear teaching to real student needs. Instead of practicing discrete, isolated skills (such as spelling and punctuation drill completed on fill-in-the-blanks worksheets) the curriculum would stress composition, comprehension, and application of skills. Rather than treating basic skills as an obstacle that must be surmounted before exposing students to more complex and meaningful learning activities, schools would give basic writers opportunities to learn and practice basic skills in the context of student-driven encounters with language. Basic writers would work more in heterogeneous groupings as part of collaborative classrooms and less in ability groupings or pull-out classes for compensatory instruction.

Much of the curriculum and instruction provided to basic writers assumes that academic skills are hierarchical in nature. For example, it is assumed that students must learn the basics of vocabulary and phonics before they can learn to read critically or for comprehension (Means and Knapp 1). Yet, cognitive research on reading comprehension has shown that students can acquire comprehension skills well before they are good decoders of the printed word (Palincsar and Klenk 113). Supporters of such evidence argue not for eliminating basic skills instruction but for combining it with approaches that teach meaning and understanding as well (Knapp, Shields, and Turnbull 265).

Writing is fundamentally an expression of one's self. As teachers we have a choice. We can we can suppress the self in an effort to standardize the expression and

push the writer toward an artificial, less meaningful production of language, or we can use this fundamental quality of writing as an impetus for leading our basic writers to greater expressions of meaning.

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