

THESIS

MAPPING BASIC WRITING “FRONTIERS”

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## ABSTRACT

### MAPPING BASIC WRITING “FRONTIERS”

This thesis will argue that there is a gap between the Basic Writing pedagogies of Min Zhan Lu and Mina P. Shaughnessy manifesting itself at the discourse site between the *language of home* and the *language of school*. This gap, it will be argued, develops from the conflicting expectations of both teachers and students created by past experiences in the classroom and a perception of belongingness based on group “membership.” Further, it will be asserted that many Basic Writing students must face personal fears created by perceptions of past academic failures and a pre-determined sense of not belonging in the classroom in order to hear and respond to those conflicting expectations using their own voices. Teachers may be able to help students face these fears by disrupting the students’ preconceived conceptions of the Basic Writing classroom. This thesis will attempt to show that one possible means of disruption is creating an “untraditional” classroom environment using a multigenre format.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Each generation must write its own history, and although he benefits from earlier efforts, these do not relieve him of the necessity of creating his own historical account.*

*Howard E. Gardner*

The year was 1969. America was polarized by civil rights demonstrations, forcing every sector of our society to re-examine its moral, ethical, and political stance in relation to race and class issues. In New York, a group of student-activists took over buildings on a City University campus in order to demand a change in a CUNY enrollment policy they saw as unfairly favoring New York's white population. In this instance, after setting fire to one building and occupying another for a period of two weeks, the protestors won the battle (Horner 6; Mwamba; Babcock). CUNY changed its admissions policy to one of Open Enrollment, and the minority admissions went from 8% before to 50% of total admissions after the policy was implemented (Babcock). In *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, Mina P. Shaughnessy claims that Open Enrollment created for teachers a "pedagogical West" (4): a new frontier made up of Basic Writing classrooms "with adult student writers who appeared by college standards to be illiterate" (3). She maintained, that with *Errors and Expectations*, she had created a "frontier map" for those teachers who "by choice or assignment [were] heading" into this

new territory (4). Shaughnessy seemed to understand that frontiers must be explored before they can be inhabited. Educators such as Min-Zhan Lu, on the other hand, argue that Shaughnessy may not have fully appreciated the way ensuing questions over the right to explore this Basic Writing frontier would create uncomfortable gaps between teachers and students within the classroom.

*Following “Tracks” to the Gap*

In “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?” Lu further argues that a certain amount of inner-conflict and struggle associated with creating a new educational identity is necessary for Basic Writing students if they are to be successful in the classroom (30-31). The complication – that is, the inner-conflict – discussed here emerges from the fact that a student’s education prior to entering a Basic Writing class is not always about exploration and the growth of human potential. Sometimes, it is about being sorted into pre-defined identities to keep students exactly where they have been placed for more homogeneous instruction (Mayer 8; *Mind* 167). This system of sorting students into groups based on presumed intellect and abilities is known as “tracking” and has been a part of the American public school system since at least the beginning of the industrial age (Mayer 8; *Mind* 168). Mike Rose, in *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* characterizes three basic tracks: the “academic or college preparatory track...one or two variations of a general education track; and a vocational track” (167). According to Beth Hatt, in “Street Smarts vs. Book Smarts: The Figured World of Smartness in the Lives of Marginalized, Urban Youth,” tracking continues “despite the fact that it has been shown to be based more upon student

social status than academic aptitude” (147). Over time, she suggests, students on the “lower” tracks – the non-“academic” tracks – create negative self-perceptions of their “efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academics.” These perceptions in turn become self-fulfilling prophecies of perceived academic failure (146).

A further complication for students on tracks leading to strictly vocational programs is that education may become narrowly equated with “job-training” (*Mind* 169-170). The “American Dream, “in this instance becomes about a better paying job and not about the impact they have as citizens in determining the direction of national policies or their ability to “not only contribute to community but to [their] own self-worth” (deLeon 94). Though there was a time in this country when it was expected that students would acquire such knowledge in school,<sup>1</sup> it is unlikely students in today’s test-driven, standardized public school system will learn how to deliberate and engage in meaningful civic discourse.<sup>2</sup> In the *Unschooling Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*, Howard Gardner considers that, though it is necessary to have a context for what came before us historically, “each generation must write its own history” (xiv). Students who expect no more from themselves or from their society than a good paying job may, unfortunately, find they have no context for reflecting on their varied histories, let alone for documenting them. This lack of knowledge may also limit students’ perceptions of their inherent right to speak in public forums. In other words – thanks to a system of

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Risley, in the preface to *How It Grew: A History of the Pueblo Public Schools*, argues that it is the public school in which American citizens were traditionally offered this opportunity. Harry C. Boyte agrees in his article “Reframing Democracy: Governance, Civic Agency, and Politics,” that education has played “a key role” in the life of an entire community, creating the “citizen pharmacist or the citizen businessman” who ultimately takes his or her place as a civically responsible U.S. citizen (538).

<sup>2</sup> As Linda deLeon and Robert B. Denhardt assert in “The Political Theory of Reinvention,” “those who are isolated from government would not be expected to have the knowledge necessary to develop serious political theory” (90).

tracking that may have kept them from fully embracing their own right to speak outside the forum of a public demonstration – CUNY students won a battle but not necessarily the war. What they may have won was only a chance to inhabit a small space on a new frontier for which they had no map.

### *Widening Gaps*

It is possible that educators thought Open Enrollment students, unlike their teachers, did not need “maps” to this new frontier because the students would have teachers to guide them. Regrettably, teachers – looking across a land of seeming “illiteracy” – may have inadvertently created a semi-permanent gap between themselves and their students, a gap which did not allow for an adequate sharing of maps. This gap marks a space between the language of school, where teachers positioned themselves, and the language of home, where they situated their students. On either side of this linguistic border, Lu argues, students are asked to establish fixed identities and are judged to belong or not belong based on their ability to exhibit characteristics common to and sanctioned by each specific community, of either school or of home.<sup>3</sup> In “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” for instance, Lu insists that, as she grew up in Maoist China, keeping the languages of home and school separate was an expectation held by both her parents and her teachers. It was implied that if she were a “*good* student” (443 emphasis mine), she would never experience the “interference” of one side of the “border” from the other (443). As she moved back and forth between the two spaces, she felt forced to constantly re-vision her social and educational identities, finally coming to the conclusion

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu has called these “indices of membership” (“Description”130), arguing that these characteristics are used to “make or unmake” political groups which, he claims, are established in order to carry out certain political actions (127).



that neither identity can ever be completely unchanged by exploration on educational frontiers. “Development,” she argues – though “played out in the outer terrains” – begins with “inner” struggles (“Conflict” 31). Regardless of expectations generated by community or academic discourse – or maybe because of them – if students are to “develop,” they must choose for themselves where on the frontier they will make their stand.

### *Exploring the “Gap”*

Shaughnessy did not see teaching Standard English conventions as a thing that might interfere with the students’ abilities to take a stand. In fact, empowering students to choose “how and when and where” to use language was an explicitly stated goal in *Errors and Expectations* (11). In “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence,” Lu validates this goal but breaks it down into three component, or “challenges,” for both students and teachers: the students must learn conventions; they need to find confidence, and they need to be able to “respond” appropriately to differences between academic and home discourses (105-106). Lu argues that Shaughnessy adequately addresses only the first two challenges. The last, she claims, gets lost in essentialist assumptions about language and meaning (107). Shaughnessy, Lu stresses in “Conflict and Struggle,” seems to be aware that academic discourse has the power to take from students their “distinctive ways of interpreting the world” (*Errors* 292). Still, Lu claims, Shaughnessy insists that a “formal” approach to teaching conventions is the most “practical” (212) for “[helping] students master the academic meaning *without* reminding them that doing so might ‘wipe out’ the

familiarity” previously associated with certain words and ways of forming and interpreting meaning (“Conflict” 49 Lu’s emphasis). In other words, Shaughnessy professed an understanding of the way students are pushed and pulled between the discourses of home and of school yet still taught language as a simple set of “conventions, rules, standards, and codes” unlikely to have a measurable effect on student meaning – or student identity (“Conflict” 50). Lu, on the other hand, argues that students should not only be informed about the ways learning standard English conventions may affect their identity, but should be encouraged in the classroom to confront the inner struggle this conflict may provoke in them as they decide where they believe they will stand on the educational frontier, that is, whether or not they will embrace standard conventions, reject them, or develop some personally workable combination of the two.

This thesis will argue that there is a gap between the Basic Writing pedagogies of Lu and Shaughnessy manifesting itself at the discourse site between the *language of home* and the *language of school*. This gap, it will be argued, develops from the conflicting expectations of both teachers and students created by past experiences in the classroom and a perception of belongingness based on group “membership.” Further, it will be asserted that many Basic Writing students must face personal fears created by perceptions of past academic failures and a pre-determined sense of not belonging in the classroom in order to hear and respond to those conflicting expectations using their own voices. Teachers may be able to help students face these fears by disrupting the students’ preconceived conceptions of the Basic Writing classroom. This thesis will attempt to

show that one possible means of disruption is creating an “untraditional” classroom environment using a multigenre format.

*A Multigenre “Frontier Map”*

The approach detailed in this thesis combines a literacy narrative format<sup>4</sup> with a more a “nontraditional” assignment known as a *multigenre* project.<sup>5</sup> Such an assignment, it will be argued, makes use of students’ actual day-to-day, lived experiences with language as well as of the composition formats expected in the traditional college writing course. It will be argued that this assignment values the students’ languages of home within the classroom, helping to empower their writing voices and establish agency in a space they previously viewed as not belonging to them. In this way they may create a new academic identity and learn to negotiate for themselves the gap between the *language of home* and the *language of school*.

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<sup>4</sup> In a WPA listserv post on 23 Feb 2011, Richard Haswell defined the Literacy Narrative as “any public or private discourse that recounts the narrator’s growth in reading and writing; any writing-course assignment that asks students to relate the background and history of their growth in reading and writing.” Haswell is the Haas Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Romano defines a multigenre project as a paper “composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content” (*Blending* x-xi).

## THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*SEC. 601. No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.*

*CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964,  
Document Number: PL 88-352  
Date: 02 JUL 64  
88<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 7152*

### *TITLE VI –NONDISCRIMINATION IN FEDERALLY ASSISTED PROGRAMS<sup>6</sup>*

When the student demonstrations of 1969 ended with a new Open Enrollment policy in place, registration across all CUNY campuses quickly rose from a total of around 170,000 to well over 200,000 students (Reeves 119; Babcock). Financial and logistical problems strained the entire CUNY system;<sup>7</sup> fortunately, city and academic administrators did have a model to facilitate policy implementation. The program, *Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge* (SEEK), opened at the City University in 1965 as an “experiment” with the proposed purpose of offering higher education to students

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<sup>6</sup> United States. Department of Transportation. “Civil Rights Act of 1964.” *Department of Transportation: Civil Rights.* Department of Transportation. Jul 1964. Web. 12 Feb 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Because the Board had to hire more teachers and construct more classrooms in order to accommodate thousands of incoming students, the budget had to be supplemented by both the City and State of New York which Bruce Horner argues had a “polarizing” effect on the city. Those who stood against open enrollment, Horner suggests, used the financial issues as a platform from which to make sweeping statements about the effect the policy would have on CUNY’s reputation as what Babcock called “The Poor Man’s Harvard” (Reeves 119; “Birth” 6-7; Babcock)

“who would not have otherwise been admitted to any college because of their low academic standing in high school” (Reeves 121). According to Shaughnessy, SEEK also “served in ways as the model for the skills programs that were to be developed under [the Open Enrollment] policy” (*Errors* Preface).

As the director of SEEK, Shaughnessy was expected to develop and defend the new Basic Writing program for Open Enrollment students. To accomplish this, Shaughnessy was forced to

1. Justify the study and teaching of Basic Writing (BW) as worthy of academic pursuit,
2. Develop a Basic Writing pedagogy that would offer open enrollment students “positive writing experiences” (Reeves 122), and
3. Keep the newly implemented program from bleeding students<sup>8</sup>

Writing *Errors and Expectations* may have been Shaughnessy’s most effective answer to these challenges. Maintaining that the book was written as a guide for fellow settlers on a frontier “unmapped, except for a scattering of impressionistic articles and a few blazed trails” (4), she declares they all must “fabricate by mother wit” the tools needed to survive in this “pedagogical West” (4). She challenges educators to consider “certain battles” on this frontier “worth waging” (13). They must be ready, she asserts, to acknowledge BW students’ “linguistic sophistication” as well as “the complexity of the task they face as they set about learning to write for college” (13). Curiously, despite her own vivid imagery, and even despite the political turmoil of the times, *Errors and*

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<sup>8</sup> Soon after admissions Open Enrollment students began dropping out. In “Mina Shaughnessy and Open Admissions at New York’s City College,” LaVona L. Reeves gives the number as around forty percent (121). Babcock claims that “only one in four students from the early open admissions classes eventually graduated.”

*Expectations* can still be described as apolitical. In “The ‘Birth’ of ‘Basic Writing,’” Bruce Horner contends that Shaughnessy’s depiction of this Basic Writing “frontier” reads like a utopian “contrast to the American frontier experience” with teachers “[venturing] into uninhabited territory as so many pedagogical Eves and Adams, pursuing a mysterious, divinely ordained destiny” (16-17). Horner suggests Shaughnessy’s neutral stance is an attempt to align herself with administrative expectations in order to have a chance at legitimizing the academic study of Basic Writing (“Birth” 16), thereby silencing the program’s detractors.

#### *Theoretical Changes and Open Enrollment*

Discourse surrounding Open Enrollment centered on “traditional” views of the “educability” of students who were initially labeled as political “activists” (“Birth” 8; “Conflict” 32, 35). For Shaughnessy this meant proving the “ability to be educated [w]as a cognitive rather than political matter,” while accepting “traditional [but limiting] definitions of educability” (“Birth” 16). In “Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal,” Lester Faigley argues that *cognitive theorists*, such as Shaughnessy look at the ways writers actually produce writing in goal-directed stages (Faigley 533). Some proponents of this view define writers as cognitively mature or immature based on an inability to either recognize an audience that is not physically present or to empathize with perspectives other than their own (532). According to Horner, representing students as “beginners and/or foreigners seeking and able to join the American mainstream” enabled Shaughnessy to disrupt negative perceptions of the Basic Writing students’ inherent “educability” (“Birth” 14).

Pointed and prejudiced questions about the intellectual abilities of Open Enrollment students from the academic community compelled Shaughnessy to attempt to decipher the BW students' "alien" linguistic codes (*Errors* viii). She set out to argue for the necessity of deciphering the codes by focusing on "the types of difficulties found in basic writing" (4); in other words, she focused on error. Aware that such a focus might raise concerns "both pedagogical and political" (6), she acknowledges that "all linguistic forms...are finally arbitrary" (9) but feels educators ultimately cannot ignore the way error disrupts meaning (10-12). She determined, instead, to examine the kinds of errors students produce in order to make a case for their errors as logical inferences rather than unintelligible and random indications of illiteracy (*Errors* 5). This decision to focus on error to appease administrators<sup>9</sup> and alleviate students' discomfort<sup>10</sup> was later read by Lu as an essentialist assumption on Shaughnessy's part that she could teach standard English code to BW students without "forcing them to reposition themselves" within the borderland of the classroom ("Conflict" 51).

### *De-Coding the Basic Writing "Frontier Map"*

In "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language," Pierre Bourdieu claims that language is a code "in the sense of a cipher enabling equivalences to be established between sounds and meanings, but also in the sense of a system of norms

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<sup>9</sup> Shaughnessy points to an "awareness" on the part of BW teachers and administrators of the vulnerability of "remedial programs" in the college system, arguing that they "are likely to be evaluated (and budgeted) according to the speed with which they produce correct writers...correctness being a highly measurable feature of acceptable writing" (9).

<sup>10</sup> "So absolute is the importance of error in the minds of many writers," Shaughnessy claims, "that 'good writing' to them means 'correct writing,' nothing more" Many, she maintained, actually wanted to revisit the same techniques that had stumped them the first time in the hopes that "this time it would take", as though, like an organ transplant, there was some basic incompatibility between their mind and the material (8-9).

regulating linguistic practices” (45). This code and the learning of it he argues are directly linked to the social conditions under which the language is formed.<sup>11</sup> The challenge for students (and arguably for teachers) in a writing class may be in the hearing of an on-going cultural dissonance defined by linguistic codes particular to but seldom shared between different cultural, social, and political groups (“Conflict” 52). Asking students to “compartmentalize” their own different languages between the world outside the classroom and the world inside the classroom, as Lu argues Shaughnessy did, confines their “thoughts and actions” (44). Furthermore, Lu argues, teaching standard English to Basic Writing students as if it is a “politically neutral” exercise – as Shaughnessy does – decontextualizes language in a way that manipulates students into “learning academic discourse” (45-49) while taking away the freedom to choose their own meaning.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire reasons there can be no agency for students who are seen as objects to be manipulated, instead of being addressed as self-reflective subjects “committed [to] involvement” in their own freedom (69). Arguing from Freire’s *critical pedagogy* stance, the key to the Basic Writing “frontier map” may be historical context. People, he argues, make and are made by history, and it is when they are “denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated” (130). “Freeing” students to “participate” further in the University’s history may not have been exactly what the 1969 CUNY administrators wanted when they looked to Shaughnessy as a gatekeeper for their community. In fact,

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<sup>11</sup> “It follows,” he argues, “that one cannot fully account for the properties and social effects of the legitimate language unless one takes account, not only of the social conditions of the production of literary language and its grammar, but also of the social conditions in which this scholarly code is imposed and inculcated as the principle production and evolution of speech” (61).



Lu argues that those who questioned the “educability” of the Open Admissions students did so out of the “*fear* that these students would not only be hostile to the education they promote[d] but also take it over – that is, change it” (35). Lu’s quarrel with Shaughnessy’s pedagogy – the site of the gap between them – in fact, can be said to appear not at the site of language use and the ability to write correctly but at the place where language use meets Basic Writing students’ perceptions of their own right to speak in the classroom.

*Defining the Gap: The “Language of Home”*

To see the real argument between Lu and Shaughnessy, it may be necessary to set aside the debate on error creation and error meaning and look at the way meaning is created *in situ*. In her article “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence,” Lu defines the “politics of linguistic innocence” she sees in Shaughnessy’s pedagogical approach as the belief that multicultural classroom discourses<sup>12</sup> can somehow be “politically innocent” (105) when there is tacit agreement within the classroom that “different discourses do not enjoy equal political power” (105). For Lu, growing up in China, torn continually between “the world of home, dominated by the ideology of the Western humanistic tradition, and the world of society dominated by Mao Tse-tung’s Marxism” (“Silence” 437), political power and language use were linked from an early age. As a child she felt comfortable moving between the languages of

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<sup>12</sup> Kim Brian Lovejoy, Steve Fox and Katherine V. Wills base their arguments in “From Language Experience to Classroom Practice: Affirming Linguistic Diversity in Writing Pedagogy” on the very diversity of “today’s classroom” which includes a mix of students from different backgrounds and different educational skill levels (261).

home<sup>13</sup> and the required “Standard Chinese” of the State schools (438). As she got older, she struggled with the prescribed conventions she saw as being dictated by “absolute laws” in both worlds (445):

Gone were the days when I could innocently write, “I saw the red, red rose among the green leaves,” collapsing as I did, English and Chinese cultural traditions. “Red” came to mean Revolution at school, “the Commies” at home, and adultery in *The Scarlett Letter*. . . I began to put on and take off my Working Class language in the same way I put on and took off my school clothes to avoid being criticized (441).

She began to see and react to the cracks in the edges of social structure. For her parents and her teachers, the language debate was about survival (Lu 444); for Lu it became an on-going internal struggle as she walked the border between two worlds. That said, Lu’s inheritance of a dominant language (English) in a newly-communistic state created an almost natural linguistic conflict to explore, while an accident of birth into a family of intellectuals gifted her with the educational opportunity to analyze what she found.

For many students in Basic Writing courses, however, it may take much more than a simple recognition of an unequal political system to get them to step outside their own perceptions based on themselves as not “smart” enough to speak in the classroom. Hatt charges that educationally underserved populations are usually “over-represented” in “special needs” programs, while more privileged populations tend to be “tracked” into “gifted” programs, leaving those on the lower tracks to define themselves as “dumb” (147). On the other hand, most teachers do not want to make students self-conscious about their writing and stifle their individual creativity, but they *may* fear their students’ voices will be ignored in the academic world if they do not effectively master accepted writing conventions. One of the most difficult inner-battles fought by teachers in Basic Writing classrooms exists at the line between teaching traditional writing conventions

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<sup>13</sup> English and the “Shanghai-dialect” of the servants

(spelling, grammar, and syntax) and the place where social justice empowers student writing voices.<sup>14</sup> This thesis, then, is arguing that between the Language of School and the Language of Home a gap has formed in the theory of Basic Writing pedagogy created by expectations of both teachers and students based on erroneous perceptions of the value of the home language, especially in academic situations.<sup>15</sup> The way to bridge this gap, it will be argued, is to disrupt these perceptions of what is “legitimate” versus what is not by acknowledging the validity of “nonacademic” forms of expression within the classroom. After validating students’ perceptions of their own voice, they may feel empowered to negotiate for their right to express themselves in ways both academic and nonacademic which will represent most closely their intended meanings as they respond to class assignments.

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<sup>14</sup> “Somewhere between the folly of pretending that errors don’t matter,” says Shaughnessy in “Diving in: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” and “the rigidity of insisting that they matter more than anything” is where teachers must find their answers (237).

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu argues that for one culture to assure dominance of language over another it is “necessary for the school system to be perceived as the principal means of access to administrative positions” (“Production” 49); that is, the state school system becomes the only means of attaining “legitimate” vocational success. Because the official language of the state is imprinted into students through a process of “normalization and codification” intentionally devoid of the “popular” languages and pronunciations the students might have learned at home (58-59), students may be left to assume their home language has no “legitimate” value. Lovejoy et al assert, however, that, even though teachers continue to struggle with the “implications” of home discourse versus school discourse, most “understand the need to accept the language of their students on the grounds that it is the language of *nurture*” (262 *Italics Mine*), and, therefore not to be dismissed.

## THE ARGUMENT

*To try to persuade a student who makes errors...that the problems with his writing are all on the outside, or that he has no problems, may well be to perpetuate his confusion and deny him the ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where he will use which language.*

*Mina P. Shaughnessy*

*These decisions involve changes in how they think as well as how they use language.*

*Min-Zhan Lu*

The line between the language of home and the language of school might also be called the borderline between *expectation* and *agency*.<sup>16</sup> When students enter the college Basic Writing class, all of their previous experiences: of home, of friends, of work, and school are carried in with them along with a previously constructed version of themselves as “students” – these self-perceptions are part of their “indices of membership.” When they sit down and face the teacher, they may act in accordance with the ways experience

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<sup>16</sup> “The academic audience,” that is, the teacher, is “the least submissive of audiences,” so that “the writer” – the student – may be expected to perform to “meet his audience’s criteria for fullness and sound reasoning. The beginning writer is of course not prepared to meet these expectations, but his awareness of them helps him make sense out of the conventions that govern academic discourse” (*Errors* 240). Rothschild and Wallace, in “Exploring Agency in Classroom Discourse or, Should David Have Told His Story,” however, argue, somewhat sympathetically to Lu’s position, that “effecting agency through classroom discourse entails actively struggling in the complex web of balances and counterbalances which informs how teachers and students interpret, negotiate, and manage their ongoing sense of position and participation in the classroom” (366).

has taught them a “student” should act<sup>17</sup> (not necessarily the ways in which a student might have of knowing or of learning<sup>18</sup>). It is as if the teacher must try to reach her students through a thick pane of glass made up of constructed personas. There are so many layers, so many identities; it’s much like trying to teach by screaming outside the closed door of a soundproof room. The only site, it may then be argued, where the teacher and students truly meet is at a place of expectations both have defined as: “an education.”<sup>19</sup> Those expectations can be so overwhelmingly different, however, that education – that is, the actual sharing and acquiring of knowledge – can feel more like a parallel process than an interactive practice.<sup>20</sup> The only thing keeping them moving in the same direction may be a common vision of the students successfully navigating their way through the class.

Situating Shaughnessy on one side of this parallel path – anchored by conventional academic thought – and Lu on the other – advocating a social justice perspective, the gap between them becomes that place where teachers can perhaps help students find what Shaughnessy refers to as the “ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where [to] use which language” (11), and which Lu further delineates as the students’

1. Need for skills with the conventions of academic writing, and the

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<sup>17</sup> In “Breaking Barriers or Locked Out? Class-Based Perceptions and Experiences of Postsecondary Education,” Pamela Aronson claims that “identity transformation occurs as students construct new understandings of who they are in relation to their education” (49); she also argues that “disadvantaged youth exhibit a constellation of characteristics that have an impact on their achievement at every stage...this is a cumulative and reinforcing effect of the multiple barriers they face” (Aronson 44)..

<sup>18</sup> One of Lu’s arguments in “Redefining” has to do with the way Shaughnessy defines students ways of knowing in their “home discourse” as “‘largely intuitive,’ ‘simplistic,’ and ‘unreasoned’” while ways of knowing in the academic discourse she defines as more developed (114).

<sup>19</sup> A place, according to Horner, where “all are equal and equally strangers” (“Mapping” 125)

<sup>20</sup> As Shaughnessy admits that the Open Admissions (BW) students arrive “with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds” and see their education as both a promise and a threat; at the same time, she acknowledges that the teachers must see “below the surface,” beyond the students’ seeming “failures” and “inadequacies” (292) by learning to see themselves a “possible source of [their] students failure” (292).

2. Need for “confidence as a learners and writers,” and, finally, the
3. Need for the *wherewithal* to “decide how to respond to the potential dissonance between academic discourse and their *home* discourse” (“Redefining” 105-106).

For the purposes of this discussion, “*wherewithal*” can be defined as *agency*, or the valuing of one’s own knowledge and decision-making processes in ways that empower one, as a self-designated agent, to appropriately respond to the dissonance. Because Lu’s central claim appears to be that it is at this site (of *agency*) that Shaughnessy’s pedagogy fails (“Redefining” 106) it also seems reasonable that this is the site where a bridge between Shaughnessy and Lu ought to be built. Moreover, this may be the most important of the three “challenges” listed above<sup>21</sup> and needs to be addressed before confidence can be attained, certainly before skills with conventional standards of English composition can be acquired.

A particular problem for educationally underserved students is to learn to *hear* the dissonance: understand that it exists in the first place and affects their choices as agents in their own lives. Only with that understanding can they even begin to interpret the discord and what it means to them and to their communities (both in and out of school). Once students have a more accurate perspective of the differences between the language of home and the language of school, with the teacher’s help, they may learn to value their home discourse and gain confidence. With confidence they may: feel empowered to tackle the sometimes intimidating rules of standard English conventions and acquire the *wherewithal* to negotiate with their teachers, in a spirit of collaboration, for their own interpretation of those conventions within the borders of their academic work. Horner

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<sup>21</sup> Lu calls these three goals “challenges” and equates them with “tasks” she believes Shaughnessy was actually setting out for basic writing teachers as she developed *Errors and Expectations* (105-106).

claims that, after all, errors are only “flawed social transactions” in which the parties involved in negotiation have not reached agreement – through “offering, testing, and amending” – on the “significance to be attributed to the written notations” between them (“Re-Thinking” 141).

Even so, hearing the dissonance in the first place may not be easy; it may, in fact, be like trying to hear the whir of a fan that has been blowing around them since birth. Having never experienced silence, the student would have no frame of reference from which to even imagine such a thing could exist.<sup>22</sup> In this instance both the fan and the silence represent the different discourses which create inharmonious conversations in the classroom. Yet these are the very conversations the teacher must work through to show her students the gap that exists between them. Helping students to bridge a gap they might not even have seen up till now will take innovation on the part of the teacher who will have to work hard to engage her students. Without engagement the students may stay safely behind their walls, disconnected from an educational system that seemed long ago to have given up on them.

*Perspective: Learning to Hear the Dissonance*

Many Basic Writing teachers generally are aware that their students are not always sure how the higher education process is supposed to work in practice. Pamela Aronson believes these students do not even have a frame of reference allowing for an understanding of where a college education will fit into their lives (45). When students enter the classroom there is always a measure of uncertainty about what will be expected

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<sup>22</sup> Rose describes the idea of higher education off the beaten (vocational) track as sounding “like a glorious fairy tale, a magical account of a world full of possibility, full of hope and empowerment. Sinbad and Cinderella” he asserts “couldn’t [be] more fanciful” (*Lives* 18).

of them. They are, according to Shaughnessy, “strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers [are] about to assign them” (3). The students’ expectations may simply include a plan to complete their schoolwork and get some degree or certificate in some specified field. The mythology for them is that upon completing this process – almost magically – doors to better paying jobs will open, and this will mean security for themselves and their families.<sup>23</sup>

The truth behind this particular mythology is that having a degree does not automatically create job openings, hence the “academic” expectation that students ought to become well-read critical-thinkers and problem-solvers.<sup>24</sup> With these advanced thinking skills, they may be better equipped to find positions in and prosper in almost any field. But, this expectation may have no point of reference for students. Making matters worse, some of the General Education “required” classes – such as English Composition and its prerequisite, Basic Writing – attached to this expectation come with ready-made, fear-based assumptions<sup>25</sup> for many students. If the teacher is unaware of, or insensitive to, this connection between fear and the classroom experience and does not disrupt those connections almost from the very first day of class, many of the students will turn away.

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<sup>23</sup> Aronson argues that for many BW students (who tend to be from low-income families) “daily survival often takes priority over higher education, which may be seen as ‘optional’ or a ‘luxury’ compared to contributing economically to the household” (49).

<sup>24</sup> In “Ethical Representations of Working-Class Lives: Multiple Genres, Voices, and Identities,” Nancy Mack argues that “although a college degree does increase the income of individuals, the educational experience should not be misrepresented as a free ride to upward mobility” (Mack 54). Shaughnessy suggests students have some vague idea (which she defines as “faith”) of entering college to make their lives better, but have no realistic concept as to how this is supposed to happen (*Errors* 3).

<sup>25</sup> In “‘It’s Just That I Was Afraid’: Promoting Success by Addressing Students’ Fear of Failure,” Rebecca D. Cox argues that for the educationally underserved populations, past experiences associated with K-12 schooling add to the “normal” anxiety that accompanies any new and unfamiliar situation (such as entering college for the first time): “Fragile and fearful these students expressed deep-seated fears...locating the object of fear in ‘college’ itself, in specific courses or subject matter, and in certain professors” (61)



Some actually will – physically – run away<sup>26</sup> before they even take a step toward that fabled education society has held out to them “as a way out of dead-end jobs, as a ticket to success in U.S. society, as a path to self-fulfillment” (Lovejoy et al 275). It would be almost inconceivable at this point that these educationally underserved students would be able to negotiate with their teacher toward an empowered and collaborative vision of their own success in the Basic Writing classroom.

The question for teachers is how to successfully disrupt this fear-filled perspective so ingrained in their students. Each student walks into class with his or her own characteristics made up of practices and beliefs previously absorbed from family, friends, community, and culture – this is the stuff of the soundproof room which here is equated with Pierre Bourdieu’s “indices of membership.” If twenty-five students walk into a classroom, chances are, the teacher is looking at the face of twenty-five separate lists of cultural characteristics and twenty-five sets of sociopolitical beliefs. Though, the more accurate number would be twenty-six, because she cannot hold herself separate from her students. What’s more, the teacher must recognize that she is not the only one from outside the soundproof room not being heard – the students, as often as not, have never heard the “sounds” of one another’s home languages either. It is surprising how often they come into the classroom with preconceived ideas about the diverse and equally

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<sup>26</sup> Cox calls this “avoiding assessment” and defines it as a strategy used by students to avoid facing classroom failure (66). Nancy Mack refers to these types of strategies (that is, not participating, completing work, or showing up to class) as “overt means to regain power on the social stage of the classroom” (“Ethical Representations” 55). Cox points to data showing that “more than half of the students who entered 2-year colleges with specific certificate or degree goals left college within 6 years before receiving any credential” (53).

insulated worlds of their peers.<sup>27</sup> In order to create a new “group” she might name “Basic Writing Class,” the teacher will need to ask her students to see beyond the class distinctions they are familiar with – distinctions Bourdieu claims are meant to “isolate, divide, and demoralize” (130). A new (possibly) subversive index of characteristics for inclusion must be constructed from all of the characteristics of the social classes represented by all of the agents (both students *and* teachers) in the classroom. Then the new “indices” must be validated by re-representing the classroom as inclusive rather than exclusive.<sup>28</sup> This revisioning would need to include new perspectives on the approach to everything up to and including class writing assignments.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Innovation and Engagement: Re-Creating Work in the Basic Writing Classroom*

Nancy Mack, in “Ethical Representations of Working-Class Lives: Multiple Genres, Voices, and Identities:” argues for ways of re-presenting traditional material to working-class students. Mack maintains that traditional approaches to composition assignments “render working-class students powerless” (54) because their identity is usually “located outside the university” (58). She continues, arguing that class assignments ought to situate students in a position of authority “relative to their topic” (54), allowing students to “compose an academic identity in addition to their other

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, Katherine V. Wills, in Lovejoy et al, claims that “many freshman confuse a foreign accent,” for instance, “with grammatical precision, assuming that if someone sounds different, he or she must be speaking in structurally incorrect English” (265).

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu argues that “heretical” (that is, subversive) discourse must produce a “new common sense...[integrating] within it the previously tacit or repressed practices and experiences of the entire group.” The group then “legitimizes” itself through a new “authorized language” which is designated at the same time it is expressed “by offering [the group] a unitary expression of its experiences” (“Description” 129).

<sup>29</sup> Cox argues that students’ fears of composition classes are “particularly intense” because these classes are considered gateway classes to the rest of their college careers (61-62, 69), so each part of the class needs to disrupt those previous perceptions of what students believe they are capable of.

existing identities” (59). Mack believes it is important then for educators to find new ways to approach writing assignments, keeping in mind such working-class characteristics (“indices”) as “sharing, cooperation, and belonging” (54). Some writing teachers have begun to do just that; for instance, Linda Christensen, in her text *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, reveals how she disrupts the language of school with the language of home to bring classes together using a poem by George Ella Lyon entitled “Where I’m From”<sup>30</sup> created from a simple list of essential and nonessential details from the Lyon’s lived experience (e.g., places, people, artifacts). By asking students to rewrite the poem using their own lists, Christensen invites the students’ “families, homes, and neighborhoods into the classroom” (19). The students then learn to hear the separate voices of their classmates and through reflection and class discussion, they learn to respond.

Katherine V. Wills also achieves disruption of dominant representations of the academic classroom through sharing language differences with and between her students. Wills not only asks students to directly reflect on their home languages, but she also shares with the students her own lived experience with language and social perspective which she claims continues to “flavor” her pedagogy<sup>31</sup> (Lovejoy et al 265). Wills argues that when students are allowed to reflect on their own language of home, and speak about it in the classroom, it not only empowers them but also helps them to “recognize and accept” the language differences ( and “histories”) of others (266): “Once students reflect on their own home language experiences and contextualize them among their

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<sup>30</sup> Please see Appendix A for a copy of the poem and accompanying lesson plan.

<sup>31</sup> Wills, from an immigrant Greek family had a negative language experience when, in kindergarten she was made fun of (called “stupid”) “because I did not speak English yet and they [peers] could not understand me” (265); Wills shares this story with her students.

classmates,” she maintains she can “assist students in better understanding the social, regional, and historical contexts of their language use” (266). In other words, through an innovative use of narrative sharing, both Christensen and Wills are able to help their students discover new perspectives on the differences between – and the inherent values of – both their own language of home and those of others. The students may then be able to place the different discourses in the context of the rhetorical situations from which they came – which is exactly what Ken Hyland, in “Genre-Based Pedagogies: A Social Response to Process,” argues that a genre-based pedagogy can do in the writing classroom.

#### *Innovation and Engagement Using a Genre-Based Pedagogy*

Like Mack, Christensen, and Wills, Hyland, also argues against a completely traditional approach to composition assignments. According to Hyland, current traditional process-based curricula teaches writing as a “decontextualized skill” which develops the students’ ego more than their writing competence and calls for only “minimal interference” from the teacher (18).<sup>32</sup> He argues that students are offered no way to see “how different texts are codified in distinct and [recognizable] ways in terms of their purpose, audience, and message” (19). In other words, the problem with the traditional academic essay can be said to be that – in the students’ minds – each paper always has the same context, because it always has the same audience and purpose.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cox argues that student fear of composition classes hinges greatly on the fact that “every interaction” with their teacher holds the possibility of validation or of “confirming students’ feelings of inadequacy” (71-72), making positive teacher-student interaction a key element of Basic Writing student success.

<sup>33</sup> It is being argued in this thesis that when “working-class” and/or educationally underserved students initially approach the “traditional essay,” message as such really doesn’t matter because, from the start, as Mack argues: these students often do not think of themselves as having anything “scholarly” to say

That is, students will bend over backwards trying to discover what each individual instructor “wants,” so they can give it to him or her and get a passing grade in that class. They are seldom thinking of writing across their curriculum or thinking of the larger contexts of writing communities and civic discourses. If, on the other hand, students can be shown that they already know what argument looks and feels like, they may base their writing on “real world” models that go beyond the teachers’ (real or imagined) personal agendas. As an alternative to traditional curriculum, then, Hyland introduces the idea of “genre-based pedagogies;” which, he argues, place “participant relationships at the heart of language use.” Genre-based pedagogies, in other words, rely on writer awareness of convention and social situation outside of the classroom.

Hyland bases much of his supposition on the work of Carolyn R. Miller who, in “Genre As Social Action,” defines the term “genre” as an active social process that is, like other forms of human communication “ interpretable only against the context of situation and through the attributing of motives” (152). That is, genres represent the different ways people communicate in different situations for different reasons hoping for specific outcomes or responses from a specific audience. As a way of disrupting students’ past perspectives of classroom politics, then, teachers have the opportunity, via a genre-based pedagogy, to illustrate to students (and to themselves) that students have lived experience in certain rhetorical/social situations and have a learned understanding of certain motives for communication.<sup>34</sup> For instance: through news programs, presidential

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about any subject: “A rhetorical indication of this conflict is the self-effacing, commonplaces that working-class students feel obliged to into their writing to the effect that theirs is only an opinion or just their personal belief about a topic” (53).

<sup>34</sup> Rose says of his own early teaching experiences that it was nothing he was doing that was “kicking [student] development into fast-forward. [His curriculum] had to be eliciting and shaping something that was already there” (*Lives* 110).

debates, television courtroom dramas, documentaries (*Behind the Music*, *True Hollywood Stories*, etc), and MTV Movies<sup>35</sup> based on true stories, they may understand how to explain, describe, and evaluate. They may not know *what* a State of the Union address actually is, but they do most likely know who makes the speech, the medium of the speech, and to what audience it is given. Though they may not know the term, they know what a narrative is, that is, what a story sounds like. And most students could probably recognize the rhythms of a poem or at the very least a song lyric. They have knowledge of dialogue through the scripting of plays and screenplays. Finally, through more current and accessible genres of e-mailing, blogging, social-networking, texting, and “tweeting” it can be argued that students have had experience in composition before entering the basic writing classroom.<sup>36</sup>

These experiences are noted here because they give the student that all-important reference point from which to begin working as not just a Basic Writing student, but as a writer. If each writer initially chooses genres with which he is familiar, then form will not necessarily overwhelm meaning as it tends to do with traditional academic writing. As Hyland argues: while process methodology is based in response to “individual needs and personalities of learners,” it “offers [students] little by way of the resources to participate in, understand or challenge valued discourse” (20). Genre creation, on the other hand, is an active process in which the student must move from point-of-view to point-of-view,

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<sup>35</sup> Movies like *Freedom Writers* and *The Blind Side* that directly address social issues surrounding our educational system.

<sup>36</sup> In “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Kathleen Blake Yancey argues that composition may in fact now be located in the “new vocabulary” of technology which has “as its goal the creation of thoughtful, informed, technologically adept writing publics” (308).

demonstrating their knowledge of different rhetorical situations,<sup>37</sup> relying on “the way language creates meaning in context” (Hyland 21). Instead of writing what they think the teacher wants to hear, they may begin thinking of themselves as real writers with working writing strategies who now have valued beliefs and opinions worth writing about.

*Multigenre Work: Bridging the Gap to “How, When, and Where”*

Juxtaposing these familiar genre formats may further clarify for students the relationships between audience, situation, and form.<sup>38</sup> Seeing the relevance of certain academic/rhetorical formats as they discover that each genre has a reason (that is, a context) can help them recognize “the effects the [rhetor’s] actions are likely to have on other people” (Miller 150). Tom Romano has spent many years developing a teaching technique that juxtaposes multiple genres inside of a research paper in order to teach students about audience, situation, and form while helping them to recognize and value their own rhetor’s voice (*Crafting* 13). Romano developed the technique after discovering a book by Michael Ondaatje called *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. He was fascinated with the way each of the book’s pieces was whole in and of itself, while also “working in concert with the others to create a single literary experience” (*Blending* 4).<sup>39</sup>

Romano called Ondaatje’s work: *multigenre*, and from there, he developed the idea of

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<sup>37</sup> Yancey argues that when students “move from medium to medium, they consider what they move forward, what they leave out, what they add, and for each of these write a reflection in which they consider how the medium itself shapes what they create” (“Composition 314”).

<sup>38</sup> Miller argues that “our stock of knowledge is useful only insofar as it can be brought to bear upon new experience: the new is made familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities, those similarities become constituted as a type” (156-157).

<sup>39</sup> “The book contained songs, thumbnail character sketches, poems, a comic book excerpt, narrative, stream-of-consciousness passages, newspaper interviews, even photographs and drawings” (*Blending* 3). In an updated e-book version of Ondaatje’s work, the author describes the work variously as a “collage” and as a “newly invented organic form” created by blending and juxtaposing moods and “surprising narrative lines” (Afterward n.p.)

teaching research writing using a multigenre format. This stylized research project based on multiple voices and multiple views of different rhetorical situations offers teachers the opportunity to see how much knowledge students already possess as they meet them half way in a forum of socially constructed situations and academic conventions. This process may then allow students to feel a level of comfort in their own decision-making abilities and competence through having had value placed on their own “ways of knowing” as they choose genres then defend their decision-making processes. They may begin to feel the agency that comes from choice and interpretation of meaning.<sup>40</sup>

All of this is not say that using multigenre techniques is a way of helping students to avoid dealing with Standard English writing conventions. In fact, one possible purpose of using multigenre projects is for teachers to guide their students to an understanding of the importance of choice and interpretation in the students’ work (including an understanding of the possible misinterpretation of their arguments by an audience based on poor grammar and syntactical choices on the parts of the students). In “Multigenre Writing: An Answer to Many Questions,” Sherri Larson argues that multigenre research papers allows Minnesota high school students to meet current standards for Language Arts in Minnesota, standards which include: Planning, organizing, and composing:

1. Narrative
2. Expository
3. Descriptive
4. Persuasive

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<sup>40</sup> “Because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by material causes, at the center of action is a process of interpretation. Before we can act, we must interpret the indeterminate material environment” (Miller 156).



5. Critical and Research writing to “address a specific audience and purpose”  
(Larson 181).

Larson asserts that Ondaatje’s book “demonstrates that historically accurate research can be paired creatively with speculation, theory, poetry, visual art, and drama” (181) which, she claims adds variety to a traditional research assignment. However, Larson cautions: “All writing must communicate with precision and clarity,” just because it’s “flexible” does not make it “arbitrary” (188). This type of assignment then brings with it the possibility of student engagement of the ideas and conversations vital to academic and civic discourse<sup>41</sup> while allowing them to use concepts of audience, situation, and form with which they are already familiar. In this way they can begin to understand the importance of conventional research techniques and forms and, at the same time, uncover (or recover) the value of their own “ways of knowing,” which Rose argues we cannot see in their test results but [which] are there nonetheless waiting to be woven into “coherent patterns” (*Lives* 8). The goal would be, then, for students to put in the effort needed – because they now have the confidence needed – to face the hard work of learning standard edited English conventions. In the meantime, they may also find the *wherewithal* to collaborate with their teachers and negotiate for their own interpretations of those conventions as they respond to the dissonance they now hear by deciding “how, when, and where” they will use their own voice.

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<sup>41</sup> Rose recognized this in his own educational journey as his mentor, Jack MacFarland “...caught my fancy and revitalized my mind” (*Lives* 47)... and he began to feel some tentative recognition that an engagement with ideas could foster competence and lead me out into the world” (47)

*Confidence, Conventions, and Collaboration: Deciding How, When, and Where*

In *Errors & Expectations* Shaughnessy argues that BW students lack confidence in their academic writing because they lack the power to assert the importance of their own experience.<sup>42</sup> She goes further, however, arguing that this lack of confidence-building motivation also cuts the student off from “grammatical situations that would save him in a truly communicative situation” (86). Lu, on the other hand, seems to be arguing that when grammar is taught as though it were merely a set of surface-level instructions and not as a complex system of signs that come together in a vast array of highly nuanced meaning – this offers students assimilation, not confidence (“Redefining” 107). Students are often introduced to grammar and syntax in school as a simple set of rules; then, almost as soon as the “simple” rules are learned, students are slammed with a list of exceptions to nearly every rule – so many exceptions in fact, that teachers often must introduce memory-aids (e.g. sayings such as “i before e except after c”) in order to help students memorize that which is not intuitive.

Kim Brian Lovejoy confesses to struggling with language structure up until the time he reached graduate school where he became “intrigued by the distinction between *prescriptive* and *descriptive* grammars, or how we *ought* to use language versus how we *actually* use it” (Lovejoy 268). Lovejoy admits to feeling frustrated with the conventional assignments he was given by teachers in elementary and secondary schools, but it wasn’t until he began his studies in sociolinguistics that he understood where the frustration came from (268).<sup>43</sup> Even so, the fact that he not only finished his undergraduate work but

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<sup>42</sup> They may feel “cut off, she argues, from the impulse to say something, or from the sense that anything he might say is important to anyone else” (86). Arguably this becomes true because, as Mack says, the writer’s experience lies outside the university where working-class voices are often disregarded.

<sup>43</sup> From the “dialects” and “idiolects” absorbed at home and in his community (268).

went on to pursue a graduate degree speaks to a sense of “wherewithal” that many BW students do not have. In the end, Lovejoy’s confidence helped him to persist, question, and “tease out connections” as he learned the craft of writing (269). It took Lovejoy years to get to a place of comfort with conventional grammar, a place where BW students (and sometimes their teachers) expect they should get to in one or two semesters. It is easily arguable from this point of view that there is no reasonable way to expect students to absorb every conventional rule in such a short period of time. It does seem reasonable, however, to expect that students can learn to see grammar as an invaluable tool worth mastering, to finally be able to effectively communicate and argue for their own points of view. To exhibit true power, a writer must have the conviction to negotiate for the interpretation of a message, not just have the ability to give voice to one. That conviction can only appear when the writer has some certainty that his or her message will be interpreted the way it was meant to be interpreted by its intended audience.

For instance, in *Errors and Expectations* Shaughnessy presents the following student work:

I did not like anything about the class. His boring lectures. Those stupid conferences. The homework assignments were always too long. The movies we went to see were out of the Dark Ages (74).

Shaughnessy, presuming to know the student’s intent, interprets the word “stupid” as imprecise “syntactic compromise” from a student who she feels does not have the maturity to find a more appropriate (or precise) adjective. She suggests: “hurried, cold, unproductive” (74) as substitutes. But, what if the student meant exactly what he said? There appears to be nothing in the student’s words to indicate that the class or instructor

felt “cold” – irrelevant maybe, so “unproductive” might work. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, however, *stupid* possesses as one possible set of meanings: “Void of interest, tiresome, boring, dull” (“Stupid”). Maybe the student found the conferences “tiresome” or “dull.” Conjecturing further, perhaps neither of those words conveyed the specific tone the student was aiming at. In other words, maybe *stupid* was exactly the term the student meant to use. The constant reinterpreting of a student’s meaning might leave the student feeling as if he didn’t know his own mind and what it is he *did* actually mean.<sup>44</sup> If the student in question had felt enough wherewithal to have searched out the definitions of the word “stupid,”<sup>45</sup> he might have been empowered to negotiate with his teacher for the use of the word in his own writing – even though it may not be a word that is traditionally considered academic or scholarly. Horner argues, in fact, that writing conventions are just an agreement (a negotiation) between two parties to use a particular set of notations while performing specific kinds of “work” (“Re-Thinking” 141). Here one might think of “work” in terms of Miller’s interpretation of meaning in the context of a specific social/rhetorical situation, in this case the situation is the collaboration of teacher and student in the formation of the student’s academic voice.

If students can begin to appropriate conventional edited English for their own use – and not forsake their own voice while doing so – then they may find the power they have always had to write themselves into their futures, as well as into their histories<sup>46</sup> through negotiation with their teachers. In a larger sense, once the students have learned

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<sup>44</sup> In “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy,” Lu argues that, in her assumptions about student writing, Shaughnessy loses touch with the fact that as the student-writer switches codes he “might also be qualifying the subject or bearing he originally had in mind” (“Redefining” 108), and that, as Shaughnessy herself has argued: “even the *slightest* departures from a code cost the writer something” (*Errors* 12).

<sup>45</sup> As found in the OED Online.

<sup>46</sup> As Gardner suggests

that there is relevance in adopting the set of notations known as conventional edited English, and are confident their voice will be valued, they may feel empowered to agree to the “work” which calls for the use of these notations. To educate students— not just assimilate them – teachers must help them to acquire the power inherent in understanding that knowing *how* to create meaning is as important as knowing “when and where” to create meaning.

## THE EVIDENCE

*One of my goals for multigenre writing assignments is to give students the discursive space to construct a powerful academic identity that legitimates and ethically represents their multiple identities.*

*Nancy Mack*

Giving Basic Writing students the tools of conventional grammar may help them harness and present meaning constructed from their experiences using the academic language of school.<sup>47</sup> Offering these tools as a conduit of meaning, however, may in fact teach students that the language of school is worth more than the language of home and may actually *change* student meaning rather than create or clarify it.<sup>48</sup> As a new teacher, my awareness of these kinds of linguistic power relations in the classroom unfolded perhaps too slowly. Worry about grammar conventions, for me, came in a distant fourth place to trying to get BW students to complete small writing assignments, or to make an effort to engage with the material at all, or even to come to class. I quickly discovered a need to become, as Shaughnessy suggested, a student of my students “in order to perceive

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<sup>47</sup> The students, Shaughnessy argues, while having a “complexity” of language which may not be recognized in the academic world (158), still make “errors” based on “unstable[conventional] grammatical habits” (154). It is these habits, one assumes, which make it difficult for them recognize correct sentence patters, and therefore make it difficult for them to grasp their own meaning. Toward the end of the “Beyond the Sentence” chapter in *Errors and Expectations*, she further argues that the “ability to recognize implicit thought patterns in sentences” will help students to discover and clearly state their meaning (272).

<sup>48</sup> In “Redefining,” Lu argues that an unintended consequence of making changes to student work based uniformly on conventional grammar standards may be that it alters a writer’s political point of view as well as the meaning (108-109).

both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (“Diving In” 238). It may have been inevitable that subsequent research in this area turned up the names Shaughnessy, Lu, and Rose – this in turn led to the beginning of an understanding that BW student’ ambivalence may come from never having been empowered to value their own voices and not from a sense of rebellion – or worse, from ignorance. Research helped me to see the obstacle for what it actually is: fear of failure.<sup>49</sup> This research, unfortunately led to as many more questions as answers in terms of translating theory to classroom practice, until I discovered the multigenre world of Romano and Mack. While still generating its own endless questions, this research opened up new possibilities for classroom work. At this point, a pedagogy (and a lesson plan) began to form.

### *Developing a Multigenre Pedagogy and a Lesson Plan*

Romano argues that strict, rigid, “often arbitrary” rules of form can “kill” a student’s voice (*Crafting* 58). Though students may have a relationship with certain academic formats that appear in social/rhetorical situations outside of the classroom,<sup>50</sup> the more unfamiliar form of an “academic” research paper, rendered in strict MLA format, can be intimidating. Storytelling, on the other hand, that is, narrative structure is familiar to most people both in and out of an academic setting. Even teachers “read plenty of imaginative literature,” Romano claims, but, then they “funnel students’ writing in the opposite direction” (*Blending* 22) toward formulaic thinking, lacking any real sense of detail or

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<sup>49</sup> Cox argues that students from educationally underserved populations hold “deep-seated fears” related to the classroom. She further argues that when students enroll in college classrooms this is when they develop those “strategies” such as “avoiding assessment, and redefining success” (63) for coping with their fears such as. It can be argued that these strategies are responsible for the perception of what might be called ambivalent student behaviors in the classroom.

<sup>50</sup> See pages 24-25, “*Innovation and Engagement Using a Genre-Based Pedagogy*”

relation to the students' lived experiences (23). Mack also seems to understand that allowing students to give voice to stories can be empowering as they call on their lived experiences through their family and cultural histories and then as they express themselves on these subjects more fully.<sup>51</sup> In "Ethical Representations," Mack outlines an assignment she developed to help students tell their own stories in order to address issues of working-class identity in the writing classroom.<sup>52</sup> It is a "type of writing assignment," she argues, "that focuses on the conflicts among academic, working-class, and other identities" (60).<sup>53</sup> The assignment began as a research project allowing students to examine their own history through the use of cultural folklore. Over time, and after she herself had researched Romano's methods, the assignment became a multigenre folklore research project ("Ethical" 60). Because Mack's objective for the multigenre folklore project<sup>54</sup> sounds very much like the beginnings of a pedagogical bridge between the language of school and the language of home, it became the seed from which the argument in this thesis grew.

Because, as Lu also argues: "learning a new discourse has an effect on the re-forming of individual consciousness" ("Conflict" 31-32), I determined to design an assignment that might create equal space for both individual ways of knowing as well as new (to them) "academic" ways of knowing. It was, of course, necessary for me, especially as a new teacher, to work within the student learning objectives of my academic institution as

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<sup>51</sup> Mack argues that "Savvy" working-class students "often believe that impersonal writing is the only way to play the game of school to succeed" (61) – this is, again, a way students look only to the individual teacher's expectations.

<sup>52</sup> "What we do as teachers speaks more loudly than what we say. In lieu of privileging my critique of working-class experiences, I make students' lives the topic in question – to be researched and interpreted through their own reading, writing, listening, and critical examinations" ("Ethical" 61).

<sup>53</sup> Which, she continues: "may further students' [development of] critical consciousness" (60).

<sup>54</sup> "to give students the discursive space to construct a powerful academic identity that legitimates and ethically represents their multiple identities," in order to "open up the topics, formats, voices, and representations available to working-class students" (60)



I designed this assignment.<sup>55</sup> Fortunately, there *are* opportunities to introduce “topics, voices, and representations available to working-class students” built right into the curriculum of some Basic Writing programs. Included in some syllabi and BW texts are Process Analysis essay modes and Literacy Narrative projects which lend themselves easily to assignments which encourage individual student voice. Process Analysis essays allow students to showcase actual experiences with instructing or explaining to an audience “a series of events leading to an outcome” (Nazario et al 142). Students, for instance, might discuss a recipe or a work-related process. Literacy Narratives, on the other hand, offer an obvious way to integrate student storytelling into an assignment. Though the following multigenre assignment grew from a new teacher’s determination to help students past their fears of “English” class using a multigenre narrative pedagogy, the project also used specified curricula and assigned texts and was developed around the Process Analysis and Literacy Narrative essay modes.

### *The Multigenre Project*

Lu and Horner contend that students can’t always make sense of their previous writing experiences in English class.<sup>56</sup> The authors believe that, in order to get them to actually engage with the academic material, the students must have a “chance to reflect on their experience with what they’ve learned” (*Writing* xiii). It is being argued here, however, that until students find the relevance in what they’re being asked to do, reflection will not necessarily lead to agency. For instance, Luis A. Nazario, Deborah D.

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<sup>55</sup> Mack cautions: “unorthodox writing assignments” such as multigenre projects “ may make them suspect” to other educators and administrators, so that “teachers must articulate and document the curricular goal being met by alternative practices” (66).

<sup>56</sup> “The conventional rules and procedures for writing they’ve learned don’t always seem to apply to the circumstances they find themselves in as writers” (*Writing Conventions* xiii).

Borchers, and William F. Lewis argue in their in-house reader *Bridges to Better Writing* that “student problems” often center around “a lack of motivation, a lack of knowledge, and a lack of skills” (v). Without motivation, knowledge, and skill, it might be difficult for students to effectively “reflect” on the way standard conventions influence their writing. Nazario et al open their chapter on “Developing Your Essay through Process Analysis” by revealing the ways this format might be useful to students *outside* the classroom, thus establishing relevance.<sup>57</sup> The authors do not limit students to what they term “Directional” Processes (that is, recipes, directions, etc.); they allow an opportunity for looking more deeply at “Informational” Processes, including the scientific and the historic. By asking them to think about the latter types of processes, students can go beyond just their everyday ways of knowing (that is, their ability to give directions or follow a recipe). Consequently, in my first semester of teaching the Process Analysis essay, I asked the students to focus on historical processes.

While working on this lesson plan, I discovered an internet timeline created by Edmond Sass titled *American Educational History: A Hypertext Timeline*.<sup>58</sup> This tool can be integrated into the pre-writing exercises for a Process Analysis essay on the topic of American educational history. I found that this interactive timeline “designed to introduce students to key events in the history of American education” (Sass) engages students as they follow internet links to information covering five centuries of American progress, from the pilgrim’s landing on Plymouth Rock to the recent controversial legislation in Wisconsin on teachers’ unions. The portion of the multigenre assignment detailed in this

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<sup>57</sup> “In your career, you may need to give instructions to someone to perform a specific job or task more efficiently, or you may need to follow a process to file a grievance or follow safety procedures” (137).

<sup>58</sup> Professor of Education at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University;  
<http://www.cloudnet.com/~edrbsass/educationhistorytimeline.html>.

paper was adapted from Sass's lesson plan as given on the website. Students are asked to study the timeline and choose five events they consider to be the most "important" events or discoveries in American educational history. They are then asked to rank the events they've chosen based on criteria they themselves decide upon individually. Because I want them to think about their choices (and their decision-making processes), students are then instructed to write a one page paper arguing for their choices and their criteria. This exercise not only introduces students to different voices, but it also offers them the opportunity to negotiate for their decision-making processes. The contention here is that students cannot be said to have true agency until they are given power over at least some of the decisions, choices, and interpretations of meaning in the classroom setting.<sup>59</sup> Sass's timeline also introduces students to ways in which society may be constructed through a series of events and decisions over time.<sup>60</sup> In order to get students to look at their own lives and identities as socially constructed in the same way as other historical events and to allow them the chance to re-vision their own experiences in the context of the history they've just been studying – especially their experiences of classrooms, specifically the English writing classroom – students are asked to create their own "Personal Education Timeline." They are asked to include within the timeline both personal experiences and references to historical/political events they now feel may have influenced those experiences.

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<sup>59</sup> In "Exploring Agency in Classroom Discourse or, Should David Have Told His Story?" Helen Rothschild Ewald and David L. Wallace assert that "agency can be understood as both the ability to interpret events as well as the ability to influence, change, or redirect them within a specific situation" (343). This understanding parallels Mack's contention that revision of identity (for both students *and* teachers), like revision of composition, is attained through "rereading, reinterpreting, reorganizing, and reconceptualizing meaning" (59).

<sup>60</sup> In "Ethical Representations," Mack argues that identity is both "temporally developmental" and "continually open to revision" (58).

After using the timeline for two semesters, I had an idea to ask students to construct their own timeline as I introduced the Literacy Narrative. Nazario et al define a “personal narrative” as a story “based on something that has happened to the author.” It is further defined as a “‘true’ story, a nonfictional representation of a shaping event” in the life of the author (48). To illustrate what this looks like in the “expository” genre, students working on their multigenre projects are introduced to narratives written by people like Lu, Richard Rodriguez, Malcolm X, and Gloria Anzaldù. Students are introduced to the multigenre format itself through samples of multigenre writing.<sup>61</sup> The samples used were chosen because their length was neither too long to be examined in one class period nor too short to fully explore the multigenre concept. These samples also incorporated “opening” genres<sup>62</sup> that are “reader-friendly, informative, and engaging” – traits Romano insists are invaluable in creating a purposeful multigenre project (*Blending* 33). Both samples also made use of endnotes for telling “which documents were written by them and which are authentic” (Mack 65) and for reflecting on why they chose each particular genre style: that is, what each genre brought to the overall narrative. Finally, students are asked to refer to a “genre list” handout.<sup>63</sup> Included on the list are genre suggestions for everything from creating billboards to newspaper press releases to inaugural speeches,

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<sup>61</sup> An internet search for samples revealed a website hosted by Miami University created by Katherine E. McKinnon in the Spring of 2006 and updated by Lindsey E. Milillo in the Fall of 2006 and based heavily on Romano’s work, incorporates links to several samples of completed multigenre papers. Another site, from the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English (MCTE) yielded an appropriate template for an assignment sheet (see Appendix B). Though the initial assignment was based on Mack’s folklore assignment, her project was just too large and involved for what had been envisioned for the Personal Literacy Narrative, and, though MCTE’s project was also more research-intensive than was warranted in this case, it was much easier to adapt.

<sup>62</sup> Such as a “Dear Reader” letter.

<sup>63</sup> This handout, which had been introduced earlier in the semester during a group project, was developed over several semesters and includes garnered from research as well as direct suggestions from students. See Appendix D for a copy of the handout.

and even “wanted” posters and ransom notes. Students are allowed to choose any genre from the list, or find genres of their own (which they may use with approval).

The only “required” genres in this project are the “Dear Reader” letter at the beginning instead of a traditional introduction<sup>64</sup> and the endnotes (in place of a “conclusion”). Whatever genre they incorporate, part of their grade depends on getting the genre “right” – that is, they cannot just present some words on a page and call it an “obituary” or a “birth certificate.” To help BW students working on their multigenre project acknowledge the validity of their own history – and help them understand that they do, indeed, have a story to tell – they are asked to choose three events from their personal timelines and juxtapose those with the events they’ve already chosen from Sass’s website. From these events they will create synthesized timelines which they will argue shaped their current educational points of view. They are encouraged to research the style and conventions particular to each genre and recreate them in their own work. This why it is important that, at nearly every step of the project, students are asked to reflect on what they’ve seen, heard, or done. As Lu and Horner argue, reflection can lead to “better writing” because students are being asked to question “the strategies, purposes, and resources for their writing” (*Writing* xiv) instead of just being told to accept what the teacher tells them as the only and absolute truth.

The final step in the multigenre project is to go back to those working-class traits Mack outlined: “sharing, cooperation, and belonging” (“Ethical Representations” 54); I call this “Gallery Day.” On Gallery Day, the class turns the room into an art showing, and student work is “exhibited” around the classroom. If it was created as a PowerPoint

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<sup>64</sup> The letter must include a thesis statement and explanation of why each scene (whether personal or historical/political) was chosen

presentation, it is displayed on the computer at the individual student's workstation; if the student brought in pre-printed hardcopies, the project is taped to walls and white boards around the room. Some students have created "books" and "scrapbooks" which are placed on tables in the center of the room. Students are then given forty-five minutes to walk around the "gallery" and view one another's work. They are encouraged to take their time and thoroughly analyze their peers' work. At the end of the forty-five minute period, students return to their seats where they are asked to write a one and a half to two page reflection paper on their project, the projects of their peers, and the possible writing strategies this project suggested to them for their future expository essays. This part of the project is invaluable as I work to subvert the old version of the exclusionary "classroom" and to create a new representation using "indices of membership" to blur the line between linguistic borders and include every students' story.

In the end, this project has the potential to thoroughly disrupt the atmosphere of the "traditional" classroom<sup>65</sup> while creating opportunities for students to speak and to make choices while still learning to "compose" in an academic setting. It also offers the chance to honor and attach value to student voices (their language of home) while negotiating with them as they acquire the use of the language of school as part of a one-on-one conference process I use to debrief. The one-on-one gives me the chance to meet with each student individually and find out where they are in the understanding of and comfort with the composing process. We discuss their projects, but we focus more on their final reflection and the strategies they have decided on to complete their next expository essay. The "we" here is important, because this is the part of the process in which the students,

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<sup>65</sup> During "Gallery Day" music can be played while the students view one another's work – this adds to the overall atmosphere of stepping out of "traditional" classroom roles and rhetorical situations.

hopefully, begin to feel enough *wherewithal* to “negotiate” for the right to respond to the dissonance of “how, when, and where” of language using their own voice.

### *Outcomes*<sup>66</sup>

The point of this assignment from the beginning was to get students to move past their fears and/or ambivalence and fully engage in the work of the classroom

1. by disrupting their pre-conceived ideas about what a “classroom” environment actually can be through the use of a “nontraditional” assignment
2. by allowing them to use their own understanding of communication and rhetorical situation in conjunction with more “conventional” formats in order to add a sense of relevance on a topic they have some “authority” over,<sup>67</sup>
3. and, perhaps, most importantly, by valuing their separate *home* dialects, idioms, etc. as well as their own worldviews in the classroom and by helping them learn to value the home languages and points of view of their peers.

The majority of students in *all* classes assigned this multigenre project turned the project in on-time, and most fully participated in the “gallery” activity as well,<sup>68</sup> indicating to me that it had at least been engaging. The reflection papers offered signs

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<sup>66</sup> In order to avoid confusion, I want to state up front that, due to timing and scheduling issues, the “outcomes” referred to in this section come from a Comp I class and not the kind of Basic Writing this project was initially intended for. It can be reasonably argued, however, that, as Shaughnessy argued: “the difficulties of so-called remedial students [are] the difficulties of all writers, writ large” (293).

<sup>67</sup> Referring back to Mack in the “*Innovation and Engagement: Re-Creating Work in the Basic Writing Classroom*” section of this paper, page 28, experience in public schools, it can be argued gives the class a common ground, and even the “research” done via Sass’s timeline offers a foundation of information (of U.S. History) they may feel they have a previous relation to and, therefore, some control over.

<sup>68</sup> As was noted earlier, in “Promoting Success,” Cox argues that one defense strategy students use against their fear of failure is “avoiding assessment:” “Every assessment-related activity,” she writes, is seen by students as a possibility of their exposure as “[unfit] for college student status” (66). For this reason, students often see not attending class on days homework and/or projects are due as “another reprieve from exposure” (66).

that this project not only engaged students but also helped them appreciate the voices of their peers while contextualizing their own experiences in relation to others. Several students reported that it was one of the most interesting projects they'd had an opportunity to work on since entering college. One student stated that seeing her peer's work was "eye opening" because, she said, "it's easy to assume everyone is doing the same thing you are. When really they are doing something completely opposite or that you'd never heard of." Another student was upset because she had not spent as much time on her project as she felt some of the other students obviously had:

A lot of people's projects in the class were SO GOOD, they had a direct point and they proved it. I didn't have a point...but this taught me how to argue things, and in my paper 3 I will have a point that I will argue strongly.

For one student, however, engagement in the class finally came through asserting his "authority" over a topic in a format he felt he had some control over.

Before the multigenre project, writing essays for this student appeared to be a bit of an inconvenience. He holds a full-time job, and, as a result, maintains that his class work must often be thrown together at the last minute.<sup>69</sup> The organization of his papers was the thing that seemed to suffer most, and he had never before made use of my available office hours. This multigenre project – which he completed in PowerPoint – was not only done on-time, it was so well done that it was voted one of the five "Best Projects" by his classmates. His work on this project was well organized and based on a carefully constructed timeline of personal and historical/political events, woven together

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<sup>69</sup> This is not an invalid argument as Aronson asserts that "working during college can have both negative and positive consequences. Particularly for nontraditional students, working can lead to difficulty balancing competing demands, interruption in school attendance, low grades, and delayed receipt of degree" (47).



nicely into a meaningful narrative. In his final reflection he mentioned feeling unsure of the “value” of this project in a college classroom (he thought “traditional” essay projects were more appropriate). During the one-on-one conference following the multigenre project, however, he expressed a wish to bring his final essay in during teacher office hours before peer review day in order to make sure his organization was on the right track. This indicated a realization of the importance of choice and decision-making in the writing process.

Another young man’s struggle to find his writing voice was so intense that his “success” story begins with the fact that I had failed him in this exact same class the previous semester. In the first semester, he came to class faithfully every week – rarely missing a day. He participated in class discussions and in group projects – but *never* turned in even a single rough draft of an essay, let alone a final draft of a completed writing project. His fear appeared to paralyze him. This, of course, is what led him into a second semester of the same class. Because a Literacy Narrative project in one form or another is a part of my lesson plan every semester, it must be argued here that it was the academic format that, as Romano has argued, silenced his voice, and the multigenre format that engaged his interest and loosened his writing “tongue.” A week before the project was due this student e-mailed his completed “rough draft” of the project and asked for an opinion and advice (something he had not done on his own before). Several “collaborative” e-mails later and his project was finished on-time. What’s more the finished product won acclaim from his classmates. The next week, during conferences, he produced an outline of an argument for the up-coming academic essay; two weeks later, he turned in the first (albeit rough) “academic” essay he had produced in two semesters.

According to Cox, for underprepared students success often comes from “recognizing that submitting [that first] writing assignment was what disproved their deepest fears” (71). What’s more, she argues, the most significant outcome for those students is not “the improvement of writing skills” but is instead the “pride in completing a difficult course, and a newfound confidence about their abilities to succeed” (75). Lu might argue instead that what the students are doing here is recognizing the borders that have confined them (“Conflict” 44). When students begin to blur the lines between the discourse of home and of school, those borders may then “delineate” for them “aspects of their psyche and the world” which “require changing” (44) – which require re-mapping.

## CONCLUSION

*“What should be the future shape of composition?”*

*Kathleen Blake Yancey*

It has been more than forty years since a group of civil rights activists occupied a college campus in New York City and created a new frontier on the post-secondary landscape. In the years since that time, diverse classrooms have become more rule than exception. In fact, this dynamic is so prevalent there are some concerns that the current generation may “dismiss issues related to diversity, such as racism and discrimination, as less of a problem than in previous generations” (Elam et al 21).<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, many “explorers” in the guise of educators and theorists have been forced by these circumstances to find a way through the Shaughnessy-Lu Gap: between the socially constructed discourses of home and of school. Constant economic, social, and technological shifts, however, make this work a slow, inexact science which possibly boils down to a basic question Kathleen Blake Yancey asked in her 2004 CCCC Chair’s speech: “what should be the future shape of composition” (Yancey 306)?

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<sup>70</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the twenty year period between 1988 and 2008, “Hispanic” enrollment in public elementary/secondary schools increased from 11 percent to 22 percent, and the total enrollment of “black” students increased from 6.8 to 7.5 million. While the combined totals of non-Hispanic/non-black groups made up less than 10 percent of the overall enrollment, students categorized as “white” “decreased enrollment from 68 to 55 percent” (“Participation”). Enrollment in *post-secondary* institutions was characterized by a 63 percent enrollment of “white” students, 14 percent “black,” 12 percent “Hispanic,” and about the same percentage as above (less than 10 percent) of non-Hispanic/non-black ethnic groups.

*Mapping Current Economic Forces on the Educational Landscape*

With states increasingly “redirect[ing] the revenue streams away from the institutions and toward the consumers, the students” (304), Yancey refers to the failing economic situation across the higher education landscape as a seismic “tremor” (304). As a consequence of this redirected funding, tuition prices have risen thirty-two percent at public and twenty-four percent at private colleges across the country (“Digest”). This means that:

1. Educational institutions (even state schools) have been forced to become more consumer-driven, and
2. Students have been forced to become more pragmatic about their “education” (Chace; Lowe).

For instance, State funding for students at one college allots 145 credit hours per student. With this state funding supporting them, the tuition rate at this community college for students is around \$66.80 per credit hour. Once the 145 hours is used up, however, the tuition rate for students rises to \$152.50 per credit hour (Davis). This would be more than enough to help students through if they were to finish a two-year degree in two-years; however, sixty-eight percent of new-first-time students just out of neighboring high schools and sixty-three percent of the total enrolled population of this college will need to take at least one remedial course before they can graduate and/or transfer to a four-year college or university (Docktor).<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, this means that every hour spent in remedial courses may cost students \$85.70 per credit hour out-of-pocket when it is

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<sup>71</sup> From a 2005 interview with Barbara Docktor, Data and Reporting Manager at Pueblo Community College.

time to enroll in core courses necessary to the completion of their degree. This circumstance further suggests that students need to demand relevance from their coursework, and schools must work to satisfy the demands of the consumer. “Remedial” courses like Basic Writing which are required by most institutions regardless of degree/certificate path, however, may dictate for students that relevance must follow engagement, if the student does not see the way the course relates to their actual area of interest (the major field of work). For teachers teaching a new generation – influenced not only by traditional cultural circumstances but also by its own “unique set of forces” (Elam 21) – engaging students may take on a whole new meaning.

#### *Mapping Social and Technological Forces on the Current Writing Landscape*

The so-called “Millennial Generation” has added its own twist to the already winding road of the diverse writing classroom. To a group of students bombarded day and night with image-filled weblogs, MTV and YouTube videos, PSA’s, television “News Magazines,” and Super Bowl commercials the “traditional” academic essay may feel archaic.<sup>72</sup> What’s more, twenty-four hour news broadcasts and television programming in fifteen-minute segments, Facebook posts, and one-line “tweets” may make sitting down to write a traditional essay feel like a form of punishment. Engaging these technologically savvy students may take a different set of teaching methods than even a typical Basic Writing class might demand.<sup>73</sup> Especially since not all “Millennials” enter the classroom with the same abilities anymore now than they did in 1970: “first-

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<sup>72</sup> Yancey argues that English departments in general “may already have become anachronistic” (302)

<sup>73</sup> In “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Yancey argues that “*the screen is the language of the vernacular*, [and] if we do not include it in the school curriculum, we will become as irrelevant as faculty professing Latin” (Emphasis Yancey 305).

generation college students may be less familiar with technology (e.g., computers, cell phone, etc), or less likely to have reaped the benefits of tutors, travel and/or support services of more educationally-advantaged students” (Elam et al 25). All of these details come together to form, picking up Yancey’s metaphor, a seismically active landscape, creating Basic Writing classes which are likely to be more diverse in more ways than ever before, making it more necessary now than ever before to disrupt traditional classroom perceptions.

### *Into the Future: Multigenre Projects and Disrupting Perceptions*

Though Romano and Mack have developed techniques to take multigenre projects to the next level, the assignment detailed in this paper is by no means to be confused with an “academic research” essay. Though it may not be within the scope of this thesis to address, it seems as though it would be more than worth the effort to look into just what *is* possible to teach students about “academic” research and writing using this tool.<sup>74</sup> A recent discussion thread on the Writing Program Administration (WPA) Listserv brought to light valid questions regarding the usefulness of this genre beyond “[allowing] students to include their own voice, or images with the text, or to give a piece ‘personality,’ thinking that academic writing somehow doesn’t allow these things” (Lowe). Questions can, and should, be asked about voice and confidence and a student’s determination to master the conventional rules of English grammar and syntax in a college composition class. Whether or not multigenre work is the best way to address these issues ought to be

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<sup>74</sup> There are definitely those who do not believe that an academic research paper and a multigenre can, by definition, be the same thing. In a recent discussion thread on the WPA Listserv, Kelly Lowe argued that composition programs needed to look “at whether what [the MGRP] teaches is 1) what their students need to learn and 2) the best way to get that learning.” Her conclusion was that “very often, the MGRP won’t fit those criteria when stacked against programs’ outcomes.”

studied as well. That said, even within the scope of this thesis, there are things that are *not* being claimed about multigenre projects.

It is *not*, for instance, being suggested that all students are “engaged” by these assignments. In that same WPA discussion thread, Kelly Lowe<sup>75</sup> asserted that while students are not “expecting that FYC can teach them the discourse conventions of every class and every situation...they also don’t want their time wasted...and are loath to experiment.” It also is *not* the intent of this work to claim that a multigenre project – especially in and of itself – can dispel all fears of the classroom, ensuring absolute success for each student who attempts it. In fact, Cox maintains that “successful” students actually credit a “supportive relationship” with their teacher as key to their persistence more than anything else (74). What is being suggested is that multigenre work might engage *many* Millennial students who are “eager to embrace change...constantly looking for new approaches and seeking the next challenge” (Lower 80). What is being argued is that questions might be raised about ways in which disrupting traditional classroom paradigms contribute to that “supportive relationship” with the teacher and help students to “hear the dissonance.” Further research is necessary in order to study the effectiveness of nontraditional assignments – such as the multigenre project presented here – at causing such a disruption. From there, a long-term plan for positively affecting retention rates might be sought. Do multigenre projects have greater potential to invite the “language of home” into the classroom than would a more “traditional” assignment? Understanding the importance of sharing linguistic diversity in the classroom continues to be important, which makes this question one that needs to be addressed.

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<sup>75</sup> Lowe is the Director of the Learning Resource Networks: Elbogen Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Wyoming

Though Shaughnessy left “hope” that students would “somehow weather our deficiencies and transcend our yet cautious expectations” (*Errors* 294), and Lu looks to the “complexity” of inner-struggle to strengthen their resolve (“From Silence” 447) as students search for the wherewithal to respond to the dissonance; for now, the gap between them remains. Basic Writing continues to be a country filled with “borderlands.” No matter how we proceed— whether as a student *or* a teacher — learning is always an expedition into a new frontier. Unlike most physical journeys, however, it is a frontier that can never be fully mapped; neither can one *explorer* accurately map the right road for someone else — though no one need, indeed, no one should, make this journey alone. The battle on this frontier ought to change the perceptions students may hold of themselves and their abilities and help them to respond with deliberate choice regarding which linguistic space they will inhabit and which opportunities they will map for themselves in the future.





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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

**WHERE I'M FROM**

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.

(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.

I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!

I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.



I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger,  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.  
Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments--  
snapped before I budded --  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

-- George Ella Lyon

### TEACHING STRATEGY:

1. Read the poem aloud with the students, making special effort to note the repeating line (“I am from”) that moves the narrative forward (Christensen 20)
2. Ask students to make a list of things similar to the things Lyon mentions:
  - a. Items around their home
  - b. Items in their yard
  - c. Items from their neighborhood
  - d. Interesting and/or special family names
  - e. “Sayings” particular to their families<sup>76</sup>
  - f. Foods that have special meaning<sup>77</sup>
  - g. Kinds of places they keep “memories”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> I often use as an example for my students something my grandfather used to say to me when I was growing up. He would always tell me: “I love you so much I wouldn’t take a nickel for you.” The absurdity generally elicits laughter – which is always a great ice-breaker.

<sup>77</sup> Dishes served at traditional family holiday gatherings, for instance.

<sup>78</sup> Christensen suggests “Diaries, boxes...Bibles,” etc. I have also had success with changing this detail to just “places” – that is, places that have special memories attached to them.

3. Share the lists out loud – this becomes an opportunity to discuss description, detail, and word choice.
4. Students are asked to write a poem in the style of Lyon
5. The class engages in a “read around”<sup>79</sup> as a peer review process
6. Reading of the final drafts.

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<sup>79</sup> Christensen calls the “read around” the “centerpiece” of her classroom strategy (14): this is a collaborative technique in which the students are asked to read their work out loud and comment on each others’ writing strategies.

## APPENDIX II

### The Multigenre Research Paper: Minnesota Council of Teachers of English

“In order to get the voice back into research writing, we are going to write a paper that is a mixture of voices and genres, all related to a single researched topic. You can imagine yourself as a writer of an historical novel. You must still do the research in order to be accurate, but you can add flair to it as well (2)”

1. Choose a time period that has historical significance. From this time period, you may choose to write about either a person or an event. For example, if you chose the Civil Rights Movement, you could choose to write about Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, the Children’s March, the Birmingham Church bombings, or any number of other people or events.
2. Research that subject, using a variety of sources. You must use at least 8 sources.
3. After researching, decide on the best way of presenting this person or event, using multiple genres. This should be a cohesive collage of thematically linked pieces of writing. It should not be a disjointed, haphazard mixture of “stuff.” Use a repeated motif to create unity throughout the pieces.
4. Create a creative cover page.
5. Include a table of contents.
6. Select two of the required genres and six of the optional genres and write them. These must be original pieces of your own work. They may not be simply copy- pasted from other sources. We’re looking for originality, creativity, and the ability to convey a deeper understanding of this historical subject.
7. Include a Writer’s Craft essay that describes your process.
8. Include a bibliography of all the sources that you used in preparing this project. Genres of Writing:

You are required to write in a minimum of TWO of the following:

Short story

Essay

Poem

Play or screenplay

You may choose a minimum of SIX of the following:

Obituary 5 photo captions of at least 5 sentences  
Newspaper feature story Eulogy  
Newspaper column Wedding invitation  
Personal or want ad Doctor's report

## APPENDIX III

### PERSONAL LITERACY NARRATIVE PROJECT<sup>80</sup>

(Pre-write for Essay #3)

You are going to create a *Personal Literacy Narrative*<sup>81</sup> using a combination of voices and genres, all related to your own educational journey so far. Be prepared to share the final product with the class on **Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup>**. As you move through this project keep an eye out for potential arguments regarding educational practices in the United States (both historically and currently) that you believe you can develop for our **Project 3 Essay**.

Here's the assignment:

1. Read Ch. 10 ("Evaluation Arguments") 156-176 and Ch. 11 ("Narrative Arguments") 177-191 in your *Good Reasons* text.
2. Create a visual **educational timeline**: include events from your own personal experience as well as the historical/political events that were happening around you at the time.<sup>82</sup>
  - a. When you feel the timeline is complete, choose 6 events and/or experiences (3 personal and 3 historical/political) you feel shaped your current educational point of view.
3. Decide on the best way of presenting these events and experiences, using multiple genres.<sup>83</sup> Each event should be represented by a different genre. Choose your genres carefully in order to create a feeling of unity and cohesiveness in your project (you could create a theme, for instance: do a magazine layout, a graphic novel, a newspaper, an anthology of literature, etc).
4. Create a cover page, include appropriate visual elements.
5. Include a table of contents.

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<sup>80</sup> Adapted from: "The Multi-Genre Research Paper." *The Minnesota Council of Teachers of English*. 2006. Web. 26 Mar 2011.

<sup>81</sup> **A sort of autobiography based on your personal educational experience**

<sup>82</sup> Use the "American Educational History: A Hypertext Timeline" @ <http://www.cloudnet.com/~edrbsass/educationhistorytimeline.html> if you are unsure where to begin this part of the research.

<sup>83</sup> Use the genre list from the first group project, or come up with your own genres.

6. **REQUIRED GENRES:**

- a. The “Introduction” section of your project will be a “Letter to the Reader” explaining the project, your event choices, and your arguments.
- b. The “Conclusion” section of your project will be written as **END NOTES** explaining your writing strategies and genre choices (why did you choose the genres you did; how did each genre contribute specifically to the overall content and arguments in your project).

**\*You may combine actual historic documents and writings with your own original writing (for instance, an actual newspaper article surrounding an event, or song lyrics from music from a specific time, expressing how you felt about a personal experience); however, make sure you clearly cite your sources, and if you choose to incorporate someone else’s work, you will need to add at least one expository paragraph of your own tying the piece in with the rest of your project (you could, for instance, write it as a Facebook post).**

## APPENDIX IV

### GENRE LIST

Ad – Billboard	Letter – Personal
Ad – Event Poster	Letter – to the Editor
Ad – Magazine	List
Ad – Movie Poster	Magazine/Journal Article
Ad – Political	Mandala
Argument – Debate	Map
Argument – Legal	Menu
Art – Cartoon/Comic	Mind Map
Art – Graffiti "Wall"	Newsletter
Art – Visual Image	Newspaper – Advice Column
Assignment Sheet	Newspaper – Article
Blog	Newspaper – Press Release
Book Review	Obituaries
Brochures	Office Memo
Certificate – Birth	Outlines
Certificate – College	Peer Review
Certificate – Death	Personal Narrative
Certificate – Marriage	Policies & Procedures Manual
Creative – Children's Story	Poster – Travel
Creative – Poem	Poster – Wanted
Creative – Short Story	Précis
Creative – Song	Proposal (Grant/Business, etc)
Critique/Review	Public Service Announcement (PSA)
Dr.'s Prescription	Ransom Note
E-Mail	Recipe
Expository Paragraph	Reference Entry – Dictionary

Free Write  
Graphs/Charts  
Instructions  
Interviews  
Invitation  
Journal/Diary Entry  
Lesson Plan  
Letter – Fundraising

Reference Entry – Encyclopedia  
Report  
Resume  
Script  
Script (TV, Movie, Play)  
Social Network (Facebook, etc)  
Specification (Spec) Sheet  
Speech – Eulogy  
Speech – Campaign  
Speech – Inaugural  
Speech – State of the Union  
Survey  
Text  
Timeline  
Trivia Games  
Twitter  
Web Page



## APPENDIX V

### The Multigenre Project Timeline

#### TEACHING STRATEGY:

##### A) Week 1:

- a) To introduce the subject of education, the class is shown a portion (about 40 minutes) of the documentary *Waiting for Superman*; <sup>84</sup> afterward, students are asked to do a ten-minute reflection using the movie as their prompt.
- b) The class is then introduced to Edmond Sass's *American Educational History: A Hypertext Timelines*.
- c) For homework, they are asked to create their own Personal Education Timeline.
- d) On day two, the class analyzes the first multigenre paper sample. <sup>85</sup>
- e) After analyzing Sample 1 as a class, students are asked to study the document on their own, then use the remainder of the period to write a reflection on what they learned/saw, focusing specifically on the strategies the author used and deciding whether or not they felt the piece was effective, explaining as they went why it did or did not work for them.
- f) For homework: students are asked to read Part I of Richard Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire: Personal Reflections on Learning 'Basics'" and be ready to discuss at the beginning of the following class period.

##### B) Week 2:

- a) Class begins with a discussion of the Rodriguez essay; topics include defining "literacy narrative" <sup>86</sup> and discussion of what it means to be "educated" (**footnote: Cox**). Time is also spent discussing Rodriguez's structure of organization and transition.
- b) Next the project assignment sheet is passed out and discussed; <sup>87</sup> then, after being referred to the genre list, students are given class time to begin working on their individual projects.

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<sup>84</sup> This film was chosen because of its accessible format, its timeliness, and its relationship to current newsworthy events – thus bringing the immediate outside world into the classroom.

<sup>85</sup> From the Miami University website, this sample is called: "Mythology to Reality" by Lauren Hewes and is based on Hewes' experience in student teaching:  
<http://www.users.muohio.edu/romanots/pdf/mythologytoreality.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup> It was decided that the definition would be "a sort of educational autobiography."

<sup>87</sup> See Appendix C

- c) For homework: Students are asked to read the remainder of the Rodriguez essay and write a reflection using the essay as a prompt, looking once more at content and structure.
  - d) Sample 2<sup>88</sup> is introduced with the same procedure of analysis, independent study, and reflection. Students are given the rest of the class period to work on their projects and ask questions as needed.
- C) **Week 3:**
- a) Class time is used for Peer Review and work on the project that would be due the following class period; this would be called “Gallery Day.”
  - b) “Gallery Day:”
- D) **Negotiation/Collaboration:** The following week, after “Gallery Day,” individual conferences were held to debrief on the multigenre project and deal with questions on the final essay project.

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<sup>88</sup> This paper also came from the Miami University website; the title is “Native Darkness: A Multigenre Research Paper Based on Richard Wright’s *Native Son*,” the author is Emily Feltes.