

LANE, THOMAS-ANDERSON JOSHUA, M.A. *Only to the Extent: Insanity in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut* (2013).

Directed by Dr. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly. 30pp.

“Only to the Extent: Insanity in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut” details the author’s public struggle with mental illness and explores a selection of his major works as coping mechanisms. The author used the realm of literature to purge his own inner fears, but did so in a way that insulated the turmoil contained on the page. Vonnegut viewed literature and media to be responsible for the propagation of a great many “cuckoo ideas,” thus he made a variety of deliberate, careful structural moves with the intended effect of building community without perpetuating false or harmful expectations. Vonnegut refused to bring “order to chaos,” instead attempting to show the chaos that underlies what people like to perceive as order.

LANE, THOMAS-ANDERSON JOSHUA, M.A. Redesigning Developmental Education (2013).

Directed by Dr. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly. 30pp.

“Redesigning Developmental Education” details the changes that many developmental education departments—ranging from mathematics to English to reading—have been experimenting with in order to meet the growing demand for enrollment while coping with dwindling resources. The emporium, the laboratory based model that many schools have adopted and many more are considering, does not solve the problems that developmental education programs face. Such a program only serves to mitigate some of the pragmatic difficulties in educating a financially struggling population and does nothing to address the theoretical flaws that hinder student success upon entry into curriculum classes. To that end, I have devised a platform for education that is intended to address both the pragmatic issues of classroom space and funding while giving students more opportunities to write in a rhetorical situation. Students should no longer simply complete developmental courses, instead they should truly develop.

ONLY TO THE EXTENT: INSANITY IN THE
WORKS OF KURT VONNEGUT
and
REDESIGNING DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

by
Thomas-Anderson Joshua Lane

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2013

Approved by

Committee Co-Chair

Committee Co-Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair_____

Committee Co-Chair_____

Committee Member_____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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ONLY TO THE EXTENT:
INSANITY IN THE WORKS OF KURT VONNEGUT

'You are pooped and demoralized,' read Dwayne. 'Why wouldn't you be? Of course it is exhausting, having to reason all the time in a universe that wasn't meant to be reasonable.' (*Breakfast of Champions*)

Kurt Vonnegut has been inspiring and infuriating readers for decades. As an artist, as an author, and as a citizen, Vonnegut has attempted to achieve a relatively simple goal—to show us the world as he experienced it, from the mundane to the outlandish to “the people so dumb you can't believe it, and the people so smart you can't believe it.” He has extended an invitation for us to think critically about that world and our places in it. In a large part, his capacity to pursue this goal has been contingent upon his use of science-fiction imagery and outsider status. By using these techniques, Vonnegut creates a context within which he is able to defamiliarize everyday concepts¹, ranging from love to procreation to patriotism. “I am programmed at fifty to perform childishly—to scrawl pictures of a Nazi flag and an asshole and a lot of other things with a felt-tipped pen,” (*Breakfast of Champions* 4) he says, “taking the perspective of someone who must explain *everything*. . . By drawing what he sees on the 'sidewalk strewn with junk' of American culture, Vonnegut holds up to scrutiny the objects that define the American character in often unflattering ways.” (Allen 107)

¹ “Like Mark Twain, Mr. Vonnegut used humor to tackle the basic questions of human existence: Why are we in this world? Is there a presiding figure to make sense of all this, a god who in the end, despite making people suffer, wishes them well?” (Burns)

Calling into question many of our most cherished ideals, as one can imagine, has drawn a wide range of reactions. There are those who see him as a moralist (which he has never claimed to be); there are those who decry him as a proponent of socialist values (which he has proudly claimed to be); and there are those who simply call him crazy.

Crazy, he was². Vonnegut's mother dealt with “untreated, unacknowledged insanity” (*Fates Worse than Death* 28), his father was a melancholic architect forced out of a thriving business by the Great Depression, his son Mark dealt with mental illness, and he himself has written and discussed his own battles with depression and schizophrenia candidly within his novels and interviews. Was Vonnegut insane? Did this play a role in the creation of his works? Does it matter? These are the questions that drove me to this line of research, and the more I read, the more I found that the answer was a resounding yes, Vonnegut did suffer from mental illness, and that illness did play a crucial role in his writing. For the sake of brevity, I have (mostly) limited my inquiry to the novels *Slapstick* and *Breakfast of Champions*, the works that he considered to be his most autobiographical; as well as *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Timequake*, novels that shed light on the author's process, illustrating the nature of Vonnegut's literature as a function of his mental illness. I will also pay special attention to the author in interviews and public speech, for it is in this domain that he speaks the most clearly about his worldview. In light of his own perspective on his role as an author and a human being, I will also

2 An interesting point with regard to a creative person's mental stability: Beginning in 1948, Brain concluded that though geniuses were probably not specially prone to insanity they were certainly more 'nervous' and that the commonest kind of cyclothymia they encountered was the manic depressive state. Additionally, the terms 'genius' and 'insanity' have only begun to be seen as dichotomous in recent years, and were often colloquially seen as interrelated. “In the modern approach 'genius' and 'insanity' have been replaced by the broader terms creativity (or simply high achievement) and mental illness.” (Hare 1587)

explore his works as a function of his mental state—a purging of fears and an effort to communicate, to escape the past, and to build community.

While his thinking was by his own admission often clouded by his “bad chemicals” and his own troubled past, the author’s self-described purpose as an artist, was to do what all great artists do, from Michelangelo to The Beatles: to make people appreciate being alive, even just a little bit. Vonnegut's overarching message was at its core a simple and rational one, summed up handily in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*: “Welcome to Earth, babies. It's hot in the summer and it's cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. You've got about a hundred years here at the outside. There's only one rule I know of, babies—God damn it, you've got to be kind.” As readers, as humans, we are all familiar with this rule. “You've got to be kind” sounds like simple common sense. If one were to remove the profanity, the above quotation would make a fine Hallmark card. However, as sane and rational as we are said to be, human beings find new and exciting ways to take advantage of one another and our environment every single day. References to these are sprinkled throughout the Vonnegutian corpus, from the brazen bull to the oubliette to the crucifix. Humanity creates a host of elaborate tortures while consistently ignoring this one simple guideline. As rational beings, why wouldn't we? In and of itself, that guideline offers no clear benefits, it is rooted in no authority, and there are no consequences for ignoring it—qualities that the oubliette and the crucifix most certainly do not share. At least, there are no consequences that we can see.

However, we live in an endlessly complicated society, in which any small act of kindness, malice, benevolence, or ignorance sparks a ripple effect. It takes an outsider to note the patterns in our interactions, to follow the chain of events to its end. Vonnegut's characters—the rich, educated ones as much as the downtrodden and poor—are outsiders, powerless pawns in a society-wide Rube Goldberg machine. They are tossed to and fro, sometimes even to distant planets, by fate, chance, and consequence. They are powerless to stop it, and they are disconnected from the entities that affect such changes in their lives. Vonnegut's characters are crippled by fear, guilt, shame, loneliness, and love. They are slaves to their pasts, barreling headlong into a future that they cannot control. Vonnegut was, too. At this point, a reader can't help but ask: How *exactly* is this meant to make us appreciate being alive at all?

We'll come back to that. To fully understand that point, we must first take a closer look at his characters, at the forces that hold sway over them, and how they are made to feel. Let us also consider what such characters and such ugly truths might represent for Vonnegut. Any discussion of mental illness in relation to Kurt Vonnegut's canon would be woefully incomplete without an analysis of the function that mental illness fulfills with regard to his characters. Dwayne Hoover, for example, the protagonist of *Breakfast of Champions* (as much as it can be said to have one) operates every day under a steadily increasing dose of “bad chemicals” in his brain³. Hoover's chemicals eventually cause

³ For Vonnegut, “bad chemicals” are synonymous with a number of ailments, ranging from drug addiction to depression to mania. Bad chemicals represent the source of the mental anguish that the people who populate his novels feel.

him to become convinced, by merit of an unintentional “mind-poisoning⁴,” that he is the only creature on Earth with free will. Everyone else, he believes, is a robot placed here by the Creator of the universe in order to test him.

Such an irrational belief is not without its benefits. If all the world's population are in fact machines, all of Dwayne's fears become irrelevant. He believes himself assured by the Creator of the universe (although in reality this reassurance is via the fiction of Kilgore Trout) that he has in fact been killed twenty-three times, at which point the Creator simply “patched him up and got him going again.” (*Breakfast of Champions* 264) Any remorse he may have felt, any pain from his wife's suicide, any guilt about owning such great wealth while the “machines” around him ceased to function from a lack of fuel, is lifted. Of course she committed suicide—“She was that kind of machine!” (*Breakfast of Champions* 266) There is no need to feel shame—machines don't have the capacity to judge. Dwayne is a very lonely man, with no real source of love in his life other than the bond he has with his dog—and why wouldn't he be? As the only real human being on Earth, he has never had the opportunity to have a different experience. While this notion does cause for him to react with violent anger, it allows for him to be blissfully disconnected for the first time in his life.

Dwayne's insanity is not only undeniable with regard to his actions, it is explicitly stated. The function of his insanity, though, is not as clear on the surface. To be sure, his insanity provides an avenue through which he is able to react toward the world in a monstrous manner. But it also allows him to relate to the world in much the same way as

⁴ In many of Vonnegut's works, ideas are represented as external ideas that come *to* an individual either as a result of their interactions or from another entity, as portrayed in Kilgore Trout's *Dog's Breakfast*.

the ostensibly sane members of his community. The citizens of Midland City are all too happy to “become agreeable, fully automated boobs, ready to conform to the most convenient mold, embrace the most cuckoo ideas, and adopt the most militant, anithumanistic poses. . . sometimes simply out of the lack of imagination to do anything better.” (Broer 100) Dwayne’s frustration mirrors Vonnegut’s perfectly.

Breakfast of Champions was written during a dark period in the author's life. Having completed his iconic work *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut “stood before the yawning chasm of the blank page with no clear direction. . . Vonnegut was at a loss. There was seemingly nothing more to say.” (Davis 84) His first and only play had opened to lukewarm reviews. His children had left home; his marriage was slowly dissolving. Vonnegut ultimately left his Cape Cod home in favor of New York City, a move that “led only to his further isolation and an increasingly tempestuous struggle with the meaning and value of human existence.” (Davis 85) He felt fundamentally disconnected from the human race and dissatisfied with the organizations that govern our lives. *Breakfast of Champions* represents the author's attempt to reach harmony. As he puts it,

I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago. . . the things other people have put into my head, at any rate, do not fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life as it is outside my head. I have no culture, no humane harmony within my brains. I can't live without a culture anymore. (*Breakfast* 5)

Vonnegut felt that he and human beings in general had lost touch with reality, a sentiment in perfect harmony with Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, a situation in which the simulation of life (as embodied in *granfalloons* such as literature, government, and

religion) has displaced life itself. The individual subject (which in this case could be said to be both Vonnegut *and* his characters) is lost, replaced with a crippling sense of “alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation.” Such people become “free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria,” (Jameson 16) evidenced in such passive/accepting/apathetic refrains as *Slaughterhouse-Five's* “So it goes,” *Slapstick's* “Hi-ho,” and *Breakfast of Champions'* “And so on.” Such remarks appear with great frequency and connote both Vonnegut's networked conception of society and a desire for consistency, meaning, and symmetry. Cognitive linguists claim that “our innate habit to structure things according to symmetrical patterns, including patterns of repetition, is in fact a projection of our embodied understanding of symmetry in the world around us.” As such, the “human brain in a human body in a human environment” must make all acts (including language acts) “intelligible if it is to survive.”

To explore *Breakfast of Champions* in terms of mental illness it is necessary to address some earlier critical responses to the work, for they do offer some valuable perspectives for my purposes. One reviewer lamented the work's “reductiveness, its labored denial of man's complexity and resilience.” (Prescott 40) Others have hypothesized that Vonnegut was attempting to cure his own malaise by imagining a world in which every other citizen was in fact a robot. Still others have viewed it as an exploration of insanity—on the part of individuals such as Dwayne Hoover and on the part of larger institutions. The first two interpretations are wildly off the mark—so far, in fact, that they can be used to illustrate exactly the problems that Vonnegut speaks to. For

Vonnegut to actively pursue a conception of the world wherein he is the only creature with free will stands at odds with literally every identifiable message of community and harmony within the work. As for Prescott's assertion that *Breakfast of Champions* is in any way a denial of man's complexity, I cannot help but wonder if he has actually read the book. Reference after reference after reference displays the unimaginable volume of influences on the way characters live and feel. While there is, I will admit, an oppressive tone to some of these references (Sheperdstown, where no blacks can spend the night for fear of lynching, for example), many of them—like the idea that so many whites are descended from Charlemagne, or that Eddie Key carries his family history with him—are wonderful examples of humanity's complexity. These two interpretations (which, I should note, are not isolated) stand out as knee-jerk reactions against the notion that humanity creates its own meaning. Both represent a desire to see some inherent meaning in human beings. An exploration of insanity, though, does have some merit, as we have seen. Those uncountable influences, though they may give our lives color, meaning, and excitement, are also a source of pain, especially for someone in the author's position.

In the end, sane or not, Vonnegut and his characters find solace in this very ability to disconnect from reality, whether they do so by merit of bad chemicals and mind poison or by unconscious slavish assimilation to cultural norms. Dwayne's eventual rampage is foreshadowed heavily throughout the text, but when it comes, it is

treated in intentionally anticlimactic terms. The real interest in the novel is not so much the literal action as it is the way Vonnegut comments on that action so as to reveal his concerns about the strained social fabric of American society and the tenuous state of his own psyche. (Allen 104)

Here we see Vonnegut crafting a story whilst simultaneously offering his own commentary upon that very story. By and large, his commentary is positive. He points out connections between the characters that might have gone totally unseen without an optimistic, searching eye. He explores concrete addressable reasons for people to behave in ugly ways. What is monstrous, in Vonnegut's eyes, is not a person's lashing out or disconnecting, but society's adherence to conventions that make these options seem so inviting. Americans are all too happy to subvert ourselves to the whims of our *granfalloon*s, those “seeming teams that are meaningless. . . other examples of *granfalloon*s are the Communist Party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the International Order of Odd Fellows—and any nation, anytime, anywhere.” (*Cat's Cradle* 92) In the author's eyes, many of the organizations that we look to for community are simply arbitrary borders we've placed around ourselves, and do not serve to create any meaningful connections. Though we may be surrounded by people, we might still be isolated.

Disconnectedness and isolation also play a large role in the plot of *Slapstick* (subtitled “Lonesome No More!”) as well. The book's protagonist, Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain (born Wilbur Rockefeller Swain) and his twin sister Eliza are “neanderthaloids,” meaning that they suffer from birth defects that render them similar to cavemen in appearance. However, when they are close to one another their minds become like one, and they are capable of brilliance⁵. Their parents—“two silly and pretty and very young

⁵ Relationships of this nature have been said to represent a schizophrenic mind on the verge of collapse. Indeed, throughout the novel, when separated, Wilbur and Eliza are in poor shape. However, Broer notes that the scenes within which they are unified represent Vonnegut's learning “to create for himself and for us that 'humane harmony' whose absence, as with Wilbur, may nearly have driven him crazy. . . learned to

people. . . fabulously well-to-do” (*Slapstick* 28) are without any idea what to do about them, and decide to hide them away in a mansion high above Galen, Vermont, where they can live out their lives. This setting becomes an idyll for them, where they happily play at being the idiot children that their parents and the doctors have predicted that they will be. Behind closed doors, they quite literally put their heads together and merge into a singular genius. This isn’t an act of rebellion, and they are perfectly happy—“all the information we received about the planet indicated that idiots were lovely things to be. So we cultivated idiocy. We refused to speak coherently in public. 'Buh,' and, 'Duh,' we said. We drooled and rolled our eyes. We farted and laughed. We ate library paste.” (*Slapstick* 41) By ignoring their potential, Wilbur and Eliza are welcomed into a community—dozens of doctors and servants *need* for them to need care, as their own livelihoods depend on it.

Of course all secrets must come to an end, and the twins do eventually come out of the closet. It is here that their idyll ends. They begin to become acquainted with the importance of good looks, with the existence of negative emotion. In the words of Eliza Mellon Swain, “We had no experience with hating, and had had trouble understanding that particular human activity whenever we encountered it in books. 'But we are making small beginnings in hating now,'” (*Slapstick* 100) Their haven begins to be visited by outsiders, people with their own conflicting goals. Prior to this invasion, the mansion was populated by people of all social classes, levels of intelligence, and backgrounds, who

resolve personal and social fragmentation by creating fantasies that encourage communal bonding rather than narcissistic withdrawal.” (118)

were able to put aside all of their differences in order to pursue a harmonious existence. Unlike *Breakfast of Champions*, the sanity of his individual characters is never called into question. Rather, Vonnegut directly questions the rationality of the system of relations we find ourselves in. Remember, even in the prelapsarian version of this microcosm, the residents enhance and ignore aspects of their personalities based on what they think others want from them; they ignore large parts of the human experience to fit into preconceived and arbitrary molds.

In Midland City and Galen alike, depersonalization is used as a tool to obtain happiness. When viewed in comparison, these situations reveal much about Vonnegut's conception of what it means to be a healthy human being. Functioning as public idiots and secret geniuses, Wilbur and Eliza are quite happy, but unfulfilled. Although he is among the most prominent and productive members of his community, Wayne Hoover is unable to relate to his fellow man. Isolation *from* society produces blissful but empty peace. Isolation *within* society leads to feelings of frustration and despair, even in those with the agency to pursue what they want to do. We need the support of others to obtain happiness, but we must be careful not to subvert ourselves too much to the inherent pressures of a community. In short, to be healthy requires active and harmonious participation with a community, keeping what works, and throwing out the rest. *Breakfast of Champions* and *Slapstick* each represent an attempt by the author to transcend one of these types of isolation. In *Slapstick*, Wilbur creates artificial extended families for all American citizens so that none have to feel alone. Vonnegut knows firsthand the benefits of such communities, saying, "I am a brother to writers everywhere. . . It is nice. It is

lucky, too, for human beings need all the relatives they can get—as possible donors or receivers not necessarily of love, but of common decency.” (*Slapstick* 5) *Breakfast of Champions* represents the author's attempt to reach harmony—each of his characters seek it out in different ways, from Dwayne’s solipsism to Trout’s reluctant journey to fame. *Breakfast of Champions* also comments on harmonious existence using Trout’s pet parrot: granted freedom from its confines, it quickly flies back in, landing on its perch. “That’s smart,” says Trout. “You’ve left yourself something to wish for.” (103) The parrot, like everyone else, needs both comfort and a desire. It can’t have both without a place to belong.

The importance of a sense of community is clearly stated in almost all of Vonnegut's work. The notion of communication is less explicit, but equally important. Consider the short stories of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's alter-ego. Almost all of them end in disaster, and almost all of that disaster stems directly from a failure to communicate. *Breakfast of Champions* alone provides numerous examples of this—from Kago, accidentally killed while giving a lecture no one notices, (29) to Zog, bludgeoned with a golf club by a man who doesn't understand his language (58). Wilbur and Eliza of *Slapstick* placed no value on either intelligence or idiocy other than that which was demonstrated to them, and hid their potential for genius only because “We simply did not realize that anybody *wanted* us to be intelligent.” (*Slapstick* 72) In both novels, things left unsaid and unnoticed lead to disaster—“It didn't matter much what Dwayne said. It hadn't mattered much for years. . . If a person stopped living up to expectations, because of bad chemicals or one thing or another, everybody went on imagining that the person was

living up to expectations anyway.” (*Breakfast of Champions* 146) “All in all, *Breakfast of Champions* depicts not just the American novelist's 'tragic failure to communicate' but the American reader's inability to see the *implications* of dehumanization and madness.” (Meyer 103) After all, outsider status implies an “inside.” What Vonnegut hopes to show is the complex system of relations between the outsiders and society as a whole—how ideas are transmitted (or not), how the marginalized become marginalized, and how they end up that way in the first place.

The root of the problem, for Vonnegut, is not insanity. Rather, it is the expectation of rationality. As a storyteller, an American and a “citizen of planet Earth,” Vonnegut is intimately familiar with all manners of *granfalloon*s—and as an outsider, he stands ready and able to break them down. He watched his family abandon their German heritage in the face of American nationalism. He watched Allied forces—his own “team”—level Dresden. He saw his father put out of meaningful work by the Great Depression, and would see many more lose their livelihoods to machines⁶. We identify every day with a number of staggeringly huge and powerful entities. And since we are within their direct sphere of influence, since we have so readily internalized their values, we are not in a position to see *how* they work. We see them, by merit of their size and our positions in relation to them, as being stable, reasonable, “normal” systems. But what if they aren't? At best, “Vonnegut considers social structures just gatherings of separate individuals, [where] even institutional hierarchy is unable to create bonds that overcome the forces of

⁶ “It used to be said of a man who had suffered a catastrophic setback in his line of work that he had been handed his head on a platter. We are being handed our heads with *tweezers* now.” (*Timequake* 38)

separation;” (Hume 225) and at times he even goes so far as to characterize them as faceless monoliths responsible for the creation and proliferation of divisive conflicts, of war and mayhem and starvation. In *Timequake* Vonnegut gives this idea a face. It is a female face, of an alien race known as the *Booboolings*. He calls her “the bad sister.” She is angry—and rightfully so—because she lacks imagination. To make up for it, to take her anger out on the world, she begins inventing, creating things that will make the populace as miserable and unimaginative as she is:

And TV wasn't the half of it! She was as unpopular as ever because she was as boring as ever, so she invented automobiles and computers and barbed wire and flame throwers and land mines and machine guns and so on. That's how pissed off she was.

New generations of Booboolings grew up without imaginations. Their appetites for diversions from boredom were perfectly satisfied by all the crap she was selling them. Why not? What the heck.

Without imaginations, though, they couldn't do what their ancestors had done, which was read interesting, heartwarming stories in the faces of one another. (*Timequake* 21)

No wonder we're lonesome! No wonder Vonnegut “cannot distinguish between the love I have for people and the love I have for dogs”! (*Slapstick* 2) We live under the influence of the Bad sister—and yet we expect things to make sense. It is rough enough living in the present—now what of the past?

Breakfast of Champions and *Slapstick* both contain a staggering number of parallels between the hardships the characters face and the obstacles Vonnegut has had to overcome in his life. His experiences in Dresden are well-documented to the point of

becoming common knowledge, and he has written often of his mother's suicide⁷.

Vonnegut the character and Vonnegut the author have even had discussions about it:

“This is a very bad book you're writing,” I said to myself behind my *leaks*.

“I know,” I said.

“You're afraid you'll kill yourself the way your mother did,” I said.

“I know,” I said. (*Breakfast of Champions* 198)

Vonnegut has told readers of his lost home on Lake Maxinkuckee⁸. He has discussed his melancholic father. Parenting in almost all of his major works has followed a consistent, autobiographical pattern—“the fathers are distant and usually domineering; the mothers are weak, often alcoholics, emotionally cold, and offer no protection for the protagonist against unreasonable demands from the father” (Hume, 230). One result of such parenting is the protagonists' inability to feel 'appropriate' emotion. This quality turned him into a man that would describe himself as “difficult” to be in a relationship with; he would go on to publicly assume fault for the fact that his first marriage failed. He speaks fondly of his ex-wife, but notes that he finds it natural

to discuss life without ever mentioning love. It does not seem important to me. I have had some experiences with love, or think I have, anyway, although the ones I have liked best could easily be described as “common decency.” I treated somebody well for a little while, or maybe even tremendously well, and that person treated me well in turn. Love need not have had anything to do with it. . .

⁷ “The story of his family, like the Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury*, is the rise and fall of a family dynasty. Each family inherits a memory of better times, but the present is marked by separation and suicide. Vonnegut's mother could recall her visits to relatives in German castles, but the prospect of her son taking part in the war against Germany may have prompted her to take her own life. Seven months later her son became a prisoner in Dresden.” (Berryman, 98)

⁸ “The Vonneguts were some of, if not the, earliest settlers to the east shore of the lake, which was then unsettled wilderness. Caty Rasmussen – a cousin of the Vonnegut family – has said that the Vonneguts 'came to the wilderness and built tennis courts!’” (The Vonnegut Families of Lake Maxinkuckee) Vonnegut often speaks of his childhood home as an idyll, perfect for a young man to explore, and laments that it is home to the Vonneguts no more.

One time, on his twenty-first birthday, one of my three adopted sons. . . said to me, “You know—you've never hugged me.”
So I hugged him. We hugged each other. It was nice. It was like rolling around on a rug with a Great Dane we used to have. (*Slapstick* 3)

The “detached observer,” as we can see, is not merely a narrative technique—it is the role that Vonnegut played throughout most of his life. It is this perspective that has allowed him to think critically about *himself*, and to take note of everything he was proud of and all that he was scared he would become. Vonnegut used his plot structures and characters to as an outlet for his fears about society as a whole, but he used Kilgore Trout to purge his fears about himself.

Trout is not a man you'd want to spend time with. He is a pain in the neck. He is sarcastic, reclusive, and dirty. He is smug, he is cheap, and he thinks he is quite clever. “Trout's resemblance to Vonnegut is in many ways quite playful; for example, Trout's remarkable anonymity is surely meant to remind us of Vonnegut's early problems in securing. . . a significant audience. *Breakfast of Champions* presents a more serious link between the author and his creation: both are frustrated idealists.” (Merrill 145) Like Vonnegut, Trout spent a bittersweet childhood under circumstances that can no longer exist—Vonnegut's extended family around the lake having dissolved, and the species of Bermuda Erns that the fictional Trout's family studied having gone extinct. The main difference between the two is that Trout has intentionally removed himself from the artificial extended family that is the writing community. As such, “he thinks of himself as being 'invisible,' his works, from his perspective, can be understood only as the writings of an 'invisible' man. . . invisibleness allows him to think that who he is and what he does

will not and cannot have an influence on humanity.” (Simpson 269) Trout is free in a way that Vonnegut is not—he does not have to consider the impact of his ideas. But this freedom comes at a cost. Like Hoover, Trout is wholly unfulfilled.

Trout represents the balance that an author must attempt to strike. As Bokoron points out in *Cat's Cradle*, “Birds got to fly.” Writers must write. “People will continue to write novels, or maybe short stories, because they discover that they are treating their own neuroses. . . it is not a way to make money or become famous. It is a way to make your soul grow.” (*Like Shaking Hands with God* 32) But this self-treatment results in a dispersion of ideas—soul-growing or not, this purging of fears, this casting out of mind-poison, does not throw the ideas into a vacuum. Instead, they are consumed by the community. Trout writes highly pessimistic works to escape the world, without realizing he has the potential to harm people by doing so. For his own well-being, he has to write—but to have a positive impact on society, to make people appreciate being alive, he needs to take into account that his writings are *communications*. For this reason, in *Breakfast of Champions*, “Vonnegut forces Kilgore Trout to examine his work's influence on humanity.” (Simpson 268) In this way, he explores his own impact. After all, what are his own communications doing? He writes for the same reason as Trout—what might he be doing to the American psyche?

Governments and social institutions aren't the only *granfalloon*s out there. Far more powerful, far more pervasive and influential, is the realm of literature and media. It is harmful enough, in Vonnegut's eyes, that we expect man-made systems to provide us with concrete guidance; it is even worse that we have begun looking to the realms of

fiction to show us what our lives should be like. We expect resolution, we expect clearly defined roles, we expect transcendent emotion and protagonists and symbolism and development and so on—but these are all man-made. Writers, then, run the risk of actively working against their own purpose. By sowing the seeds of unrealistic expectation⁹, they set their readers up for lives filled with disappointment. Once Vonnegut realized this,

I understood how innocent and natural it was for them to behave so abominably, and with such abominable results: They were doing their best to live like people in story books. This was the reason Americans shot each other so often: It was a convenient device for ending short stories and books. . .

Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. . . Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done.

If all writers would do that, then perhaps citizens not in the literary trades will understand that there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to chaos instead. (*Breakfast of Champions* 215)

This is why Vonnegut writes of helplessness and disorder.

On the one hand, for his own sake, he must write, he has to purge the fears within himself¹⁰. But he must also be careful not to espouse harmful and unrealistic world views. To speak of things in the way they have traditionally been treated in the media would be

9 Unrealistic expectations and distorted perspectives are troublesome aspects of mental illness—both clinical disorders and the societal disillusionment Vonnegut refers to. His son Mark describes his battle with schizophrenia thus: “Most diseases can be separated from one’s self and seen as foreign intruding entities. Colds, ulcers, flu, and cancers are things we get. Schizophrenic is something we are. It effects the things we most identify with as making us what we are. . . always weaving inextricably with what we call ourselves.” (M. Vonnegut, ix)

10 His most celebrated purging was, of course, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In this work, he attempted to allow readers to relate to his experiences in Dresden and “consistently used ingenuous understatement as a way of imaginatively engaging his readers with the horrors of war.” (Rigney 5)

a lie. Writing, for Vonnegut, is not a matter of bringing beauty into the world. Rather, it is a matter of helping us to see the beauty that is around us every day. There is only one way for a moment to be “structured.” There is only one way for the world to be—the way it is¹¹. “Trout is the one character in [*Breakfast of Champions*] (including Vonnegut) who seems to have no illusions. It is he who realizes that what is, is;” (Mayo 56) and thus it is Trout—the author's literary incarnation of himself—who provides the perspective of reason. Madmen see and believe things that aren't really there. Authors who cater to this, then, are perpetuating madness.

All of this raises the question: if the risk of doing harm by writing is so great, even assuming that an author simply *has* to write, why publish? Why should Vonnegut or Trout or anyone at all send such mind-poison out into the world? By the time readers see 1996's *Timequake* (which ended a long period wherein Vonnegut published no fiction), not even Trout is publishing. He still writes, of course, to purge and escape; but he simply throws his stories away when they are finished, and in this way ensures that they will harm no one. Of course, this also ensures that they will help no one. Vonnegut was very conscious of the therapeutic nature of reading, often comparing it to meditation and referring to short stories as “Buddhist catnaps.” He is also highly conscious of his potential to build community. His works have a casual, conversational tone throughout, as if he is addressing his friends—which, in many ways, he was. He disclosed his secrets

¹¹ Vonnegut continually asserts that all aspects of reality, no matter how unpleasant, need to be faced head-on in order to move forward. *Breakfast of Champions* “acknowledges the human propensity for suicide, both individually and collectively, while pillorying the contemporary inability to treat serious problems seriously. . . They may appear all but inescapable, given humanity's, and especially Americans' refusal to face and deal with such problems. Yet Vonnegut holds out that slight hope, through his satirizing of pretensions, that people could begin by simply acknowledging their humanity.” (Morse 106)

to us freely, and “the pain in Vonnegut was always real. Through the transpositions of science fiction, he found a way, instead of turning pain aside, to vaporize it, to scatter it to the plane of the cosmic and the comic.” (Updike, 47) Knowing that “intimacy with the author makes readers feel personally intimate with the work, Vonnegut rewards his fans by putting in references that only they will fully appreciate, thus increasing the sense of friendship.” (Hume 232) And he goes to great lengths to keep that relationship positive, preventing himself from harming his readers.

For example, although he did soothe his own wounds by writing *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut was aware of his power as a now-critically-acclaimed author. He went to great lengths to mitigate the extent to which readers could internalize the message of the work. As straightforward narratives, many works of fiction actively invite the reader to place himself in the shoes of the work's protagonist. *Breakfast of Champions*, on the other hand, uses unfamiliar structural techniques to fight against exactly this sort of identification. To begin with, the work lacks a clear protagonist. Dwayne, as he is the person most of the action revolves around, might at first appear to be our man; however, it quickly becomes apparent that he is controlled by his “bad chemicals” and is taking no action of his own accord. Trout could potentially be the protagonist as well, but Vonnegut is careful to ensure that he is not a man anyone would want to identify with. The only other option to play the role of our protagonist is Vonnegut himself. Of course, Vonnegut lacked a methodology by which he could make even Kurt Vonnegut central to the theme of the work. To have portrayed himself as any more or less important than any of the characters he had created would have been inconsistent with the work's internal logic, its

continual assertions that all of us are equal. Additionally, the act of minimizing his own importance in the work serves a therapeutic function by contextualizing his own inner turmoil, placing it within a harmonious and multi-faceted system.

Even Vonnegut's inclusion of himself as a character is multi-layered. Kurt Vonnegut the author does not simply include Kurt Vonnegut the character in his work. Instead, Vonnegut the author includes Vonnegut the author/character, a man capable of visiting his own fictional world and controlling events there; he is a character whose powers border on omnipotence in terms of the environment, but whose control over his own characters is anything but absolute—"I could only guide their movements approximately. . . there was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as though I was connected to them by stale rubberbands." (*Breakfast* 207) The citizens of Midland City serve as perfect metaphors for literary works. An author can control the circumstances of a character's creation, can make them look and act and feel certain ways—but once an author has done so, that author cannot hope to fully contain them. These characters take on lives of their own, much like written language does.

The written word does not function in the same manner as visual and artistic artworks. Visual artworks and pieces of music are, as Saito explains, not intended to be interacted with in the sense that we interact with most objects in our daily lives. Our relationship to paradigmatic Western artworks is that of speaker-listener—art speaks *to* us, we do not converse with it. We consider art to have a stable identity. Art is permanent and immutable, whereas life is transient and impermanent. Additionally, "paradigmatic

art is a more or less stable object bounded by a frame, spatially or temporally, distinct from its surroundings, typically experienced through sight and sound with a spectator-like, distancing attitude, and in a certain expected and prescribed mode;" (27) that is, a sense of separation, isolation, distinction, divorce, or disengagement. Texts, with the exception of their material bodies, have no such frame or distancing quality. As the deconstructionists have famously asserted, there is nothing outside the text, meaning of course that narrative's power extends to all areas of life.

Breakfast of Champions complicates things here. While Vonnegut did take measures to insulate his narrative, thus objectifying it and limiting the range of its influence, he has explicitly argued against art conceptualized as "exception." Vonnegut would have found the notion of an aesthetic experience, defined as "a sort of self-contained unit, 'demarcated... from other experiences,' 'complete in itself; standing out because marked from what went before and what came after.'" (Saito 44) to be problematic, for it devalues the everyday, sets it up as the anti-aesthetic. "Just as art is necessarily defined as an *exception* to everyday objects, the aesthetic experience conceived as a special experience is also an *exception*¹² to the everyday experience¹³, according to these views." (Saito 45) For Vonnegut, art was a part of life, or it was meaningless pretense.

To ensure that his novel remained firmly grounded in the everyday, in real life rather than fiction, Vonnegut included a number of references to the material/corporeal basis of many of the artifacts that appear on the pages. These artifacts are by no means

12 *OED* "To take out"

13 *OED* "To put to the test"

beautiful. Describing Kilgore Trout's disheveled condition on his way to the arts festival, Vonnegut notes that Trout had slipped on some dog feces, soiling his jacket in the process, and “by an unbelievable coincidence, that shit came from the wretched greyhound belonging to a girl I knew.” (*Breakfast 202*) At the arts festival Vonnegut “has” cocktail waitress Bonnie MacMahon tell Rabo Karabekian (whose words about the nature of art would later save Vonnegut's life) and Beatrice Keedsler some stories about life in Midland City which, should the artists deem them worthy of representation, they might use in their next works. She tells them about a death row inmate she's heard about and about Dwayne Hoover's dog. Immediately following this is an aside from Vonnegut, who tells us that

this book is made up, of course. . . but the story I had Bonnie tell actually happened in real life—in the death house of a penitentiary in Arkansas. As for Dwayne Hoover's dog Sparky, who couldn't wag his tail: Sparky is modeled after a dog my brother owns who has to fight all the time, because he can't wag his tail. There really is such a dog. (*Breakfast 202*)

In truth, Karabekian and Keedsler care very little for the everyday. Although Karabekian nearly begs Bonnie to illuminate him about Midland City life, he oozes condescension while doing so. His flattery is self-serving and Bonnie only obliges his cajoling request because she is “deceived by his enthusiasm.” (220) Indeed, Karabekian does not even know the stories behind his own paintings. The centerpiece of the Midland City arts festival is a massive piece by Karabekian entitled *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. This title, of course, refers to the story of Saint Anthony's sojourn through the desert and subsequent canonization, a theme that has been explored in numerous

paintings including Salvador Dali's 1946 work by the same title, notable for the fact that it was created as a contest entry¹⁴.

Further illustrating the gap between the work's significance to Vonnegut and the work's potential significance to the reading public is the unreliability of the network for the translation of meaning. Reality in Vonnegut is wholly dependent on context and personal experience; sanity or insanity are all in the eye of the beholder, and the best, most reliable source of meaning that any of his characters ever find are *foma*, *Cat's Cradle's* harmless untruths. Vonnegut finds no inherent meaning in anything, but instead of placing a value judgment on that fact, he takes a pragmatic stance, attempting to actively create a meaning that will help humanity—all the while acknowledging that that meaning is a product of humanity. Jameson speaks to this perceived incompatibility between subjective and objective reality. We have found ourselves to be a part of a “situation in which we can say that if the individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience.” (The Jameson Reader) The work is laden with references to misconstrued or distorted narratives purported to have some measure of objective truth. Utterances meant to have no impact beyond the present moment invariably grow to something far beyond the speaker's control. Midland City Blacks continue to imitate bird calls, never knowing why. Trout's joke about mirrors is passed on, “the driver would tell his wife that mirrors were called *leaks* in Bermuda, and she would tell her friends.” (*Breakfast 92*) Much of Trout's fiction deals with this notion as well—the story *Plague*

14 For which the winner would figure in a film taken from the story "Bel Ami" by Maupassant. (urvas.lt)

on Wheels treats of humanity's end, all due to the fact that human beings are helpless to halt the proliferation of ideas, and can be “felled as easily by a single idea as by cholera or the bubonic plague. There was no immunity to cuckoo ideas on Earth.” (*Breakfast 27*) Indeed, even the most cuckoo ideas find a way to move into society and proliferate. On the way to his fateful meeting with Hoover and Vonnegut, Kilgore Trout is beaten and mugged by someone he hardly sees. When he is asked for information regarding the people who did it, Trout quips, “For all I know, that car may have been occupied by an intelligent gas from Pluto.” It was meant as an innocent joke, but a newspaper reporter published a distorted version of the utterance, which turned out to be “the first germ in an epidemic of mind-poisoning.” (*Breakfast 77*) The line is passed on and on, through channels with less and less connection to the original speaker. Eventually reporters begin asking police about the now-notorious *Pluto Gang*; the police begin warning the citizens to stay indoors to avoid the threat. Shortly thereafter a group of young men who want respect adopt the label, coming to embody the fear on the public's mind.

With the fear of miscommunication in mind, Vonnegut made careful structural moves to contain his narrative within the pages of the book, hoping to avoid the proliferation of cuckoo ideas. The closing chapter of the work contains a number of subtle (and not so subtle) thematic references to the opening chapters, which lend the work a cyclical feel. In the foreword, readers encounter a disclaimer about General Mills' fine products, followed by the isolated word “Defunct,” followed locomotor ataxia, followed by a reference to goiters. The closing chapter contains the exact same references in the exact same order, with small but notable differences. *Defunct*, for example, is

stressed even more heavily the second time around than it was in the beginning. It is quite obviously intended to be noticed, intended to reinforce the memory of beginning the book. The references to locomotor ataxia and goiters are even more noteworthy—having drawn the reader's attention to these things in the introduction, Vonnegut ends the work by drawing Trout's attention to them. Vonnegut is not only telling this story to the public, he is telling it to his own characters. The important thing for Vonnegut was not to get a message *in* to a reader—it was to get it *out* of himself. Vonnegut tells himself—and his readers—quite a bit about the dangers of storytelling with his discussion of *Now It Can Be Told*, the novel by Kilgore Trout that sends Dwayne Hoover into a rampage.

And even at his most pessimistic, while getting all of this frustration out of himself, Vonnegut wants his works to remain pieces of communication between friends. Thanks to his tendency to use alien imagery, “Vonnegut wounds no sensitivities while maintaining his sardonic attitude towards all humans. As he says in *Timequake*, “[I] would never allow myself to be funny at the cost of making somebody else feel like something the cat drug in.” (Hume 237) To adopt the author’s phrasing, we have all been drug in by one cat or another at some point in our lives. So why not confront it? His works are reminiscent of Whitman in that they celebrate the beautiful, the terrible, the absurd, and the mundane; and in doing so they provide a breath of fresh air.

So: was Vonnegut insane¹⁵? Sure. And as he tells us in *Breakfast of Champions*, when he felt sad he took a little pill, and he would cheer up again. Is society insane? This

15 As for the role of insanity in his propensity to be a creative person, the jury is still out among psychologists. Dr. Ghadirian, who conducted a study on the subject, noted that in the past, the link between creativity and mental illness had been neglected as a subject of investigation; and found that his own results should be “treated with caution, and further studies are warranted.” (148)

part is a matter of opinion, but at the very least we can say that it is irrational, and that it is folly to look for true order in it. Vonnegut saw chaos in everyday life, but chose not to assign a value judgment to it—he instead chose to accept that chaos unconditionally, and hoped to suggest ways for us to be happy within it. So he wrote. His works had plots and characters, to be sure: but in almost all of his works he wrote to us from *after* the conception of his stories. As he revealed some action he would use phrasing such as “I had Dwayne walk...” He spoke directly to us *about* his stories even as he told them because as an author, an outsider, a detached observer, and a human being, he understood that “many people desperately need to receive this message: I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, even though most people don't care about them. You are not alone.” (*Timequake* 221)

One famous work that exemplifies the practice of writing after a story's conception is *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which according to the author is the book that hung over his head as he worked on his other novels after returning from the war. Dresden, he thought, was his meal ticket. It was a story that Americans didn't truly know or appreciate, and one that he felt we needed to know. He thought its creation would be easy, “since all I had to do was report what I had seen.” (2) But the words wouldn't come. He thought, too, that it would be a masterwork, or at least make a ton of money, since the subject was so big. But the words just wouldn't come. When they finally did, the work was “jumbled and jangled” because “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” (19)

But of course it's jumbled and jangled. Why wouldn't it be? It's an autobiography full of made-up people, full of aliens and starlets and time travel. It's a historical account of a conflagration twice the size of Hiroshima, by the author's account, and it's an attempt to come to terms with the fact that this conflagration actually existed. Vonnegut needed some method by which he could contextualize a horror that defies imagination, some way to understand our willingness to spend the lives of our children in these conflicts, and he found it in Tralfamadore.

Tralfamadorian time works in a way that is much different from ours, which is this: the Tralfamadorians are able to see into the fourth dimension, time. They know every moment that has existed, every moment that will ever exist. They've seen the beginning of the universe and they know how it ends: because of them. They set one of their mechanics to work testing some rocket fuel, he presses a button, and the universe goes dark. So it goes. They'll never stop him from pressing the button because there is only one way for that moment to be structured. That moment, like all moments, simply is.

Tralfamadorians pity us humans and our lamentable perspective. To explain how a human perceives his moments passing by, the Tralfamadorians use the following metaphor: a man with a steel sphere encasing his head, which he can't take off. The sphere has a little hole in it, out of which protrudes a six foot length of pipe, with a little hole on the end. The man with the sphere on his head is strapped to a moving flatcar on rails, and he can't move, and he doesn't know that he's helpless, and he doesn't know there's anything peculiar about his situation. He looks at his little allotted dot of time, one dot at a time, with no control and no consciousness of other moments except those he's

already seen, and he thinks to himself, “That’s life.” (115) But they, the Tralfamadorians, can see all the moments. They know that no one moment is more important than any other, that even when something terrible happens to someone, it’s really only happening to them in one of an incredible number of moments. Even if you’re mining corpses right now, even if you *are* a corpse right now, you’re playing poker or listening to jazz or dancing real crazy, real sexy in a whole bunch of other moments. No big deal. So it goes. It’s a happy thought. It’s too bad Vonnegut made this part up, too bad he had to live through all of that other stuff.

One can see why he’d want to think like this. Those Tralfamadorians got to choose what parts of their lives they look at. Vonnegut didn’t. He sat up nights long after everyone else in the house was asleep, wrote and discarded thousands of pages. He couldn’t escape thinking about Dresden. Like the Tralfamadorians suggest, Vonnegut would love to spend his time contemplating the good moments, ignoring the bad ones. Instead, he was stuck reminding himself of the old bawdy limerick; “There once was a man from Stamboul/ who soliloquized thus to his tool:/ ‘You took all my wealth/ and you ruined my health/ and now you won’t pee, you old fool.” (3) The experience had crippled him in many ways, but could be his salvation—if only the words would come.

Like *Breakfast of Champions*, the plot of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is disjointed and cyclical because Vonnegut’s thoughts on the subject matter were, too. It is a purging. Chapter One (which functions more like a preface than a chapter) gives readers an overview of all that is to come within the work: a brief description of some major characters, a first-person and an academic account of the happenings at Dresden, and

most strikingly, it tells the reader what the first, last, and climactic parts of the story will be. Readers know, by the time they have the opportunity to begin the novel, much of what's going to be contained inside, even if it's their first time reading it because Vonnegut knew it, too. By providing such an overview of what's to come, Vonnegut robs the plot of a great deal of its shock. Readers will not be afforded the opportunity to watch a conflagration unfold, will not feel the tension rising as they know that a great spectacle approaches. Vonnegut will not allow his readers or himself to romanticize the most difficult moment of his life. It happened, it affected him daily, and he needed to cast that message out. The story needed to be told, and now it could. Nevertheless, in ridding himself of that pain, Vonnegut would not take the risk of John Wayne-ing the root of his trauma. He would tell it in such a way that no reader could apply narrative convention to it, even something as simple as time order.

In the end, if we use Vonnegut's logic, it doesn't matter who is sane or insane. All that matters is that we are kind and work to improve ourselves—"By working so hard at becoming wise and reasonable and well-informed," he once said in a commencement address, "you have made our planet, our precious little moist, blue-green ball, a saner place than it was before you got here." (*Agnes Scott*) His works are a direct function of his mental state in that he addresses the roots of the pains he feels, and imagines others must as well. And while he acknowledges his own neuroses, he illustrates those of society at large. By removing the value judgments associated with sanity, we are left only with what is rational or irrational; what is kind or unkind. And so on the day when he put Kilgore Trout to rest, Kurt Vonnegut wrote this for his epitaph:

KILGORE TROUT
1907-1981
WE ARE HEALTHY ONLY TO THE EXTENT
THAT OUR IDEAS ARE HUMANE

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REDESIGNING DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Introduction

I checked out of my education at about the age of twelve. College, I had decided, was something that rich people did, an avenue that would be closed to me forevermore. A few years later, at seventeen, my metaphorical withdrawal became a literal one; I got the paperwork signed and started raking in the dough at a pizza place.

Thankfully, I later learned that colleges existed to serve even people like myself. I got my GED from Alamance Community College, met many amazing people, and promptly began looking for employment avenues that would allow me to stay in that environment forever. But even the presence of that ambition doesn't illustrate the positive effect of my experiences at ACC. There, as a developmental student, I was not only provided with the instruction and guidance necessary to complete the required coursework, I was inspired to achieve ever greater things, to have confidence in my own abilities, to truly *learn* things. Community college changed my life. Education has the power to do that.

For developmental students, though, this power has fallen into the shadow of a very real and imminent threat: the computer. As community college enrollment skyrockets and funding continues to dwindle, educators and legislators alike are

desperately seeking ways to accommodate more students for less money. Enter web-based instruction. Programs like Pearson's MySkillsLab or MyMathLab, Cengage's Aplia and a host of others allow students an opportunity to progress through entire semesters' worth of work at their own pace and on their own terms. After absorbing the cost of a computer lab and licensing fees, institutions are able to meet the growing demand for enrollment while mitigating the associated requirements of classroom space, records-keeping, and additional staff.

All of this sounds great, especially from a taxpayer's perspective. More students move through their requirements more quickly, and for less cost—what's not to love?

Well. . . lots. Although the goal of expediting completion and individualizing education is well-intentioned and laudable, the growing trend of displacing traditional lecture-based classes in favor of computerized, skill-oriented exercises is misguided at best, actively counterproductive at worst. These programs offer no opportunities at all for conversation, collaboration, community, or connection. Education is reduced to a mere series of hurdles or checkpoints, and students are deprived of the chance to be a part of something bigger than a graphical user interface.

Of course, the underlying sentiment of all of this is still logical, still needs to be addressed. Community college populations are comprised largely of working people: people who desire training, and quickly, so that they can begin productive work in the fields that they have chosen. Developmental students in particular face a host of obstacles that must be overcome to attain any sort of education at all. My classrooms at a certain Technical Community College are full of single parents, laid-off tradesmen, destitute

teenagers, diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disabilities, people with multiple jobs, speakers of English as a second language, teenagers, retired persons. There exists a very real link between the completion rate for my classes and the availability of free bus passes. Developmental students are one blown carburetor, one loss of a babysitter away from having to abandon their ongoing academic requirements at all times, resulting in a devastating amount of wasted effort and tuition money each and every semester.

In addition to the practical issues—and far more difficult to solve—there is the issue of curriculum integration. Many developmental students don't finish developmental courses, much less satisfactorily complete work on a degree. When they get to English 111 or the equivalent freshman composition classes, they aren't prepared, aren't succeeding. Clearly the traditional classroom model does not meet the needs of developmental students as well as it should, either.

So this is not a call to turn our backs on technology. As troubling as it may be, the trend towards individual electronic work is a natural, predictable response to a real and pressing issue. Business as usual may not be the best option for a developmental English program; I can't stand the thought of losing another student due to a change in employment hours. I can't stand by and watch as developmental students stumble into English 111 unprepared. Something needs to be done. Our attention, then, should be turned towards making technology work *for* us. Developmental students need both the structure, guidance and attention characteristic of a traditional classroom *and* the freedom, flexibility, and instantaneous feedback characteristic of computer-based exercises. Furthermore, they need experience and guidance in the development of

compelling arguments. By utilizing technology in a conscientious manner, rather than simply shoehorning it on top of some grammar exercises, community colleges can offer all of the above.

It would, I think, be presumptuous to assert that I've found the answer to this conundrum—but I do believe that I have found an answer that will benefit students, instructors, and the community at large. The document that follows breaks that answer into several components. First is a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of developmental instruction both in the traditional classroom and the laboratory emporium model, paying special attention to the ways that developmental programs ensure, or don't ensure, success beyond developmental education. Second I will outline my proposed curriculum changes, providing a rationale for such based upon my findings in part one.

Change is coming to developmental education. I aim for my Technical Community College to be on the forefront.

Dangers and Doors

Just outside of my office, two doors down and to the right, there exists a buzzing hive of activity. Forty students, an instructor, and three tutors. All of the latest technology. From 7:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., the L.E.A.P lab (Leading Edge Academic Program) admits developmental mathematics students in large groups, determines competencies and deficiencies nigh instantaneously, assigns students only those exercises that are relevant to their unique needs, and provides individual instruction on an as-needed basis. No two students move at the same pace, and now none have to. They enter

the room, pull up the relevant exercises, and get right down to business. I'm getting excited just thinking about it.

The L.E.A.P. Lab falls under NCAT's (The National Center for Academic Transformation) heading of an "emporium model," and is characterized by the following qualifications. The emporium

- 1.) Eliminates all lectures and replaces them with a learning resource center model featuring interactive software and on-demand personalized assistance.
- 2.) Depends heavily on instructional software, including interactive tutorials, practice exercises, solutions to frequently asked questions, and online quizzes and tests.
- 3.) Allows students to choose what types of learning materials to use depending on their needs, and how quickly to work through the materials.
- 4.) Uses a staffing model that combines faculty, GTAs, peer tutors and others who respond directly to students' specific needs and direct them to resources from which they can learn.
- 5.) May require a significant commitment of space and equipment.
- 6.) More than one course can be taught in an emporium, thus leveraging the initial investment. (Twigg)

At this Technical Community College—and many others, including Louisiana State, the University of Alabama, the University of Idaho—the emporium model has entirely supplanted developmental mathematics courses of the lecture format due to the advantages listed above. The mathematics emporium model is entirely student centered, and it reduces three semesters' worth of work into thirteen independent modules that are to be completed at whatever pace a student deems best. Just look at the emphasis in these bullet points: "interactive," "on-demand," "allows students to choose," "respond directly to students' specific needs." On paper (or more appropriately, on a computer screen), the emporium is the future of education.

So why is a real-life emporium such a depressing place?

Those who poke their heads into one of these laboratories will see a vastly different picture than NCAT's description paints. Picture a large group of students, each staring into a computer screen. There is no sound save for the clicks of mice, the clacks of number pads, and the ever-present drone of forty computers' cooling fans spinning in unison. The fans keep the heat from damaging the valuable processors inside each tower. Instead, that heat permeates the air in the lab. The warm air off the towers, the body heat of the people, and of course that hum all work together to inspire a spectacular drowsiness. At each workstation there are two Solo cups with little notches cut into them, a red one and a yellow one. They fit right over the top of the flat-screen monitors. They are distress signals. Red means, "I need help." Yellow means, "I'm taking a test. Don't disturb me." Conversation is strongly discouraged. These labs are filled to capacity and nearly silent for most of the day.

On a recent morning, a student named Theo mentioned his boredom with the mathematics emporium, so I asked him if others in his class felt the same way. Theo told me that he couldn't be sure. He didn't know anyone in his class.

On to the obvious question, then: if the emporium is really such a terrible thing, why does it exist? Why are intelligent and insightful people backing such a program? There are several good reasons. As depressing as I might find the lab space, its core principles are sound. Only its implementation is flawed.

In a perfect world, each and every student would attend small classes with an intimate cohort of students, receiving on-demand attention and guidance from a devoted

and knowledgeable expert. Sadly, this just can't be the case for everyone, and for one simple reason: money. Education isn't cheap; not for students, and not for the taxpayers, either. In the face of declining revenue and near-exponential enrollment growth (my Technical Community College, for example, has seen a thirty-percent increase in its student body in the past two years, mirroring national trends) community colleges must continually find ways to do more with less. As much as this school and other colleges would love to simply begin offering more classes, they are unable to: there are not enough rooms to hold everyone who wants in, and there aren't enough funds to pay all of the people who would be required to teach them.

The emporium model addresses both of these problems simultaneously by increasing the number of students that can work in one classroom while reducing the amount of teachers who would have to be present. The classrooms in the Campus Center building here on my Technical Community College's satellite campus used to have a capacity of 25 with one full-time or adjunct instructor, with whom students would meet for three hours per week. Those rooms now have a capacity of 40 students and are totally filled for the majority of the day, five days per week. It is as if they have created space out of thin air; the school would have needed an entirely new building's worth of classrooms to accommodate all of those people.

As lecture courses are no longer available, the number of teachers needed has been greatly reduced. Bad news for adjuncts. A great deal of adjunct positions are no longer required. Consider NCAT's "INSTITUTION E." Prior to 2007, Institution E offered twenty-four to twenty-six developmental reading classes per semester, which

would be staffed by two full-time instructors and five to six adjuncts and have an average class size of seventeen students. Institution E used to enroll roughly 400 students per semester, educating them at an average per-semester cost of \$197 each. Their post-redesign program looks vastly different. Those twenty-six sections of seventeen students have been consolidated into *two* sections of roughly *two hundred* students. The number of necessary adjunct positions has dropped from five or six to zero. As my astute readers have no doubt already surmised, this means that the entire developmental reading curriculum at Institution E is planned, administered, and recorded by only two people, each of whom are responsible for two hundred students per semester. The cost per student, accordingly, has dropped from \$197 to \$101, a 48.3% decrease. These savings are to be “reallocated for the support of the educational needs of the students enrolled at Institution E.” (Twigg) Further savings are projected as the program gains momentum.

Institution E isn't isolated. The average full time instructor in XTCC's developmental mathematics department used to be responsible for roughly one hundred students, four classes of twenty-five people each. The average full-time instructor now deals with two hundred and fifty students, representing a 150% increase. From another perspective, that statistic represents, more accurately, a sizeable decrease in the cost of instruction. Some of this decrease was merely a happy side-effect, and seems to have been only partially considered in early trials of the emporium model. At the University of Alabama, for example, the initial plan was to staff the MLTC (their mathematics lab)

primarily with instructors and to use graduate students and upper-level, undergraduate students for tutorial support. It soon became apparent that the undergraduate students were as effective as the graduate students in providing tutorial support, thus eliminating the need for graduate students. Based on student-use data collected during the first semester of operation, Alabama also reduced the number of instructors and undergraduate tutors. (Educause 35).

Today, the lessened requirements are used as a selling point to attract schools to this model. And these days, money is a powerful selling point indeed. The National Center for Academic Transformation includes in its rationale for adopting this model several bullet points, such as “whole course redesign,” “commercially available computerized education products,” and “modularization + mastery learning.” But they get downright lustful at the bottom of the page, dropping the impartial tone altogether. “Oh yes,” the bullet point reads, “cost reduction.” (Twigg)

Computer labs, of course, are not cheap. Setting up an emporium model requires a significant up-front investment, which is later balanced out by lower sustained expenses. Even in the face of the aforementioned economic pressures, though, saving X amount of dollars is not reason enough for a whole course redesign, especially one which saves money in large part due to loss of jobs. Such redesign requires concrete and measurable gains in student success, which these course redesigns do have.

Nationwide, developmental English, reading, and mathematics programs tend to have unacceptably high failure/withdrawal rates, generally around forty to fifty percent. When I heard colleagues point out that half of developmental students—defined as “those who find academic writing tasks especially challenging” by Bill Bolin, who also notes deficiencies in prewriting skills and need for instruction on writing from classical

rhetoric—do not complete their courses, I thought they were being hyperbolic. They weren't. Roughly ten percent of students enrolled in developmental programs throughout the country are repeating their respective courses. For whatever reason, developmental students are dropping like flies in lecture-based classrooms. Furthermore, there stands a yawning chasm between that fifty percent completion rate and the ten percent of students who are repeating courses. Many students—thousands in every state—leave developmental programs without completing their courses, and they never come back. They give up.

Of the small percentage who progress to their curriculum courses of study, a still smaller percentage succeed there. The developmental population's entrance numbers are ballooning while the completion rate sinks. Among the primary causes of this is poor placement.

A major issue in developmental education, and particularly placement, is redundancy. A student who places in to Mathematics 080 comes in lacking knowledge of many of the rules taught in Mathematics 070. In complement, many of the students who place into an English 090 class are unaware of what a fragment sentence or a comma splice are, or perhaps don't understand the principles of paragraph structure. Placement into developmental course levels is based on a percentage score on an entrance exam, and as such only reflects approximate skill level at best. Formal rules of plotting intercepts or correctly using adverbs are not innate skills, so often instructors of a higher-level developmental course must devote time and energy teaching skills that belong in a lower-level class. Many of the students in the room may need this remediation, but many will

not—some have already come through that lower level class, and may have to spend a significant portion of their classroom time on material that they already know.

The emporium model redesign addresses this by eliminating course levels. Students are no longer enrolled in Mathematics 060, 070, or 080; instead, they are simply considered to be students of developmental mathematics. Since they do not have to take as many as three separate classes, each with an entirely new cohort of classmates--and thus an entirely new foundation that needs to be established—students can be sure that they will have to learn and show competency in each skill only once. In an ideal world, no student would ever have to sit through such a retread in any class, but each student's needs are different, so there is simply no way to design a curriculum and placement system that wholly avoids this.

Grammar studies are no different from mathematics in this respect. Some students enter the program with an innate knowledge of unity, tense, parallelism, and style—and some don't. This semester, for example, I am teaching three different course levels which contain (supposedly) students of respectively differing competence. Still, each of the three classes must cover much of the same material. Those students who complete my lower level courses this semester will move into a higher level class where they will take some of the same assessments over again, as incoming students who did not take the lower level courses will need instruction in those areas.

Repeating material causes frustration and boredom in students, which generally leads to one of two outcomes. The first outcome, and the least surprising, is that they “check out” of instruction. They stare out the window, at the clock. They surreptitiously

check their phones for text messages. They half-heartedly apply themselves to the day's activities, sighing with theatrical exaggeration when they finish early. Time is valuable, and I've met no one with a keener sense of this than developmental students. When students have to repeat large amounts of material, they feel—and rightly so—that their time is being wasted, that these exercises are pointless to them. Furthermore, they question the accuracy of their placement. “Why,” one student wanted to know, “did I have to take a semester of this stuff if we're just going to cover it again here?” No satisfactory answer exists for that, and once lost, a student's enthusiasm is nearly impossible to regain.

On the other hand, some experienced students are understanding and accepting of the need for newcomers to be instructed in topics that they themselves have already mastered. They readily participate in discussion and exercises, and can be incredibly positive members of a classroom community. They delight in the opportunity to share their knowledge with the less experienced, and they can be invaluable resources when test time comes around, providing guidance and sometimes even leading informal study groups. Their unbridled enthusiasm, unfortunately, is a double-edged sword. When questions are asked to the class, there is generally a delay of several seconds as the newer class members mentally assert their newfound knowledge or physically pore through their notes. More experienced students, of course, don't need this delay. Answers come to them freely. It is incredibly gratifying to witness, but the gap in skill level can be an intimidating thing for students whose confidence in their own abilities is already on shaky ground. Knowing that someone in the room is bursting to share an answer makes

many students feel ashamed of their own struggles and invites complacency. When students aren't sure of their answers, but no one speaks up, an awkward silence can be a blessing—people hate the silence and will hazard an educated guess to break it. These educated guesses are the source of numerous unexpected teaching moments, but they can't exist in the same ecosphere as a person who doesn't have to guess. Every newcomer knows that the experienced student has an answer, and when lacking confidence, he or she is more than happy to hang back and hope the responsibility of speaking gets picked up by someone else rather than risk feeling foolish.

Redundancy is difficult for instructors, as well. The constant need for remediation detracts from time that could be spent making progress on more substantive material, forcing instructors to either rush the class through certain topics or sometimes even drop them altogether. Furthermore, instructional materials such as textbooks and web-based supplements for a given course do not include information on remedial topics. Instructors then must spend valuable hours repurposing old materials or creating new ones to teach the required skills. Out-of-class hours that could have been spent more accurately assessing student work or creating interesting, thought-provoking assignments must instead be wasted playing catch-up.

The problem of sorting has always been present—especially in skill-based, introductory programs such as developmental education—and it isn't likely to go away. Trying to productively divide thousands of people into just a few distinct groups is an ambitious endeavor to say the least! Modular programs such as the emporium don't just reduce the redundancy that students and instructors must deal with; they totally eliminate

it—when students pass a module, proving competency in a given skill, they never have to see it again unless they do so of their own accord. Instructors, too, are free to devote their attention to where it is truly needed. For that, I admire the emporium.

On the other hand, while the emporium does individualize instruction, it does so at the cost of isolating students. There is no mechanism in place by which students can meet with peers who are working on the same skills. There is no room for collaboration, either. Gone are the days when an instructor could believe that invention happens in a vacuum. With the benefit of collaboration, it is possible to see students assert their own “being-in-the-word” (Goggin 36), but without it education becomes a solitary act, a solo trip from point A to point B. Students receive a list of intellectual obstacles to surmount, and having finished, are considered to be “done.” Knowledge, conceptualized this way, is measurable, quantified, accounted for. An instructor, assuming one were present, could direct a student’s attention to a coordinate on a graph and say, “You know *this* much.”

The desire for a method of quantifying knowledge is nothing new. Scholars and laymen alike have bickered and debated over the best way to do so—and indeed whether doing so is even possible—for decades. To that end, the old standby of a paper test with a percentage score has served a crucial role. Conscientious educators, though they may use these tests, are aware of their limited utility. Multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, true/false: these questions can only represent a student’s command of a given subject to a loose approximate degree, and they certainly cannot gauge a person’s ability to apply the knowledge that he or she has acquired. Furthermore, depending on the format, a student can have anywhere from a twenty-five to a fifty percent chance of choosing the correct

answer to a question by simply hazarding a blind guess.

The attraction to these types of assessments does not stem from their benefit to students or from their inherent ability to codify achievement. Rather, these tests still exist due to pragmatic concerns. No one instructor can be expected to devote the unimaginable amount of time it would take to thoroughly consider, assess, and respond to the written arguments of a hundred students each week. There simply aren't enough hours in the day. We feel, we know, that the best way to teach writing is to have them constantly generating content that is stimulating, relevant, and contextualized. We love watching ideas bloom and take shape upon the page—but who's going to grade it all, coach these students through the unpredictable idiosyncrasies of written English? Furthermore, as the curriculum is currently written, developmental English classes are supposed to focus almost exclusively on clarity and correctness in written expression— to what extent can an instructor whose course plan is basically a glorified grammar primer ethically grade students on how sound their arguments are?

To choose one example among many, let's have a look at the proposed Student Learning Outcomes for my English 080 class. While these are a local, personal example, they are also consistent with national trends. My students, before they ever meet me or set foot in my classroom, sign on with the expectation and understanding that they will “demonstrate prewriting techniques, create a unified paragraph, construct complete sentences free of structural error, use verb forms correctly, write a variety of types of sentences, use nouns, pronouns, and modifiers correctly, demonstrate correct punctuation, and select appropriate correctly spelled words in context” (XTCC Spring 2012

Departmental Syllabus). At XTCC and nationwide, developmental English departments focus almost solely on conventions of formal grammar. The placement tests use grammar conventions to determine competency; the textbooks are split into chapters not by genre or era but by parts of speech; every resource that these students have access to and almost every assessment, be it in-person or online, devotes enough time to issues of conjugation and comma placement to give any pedant pause. As if it weren't troubling enough that so many lecture-based classes devote an inordinate amount of time to mechanics, the new online/emporium methods of instruction will place an even *heavier* focus on them! After all, a computer cannot assess the efficacy of an argument; it can only judge whether a person has clicked the proper radio button.

I will not disagree with the assertion that developmental English students lack familiarity with grammatical convention. They have not read all that much, have not exactly written volumes. Their writing is laden with errors, ranging from those serious enough to inhibit comprehension to those innocent enough to niggle only a true prescriptivist. But should a course focus nearly all its energy on such things?

For expediency and efficiency's sake, a course plan of this nature has much to offer. These grammar exercises can be graded in a matter of minutes—less, even, with the aid of technology. It is easy to slap a stack of Scantrons onto a machine and press the “Grade” button, or to assign some computerized radio-button true/false or multiple choice questions and receive instant feedback. By testing on concrete right-or-wrong issues and choosing to assess students by push-button means, instructors save countless hours of intricate marking and commenting, all while fostering an air of objectivity. One's

personal feelings on the thesis of a persuasive topic cannot possibly have any bearing on whether a given sentence is a comma splice. No matter how problematic or ornery a student may be, he or she can never point to a computer and say “That thing just doesn’t like me,” or “MySkillsLab docked me points because it disagreed with my stance on gay marriage.”

Furthermore, the vast majority of developmental students in my experience are concrete learners who respond much more positively to a worksheet on pronoun usage than they do to a thought-provoking question for discussion. While identifying sentence types—one of the least productive, most insular exercises that I can think of—students find joy and confidence in their newfound ability to point out a sentence that is both compound *and* complex. Yes/no exercises give them the opportunity to be *right*, unquestionably, unequivocally *right*. It’s nice.

As if the objectivity, the ease of assessment, and the opportunity to build a student’s confidence weren’t enough, yet another lure keeps developmental instructors stuck on grammar: it is just a breeze to teach. A couple rules here, a couple of example sentences there, and hey presto! You’ve taught apostrophes. I do not intend to cast aspersions at any of my colleagues or imply that those who do choose to focus on these things are lazy. They’re doing exactly what anyone else in that position would be tempted to do. When both students and administration expect a class to have a given focus, when that focus caters to the concrete learners who are often present in developmental classes, when the required course texts contain maybe ten readings of a page or two each versus two hundred pages of exercises, it’s the perfect storm. One can speak about pronoun

cases for days on end using the materials that are readily available, telling students that yes, they've learned when to use *whom*; that person can then leave the classroom and mark up a pile of assessments in a matter of minutes. That instructor can then report to his or her supervisor that "objective, mastery-based" assessments have demonstrated that this or that batch of students have learned to appropriately utilize pronoun cases with eighty-five per cent accuracy and go on about his or her day. When the alternative is spending the lion's share of one's free time tracking down relevant readings, finding a way to distribute those readings to a cohort of students who hesitate to speak up in discussion and much prefer the comforting glare of a worksheet, and when one is ultimately going to have to find a way to prove a class' expanding ability to an audience who desires only numerical data—in this case it's not surprising at all that an intelligent and well-meaning instructor might be seduced by the call of the status quo. In fact, it is more surprising that some are still able to resist it.

But resist it they should.

When considering the goals for a course or imagining the new capabilities that students should have upon completion of a semester, one has to consider first and foremost what the fundamental purpose of that particular discipline is. In the case of English studies, I think we can all agree, the fundamental purpose of writing is actually far removed from writing sentences that conform to a particular standard. In fact, that grammatical standard only exists as a way of aiding in writing's true purpose: the successful transmission of a piece communication in the absence of the utterer. In other words, we don't teach students to write merely in order to teach them to write; we teach

students to write in the hopes of providing them with the necessary tools to effectively *formulate* and *communicate* an idea. The mechanics are simply a means to an end.

Students of developmental English do need some experience with the mechanics, but we must ask the question, to what extent will those mechanics lessons enable them to succeed in future, more difficult writing situations? These skills only truly serve to reinforce “middle-class values, such as social stability and cultural homogeneity. . . [they] serve a gatekeeping role” (Burnham) and little else. Furthermore, how much of a student’s success is dependent upon grammar? To answer these questions, I have obtained the syllabi for two freshman composition classes; one from XTCC and one from UNCG. At UNCG, English 101 is meant:

1. To help students develop the ability to analyze texts, construct cogent arguments, and provide evidence for their ideas in writing;
2. To provide students with multiple examples of argumentative and analytical discourse as illustrated via student and professional/published texts;
3. To introduce students to rhetorical concepts of audience, writer, message and context, and how to employ these in both formal and informal writing situations;
4. To help students develop the ability to summarize, paraphrase, and use direct quotations in writing;
5. To promote to student writers the value of writing-to-learn through sequenced assignments rooted in a common theme or focus;
6. To introduce students to the act of writing as a public and community-based process through the activities of drafting, peer review, and revision.

In addition, English 101 is designed to address three of the proficiencies listed under Student Learning Goals in the UNCG General Education Program. These proficiencies are:

1. Ability to write and speak clearly, coherently, and effectively as well as to adapt modes of communication to one’s audience;
2. Ability to interpret academic writing and discourse in a variety of disciplines;
3. Ability to locate, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information (2007-2008 UNCG Undergraduate Bulletin 53)

On completion of this Technical Community College’s English 111, students are expected to be able to

1. Write college-level expository essays with a clear thesis, clear organizational strategy, and supporting detail.
2. Revise writing using proofreading and editing comments.
3. Write a college-level essay incorporating academically appropriate field research.
4. Incorporate academically appropriate print and electronic research using MLA documentation into writing.
5. Write at least three college-level essays in a timed setting.
6. Analyze non-fiction readings and other texts through the use of summary, paraphrase, and discussion.

Not one of the proposed goals for freshman composition classes at either of these institutions focuses on formal aspects of expression¹⁶.

If students who are unfamiliar with writing as a means of communication enter into a developmental program, they are clearly developing *toward* something. They are being groomed, trained for the challenges ahead. Unfortunately, today’s developmental students are only partially prepared for those coming hurdles. Grammar exercises might teach them to construct sentences that are free of error, but such exercises do not teach them to write. A semester’s worth of punctuation training teaches students to write effectively in the same way that learning to change the oil teaches them to be auto mechanics, or learning to dribble teaches them to play basketball: in a manner that is woefully incomplete. It’s not enough to know the mechanics; in scholarship and in everyday life, as Mike Rose states in *The Mind at Work*, “You need to know how a thing

¹⁶ One could perhaps argue that this Technical Community College’s “college level” qualifier includes grammatical correctness. However, even if this is the case, emphasis is clearly placed on writing as communication. Correctness, though it may be an important afterthought, is still an afterthought.

is put together, how a device, or a category of devices, works.” (59) Developmental students need instruction in argument, structure, in positioning themselves as participants in an academic discourse. They need to know how to dig deep into the content of a text, how to cogently articulate a statement about that text, and how to confidently express that statement. They need to be taught to think critically about their own writing and the work of others. They need to know how written communication is assembled, how it works. They need grammar help, too. And they need all of this in a semester or two. And for less money, please.

Of course, the formation of cogent arguments is quite difficult, especially for the inexperienced, and this would adversely affect completion rates. And the amount of instructor interaction that such a curriculum would require is very high, which would significantly increase the cost of instruction. Hurdles such as these keep developmental programs firmly on their current courses. If a department does decide to change anything, they shift to an online hybrid or emporium model, increasing completion rates and cutting costs simultaneously. Again, it all sounds lovely on paper, but there is a distinction that needs to be made: are developmental programs attempting to produce A) students who have completed developmental English, or B) students who are adequately prepared for college composition?

The emporium and other such modular programs only truly serve to produce members of group A. As these models gain ground, it's true, more students will complete English 090, and the school will have to spend significantly less money on each one of them. The short-term gains are phenomenal. Unfortunately, these gains will not translate

into an increase in the rate of curriculum completion because the changes brought about by modularizing do not address the root causes of student failures. These changes focus exclusively on the pragmatics, and sometimes fail to adequately address even those¹⁷. Students will be no better prepared for freshman composition after completing such programs—in fact they will be even less prepared—because these programs are set up to solve the wrong set of problems. They operate mostly to the benefit of the financial bottom line of the institution and the pocketbooks of the companies who license the programs. I truly believe that the majority of these implementations are well-intentioned, but sadly, “in the immediate push and pull of legislation, questions of broader impact rarely get asked.” (Rose, 43)

If indeed we hope to enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed at the college or university level, then we have quite an arduous task ahead. To do so will require a curriculum that both compensates for pragmatic obstacles such as meeting space, meeting times, cost, and instructor staffing, and addresses the theoretical concerns of content and relevance simultaneously. In other words, students need more opportunities to discuss their work with peers, tutors, and teachers, more opportunities to write from a rhetorical standpoint, an open and engaged connection with their writing, and detailed feedback to inform their future work. Writers, developing or otherwise, invent by involving other people, whether as editors, resonators, or even challengers, pushing their efforts steadily toward higher ground. Without the influence of others,

¹⁷ In the case of mandatory scheduled lab hours, for example, while the school is free to designate less classroom space for the number of students enrolled in a given program, each student must still report to an inflexible location at an inflexible time, totally negating the purported freedom offered by web-based instruction.

writing languishes. (LeFevre 34) And in spite of my reservations about a grammar-centered class, developmental students do need opportunities to improve those skills as well—as Lanham describes, it’s getting more and more difficult by the day to find college students who can compose introductory memos and the like at an acceptable level: the “prose problem” persists (32). Furthermore, such a class must allow a measure of flexibility in scheduling.

Thanks to the very advances in computer technology that threaten to turn so many curricula into simulacra, such a program may be well within our reach. Rather than allowing the teaching of writing to be supplanted by such vehicles as MyWritingLab, developmental educators should be considering ways to use them to enhance traditional writing classes. When carefully applied, such tools can be used to aid in placement, assess—and even, to an extent, teach—many of the more formulaic elements of written expression (punctuation, pronouns, and the like) and provide that much-needed flexibility. Computerized delivery methods, in summary, can be used to outsource the necessary (but less thought-provoking) pieces of developmental English curricula to a flexible time outside of class, thus freeing those class hours to focus on how writing works. This “outsourced” material could be completed on the student’s own time, which would offer a measure of flexibility. Furthermore, a shift of this sort, removing so much material from the in-person meeting, would allow for developmental classes to assemble for the one hundred and fifty minutes a week characteristic of curriculum freshman courses rather than the two hundred and fifty minutes for which they must currently be present. Not only would students welcome such a reduction in hours for the lessened

structured obligation, this would benefit community college administrators as well by reducing the amount of required classroom space. Unlike current modular programs, this reduction would not offer an instant, dazzling cut to the price of instruction per student, as such a shift does not call for massively increased class sizes or a decimated teaching staff. However, shifting grammar to the computer would absolutely increase the amount of interaction and writing guidance that each student is able to receive, better equipping each one for the curriculum and ultimately paying off by producing ever-increasing numbers of college graduates.

Our task, then, is to pull the best parts out of modular programs and produce a happy marriage with the classroom. As I have mentioned previously, some major problems affecting achievement in the classroom are placement and redundancy. Modular instruction can address both of these with one fell swoop: the elimination of course levels. Instead of offering English 070, 080, 090 and reading 070, 080, 090, colleges can simply offer a program called Developmental English and Reading. The Developmental English and Reading program will cover every topic that the current classes do, plus provide a greater focus on allowing students to actually write. Instead of meeting with one class every day of the week, students will select from a series of running seminars, each based around a given focus and supplemented by online material and a tutoring center. Students need only to attend the seminars that address skills which need development. In this way, each student receives a personalized program. Prior to recent advances in technology, such would have been a logistical nightmare. Today, on the other hand, anything is possible. Any halfway competent IT department can create a

program to keep student records synchronized across multiple computers and display real-time seminar openings with relative ease. Why would we need such a program?

My proposed curriculum changes are in accordance with the NCAT's desire for "whole course redesign," which means they start from the outset. This includes three major factors—a more effective entrance exam, focused, short-term seminars rather than generalized long-term classes, and a capstone project. As I write this, students who hope to attend any class at this Technical Community College must begin by coming to campus a few weeks before the beginning of the semester to take the COMPASS test at orientation, which determines placement by merit of a simple percentage score. Those students who score below the requisite number for entrance into freshman composition will be placed into the tiered developmental classes. In the future, I'd like to see a different chain of events.

In my proposed program, students who place into Developmental English and Reading will first be directed to a meeting hall for a departmental orientation, wherein the nature of the program that they have just entered will be thoroughly explained in a group setting. Again, thanks largely to the advent of the internet and technology, my Technical Community College and other schools hoping to follow suit will be able to offer a much more student-centered approach than has been possible in the past. For the weeks in between orientation and the beginning of the semester, each student will be allowed unfettered access to practice exercises and a study guide about all course material in the form of a downloadable PDF. In the recent past, the idea of freely distributing such a resource would have been laughable. A document containing all of that work and

information would be quite a large number of pages, and printing one for every applicant would prove a difficult financial burden for an institution already suffering from dwindling funds. Today, schools can offer them for no cost other than the one-time expense of production and the negligible fees for file hosting.

At the departmental orientation, students will not only be instructed in how to access these resources, they will also be informed of exactly why they might want to use them: when the semester does start, they will be taking a Developmental English and Reading diagnostic test,¹⁸ which will be quite lengthy and will cover skills found in all developmental classes. Many students do not realize the importance of the COMPASS in determining the course of their future studies. Once they find out that it won't affect their GPAs, they approach it with a casual attitude that ends up costing them a large amount of time and energy. Developmental English and Reading students will know exactly what type of material is on their coming test and how to study for it; they will also be aware of one very important factor: the developmental diagnostic will be electronically taken and scored, gauging student competence in each of the individual skills that Developmental English and Reading focuses on. These results will be used to determine exactly which in-person seminars and electronic assessments that the student has to take. In this way, success on the diagnostic will directly translate to lessened obligations in the future.

Armed with a real and immediate benefit for performance and the materials to with which to study, entrants into the program will be better prepared and motivated from day one.

¹⁸ A general diagnostic placement test followed by a specialized diagnostic placement test might seem to be overkill, but this is the best practice for two reasons. First, while roughly twenty-five percent of students require some developmental remediation, the other seventy-five percent don't—these students have no need for the developmental diagnostic. Second, the developmental diagnostic is an invaluable tool in providing a student-centered program.

On the day that each student takes his or her developmental diagnostic, that student will be assigned a faculty mentor, and advisor who stays consistent throughout the student's developmental career. One downside to a modularized program is that students do not have a figure with whom they can grow and feel comfortable. A designated mentor will address this deficiency. Not only will students feel more comfortable knowing that they have someone who will stick with them through their adjustment into the life of a college student, mentoring offers many practical benefits. Mentors can aid in registration and financial aid paperwork, thus reducing the strain on those departments, and they can offer support when a student is having difficulties. Of course as the saying goes, freshmen don't do optional, so past mentoring programs have been of limited utility—students just don't take advantage of the opportunity that mentoring provides. To ensure that students check in regularly, mentors will be granted one very special power: only a student's faculty mentor can register him or her for a seminar. Students must speak to a consistent person on a regular basis to report on successes or failures, at which point they can discuss strengths, weaknesses, and strategies for the future.

The exact number of seminars and their focuses will vary from institution to institution, but they can be selected and offered by dissecting the current programs and looking ahead to the curriculum. At all times the students will have access to their grammar exercises, supplements, and assessments online, and will have the opportunity to meet with peer or professional tutors in the tutoring center. The seminars will focus on analysis of texts and expression in written communication. They will range from

introductory, paragraph length assignments in the beginning to more complex and lengthy discourses toward the end of the program. Early seminars, of course, must be taken or placed out of before the later ones, and certain milestones in the grammar section must be met before enrollment in later seminars. With such a structure, students can be sure to remain engaged and challenged by novel and interesting material without having to retread earlier work or being left behind. At the end of the seminar term—which could range from one to two weeks depending on the content covered and product created—the student would have his or her mentor record his or her progress and place him or her into the next selected section.

There are pragmatic advantages to this, as well. If a student enrolls into a course that meets in a static time and place for eighty days, then that student must be able to adapt his or her entire life schedule to that time frame for the next four or five months. Further, many students, by merit of hard work and classroom participation, achieve passing grades in classes for which they have barely grasped the material. If a class meets for four months and has one final grade, then it is entirely possible for a student to be thoroughly lacking in one or two areas and still pass the course. Instructors hesitate to hold hard-working students back, even if they are lacking, due to the efforts they have made and the fact that failing a course will result in a setback of nearly half a year.

If, on the other hand, seminars are focused and short, instructors can hold students to a much higher standard. Currently, students in developmental English classes on this Technical Community College's campus can miss up to ten(!) of eighty days before they are dropped. Such a low standard for attendance—while often made necessary by the life

situations of many low-income students—invites students to skip class and take too many days off. Absence undoubtedly harms performance, but a certain amount must be tolerated in a class that meets eighty times. However, if a class meets only a few times a week for two weeks, at the hour of the student's choosing, it is possible to hold students to a much higher standard. Not only can instructors expect perfect or near-perfect attendance over such a short term, they can raise their standards for student work. A grade of seventy will result in promotion to the next level of developmental English under the current model because instructors have to account for a very wide range of material over a long period of time. To ask every student in one class to maintain an A average over sixteen weeks or repeat the course is a bit absurd. One rough patch, and that student falls a semester behind. When a seminar lasts only for a week or two, though, and will be offered many times throughout the course of a semester, we can ask for more. Each student must excel in each seminar to progress. Today, the cost for failure is a long and arduous setback from which many students don't return. As such, instructors tend to pass mediocre workers onto the next level. If the price for failure was an annoyance from which one could recover, students would learn from those failures instead of giving up. Instructors, accordingly, could grade more rigorously, raising the ambition and attention to detail that each student displays.

And students will be well-served by that ambition and attention. In order to successfully complete my proposed course, each of them will be required to complete a capstone assignment, to be negotiated with and graded by his or her mentor. These capstone assignments will take the form of a written essay, and will be planned with input

from curriculum English instructors. As our main goal is to enable success in the curriculum, it stands to reason that we should increase input *from* the curriculum. Moving into college composition should require the competent demonstration of college composition techniques.

Recent technological advances have provided instructors and curriculum planners with an arsenal of new techniques and methods for teaching. Simultaneously, pragmatic difficulties caused by the influx of new students in the midst of an economic downturn have provided the impetus for a drastic departure from the usual face-to-face grammar course. Right now, we stand at the meeting point between problems and advances, and we have the perfect catalyst to stop being complacent and start making progress. By coupling cost-cutting measures such as computerization where appropriate and devoting more attention to the generation of writing in a rhetorical context, we can serve developmental students in a way that was until recently quite simply impossible. If educators will take this opportunity to make the necessary strides, then developmental students nationwide, in greater numbers each semester, will get where they're going more quickly, more efficiently, and with greater skill. They will learn and grow on their own terms—and that pays dividends that no bank account could measure.

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