

California State University, San Bernardino

CSUSB ScholarWorks

Theses Digitization Project

John M. Pfau Library

1992

Replacing fear, anxiety, and interference with motivation in basic writers: A reader-response approach

Lisa Lynne Turnbull

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project>



Part of the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Turnbull, Lisa Lynne, "Replacing fear, anxiety, and interference with motivation in basic writers: A reader-response approach" (1992). *Theses Digitization Project*. 1125.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/1125>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

REPLACING FEAR, ANXIETY, AND INTERFERENCE WITH MOTIVATION
IN BASIC WRITERS: A READER-RESPONSE APPROACH

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Lisa Lynne Turnbull
September 1992

REPLACING FEAR, ANXIETY, AND INTERFERENCE WITH
MOTIVATION

IN BASIC WRITERS: A READER—RESPONSE APPROACH

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,


San Bernardino

by


Lisa Lynne Turnbull

September 1992

Approved by:


Bruce Golden, Chair, English

September 3, 1992
Date


Elinore Partridge


Kellie Rayburn

Abstract

There are no foolproof strategies for ridding students of writing blocks and anxieties; if it were that simple we'd have no reason to keep brainstorming on the issue. But students continue to fear writing, researchers continue to research the problem, and teachers teach with the tools they have before them. All we can do is modify the knowledge we do have and work towards new "leads."

This thesis attempts to produce such a lead—one linking reader-response strategies in the collaborative writing environment with decreased apprehension/increased motivation in basic writers. I investigated basic writers, causes and effects of writer's block on inexperienced writers, methods of responding to student texts, the motivating force of collaborative learning and reader-response concepts of Stanley E. Fish and Wolfgang Iser.

While I found that some concepts taken from Fish and Iser can provide a loose framework from which to work in the basic writing classroom, these concepts must be taken as "creative suggestions" rather than exact prescriptions. Certain areas need further study in order to prove the connection possible in practice. Because students are afflicted by writer's block for both affective and cognitive reasons, the complexity of the problem makes it difficult to research and pinpoint exact causes. Still, my research has indicated some potential strategies for alleviating anxiety and subsequently increasing motivation. And this is promising—considering the growing population of basic writers.

** cause & effect
of W.ers block
* Responding to
texts
* Mot. of collo
learning
* R-er response*

Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Signature Page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: Background.....	1
Chapter 2: Causes and Implications of Writer's Block.....	4
Chapter 3: Bridging Reader-Response and Composition Theory.....	13
Chapter 4: Reader-Response Strategies as a Basis for Collaborative Learning...	19
Chapter 5: Alleviating Writing Anxiety Through Reader-Response Strategies..	32
Appendix A.....	45
Bibliography.....	46

Chapter 1. Background

One common yet serious problem in basic writing classrooms is the fear or anxiety experienced by many writing students. This anxiety inhibits creativity and learning, causing poor writing, and resulting in low grades and further apprehension. Thus, a circular and detrimental pattern develops. Various studies conducted on writing apprehension and writer's block—particularly those of Mike Rose—indicate that much of this phenomenon stems from a cognitive dysfunction occurring as a result of several psychological and educational factors—a primary one being the rigid composing rules first taught in the classroom, then embedded in the recall of the student. Students are preoccupied with turning "correct" papers; and, as English Instructors we witness how devastated students are when their work is returned marked "incorrect" in places.

Despite the overemphasis many students place on form, we have yet to devise a universal method of response that gives equal weight to content and that treats student writings as works-in-progress. Composition practitioners, as well as some researchers, warn us of the inadequacy of grading student essays in the privacy of our studies; they warn we might misconceive what students are attempting to communicate. Furthermore, written response produces comments often confusing and ambiguous to students, and ignore the fact that we stress "process" in our classrooms.

The teaching community has suggested alternative modes of teaching basic writers, such as the one-on-one conference, peer evaluation and collaborative writing. But, suppose we took the strengths from each procedure. And suppose we then selected concepts from a critical theory known for crediting response and underlining the processes of reading and writing. What would occur if we

ISS
Fear/Anxiety

Cog.
dysfunction
Ss focus on
correctness

ISS
No systematic
response

applied this myriad of approaches in a composition classroom?

In this paper, I investigate the potential role of select concepts from reader-response critical theory, as explained by Stanley E. Fish and Wolfgang Iser, as a means of alleviating writer's block in basic writers, thus increasing their motivation to embrace the writing process. I have divided my investigation into three areas, although occasionally the concepts cross over. My research is based on the following assumptions:

(1) Fear of evaluation is a common threat to basic writers. They often receive first drafts covered with corrections. Reading and understanding these marks, as one basic writer put it, "... is like trying to learn a foreign language." Consequently, "performance anxiety" occurs. However, if teachers instigate collaborative learning in conjunction with formal guidance, students learn to respond to texts as members of what Stanley Fish has called an "interpretive community"; supportive suggestions take higher precedence than discouraging criticism and students gain more authority over their work. As a result, students have more creative license and the student-centeredness initiates a more relaxed environment.

ISS
Fear of
evaluation
↓
SS belong
to interpretive
comm.

(2) Many students fear writing because they have been taught the concept of "good" and "bad" way to compose. Rigid rules are a prime source of writer's block for many writers; these directives include anything from the stifling five-paragraph model, to phrases like "Don't use passive verbs," and "Don't put 'I' in an essay." In reader-response where the text is not considered to be a stable artifact but an activity that the reader performs, the burden of trying to fit an ideal is lifted from the writer, and the oppressive feeling associated with writer's block subsides.

ISS
Formal
writing rules
↓
Text Not
Stable

(3) When students are asked why they are "blocked," the answer will often be that they have nothing to say or write about. But by reading texts (as well as writing them), students gain a sharper awareness of the mental processes in

which language engages us. If composition were taught from a reader-response strategy, the pertinent question would shift from "What does the text mean?" to "What does the text do?" or "What does the reader do?" (developed by Fish and Iser, respectively), and the student text would be viewed not as an object (or product), but as a set of instructions for creating an aesthetic experience. Such instructions would serve as a cognitive tool to aid students in composing; with guidance, students could build a schema for talking about language, and they would feel more in control of the language. Once the students felt comfortable talking about language in groups, collaborating would stimulate ideas in the students while increasing their motivation to revise and engage in the writing process.

Thus, using reader-response strategies in collaborative learning situations can become an important aspect of motivating basic writing students who may already be prone to writer's block. By giving formal suggestions and prompting key concepts and questions such as "interpretive community," "What does the text do?" and "What does the reader do?" the teacher's role becomes twofold—one of "audience," and one of "supportive friend." My research focuses primarily on the second role; more specifically it explores the questions, "To what extent can reader-response strategies form the basis for successful collaborative learning, and to what extent can they alter a strictly formal teaching approach, and hence, alleviate writer's block?"

role of
T. or
-audience
-support

RQ1

Chapter 2.

Causes and Implications of Writer's Block

Those of us who write with little or no apprehension, or better yet with pleasure, have difficulty understanding where the root of writing anxiety lies. The wealth of research by Mike Rose—perhaps the key researcher on writer's block—indicates that differences between blockers and non-blockers tend to be cognitive problems rather than emotional fear (Boice 208).

Rose's 1980 essay "Rigid Rules" (as well as Rose's earlier dissertation) laid the groundwork for the contemporary study of writer's block. His book Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension (1984), demonstrates a combination of research approaches, including questionnaires, case studies, stimulated recall and other empirical studies. Rose's strategy involves circulating 351 questionnaires, from which ten students (six high- and four low-blockers) are picked. Next, the subjects are videotaped while composing an essay during a sixty minute session. Stimulated recall follows (Rose 230). In response to the sessions' results, Rose proposes various connections between cognitive processes and composing behaviors.

From detailed accounts of Rose's studies we learn that students who have been taught rigid composing rules are less flexible, and, as a result, tend to block more easily than do flexible writers. Furthermore, Rose postulates that premature editing, inappropriate evaluation, and uncertain organizational strategies create blockage in otherwise motivated and able writers (231). In light of such findings, Rose advises teachers to interview new students to discover their histories. Moreover, he urges that teachers encourage students to take risks and teachers to promote "free" writers. In this context "free" means the students should know the rules of, and dominant patterns in, composition, but still be able to dismiss these

Sup
rigid rules
↓
block

procedures when necessary.

Though it is Rose who has most wholeheartedly led the inquiry into "writer's block," utilizing over the past decade a compilation of methods which he calls "the researcher's bag of tricks" (When a Writer Can't Write 231), others have ventured research in related subjects focusing on one method of knowledge-making.

Cynthia Selfe, for example, in her article "An Apprehensive Writer Composes," focuses strictly on clinical research; Selfe analyzes the case study of Bev, an eighteen-year-old college student—a music major with a total G.P.A. of 2.54. Bev is a detrimentally apprehensive writer who has a lack of confidence in, hence a ritualistic procrastination of, composing. Bev considers her fear of writing "realistic," and attributes her average marks to the inadequate instruction of past English teachers (84-85).

As Selfe's account proceeds, Bev's writing process is investigated during a composing-aloud protocol. This session reveals several key factors. First, Bev engages in free writing, yet with no prewriting activities. It follows that her paper, to form an analogy, begins as a series of disconnected roads headed for dead-ends, rather than a central expressway from which many side roads can be accessed. During the session Bev's frustration with her inability to find a theme furthers her anxiety. Furthermore, Bev tends to edit rather than revise, therefore neglecting to rethink flaws in logic and coherence. She is more concerned with getting the words on the paper than she is with whether or not the words contribute to clear themes (84-88). To summarize Selfe's diagnosis of Bev, the author states, "Her apprehension about writing had been sparked by an accurate perception of her limited composing skills, and yet that very apprehension kept her from involving herself in composing activities and thus exercising, perhaps improving, the skills she did have" (89).

Sup
Selfe
Case
Study

Her problems, then, fit the mold of a great many students also new to the academic discourse community. So, despite the limitations of presenting only one case study, Selfe's findings offer insight to practitioners faced with their own "Bevs." Bev's negative experience with former writing teachers, and the reverberations of that perception, indicate a need for writing teachers to familiarize themselves with the causes and effects of writing blocks.

The most obvious limitation of Selfe's study is that it portrays the case study of only one student. Certainly Bev's socioeconomic and educational background, as well as her psychological make-up and schema, differ from say, "Joe's," or better yet "a Freshman class of basic writers." Nonetheless, astute practitioners can store the information in much the same way they reserve a closet in their houses of lore (to use Steven North's metaphor) for such situations (North 27). Though the information (the bit of "lore") is not, at this point, a personal testimony passed around in the Staff cafeteria, it does have, in my opinion, a hypothesis-generating quality.

Taking a completely opposite approach (although in my opinion a complementary one) is John A. Daly, who has long investigated the causes and effects of student writing apprehension. Unlike Rose and Selfe (although Selfe studied under Daly), Daly and his co-researchers are strictly experimental in their inquiry. Daly and Deborah A. Wilson, in their 1983 article "Writing Apprehension, Self-Esteem, and Personality," view their "high- and low-apprehensive" subjects in much the same way Rose and Selfe do "high and low blockers." In fact, the similarity in the two definitions indicates that, indeed, both teams of researchers are investigating approximate phenomena. Daly and Wilson's article, however, investigates specific correlations, usually between apprehension and personality. They identify personality as "...self-esteem, general personality, or subject-specific anxieties and attitudes" (336). Thus, Daly's

work focuses more on the affective dimension than the cognitive.

To carry out their study, the researchers administered the Writing Apprehension Instrument (designed and proven reliable by Daly and Miller in 1975) to 172 undergraduate students taking beginning composition classes. In addition, these students completed two measures of general self-esteem, one created by Rosenberg (Society and the Adolescent Self-Image), the other by Pervin and Lilly ("Social Desirability"). A second group was also tested, and results from the survey proved an overall inverse relationship between writing apprehension and self-esteem. Three separate but smaller samples (elementary and high school teachers enrolled in communication classes, and employees of a large federal agency) were investigated to study the same research issue; the results were consistent.

Similar methods were used to test the relationships between apprehension and specific self-esteem, other personality variables, and other subject-specific attitudes--for a total of thirteen separate investigations. Correlations, both significant and nonsignificant, imply that apprehension ". . . wasn't closely associated," Daly says, "with every perception one has of self as a writer" (337). In other words, a writer does not usually feel apprehensive about the honesty and accuracy of his writing, per se; instead, apprehension seems to revolve around the qualities in a piece of writing by which a writer's competence could be judged.

The limitations of this study are first, that the correlations between apprehension and general self-esteem are not large enough to suggest a one-to-one congruence. Second, while it is true that apprehension can fuel low self-esteem, and while both apprehension and esteem have an evaluation constituent, Daly and Wilson do not presume that either is "performance anxiety" in an evaluation sense.

Sup
Daly focus
on affective

Iss
Wier most
apprehensive
about judgments

Burgoon and Hale, in their experimental studies, (using, in part, the Daisy/Miller measure) find correlates between writing apprehension and interpersonal communication anxiety and public speaking anxiety (Daly 56-57). This suggests that writing-apprehensive students might overcome their fear by being part of a response-centered classroom, using oral presentations, peer editing, and so on. The studies of Rose and Daly, combined with experimental inquiry and its generalizable data, and clinical inquiry, with its emphasis on the particular and the individual, provide an interesting research balance.

Imp

Gaining momentum in the research area of composing processes and dysfunctions are ethnographic studies. Donald A. Graves is one researcher choosing this route; his article "Blocking and the Young Writer" illustrates how this method operates as well as some interesting findings—like the startlingly young age at which children become susceptible to writer's block.

At the onset of his article, Graves describes naturalistic observations (funded by the National Institute of Education) studying the writing processes of six through nine-year-olds over a period of two years. Children in groups of sixteen to one hundred twenty were observed in a series of what were essentially case studies. The complete scope of the study includes interviews with teachers and children, direct observation of the children as they compose, their interactions, and their written products (2).

The NIE studies, in addition to his similar naturalistic studies, lead Graves to conclude that young writers shift their focus back and forth between formal issues, such as mechanics and spelling, to those of more sophistication, such as audience and revision. Graves states, as well, that children get stymied by momentary concerns; consequently, the response of the teacher or parent, at that moment, has the potential of assisting the writer through the problem. By contrast, these immediate responses, if negative, can hinder a child's ability to

Imp

move forward and accept new challenges. The child may become blocked, thereby stagnating as a writer (17-18).

Graves supplies detailed field notes which, in conjunction with his illustration and description of problem-solving categories (the order that blocks occur in development) (4), provide a most comprehensive look at cognitive and environmental factors—which are equally valid to the use of participant/observer in the fields of anthropology and sociology (among other social sciences). Done correctly, a study like Graves' can accurately reflect the social nature of composing.

Defining and explaining phenomena such as writer's block can largely begin with research, yet the academic discourse community is not obliged to accept all discoveries as foolproof answers to the problem. It is important to realize that some of the best studies are done by practitioners themselves; they, too, conduct research in their own laboratories—their writing classrooms—where preliminary data (like the work of Rose, Selfe, Daly and Graves) undergoes further tests. While each research method has its limitations, each offers certain insights that help us comprehend the nature of writer's block and writing apprehension.

The Effect of Rigid Rules

The studies of Mike Rose are particularly relevant to my search for an answer as to whether or not reader-response can work effectively in a composition setting because, (1) many of them focus on the basic writer, whereas other studies target either the general writing population, or an altogether different group, such as graduate students (Bloom "Anxious Writer's in Context") or elementary students (Graves "Blocking and the Young Writer"), and (2) the conclusions Rose reaches regarding the stifling effects of rigid composing rules on the composing process are a major point in case for utilizing reader-response and a collaborative classroom over a primarily teacher-centered class and/or

formalist readings of texts.

Since Mina Shaughnessy's introduction to the concept of the basic writer, others have continued to make the same claims about the connection between unrealistic focus on form and increased anxiety (Rose "Rigid Rules," Bechtel "Videotape Analysis," & Selfe "An Apprehensive Writer Composes.") It is the large number of rigid prescriptive statements students internalize that wreaks havoc on their ability to perform writing tasks, and causes them writing apprehension and/or writer's block. Thus, it is unsurprising that one advantage of using reader-response as a composition theory is its focus on the reader's experience, rather than on his or her formal ability to recognize syntactic patterns, correct grammar, and other form-related issues.

Shaughnessy herself recognized the connection between rigid rules and composing-process problems. She describes the situation in Errors and Expectations, where she gives a startling example of fear of errors by reproducing a list of "starts" produced by one student while working on her first draft (see Appendix A). The student takes ten "starts" to get one paragraph written. Shaughnessy attributes this type of problem to students' feeling that "good writing" is characterized by one factor alone—correctness (7-8). This claim is substantiated by discoveries made by Rose that confirms the detrimental nature of the "internal editor." Conversely, Rose finds that when students take risks with steadfast rules, substantial breakthroughs are made in writing competency.

In Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension, Rose discusses the subject of risk-taking by using two case studies (Glenn and Liz) as evidence. Glenn, a low-blocker, with a G.P.A. of 3.85, feels comfortable writing an essay. Liz, a high-blocker, with a G.P.A. of 2.67, feels extremely anxious—to the extent that she can barely produce one paragraph when under pressure. The main difference between the two students concerning their writing habits is their attitude toward

composing rules.

Although Glenn discloses certain rules he'd learned, he also boasts of the way in which he can abandon them if he feels the need to do so (68). Glenn's ultimate goal while writing his essay was to achieve rhetorical effect, while with Liz, rhetorical concerns were secondary to just "getting something down" to meet the assignment. While Liz's composing problems result from several factors, such as premature editing, inadequate prewriting and failure to really conceptualize the rhetorical implications of the essay question, her tendency to cling to composing-process rules hinders her throughout the session (49-50).

In the course of her session, Liz expresses several times that her paper lacks compliance with certain rules, some of which are questionable. However, Rose states, "Most of Liz's other rules are legitimate and could be functional if they were not invoked at so early a point in the composing process" (50). Rose concludes from his protocol analysis that "low-blockers expressed 17 times as many functional rules as did high-blockers, and one-quarter of the non-functional rules" (71).

Interestingly, Glenn—the low-blocker—attributes some of his "risk-taking" efficacy to a "self-expressive" writing class he had in high school. Numerous practitioners and researchers have encouraged teachers to teach students to use language creatively, in order to "free" students from the chains of form that constrict the evolution of their content (Pumphrey 670). It would be telling to investigate groups of students who had had creative or expressive writing experience in high school, in comparison with those who did not, in order to see if a link between creative writing experience and "risk-taking" with composing process rules exists.

Basic writers, however, cannot feel comfortable and empowered to take risks with language if they are expected to learn traditionally by separating learning

ISS
Learning
Separated
from said
e.g.

and social experience. Fortunately, the flooding of nontraditional students into higher education has demanded alternative teaching environments such as decentralized writing classrooms which enhance risk-taking. Collaborative learning environments also lessen the anxiety nontraditional students feel when they are expected to make the transition into traditional student roles (Trimbur 90). The question then turns from "Will collaborative learning alleviate writing apprehension?" to "How will it work?" Combining literary and composition theory is one possible answer.

Chapter 3.

Bridging Reader-Response and Composition Theory

Reader-response critical theory lends itself to collaborative learning because its vital relationship is between reader and text. This is significant because this interaction shifts the responsibility of learning in several directions. Reader-response as a literary theory, however, is far too broad in its concepts for us to generalize what it can or cannot do in the basic writing classroom. While key theorists such as Fish and Iser, Jonathan Culler, Norman N. Holland, and David Bleich share a common ground in that they reserve some or all of the meaning-making task for readers instead of accepting literary texts as containing meaning in and of themselves, it is clear that they disagree frequently. Consequently, I have chosen two particular figures—Fish and Iser—whose main concepts reflect a similar notion, insofar as they both assert a central proposition that meaning evolves from the interaction between reader and text—an interaction that involves a circuitous process (Berger 148).

Reader-Response—Through the Eyes of Fish and Iser

Stanley Fish's ideas transfer most comfortably into an aspect of composition theory. In fact, they anticipate the ideas of influential composition professors and researchers such as Mike Rose and Donald Murray. Both Fish and Rose stress the cognitive over the affective aspect of reading and writing. Fish's approach incorporates the "structure of the reader's experience," whereas Iser is more interested in the indeterminate nature—the gaps—in the text (Berger 149). Incidentally, Iser's approach is categorized as phenomenological. Fish's ideas are illuminating as they relate to further data on the cognitive dimension of inexperienced writers and/or writer's block (See Harris "Diagnosing Writing-Process Problems," Jones "Problems With Monitor Use," and Flower &

①
Meaning evolves
from interaction
of Reader w/
text

Hayes "Problem-Solving Strategies").

Iser describes an alternate theory of how "learning" takes place in his essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." He says: "As the reader uses the various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and the "schematized views" to one another, he sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself" (The Reading Process 51). Iser sees aesthetic response as one revealing a three-way dialectic of sorts between the reader, writer and the interaction between the two (The Act of Reading x).

Although Fish and Iser apparently intend their viewpoints to be transferred to composition theory, they acknowledge the connection between literary theory and composition theory. Both Iser's and Fish's work can be categorized as transactional, and both discuss the relationship between the literary and non-literary text. Because these critics focus on the reader and the act of reading rather than the objectivity of the text, "their ideas contribute directly to the writing teacher's understanding of how readers and transactive processes become part of an overall interpretation and how that process of interpretation can be enriched and made more coherent when different kinds of writing exercises are interspersed in the reading process" (Comprone 315).

The Effect of Reading on Composition

Much research has been done on the connection between the act of reading and successful writing. More specifically, claims are often made that when students frequently see the written word, they begin to internalize stylistic techniques; they get a feel for how to arrange sentences, paragraphs and essays in an effective way (Eschholz 21). For unskilled writers, whose ideas sometimes get lost in the writing process because they are concerned with form, reading, discussing and imitating literature may be especially functional; it is a way to

teach form while promoting and inspiring creativity (Gorrell 53). This is one strength of using prose models as composing exercises.

In addition to the benefit of reading while learning to compose, others agree that students will benefit from learning to "actively" read in order to become critical thinkers. While few practitioners or researchers would argue against this, the difficulty is discovering the most conducive and practical method for implementing a reading/writing course. This task proves even more critical in a basic writing course, where a large percentage of the class is underprepared for college, are first or second-generation Americans, or have had little experience with reading and/or writing. Sometimes, ignoring the cultural and idiosyncratic differences in the students can alienate students, causing them to drop the course altogether (Barr Reagan 110).

Iss
Obstacles

In order to implement a successfully integrated reading/writing program for basic writers, we need to define "active reading" in terms of the basic writer. Should they be able to notice when writers use a figure of speech and determine why they chose that particular strategy? Should the student identify writers' chosen points of view, so the student can better assess their motivations? Probably not, for while this line of questioning is common and often illuminating in a literature class, intermediate composition class, or a combined composition and literature course, it is probable that basic writers would become intimidated if expected to answer a series of questions for which they had no schema.

7
Def of
active r.
for basic
writers

Intimidation, as a cause of writer's block, occurs at all levels. Even in my freshman composition class when I asked the students to write on the topic, "What makes you comfortable or uncomfortable about writing," ten out of forty students stated directly that they suffered from writing blocks; an additional five students alluded to experiencing problems that reflected writer's block. Basic writers, then, have to overcome further obstacles to get past the apprehensive

hurdle, so facing formalist literary reading strategies is not a remedy to writing well but rather a detriment. By contrast, a reader-response interpretation would alleviate apprehension, because while the majority of basic writers are unfamiliar with interpreting prose from a formalist approach, all students—basic through advanced writers—respond to writing. Thus, the Fish/Iser theory of reader-response offers a potential gateway to teach writing through the examination of fiction and student writing.

Reader-Response as Hermeneutics

If we implemented reader-response in the composition class, we would be using, in essence, hermeneutical knowledge-making strategies. Steven M. North explains hermeneutics (or Critical inquiry) in his text The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field:

In keeping with the tradition of textual interpretation from which it derives, I will call [Critical inquiry] Hermeneutical, and its practitioners, the Critics. It has three major concerns: (a) establishing a body of texts, usually called a canon, for interpretation; (b) the interpretation of those texts; and (c) generating theories about (a) and (b)—that is, about what constitutes a canon, how interpretation should proceed and to what end (116).

Traditionally hermeneutics has involved Biblical and/or literary works as its object, although James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse attempts to use this mode of inquiry to bridge the gap between composition and literature. More relevant to this thesis are Chapters 5 and 6 of Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers. The author describes a teacherless (so to speak) writing class, which North says, ". . . is a practical. . . hermeneutics for an interpretive community whose 'canon' consists solely of its own productions" (118).

The key characteristics of hermeneutical knowledge-making it theoretically suitable to teaching reader-response in composition classrooms. First, hermeneutical inquiry involves dialectical logic; or as North would say,

". . .the mind studying its own operations" (119). This complements Iser's dialectic (previously discussed). Secondly, the critics interpret the texts by seeking patterns—a process that stimulates rhetorical awareness. Moreover, hermeneutics potentially allows for a canon of both student and professional texts. Because reader-response involves seeing the text as a set of instructions for creating an experience, using reader-response to seek patterns would require a somewhat different strategy than if we sought traditional formal patterns in a text assumed to contain meaning.

In all likelihood, using reader-response strategies to interpret texts in a basic writing setting would eventually teach students to discuss language from a formal approach. Fish recognizes this in a literary context by explaining that "There are still formal patterns [in a text that emerges from our individual interpretation], but they do not lie innocently in the world; rather, they are themselves constituted by an interpretive act" (Is There a Text 13).

If basic writing instructors gave their basic writing students a few passages from Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," for example, one student might respond by stating, "When I read this I feel like I'm right there with the guys talking." If an instructor asked why that was so, the student might answer, "Maybe because the way the guys are talking is so casual. I don't feel like it's over my head." The student's responses reflect their awareness of what the text is doing, even though they might not possess the schema to express their responses through formal properties.

From the student's insightful response, however, instructors could casually but methodically and deliberately introduce the terms "dialogue," "tone," and "diction" to the group. These are properties commonly referred to by the language of formal criticism, yet instructors could introduce them to the class while giving credit to the student for his or her discovery, and they are relevant to

composition writing. This three-way dialectic between text, teacher and reader makes hermeneutics and reader-response promising for motivating students to learn.

From studying such topics as the causes of writing anxiety in basic writers, the effects of various types of response to student writing, the effects of teaching writing as "process" and Fish and Iser's reader-response, one can discover potential correlations between this myriad of approaches and student motivation. Still, any preliminary connections would need further research in order to prove that these ideas work in practice. For the moment, most of the scenarios and anecdotes I pose illuminate these connections in theory only.

Chapter 4.

Reader-Response as a Basis for Collaborative Learning

The term "collaborative learning" began gaining recognition in the late sixties and early seventies; the broad label encompasses classroom techniques such as small writing groups, peer critiques, collective writing assignments, peer tutoring in writing labs and centers, and reader response (Trimbur 87).

Even in the early years of basic writing studies, Shaughnessy identified the value of a student-centered classroom. She states, "It should not be surprising, however, that BW students, who have generally read very little and who have written only for teachers, have difficulty believing in a real audience" (Errors 39), and goes on to suggest various strategies to remedy this such as exchanging and reading student papers and exposing the students to unpunctuated passages that the students are required to read out loud. The latter technique requires reader-response detective work of sorts; the passages will invariably be read from student to student with varying intonation, emphasis, pronunciation of words, omission of words, etc. Thus, the students will formulate from the text different meanings.

Recent research has also indicated that when basic writers collaborate in small groups over a piece of writing, confidence builds and anxiety lessens. In At The Point of Need—Teaching Basic and ESL Writers, Marie Wilson Nelson does extensive research on which methods and environment promote the best learning and motivation in basic and ESL writers. Nelson's five years of qualitative research produce some interesting (although not surprising) discoveries on the machinations of the basic writer.

Nelson's results reflect ethnographic studies which took place on a tutoring center at a college campus. The tutors took extensive notes on each pupil during

each session. The group sessions among the tutors reveal patterns that, indeed, indicate a potential connection between reader-response in the basic writing classroom and decreased apprehension/increased motivation in basic writers.

One key factor discussed during the study was the role group discussion/peer response plays in motivating students. Paramount to the tutors' discoveries is the importance of what they termed "interdependence." Interdependence is the crucial stage between student dependence and independence as writers. It is when the students work together as a team, contributing to each others' work, that breakthroughs are made in attitude (51-53).

Diep, one of the tutors, comments in his journal regarding the importance of group size and suggests that groups of five or six are most active because the students shared a larger "knowledge pool" (60). The knowledge pool Diep speaks of reflects the benefit basic writers receive when they share similar responses—responses that arise as a result of their membership to their "interpretive community."

As for students already experiencing "writer's block," sharing ideas and knowledge can ignite their imaginations and reestablish them in the process—even if it is in a prewriting stage (Weiner 93). Consequently, sharing a piece of work may present a new fear for students: that of being exposed. This is one writing anxiety, nonetheless, that can be remedied by response if the writer, the writer's peers and the teacher regard the piece of writing, and what it's saying, with the necessary detachment (Murray "Writing as Process" 19). This could be potentially difficult on an emotional topic. Because basic writers tend to write in an egocentric manner (Flower 16-18), it raises the question, "Would the writer have enough control to sit back and have a piece of expressive writing altered, possibly changing the entire meaning of the piece?" This is one topic that should

be investigated further.

Basic writers may also become motivated in group response settings because they feel equal. They feel equal because, as one student admitted, ". . .when I read my friend's writing, I can find errors in his writing, okay? And at the same time, I can find errors in my own writing, so I am equal with him, or with her" (Nelson 82). This statement not only reflects the positive environment of peer response, but it also indicates the strength of using student texts from the community of fellow students in the class room as models, rather than viewing only professional documents.

Fish's Reader-Response in the Collaborative Writing Environment

Peter Elbow, James Moffet, and Kenneth A. Bruffee express views of collaborative learning that indicate a positive alliance between reader-response critical theory. Elbow's "teacherless class," for example, promotes what Elbow calls a "believing game" where readers' responses to a piece of student writing take the spotlight over teacher evaluation. The "believing game" sharpens the students' awareness of the effect words have upon other students, whereas the "doubting game" (which uses standard procedures, rules of evidence and so on) allows for only one opinion—that of the teacher. Elbow's approach stems from his belief that students block because they worry too much about messiness, error and turning in a perfect first draft (Writing Without Teachers).

Like Elbow, Moffet believes multiple responses to student drafts create a more motivating ambiance in the composition classroom. Peer feedback, Moffet asserts, is less threatening to students because multiple responses "make feedback more impersonal and thus easier to heed" (193). Kenneth Bruffee also sees writing as a social act; therefore his position is that collaborative learning is absolutely essential to writing—that we should consider composing an activity within Fish's "interpretive communities" (303). The concept of "interpretive

communities" is perhaps the key to forming a collaborative learning base from reader-response.

Fish's description of "interpretive communities" is complex, yet it transcends situations beyond the literary community. He states, "If the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform; that is, it will proceed in terms of the system of rules all speaker's share" ("Literature" 84). The key to Fish's explanation is the assumption that each reader has "somehow internalized" the system of rules. If texts were to be interpreted from the traditional formal approach, students would most likely be expected to contribute with responses such as:

"The subject and verb do not agree in this sentence."

"This sentence contains a fragment."

"This pronoun is unclear—we don't know who the writer is talking about."

What's interesting about formal interpretation is that it isn't really interpretation at all. It is examination. It is locating a fault or error in the form of the piece. Examination of this kind rarely discusses the content of the paper. It rarely allows the reader to think critically about the paper. And it suggests that the success or failure of the writer's paper depends on how well he or she can stick to the rules of punctuation, grammar, spelling, etc. Since rigid rules are a major factor of writing apprehension in basic writers, this approach seems detrimental to the progress of both reader and writer.

These factors make Fish's notion of "interpretive community" interesting.

Jane P. Tompkins explains Fish's concept:

It (interpretive communities) is shorthand for the notion that since all sign systems are social constructs that individuals assimilate more or less automatically (or, more accurately, that pervade and constitute individual consciousness), an individual's perceptions and judgments are a function of the assumptions shared by the group he or she

belongs to (Reader-Response xxi).

Because basic writers characteristically come from a multitude of socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups, Tompkins' description brings new possibilities of how to interpret student texts in the basic writing classroom.

In his essay "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing," Edward M. White puts Fish's concept of "interpretive community" into a composition context. White's argument is that composition teachers have been utilizing, in a practical way, many of the theoretical ideas claimed by Post-Structuralists. White uses the example of "interpretive communities" to explain holistic grading among writing teachers. He states, "[t]his concept helps us . . . see why we as composition teachers tend to respond to student writing the way we do: our interpretive community has a set of coherent and powerful assumptions and strategies for approaching (Fish would say writing) student texts" (291). Perhaps more important than arguing for the applicability of literary concepts to composition is whether or not using "interpretive communities" as a strategy will motivate writers. White asserts, "[p]articipation in the 'interpretive community' of test scorers thus can radiate into a sense of participation in the wider community of professional teachers of writing; this increased sense of community tends to be one of the most beneficial by-products of holistic reading" (292). Though it is probable that basic writers, as a group, have a more complex community than White's holistic scorers, the "interpretive community" concept offers a versatile explanation as to why a text can be interpreted differently and similarly by several members.

Fish, in his essay, "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable," argues through several literary examples, that the very disagreement of texts is very insightful. One illustration he employs is Blake's "The Tyger." Fish uses the numerous approaches critics have taken to explain "The Tyger" as an argument

against subjectivity. He says that while more than one interpretation of the poem is possible, there is such a thing (even in Reader-Response!) as limited plurality. This limited plurality (what I see as a "check and balance" system) is possible with expository texts, as well.

How the Interpretive Community Works

When students gather to discuss texts—whether they are professional or student—the goal of the instructor is most likely twofold: to get the students to recognize and respond to formal concerns, and to get the students to respond originally (Elbow calls these types of feedback criterion-based and reader-based, respectively). Let's say Juan reads a "process" essay he wrote on "How to Wash a Car." Sylvia might offer advice such as, "You need to capitalize the 'D' in 'Dry the car with a towel,' since it is the first letter of the sentence." Her criticism here is formal (or criterion-based) in the sense that, since she and Juan form the same academic community, they are inevitably bound to the code under many circumstances.

On the other hand, Sylvia might respond by saying she thinks Juan needs to add a step in between "Dry the car with a towel," and "Pop open a can of Coke and relax." She asks Juan if that's really the process—doesn't he need to roll up the hose or empty the water first? This comment is Sylvia's own idea (or reader-based) supported by her personal experiences. Her reactions are illuminating, because if she and Juan come from different communities, chances are their cultures and environments effect their experiences. Juan may or may not choose to add a step to his process. Perhaps he says, "In the East side we relax first. Then, we finish the job." Whatever the outcome, the students have exchanged interpretations in a non-threatening way, and they've learned that it is natural for interpretations to vary.

Fish describes how interpretations prove that language can have more than

one literal meaning in his essay "Is There A Text In This Class?" The essay presents one student's question to her professor: "Is there a text in this class?" The professor, understandably, thinks the student is asking what textbook is required for the course. The student's true inquiry, however, is if she (and the other students) are supposed to "believe in poems and things," or if would be "just us." In this instance, two literal meanings are possible. This acceptance of multiple literal meanings is reassuring to basic writers.

Prompting Reader-Response Questions During Collaborative Work

Some practitioners might argue that any peer response—not just reader-response—is beneficial in motivating students. While peer response is nearly always positive, it is hard to come by in the basic writing classroom unless the students feel at ease. They are more likely to feel at ease if they realize that they can respond to what the text does—rather than what the text means. One student, for instance, may write with a wonderfully fresh sense of humor but may have a severe problem with mechanics. This student needs to be encouraged to react to other students' texts in a way that will underline and reinforce her strengths (humor)—not her weaknesses (mechanics). If this student responds to peer texts by saying, "If I were you, I'd talk more about your day at the carnival, it could be really funny," instead of being expected to say something about physical errors, she participates without feeling anxious.

Recall the first literature class you took in college. While the seniors sat smugly discussing how the "eyes" of T.J. Eckelbury, in The Great Gatsby, were really Fitzgerald's symbol of Thomas Jefferson and America as a wasteland, you sat there in awe. Not to mention feeling mortified. The basic writer faces the same anxiety in his or her basic writing course. The teacher rattles off unfamiliar terminology, and by the very act of his or her "red pen," assumes the student knows what a comma splice is or what "wordiness" means. This is the result of

our formal upbringing. This is how we grow up in college. Unfortunately, most often basic writers have a student profile that does not allow for this kind of learning: most have had little luck in the educational system before and their confidence is simply too low to sit in class week after week if they feel "lost."

Now recall the first situation—the literature class—with an alternate approach. Imagine the teacher asking the class, "What does the reader do in this story? What is being done to the reader, and for what purpose?" As Fish explains, interpreting texts in a reader-response manner approaches the poetry or prose as "occasions for a temporal experience," rather than spatial objects. The freshman student can now feel more comfortable responding, because the answer does not require a "correct" answer; because his answer could be just as interesting as the senior's answer; because it does not take an elite vocabulary to describe what is being done to someone or something.

Similarly, if basic writers are asked to respond to the same questions, a burden is suddenly lifted. Although it is not exactly the same situation—they are not in the shadow of more knowledgeable seniors—they're allowed to answer somewhat subjectively. They're allowed to argue for something without the anxiety of worrying about whether their answer is "right" or "wrong." Like the freshman, basic writers, by answering a different set of questions, can feel as if they are valuable contributors in the classroom.

Part of teaching inexperienced readers and writers to respond is by turning the passive reader into Fish's "informed reader." This goal is achieved by giving students so much collaborative work that eventually students become rhetorically aware of what they are reading, why it has the characteristics it does, and what linguistic features create the text. Reader-response gives the students the authority to read "actively," without feeling that they lack the knowledge to criticize a peer or published writer. Another important factor is Fish's claim that

reader-response "slows the reading process."

I have heard many complaints from fellow instructors who say they feel frustrated during; they fantasize that each group makes significant observations, eventually evolving into better writers from their new found knowledge. Before this dream can be enacted the students must know what they're looking for, and how to respond to what they find when they recognize it. This situation exemplifies why, although too much emphasis on formal properties is detrimental, some instruction in this area is still needed. Neither process, however, can occur without slowing down the reading process. Once the reading process is slowed, according to Fish, meaning can become an event; the question of "what does the text do?" arises.

Fish describes this process further by saying, "It is as if a slow-motion camera with an automatic stop-action effect were recording our linguistic experiences and presenting them to us for viewing" (Is There a Text 28). Another advantage of the "text as an event" concept for a basic writing course is that, under this assumption, the ordinary language in a basic writer's text cannot be viewed as ordinary; it must be viewed as extraordinary because it reflects (although simply) our ordinary understanding of the world.

Similar to Fish's "Informed Reader" is Iser's "Implied Reader." Joseph J. Comprone accurately summarizes Iser's description of the Implied Reader:

Iser, then, posits a reader who constructs meaning out of a constant tension, during reading, between points of textual disappointment and counterpointing moments of insight in which social and cultural information is brought in to fill the holes in a text. Iser's ideal reader is above all active, always relating cultural frames of reference to holes or gaps in a text, seeking a balance between subjective and objective perspectives (302-303).

Interestingly, Iser focuses on what readers do as they read, instead of what their reading means—as opposed to Fish's question of what does the text do.

Comprone says of the two "Fish, like Iser, tries to describe the mental processes of readers as they read, just as current composition theorists wish to develop descriptive models of what writers do as they write (304).

To analyze what a text or reader does is less threatening to basic writers. They do not need to know what a verb or adverb is. They do not need to express, for example, that a sentence doesn't make sense because it has a dangling modifier. Instead, basic writers explain what the sentence does and inadvertently discovers what the sentence does not do. But, basic writers will not have to describe what the sentence does not do in formal terms; the analysis will make sense to their peers as explained in ordinary language, in ordinary context.

If reading "processes its own user," according to Fish, then will examining student and professional texts help basic writers discover their own writing processes? By examining a professional text for what it does, basic writers are encouraged to examine the strategies used by the author. Most likely, the students will not be able to elucidate the text in the same manner another professional writer or an English major might (for example, "The author has used anaphora to establish repetition and heightened emotion in his piece"). Instead, the teacher/student dialogue in a response session is likely to resemble the following:

S: (hesitantly) I like this essay because it sounds good.

T: You're right. What does the text do in that section that makes it sound good?

S: It sounds strong—like a drum beat.

T: What comes to mind when you read the passage out loud?

S: It's like the author's using "rap"—he's really getting a rhythm going.

The student in this dialogue might not understand what the meant if that

teacher replied, "The repetition is anaphora—a repetition of the beginning of successive clauses." Left to his own devices, however, the student will create his own meaning with the resources he does have. He may assert that "rap" music reminds him of the passage. It is most certain that many classmates will share this student's other "interpretive community" (perhaps a socioeconomic one rather than the academic "interpretive community" they form as classmates). Without knowing a single thing about subject, verbs, antecedents, etc., this student has opened a lot of classmates' eyes (and ears) with his discussion of the passage. What's important, an image has been created in the students' minds. The next time they go to write a paragraph or a journal entry, they might attempt to use a "rap"-like style if they want to imitate the essay's effects. Most vital, perhaps, is that a student has actively read, made an interpretation, received accreditation, and learned from his own critical thinking. These are major steps toward alleviating apprehension.

I have used this technique in my own basic writing class. I gave the students a narrative passage to read ("Growing Up" by Russell Baker), then asked them Fish's and Iser's questions. We considered the following sentence in "Growing Up": "Before, the plane had had a will of its own; now the plane seemed to be a part of me, an extension of my hands and feet, obedient to my slightest whim." "What does the text do here?" I asked. Norma responded immediately: "In the first part of the sentence the plane is like a human. Then, it becomes one with the man. It creates a visual picture—of the plane as a pet or something! I can see it with a collar on!" After commending Norma for her insights I told the class that ". . .by the way, 'personification' is what it's called when a non-human thing has human characteristics." I didn't define the term because I expected all of the students to learn the technique by name and use it; I defined the term very off-handedly, in case some of the more advanced students

desired to build up their vocabulary and awareness of specific writing techniques. A few were very interested, and used the technique by name in the future—either in their own papers or when commenting on others texts.

In the last part of "Growing Up," the tension builds when the author increases action verbs, switches to present tense, and eliminates end punctuation for the last five lines. The students responded to my question of "what does the reader do here?" in several ways:

John: I think of myself on the track—I race cars—and I can relate to the guy in the plane. . .it's tense—but exciting.

Ede: I feel like I'm in the plane with him. I'm doing whatever he does.

Eduardo: I just got lost half way through. The sentence is too long.

Maria: It makes me hold my breath just reading it!

Sometimes, reader-response initiates responses that bridge content and form. My basic writers often respond to the form of "Growing Up"—but usually as the form affected content.

In addition to revealing form-related issues, reader-response initiates response to social issues, dialects and emotions—responses such as these:

(1) "That part doesn't sound natural. I would say it like. . ."

(2) "You say Blacks are discriminated against, but I'm Vietnamese, and I've had the exact situations occur. I don't think you should limit the discrimination part of your paper to one race."

(3) "This paper makes me angry. I want to agree with the writer, but I feel he doesn't have the authority to say what he says."

The last example is particularly telling; it demonstrates how intense student involvement can be made by asking the student simply, "What does this text do?" If one student is angry, then there's a strong possibility several students are angry. The writer, now aware of the effect and affect his paper has on certain members in his community, can choose to alter his paper or keep it the same. Regardless of

the end product, students have had the chance to respond openly to the content of the piece, and the writer has received feedback that is undoubtedly more valuable than "You missed a comma."

Moreover, readers can respond easily to a paper in terms of how the paper sounds. Fish talks about a system of rules all speakers share. Notice that Fish says "speakers"—not "readers" or "writers." If you have a group of five basic writers interpreting a student's paragraph, for example, they are likely to respond as a speaker of the language. They will discuss the way the essay sounds—"Something in this sentence doesn't sound right"; "I wouldn't say it that way;" "You sound 'high and mighty' by saying that." Once again, we have bridged the gap between form and content; the effects of a sentence, paragraph or essay might be caused by a flaw in punctuation, grammar, etc., and the reader or writer is likely to figure that out by focusing on how the paper "sounds" and what the subsequent options are. This may be an opportune moment for the teacher to discuss "voice." Ideally, reader-response strategies would form the basis for a collaborative learning situation in which formal concerns are explained—but secondary.

Chapter 5.

Alleviating Writing Anxiety Through Reader-Response Based Collaboration

Responding to Student Writing

Responding to student writing is an abundantly explored topic. The general consensus is that the traditional method, where the professor makes marginal comments in private, is ineffective (see articles by Murray, Sommers, Zamel, Carnicelli, Shaw). Sommers states that written comments suggest to students that their paper is done—has a fixed meaning that is not negotiable; the students confuse product with process. As a result, the students learn to see their paper as a system of words, sentences and paragraphs rather than a unified essay ("Responding" 161-163).

The biggest frustration regarding this method for the basic writing student occurs when the instructor returns the draft with corrections that completely alter the student's "purpose." Vivian Zamel goes into further detail in her essay for TOESL quarterly. She proposes that many responses are ". . .confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible" (79). Furthermore, she states that this type of responding gives the students a limited view of the writing process because it fails to recognize that a text is not fixed but constantly evolving. Zamel's authentic examples are convincing and substantiate her plea for teachers to devise alternate responding methods.

Although her article involves ESL writers, Zamel's advice is surely applicable to basic writers. Basic writers often experience difficulties translating their own dialects to standard written English, causing instructors to sometimes completely misread what students are trying to "do" with their papers. Reader-response is one substitute method; it allows the students to discuss what their paper is trying to "do" before their paper comes under siege from the instructor's pen.

We can use an example from Zamel's article to show how reader-response might work to combat inappropriate teacher response. Example 2, in her article, illustrates a teacher's misinterpretation of a word:

(2) . . . I was so shocked and surprised by his answer that I didn't tell him anything else. He kept his money and became my ^{ENEMY}emie that was a lesson to me, (^Itough) ^{TO MY SELF}thought ~~me~~ how money could change someone's personality and honesty . . . (88).

As illustrated by the instructor's corrections, the student's (we'll call him "Jesse") intended meaning "taught me" is interpreted by the instructor as "thought to myself." Now, imagine that a group of five students discuss Jesse's work in progress. Because the group is of the same interpretive community, it is likely that a few students understand what the writer is trying to say. Even more likely, students throw out their own interpretations as to what the sentence is trying to "do." Jesse does not feel threatened because the various interpretations are just commentaries—not judgments or misconceptions. The author may then choose to revise the sentence and concept to fit an alternate interpretation, or he may choose to rework his own, until it is understandable to all members of the group.

From the scenario I've created, three benefits are possible:

- (1) Jesse will discover that his draft is "evolving"—not static (therefore giving him a sense of control over his language).
- (2) Jesse will not feel judged (and therefore not anxious).
- (3) Jesse will have the chance to work through his own paper and voice his own reasons for why he has made certain choices (therefore alleviating the frustration of getting back a paper with misconceived corrections).

In Jean Pumphrey's article "Teaching English Composition As A Creative

Art," one student responds to Ms. Pumphrey's question, "What makes writing so painful?" by saying, "Writing is difficult because everything you write down is there forever. . .writing is stating something—not being able to take anything back" (668). This student's fear exemplifies why responding to student writing through reader-response might work; once Jesse, for example, realizes his assignment isn't "all or nothing," and once he physically takes part in the process of composition and learns that he has options, the composing process takes on a new meaning.

It is also worth noting that the third "situation" in my scenario is directly addressed in articles discussing the one-on-one conference by Donald Murray and Thomas Carnicelli. While the one-on-one conference allows for more quality time between student and instructor, it does not provide the necessary environment for reader-response to take place. Nevertheless, many of the benefits characteristic of the one-on-one conference match those of reader-response. In Carnicelli's article, for instance, the author talks of the productive "arguing" that sometimes occurs when a student defends the way he has written something in a paper. The student, by having this opportunity to debate, realizes that he does have some authority over his work. As Carnicelli describes it, "The student gains confidence as a writer and self-critic, as well as respect for the writing course itself" (109).

Margaret L. Shaw, like Zamel, seeks to find an alternate approach to marking student texts in her article "What Students Don't Say: An Approach to the Student Text." She argues that marginal comments result in the writer simplifying the content of the text during revision rather than increasing its complexity (45). One method she proposes is to teach students to view "textual discontinuities" such as "gaps" and "contradictions" in a positive light .

A good deal of Shaw's argument is directly applicable to the role of reader-

response as a method of response. Shaw submits that if writers use gaps as discoveries through critical and literary theories—instead of covering them up—students will be more motivated to revise. With her plan, the writer makes significant revelations. Reader-response, however, requires the "community" to make major contributions; ultimately, it is the combination of writers and readers that fills the gaps and inconsistencies. While Shaw's primary goal may be for each student to push his or her vision to the limit and explore new ideas and styles, the reader-response goal is to give each student more confidence and alleviate anxiety, so that in the process they, too, may achieve Shaw's ideal.

Taking the "Error" Out of Writing

The word "error" has plagued students and teachers alike. Fortunately, professors are becoming increasingly cognizant of the true implications of errors as a result of basic writing pioneers such as Mina Shaughnessy (who realized early on the ambiguity in the word "error"), David Bartholomae, and Mike Rose. In Lives On The Boundary (1989), Rose states, "Mina Shaughnessy, an inspired teacher, used to point out that we won't understand the logic of error unless we also understand the institutional expectations that students face and the way they interpret and internalize them" (171-172).

It doesn't take research to see that a good majority of basic writers swear by memorizing rules. We would think that remedial students would know so little about grammar, punctuation, and so on, that particular rules would not be in their recall when writing. This is simply not the case. In fact, in Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy notes, "...there is the urgency of the students to meet their teachers' criteria, even to request more of the prescriptive teaching they have had before in the hope that this time it might take" (8-9). When inconsistencies arise (and they inevitably do) students feel helpless.

If we taught these same students to embrace inconsistencies—that

composing rules have various interpretations—they might stumble further. But, if we as professors taught the students that different interpretations are possible; that they are apt to change over time; that if we used strategies of reader-response to demonstrate that there is not merely one "correct" way to compose, then perhaps students would be more willing to embrace, instead of fear, gray areas in language.

Embracing Ambiguities

That which is deemed "correct" is destined to change; yesterday's "error" might be tomorrow's ideal word choice. The word "lifestyle," for example was, in the recent past, considered by many writing teachers "jargon." In the '90s, however, the need for the word "lifestyle" is great; just try to think of an adequate synonym for the word; would "way of living" suffice? Or "daily routine"? As the culture evolves, so does the vocabulary necessary to describe it.

The various dialects of the English language, as well, are increasingly diverse. The grammar and diction of America's southern states, for instance, might not be deemed "acceptable" by many college teachers. But as our culture throws more ingredients into its "melting pot," our language inevitably demands that exceptions be made for the sake of communication.

And then there is the dilemma of fragments. Some students are skilled at using fragments stylistically. Some are not. Once again, as teachers we are at crossroads. We cannot rightly say that this form of sentence structure is "incorrect," yet students need some guidelines. Fragments are commonplace in journalistic documents as well as fiction. Still, we tend to categorically write "frag" by any incomplete sentence we locate in a student draft.

The "correct" use of commas has also varied from time to time in the literary community. Students find this frustrating. While one teacher may state rigidly,

"You place a comma before 'and' or 'but,'" another teacher may argue "You must not place a comma before a conjunction in a series of commas." The confused basic writer scratches his or her head and continues to make "errors." When his paper is handed back he is usually marked down. He becomes further confused as to why there is a discrepancy in something as "black and white" as comma usage.

Most, if not all, English professors would be hard pressed to produce an objective, systematic rule book defining when a word, phrase, or sentence pattern is and is not acceptable. Yet, we expect our students to know. And when they make a decision, they are rewarded not with a praise for taking risks, but with a "frag" next to a fragment that may or may not have been intended as a rhetorical strategy.

Clearly, basic writers (as well as Freshmen writers) fall into traps of unclear pronoun referents, unusual choices in diction, slang, etc. But by having the students read aloud, and interpret each others' papers, many of these inconsistencies or idioms become apparent to students without their papers undergoing an attack of the red pen. Moreover, in creating an environment where student evaluation is based on collective interpretations of readers and writers, we accomplish several tasks simultaneously. We motivate students to be creative and take risks. We teach them "audience" awareness. And we teach them that they have control over their writing process.

We are taught from an early age to embrace black and white rules and standards. With the advent of the "multiple-choice" test, we have taught students that knowledge exists in prescriptive form; that there is one "right" answer and three "incorrect" answers (White "Lecture"). When it comes to motivating basic writers, deviating from absolutes and allowing them some creative license gives them a variety of ways to understand the composing process.

Fostering Motivation By Stressing "Process"

Teaching composition as a "process" is one of the largest movements the writing community has experienced. If we glance through the textbooks designed to put the classical handbook to rest, we find examples such as: Brannon, Knight, and NeverowTurks's Writers Writing, Peter Elbow's Writing With Power and Ken Macrorie's Writing to be Read, Uptaught, and Searching Writing: A Contextbook. Such alternate methods of teaching composition work from a ideology similar to reader-response.

Stanley Fish, in describing reader-response, says literature is a "kinetic art." Composition is no more a "stable artifact" (Fish's argument against Formalism) than literature. If an essay or composition were stable, we would view it as a product rather than process.

Fish says, "[t]he great merit (from this point of view) of kinetic art is that it forces you to be aware of 'it' as a changing object—and therefore no object at all—and also to be aware of yourself as correspondingly changing" ("Literature in the Reader" 82-83). This statement greatly resembles the process of writing—the revision process in particular. If students, especially basic writers, perceived their writing as work-in-progress, if they perceived revision and errors as commonplace stepping stones, then based on Rose's findings, their writing apprehension would subside.

Reader-response strategies in the basic writing classroom give students the opportunity to actively participate not just in their own writing process, but in those of their peers, as well. Moreover, these strategies force teachers to limit their interference in their students' natural writing progression. I do not mean to imply that instructors are unnecessary in the composition classroom, just that students need to fathom their own processes and that teachers can help them in that regard.

In "Writing as Process," Donald Murray examines the role of the writing teacher. He asserts, "The teacher has to restrain himself or herself from providing a content, taking care not to inhibit the students from finding their own subjects, their own forms, and their own language" (13). This perception sounds similar to Rose's plea to allow students to take risks. Reader-response fulfills both Murray's and Rose's criteria by presenting an environment where basic writers (whose initial draft may be chaos) learn through "process" that the chaos of a first draft is not the death of the paper but a door to future discoveries.

Murray also says, "[i]n teaching the process we have to look, not at what students need to know, but what they need to experience" (13). This statement, in a sense, unites the composition and reader-response. Murray's assumption that "experiencing" is central to the beginning writer resembles Fish's assumption that "experiencing" is central to the reader of literature.

A further connection can be made between Murray and Fish. In his article, Murray stresses how important it is that students ". . .listen to the voices which are coming from the members of their writing community, and that they discover that writing is a process of discovery" (15). The "supportive writing community" of which Murray speaks is similar to Fish's literary "interpretive community."

Murray professes that "the community of writers instinctively knows that each piece of writing is trying to work its way toward a meaning. The community wants to help the writer help the piece of writing find its own meaning" (15). The author's notion that the process of a paper's evolution, in part, motivates writers, and that language contains its own purpose and instructs the writer on how to proceed, is in many ways parallel to Fish's idea. Both suggest procedures requiring interpreters to break down the text (and as Fish says, "negotiate the text sentence by sentence and phrase by phrase.").

There is, however, one major difference between the two processes. The

reader-response readers interpret a text written by someone else; they do not receive any "help" regarding the author's intended meaning of the text. But the composer interprets his or her own text. This changes the game slightly; while both groups discuss what the text "does," the literary group does not get feedback from the writer, whereas the composition group does. Thus, reader-response as an aspect of composition theory is a modified version of reader-response as a literary approach.

If students collaborate (using reader-response strategies) in order to unravel their texts, they will discuss "process"; this is inevitable, because when students discuss their topics, drafts, motives, etc., they're not viewing the written word as a static object, but as a work-in-progress—a work that will undergo revision according to the input of their group.

Giving Students Creative Control

The research of both Mike Rose and Marie Wilson Nelson indicates that writers must feel that they have control over their own decisions regarding their work. Without this feeling, motivation wanes. Creative forms of writing usually allow students more freedom from form, as well as inspiring topics that arouse their interest. The quest, then, is combining creative writing with student control. Because it is a literary theory, reader-response naturally lends itself to teaching students techniques of fiction—in a way that will benefit their non-fiction composition skills.

Beginning with Shaughnessy, writers on basic writing have accumulated evidence illustrating the effectiveness of expressive writing forms, write-think, feel-think models, and so on, even when the intent, as Shaughnessy says, ". . . is to end up with formal academic writing" ("Basic Writing" 191). If this is true, then reader-response as a composition approach seems exceptionally suitable for basic writers. In fact, Fish's examples in "Literature in the Reader" are

from non-fiction prose, proving the versatility of reader-response techniques.

In many cases, basic writers have read very little literature—if any. Yet, literature is not always used as a learning tool in basic writing courses. Some instructors feel that literature is too difficult for, and intimidating to, the students. Perhaps instructors worry that with all they need to accomplish in eighteen short weeks, reading literature would waste valuable time. Nevertheless, some research proves that literature is invaluable in a basic writing course. Marie Wilson Nelson, for example, reports "literary epidemics" in the tutoring center which served as a five-year-long study on basic and ESL writers. She says:

Working together to improve pieces on which they had critical distance but whose writers they felt a friendly commitment to, students practiced together a wider range of topics and genres than they otherwise could have in a semester's time. The vicarious interest that developed in pieces they had helped improve increased their commitment to one another's work, blurring the already hazy lines between group and personal ownership, breaking down fear and prejudice toward genre and topics and ideas, and motivating these budding writers to retain what they'd learned (At the Point of Need 87).

Like Nelson, I have witnessed enthusiasm flourish when I have students read either a literary passage relevant to my lecture discussion or a professional narrative essay.

Another reason to support creative writing and response in basic writing curricula is that although formal dissection of formal academic writing has its purpose in higher levels of academia, it is more appropriate to respond to expressive writing in a way that does not make the writer uncomfortable or defensive; it would be devastating to criticize every minute error in a basic writing student's narrative account of "An Incident that Changed My Life."

Janet R. Gilbert discusses the "affective environment" in "Patterns and Possibilities for Basic Writers." She asserts that basic writers must learn to feel as if they own their language, that their language comes from them rather than being

imposed upon them" (41; emphasis included). Gilbert suggests that teachers create assignments, requiring the students to switch conscious gears from narrative to analytical; but other practitioner testimonials upset this assumption.

One such article is "Warning: Basic Writers at Risk—The Case of Javier," by Sally Reagan Barr. Barr presents a semester-long case study of Javier. Javier's lack of confidence in and apprehensive feelings toward writing seem to be signs of laziness; yet, deeper penetration of the problem demonstrates that in the course's transition from narrative prose to more analytical discourses, Javier becomes increasingly alienated by the "academic" prose he is expected to produce—to the point where he eventually drops the course. This example demonstrates why we must teach students to write not only for an academic audience but for themselves and their peers as well. If students cannot "connect" with their writing and feel as if they have no control over their content, they have little motivation to improve.

Approaching texts from a reader-response perspective, whether they are written by students or professional writers, also gives students control by teaching them how to think metacognitively about the written word—it "sensitizes" students to the language ("Literature" 98). Fish comments on the power of regarding written language as an experience. He says, "Not incidentally, they [readers] also become incapable of writing uncontrolled prose, since so much of their time is spent discovering how much the prose of other writers controls them, and in how many ways" (99). Although Fish directs this statement to readers of literature, it is clearly applicable to basic writers—or any level of writer for that matter.

While I don't imply that reader-response would make all basic writers incapable of writing uncontrolled prose, I will assert that their increased awareness of the language would improve their writing skills—as well as their

motivation to improve writing skills. Of course, further research like Barr's would need to be conducted to reach a conclusive decision on this hypothesis.

Reader-Response as a Means of Teaching "Audience"

Using reader-response may very well assist basic writers in making the transition from what Linda Flower defines as "Writer-Based Prose," into "Reader-Based Prose." First, because basic writing classrooms often focus on expressive writing, the student writing contains a lot of casual language—language that is a "verbal expression written by a writer to himself and for himself" ("Writer-Based Prose 16"). The "privately loaded" terms and "talking" associated with writer-based prose are characteristic of basic writing assignment like narratives, description exercises and autobiographies.

In order for students to make the transition from writer-based to reader-based prose (what Flower defines as a ". . . deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader"), the student must gain an awareness that there is an audience present—that the prose has value outside of its journal-like quality. Rose goes further to say that in order for the writing to communicate to the reader, ". . . it creates a shared language and shared context between writer and reader" (16). Once students become an active part of the community and respond to the work of their peers, they take on the role of audience (albeit a subjective one), and they gradually recognize their responsibilities as writer and as reader. Instead of having to "Invent the University" (to use David Bartholomae's phrase) each time they write a paper, students become the "audience" of their own discourse community.

Collaborative writing can help basic writers make make the transition from writing for peers to writing for an academic audience. It can also help students "generate a transitional language to bridge the cultural gap. . ." (Trimbur 101). This view is somewhat challenged by Bruffee whose argument for collaborative

learning uses the concept of "interpretive communities" to explain why all writing is primarily a social act rather than a rhetorical one. We can argue that teachers represent students' "audience," or we can argue that teachers are (as Elaine P. Maimon explains) "native informant[s]" or translators between communities ("Knowledge"); but, realistically, teachers must be both.

Using reader-response strategies as a basis for collaborative learning allows students the opportunity to examine their moment-to-moment reactions to the language. Yet the teacher's role is still vital. The teacher not only leads the students down the path toward academic writing but also to their personal discoveries. Once students acquire a means of discussing language, and once they begin writing for themselves and their peers rather than for a solely academic audience—then the conditions causing writer's block will fade, leaving more room for untapped motivation.

Appendix A

- Start 1. Seeing and hearing is something beautiful and strange to infant.
- Start 2. To a infant seeing and hearing is something beautiful and stronge to a infl
- Start 3. I agree that seeing and hearing is something beautiful and stronge to a infants. A infants heres a strange sound such as work mother, he than acc
- Start 4. I agree that child is more sensitive to beauty, because its all so new to him and he apprec
- Start 5. The main point is that a child is more sensitive to beauty than there parents, because its the child a infntant can only express it feeling with reactions
- Start 6. I agree a child is more sensitive to seeing and hearing than his parent, because its also new to him and more appreciate. His
- Start 7. I agree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than grownup, because when infants comes aware of a sound and can associate it with the object, he is indefeying and the parents acknowledge to to this
- Start 8. I agree and disagree that seeing and hearing have a different quality for infants than for grownups, because to see and hear for infants its all so new and mor appreciate, but I also feel that a child parent appreciate the sharing
- Start 9. I disagree I feel that it has the same quality to
- Start 10. I disagree I fell that seeig and hearing has the same quality to both infants and parents. Hearing and seeing is such a great quality to infants and parents, and they both appreciate, just because there aren't that many panthers or musicians around dosen't mean that infants are more sensitive to beautiful that there parents.

Source: Shaughnessy, Mina. Errors and Expectations. Page 7-8.

Bibliography

- Acevedo, Diana. The Importance of the Affective Dimension in Composition. Thesis at California State University San Bernardino, 1988.
- Barr Reagan, Sally. "Warning! Basic Writers at Risk: The Case of Javier." Journal of Basic Writing 10 (1991): 99-114.
- Berger, Carole. "Viewing as Action: Film and Reader Response Criticism." Literature—Film Quarterly 6 (Spring 1978): 144-151.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?" College Composition and Communication 37 (1986): 294-301.
- Bechtel, J. Videotape Analysis of the Composing Processes of Six Male College Freshmen. Paper presented to the annual conference of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
- Bloom, Lynn Z. "Anxious Writers in Context: Graduate School and Beyond." Rose 119-133.
- Boice, Robert. "Psychotherapies for Writing Blocks." Rose 182-218.
- Brannon, Lil, Melinda Knight, and Vara Neverow-Turk. Writers Writing. Montclair, NJ: Boyton, 1982.
- Carnicelli, Thomas A. "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation." Donovan and McClelland 182-90.
- Coles, Nicholas and Susan V. Wall. "Conflict and Power in the Reader-Responses of Adult Basic Writers." College English 49 (1987), 298-314.
- Comprone, Joseph J. "Literary Theory and Composition." Tate 291-330.
- Daly, John A. "Writing Apprehension." Rose 43-76.
- Daly, John A. & M.D. Miller. "Apprehension of Writing as a Predictor of Message Intensity." Journal of Psychology 89 175-177.
- Donovan, Timothy R. and Ben W. McClelland, eds. Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. Urbana: National council of Teachers of English, 1980.
- Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Eschholtz, Paul A. "The Prose Models Approach: Using Products in the Process." Donovan and McClelland 21-36.

- Fish, Stanley. Doing What Comes Naturally. Durham: Duke UP, 1989.
- . "Interpreting the Variorum." Tompkins 164-184.
- . Is There A Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- . "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?" Keesey 347-356.
- Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." College English, 41 (September 1979): 19-37.
- Flower, Linda and John Hayes. "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process." College English 39 (1977): 449-61
- Gilbert, Janet R. "Patterns and Possibilities for Basic Writers." Journal of Basic Writing. (1987): 37-52.
- Gorrell, Donna. "Freedom to Write—Through Imitation." Journal of Basic Writing 6 (1987): 53-65.
- Graves, Donald H. "Blocking and the Young Writer." Rose 1-18.
- Harris, Muriel. "Diagnosing Writing-Process Problems: A Pedagogical Application of Speaking-Aloud Protocol Analysis." Rose 166-181.
- Harris, Muriel. "Evaluation: The Process for Revision." Journal of Basic Writing, 1 (Spring/Summer 1978): 82-90.
- Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- . "Interaction Between Text and Reader." Keesey 147-154.
- . "The Current Situation of Literary Theory: Key Concepts and the Imaginary." New Literary History 11 (Autumn 1979): 1-20.
- . "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." Tompkins 50-69.
- Jones, Stan. "Problems With Monitor Use in Second Language Composing." Rose 96-118.
- Keesey, Donald. Contexts For Criticism. Mayfield Publishing Co., 1987.
- Kinneavy, James L. A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse. New York: Norton, 1971.

Lunsford, Andrea. "Basic Writing Update." Tate 207-226.

Macrorie, Ken. Searching Writing: A Contextbook. Rochelle Park: Hayden, 1980.

———. Uptaught. New York: Hayden, 1970.

———. Writing to be Read. New York: Hayden, 1968.

Maimon, Elaine P. "Knowledge, Acknowledgement, and Writing Across the Curriculum: Toward an Educated Community." The Territory of Language: Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Writing. Ed. Donald McQuade. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. Forthcoming.

Murray, Donald M. "Teach the Motivating Force of Revision." English Journal 67 (October 1978): 56-60.

———. "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference." College English 41, (1979): 13-18.

———. "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning." Donovan and McClelland 3-20.

North, Steven M. The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton, 1987.

Perl, Sondra. "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers." Research in the Teaching of English 13 (1979): 317-336.

Pervin, L. & R. Lilly. "Social Desirability and Self-Ideal Self-Ratings on the Semantic Differential." Educational and Psychological Measurement 27. 845.

Pumphrey, Jean. "Teaching English Composition as a Creative Art." College English 34, (1973): 666-673.

Rose, Mike. "Complexity, Rigor, Evolving Method, and the Puzzle of Writer's Block: Thoughts on Composing-Process Research." Rose 227-60.

———. Lives on the Boundary. New York: The Free Press, 1989.

———. "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block." College Composition and Communication 31, (1980): 389-401.

———. Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984.

- Rose, Mike, ed. When a Writer Can't Write. New York: Guilford, 1985.
- Rosenberg, M. Society and the Adolescent Self-Image. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1965.
- Selfe, Cynthia L. "An Apprehensive Writer Composes." Rose 83-95.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. "Basic Writing." Tate 177-206.
- . Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Shaw, Margaret L. Shaw. "What Students Don't Say: An Approach to the Student Text." College Composition and Communication 42, (February 1991): 45-52.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." College Composition and Communication, 33 (May 1982), 148-56.
- . Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." College Composition and Communication, 31 (December 1980): 378-88.
- Tate, Gary, ed. Teaching Composition: 12 Bibliographical Essays. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1987.
- Tate, Gary and Edwar P.J. Corbett, eds. The writing Teacher's Sourcebook. New York: Oxford UP, 1988,
- Tompkins, Jane P., ed. Reader-Response: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1980.
- Wiener, Harvey S. "Basic Writing: First Days Thoughts on Process and Detail." Donovan and McClelland 87-101.
- . "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation." Tate and Corbett 238-247.
- White, Edward M. Lecture at California State University San Bernardino. April, 1991.
- . "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing." Tate and Corbett 285-291.
- Wilson Nelson, Marie. At the Point of Need: Teaching Basic and ESL Writers. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook 1991.

Zamel, Vivian. "Responding to Student Writing." TOESL Quarterly 19
(March 1985): 79-100.