
The Writing Studio Program: Reconfiguring Basic Writing/Freshman Composition

Rhonda C. Grego
Nancy S. Thompson

1. Basic Writing

In many recent discussions of basic writing,¹ concerned teachers and administrators pursue questions about academic and student culture, writing environments and contexts—questions which betray attitudes quite different from the gate-keeping mission of assessment which gave birth to many freshman writing courses and which has primarily sustained the basic writing “class culture.” Research over the past decade has increasingly helped us see academic writing and writing instruction from the perspective of students and to understand their needs and institutional culture as reflections of each other. Those who administer programs that fill *institutional needs* are thus led to question *student needs* which increasingly lead back to questions about academic institutional culture as it influences (sometimes even dictates) teaching and student writing. The result is that we are increasingly able to understand and treat student, teacher, and institutional needs as historically and politically situated *perceptions* of need. Writing programs must strike a critical (and flexible, ever-shifting) balance among these perceptions. How?

For the past four years we have worked with an alternative first-year writing program that provides an access point for students, teachers, and the institution to learn more about each other—a program we call the Writing Studio. All students enroll in regular freshman composition (English 101) classes, but some receive additional peer and expert help in weekly small-group writing workshops. These meetings are held in a place separate from the English 101 classroom, with students from other 101 classes, and are led by an experienced writing group leader. For students, the Writing Studio program thus works on writing development “outside” the classroom but “inside” writing groups. For the institution, this program works to “reposition”² early college writing instruction to a place outside the realm of the traditional labels and stereotypes—which have become, as David Bartholomae suggests, too comfortable—while still providing the additional help that some student writers need and others desire.

While student populations have changed and researchers have used various methods to articulate and understand student writing and pedagogy, the assessments, courses, and conceptual place held in the academy’s mind by the traditional concept of “basic writing” may have unwittingly allowed academic

institutions to stop growing and learning about student writing. Our repositioning of student writing, assessment, and teaching in the Studio program has helped us see freshman composition programs as a potential site, for both teachers and students, for “research as learning”³ about academic cultures of writing, and as a way of beginning to change the institutional culture of writing. Here we present the story of how our program reconfigured basic writing/freshman composition, giving particular attention to implications for writing program administration and its intellectual position in the university.

2. Bringing the Studio Into Being

Until 1992, the first-year writing program at the University of South Carolina had for many years consisted of three courses: a traditional pair, English 101: Composition and English 102: Composition and Literature, and a course that received elective credit, English 100: Basic Writing. However, during the late 1980s, South Carolina’s Commission on Higher Education (CHE), without communicating with those of us who taught basic writing, revoked the three hours of elective credit for English 100. It is likely that we would still be teaching in a separate English 100 system had it not been for the CHE’s action. Anger—which at first paralyzed us—eventually pushed us to solve the problem of a now uncredited course, a change that undermined its integrity, “welcoming” students by placing them behind before they had even begun their college careers. Both students and instructors had to invest much energy in overcoming these students’ resistance.

How could we get around the debilitating institutional problem of no credit for the course and still meet the needs of students who needed extra help entering the academic mainstream? Despite understanding the different and difficult circumstances in which various basic writing courses are taught, we took seriously then—and still do—the NCTE resolution against tracking approved in the open Board of Directors Meeting at the 1991 Fall Convention: “RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English support curricula, programs, and practices that avoid tracking, a system which limits students’ intellectual, linguistic, and/or social development.” We took the stance that it is important to integrate students of different skill and/or knowledge levels, so that those who are less prepared might begin immediately learning how to function in the academic environment, with appropriate assistance in small groups. In the early phases of developing the Studio idea, this stance allowed us to entertain seriously the possibility that traditional teaching strategies were perhaps not adequately addressing the student problems that our experience told us persisted in both regular sections of freshman composition and in basic writing.

In this initial phase the two of us formed a “Basic Writing Practicum” with other basic writing teachers in Fall 1991 and began to work as an inquiry group, following Reason and Rowan’s research approaches in *Human Inquiry in Action*. Each of us worked outside the practicum group to teach our courses and then, every two weeks brought our observations back inside the group for

collaborative exploration in intensive 90-minute discussions. Reason and Rowan provided a model for small-group action research that encouraged us to enact a spiralling pattern of trial and observation, leading to research questions circling around the extent to which our 100 and 101 students had similar or different needs and perceptions of themselves as developing writers. All of us were already using small-group pedagogy in our classes, but our practicum experience within our own small group plus Marie Wilson Nelson's *At the Point of Need* pushed us to consider ways of using small-group learning outside the regular classroom structure. The sense of progress and support created in our practicum made us think about how to create that same fluid and dynamic work environment for our students. We began to suspect that if students themselves could be brought together in small groups similar to our own, they too might be able to see correlations and thereby be better motivated to take action on behalf of their own writing.

This practicum laid the groundwork for a proposal to our department. We would discontinue the former English 100: Basic Writing course and our Writing Placement Test (WPT, a one-time, timed writing sample). Now, all students would be placed in English 101. Some students could volunteer, and others whom teachers identified could be placed (based on two first-week writing assignments and a portfolio of previous writing) in the Writing Studio. Small groups of 4-5 students (from different sections of English 101) would meet one hour once a week with an experienced small-group leader for intensive help on the writing they would currently be doing for their 101 classes. The groups would hold a regular weekly meeting in the Writing Studio. Studio Staff small-group leaders would communicate each week to the students' 101 instructors via a written Dialogue Sheet to encourage the instructors to return it with their comments. Instructors would use these weekly communications, a final summary report on each student, and student grades on other course requirements to arrive at the student's final grade in English 101. No grade would be given directly by the Studio, though attendance and active participation would be basic requirements.

This proposal was accepted. We piloted the Studio program in fall 1992, wrote a report in spring 1993, and ran the program for the second, third, and fourth times in fall 1993, 1994, and 1995. Throughout this time we have been continually working out details, changes in plans, and strategies. As we see how some aspect of our logistics or approach doesn't work, we probe for new ideas; and, just as important, we explore and build upon what does work. For example, we found that standard, monologic institutional methods for communicating with students about writing assessment and placement (or about their chance to volunteer for a program like the Studio) tended to reinforce both students' estrangement from the academic institution *and* the institution's assumption that it knows all it needs to know about student writers' needs. Our job, then, was and is to create a site within the institution which generates both the possibility and the willingness for reciprocal learning on the part of institution, teachers, and students—starting with our assessment process, described below.

3. Portfolios, “Writing History” Diagnostics, and Referral

One of the most important ways to re-member our students’ writing histories, we decided, would be to ask all incoming freshman students to bring with them a portfolio of previous writing.⁴ In contrast to the usual holistic scoring methods used for portfolio assessment, we saw our students’ portfolios as a more open-ended diagnostic tool that could yield richer information than traditional assessments and give us a more comprehensive view of students’ writing backgrounds. Traditional-aged freshmen can include written projects, papers, and essays from high school classes in a variety of subjects—or from non-academic recent writing experiences, as we encourage nontraditional-aged students to do. In this way, we aim, from the start, to open up that heavy silence which students bring with them to first-year writing classes: What writing experiences and instruction have they had previously?

In Fall 1992 about 60% of the incoming freshman students brought portfolios to their English 101 classes. In Fall 1993 and Fall 1994, the participation rate went to about 70%. Participation in the portfolio system was obviously uneven; thus we also designed a “Writing History” diagnostic system for the first week of classes to provide additional information about the needs of our first-year student writers. In the Writing History diagnostics, students are asked to discuss their writing history in two different formats: an in-class timed writing and a take-home assignment due the next class period. The in-class writing is framed as an informal piece wherein students are to introduce themselves as writers to their classmates and 101 instructor. The take-home essay is a more formal assignment which asks students to discuss/make sense of the writing experiences that they bring to 101 (including references to the pieces of writing in their portfolios) for the Freshman Composition Committee, an audience genuinely interested in their previous writing experiences and who will use that information in ongoing curriculum design.

Rather than looking at student writing through institutional eyes, we try to use student writing to look at the academic institution and the composition instruction provided therein. We believe strongly that an important indicator of writing development is what writers can say about their own writing products and processes,⁵ though we do not simply accept their words at face value. As we ask students to tell us about their previous writing instruction, we note the language students have developed for discussing and making sense of their writing pasts, the ideologies of writing and learning that their words perhaps unconsciously serve within academia.

In the Writing History diagnostics, students often use the vocabulary of emotions: they might talk about how frustrated or paralyzed or nervous they get when trying to come up with something to say or when they can’t write down clearly all the ideas in their heads, about how angry (or proud) they feel at teacher comments on their written work, or about how much they enjoy writing their own poetry or stories or songs. Our observations lead us to hypothesize

that, in settings where students don't have some technical language for identifying or discussing issues in their writing products or processes (or when they have not been asked in the past to reflect in this way upon their writing), students instead will report felt emotions. These emotions are not so indicative of simple "frustration-induced-by-ignorance" or lack of ability as assessments derived from holistic-scoring scales might leave us to believe.

Embedded in students' emotions is much the institution needs to learn about how student writing processes, products, and attitudes are predicated on institutionalized ideologies in English departments. In an upcoming article (Grego and Thompson), we use feminist approaches to shed light on the inequitable relationship between the institution's need to deal efficiently with student writing versus the deference it accords to Literature. Our Studio assessment system does not focus on efficiently dealing with student writing as much as it generates the kinds of questions about student writing that are usually only asked about literary texts. In Studio assessment and pedagogy, we struggle to allow students' emotions about their writing to be considered as an important part of the academic learning about writing experience, *not* to be sloughed off as unintellectual.

How do the English 101 instructors use this assessment system to refer students to the Studio? (Recall that many other students volunteer.) They do so with the help of 1) an orientation session wherein the two of us talk about telling features of the portfolios and diagnostics, about how to combine this information with other observations of students and what they know about themselves as teachers; 2) a 4-5 page section explaining the Studio in our *Teacher's Guide*; 3) a Studio Referral Sheet; and 4) Studio Staff who are available during the first two weeks of classes in the Writing Studio to work as hands-on consultants with 101 instructors. The kinds of writing features that we asked teachers to look at the first year were very faithful to institutional standards: following the assignment, elaboration of content, organization, and mechanics/sentence structure problems. To this traditional set of assessment categories, we added questions the second and third years which direct teachers to indicate and take note of what *students* say about their own writing characteristics or experiences related to the original assessment categories, for reasons noted above. In Fall 1995, we changed our procedures rather than our referral sheet: during the initial diagnostic period, instructors come to the Studio with their students' portfolios and writing histories to sit around the table with 3 or 4 other instructors and a Studio leader to discuss which students should be referred, and why. This procedure brings fuller and more thoughtful participation in the diagnostic process. It also teaches instructors more about the experience their students will have in the Studio.

Our guiding principle in making decisions about Studio candidates has, in general, been that if instructors *perceive* students as needing Studio help, or if instructors *perceive* that they don't have the expertise or the time to work with a particular student, then these perceptions should count as much as what we see

in the student writing itself. The instructor's perception that a student might fail the course is a powerful one and must be acknowledged. If we can help students work with that instructor's perception—learning how to work with their teachers (as audience often representative of institutionalized assumptions about student writers and their work) *and* with their writing, both as parts of a rhetorical context—then the Studio serves a valuable purpose in the student's education. If the Studio can raise teachers' consciousness of their assumptions about student writers, then it serves a valuable purpose in the teacher's education as well.

4. Interactional-Inquiry Inside Studio Groups

How did students in the first three years react when they entered the Studio for their first session? While the Studio provides, from the institution's point of view, positive integration with additional support for students, the Studio can still represent, from a student's point of view, being negatively singled out from other 101 students. One of the first things that we do with Studio groups is some exercise (freewriting, metaphorizing, etc.) designed to get students talking about "what they thought when they first heard that they'd be coming to the Studio." We want to get any initial reactions out "on the table" for discussion so that we can talk about how the Freshman English curriculum worked in the past, how we've changed it for the better (according to student testimonials from previous years), and what the Studio won't do, as well as what we hope it will. Getting these initial reactions out "on the table" is just one of the ways in which we begin engaging students in building a community culture that opens up interactions for inquiry.

We see the voicing of student reactions as essential to what Bizzell and Lu have termed "recuperating" the individual student-learner, as a first step in students' taking a more active role in their own education. What initial feelings do students reveal? There are students—often those who need the most support—whose first response is anger; we regard the voicing of this anger as a good effect of repositioning the student outside the 101 classroom/inside the writing group. Students can voice this anger more freely in the Studio, perhaps because they know that the Studio leader has no grade power and because the student is sitting at a table with other students who also might be similarly angry. Giving voice to anger in a supportive community setting can lead to productive action and change, as we knew from our own experience. Resignation is another common response. Some students anticipate being placed in the Studio because of their high school tracking experiences or because they've been told over and over that they have problems with their writing. Years of such experiences have squashed these students into submission/resignation. While these students are more docile and perhaps ready to work, we don't necessarily see this as productive either. Both anger and resignation can trap students—with one approach and one set of expectations for themselves as writers and for the writing instruction they will receive. (For a variety of reasons, their 101 instructors may also come to class with one approach and one set of expectations for

those student writers.) With resignation as with anger, setting students to talk about their past and present difficulties—with a Studio group leader working to do justice to the complexity of their problems and bringing the 101 instructor into these deliberations—seems vital to helping them reposition themselves as productive learners and developing writers. The key is “deep listening” and responding to student perceptions/talk/writing/emotions as the product of the student’s educational process, as the product of the relationships which the student has had with their own texts and with their teachers.

Thus we become co-researchers with students in exploring how academic culture influences writing. We call our co-researcher method “interactional-inquiry,” our version of Reason and Rowan’s human inquiry. Interactional-inquiry is grounded in relationships: using small-group collaboration for rounds of listening; talking and writing to generate ideas; acting upon them; and reflecting about them—a continual to-and-fro between action and reflection. For the student groups, the inquiry cycle operates in the following way. The student members of any one Studio group attend their various 101 class meetings. Inside those classes they are one of 20-25 students who receive writing assignments and work on those assignments: they bring to their weekly Studio group their work-in-progress: writing assignment sheets or notes of their own, brainstorming lists (or the need to brainstorm), freewriting (or the need to do some freewriting), rough drafts of papers, final drafts, drafts with teacher comments for further revision/portfolio work, and lots of questions about what to “do” with these documents, about how to “read” the teacher comments, and about the actions that the documents or comments (often implicitly) suggest. In other words, the “action” about which this reflective inquiry revolves consists of whatever assignments students are pursuing for their 101 classes (though our discussions sometimes roam broader afield).

“Reflection” means getting on the table all the assumptions about academic writing at this university, in this freshman program, in these 101 classes, for your 101 teacher, in your paper. This list emphasizes all the various scenes (to use a term from Burke’s pentad) in which the students see writing and themselves as writers. The Staff leader is there to be open and generous with information to contextualize writing assignments: why tasks are the way they are, curriculum or institutional history, various theories/competing ideas about writing instruction or writing process, etc. The leader’s job is not only to talk directly about academic writing, but also to listen to the more informal conversations and interactions between group members in order to understand students’ depictions of academic work.

Reflection includes a wide range of activities, and the Studio staff member is to facilitate and engage in them: chatting about how the semester is going, about the latest “big news” in the *Gamecock* (student newspaper) or about the upcoming break, rehearsing what the latest writing assignment is asking a writer to do and how to do it, brainstorming, getting responses from other group members on their draft or on ideas for a draft, exploring the organization choices

for a piece of writing, going to a dictionary or handbook to find answers to questions about style and/or mechanics, and, above and through all else, “talking open” and asking questions about ways for negotiating the world and work of academic writing in English 101. Though similar activities can be orchestrated in the regular classroom, they may be less meaningful than if they are allowed to arise organically within an institutional site, as in a Studio conversation where the help can then be offered “at the point of need” (Nelson).

Reflection seems to be a mental “site” at which emotion and reason are clearly operating together. In *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Antonio Damasio locates the biological processing of emotion in the same place in the brain as the process of what we consider to be reason. He notes that emotion plays an integral role in assessing information. For instance, when we have to reason through several alternative potential actions, we mentally try out a solution and reject or embrace it based on a quick check of feeling about it (174-5). Damasio’s concept that we hold an image in mind in order to reflect upon an idea and thus interrogate it more fully describes an intra-individual act analogous to the Studio inter-personal actions of getting ideas on the table. Studio small-group members can help a student writer hold an idea in mind and interrogate it more fully, perhaps slowing down the quick check of feelings that might cause a student writer to dismiss or accept an idea too quickly. As our writing history diagnostics have shown, the feelings which students are quickly checking are often emotions shaped by the student writer’s previous patterns of behavior in matters of academic writing.

Studio Staff leaders, in parallel fashion, engage in another cycle of interactional inquiry in weekly Staff meetings. The work we do leading small groups provides the experiences we bring to the table for reflection. Instead of a 101 assignment, we bring to meetings a one-page written discussion or enumeration of concerns, problems, successes, or questions relevant to the particular weekly work of the Studio student groups. These guide our own cycle of reflective inquiry.

5. From “Basic Writing” to “Basic Teaching”

“Basic teaching” is a phrase that Studio Staff member Hayes Hampton has insisted upon. The Studio experience helps us understand teaching in a way not available through composition theories or pedagogies, thus subverting the original institutional label “basic writing” with which our story began. The Studio’s repositioning of remediation holds a mirror up to our teaching, helping us see that it is not just student texts that need remediation, and moving us to question the power structure held in place by words like “remediation.”

Early on we realized—and embraced—the fact that being outside the normal academic credit structure requires forging inquiry-based, collaborative relationships with instructors and others to make the Studio work. But how? How can we involve each instructor in interactional-inquiry about their student

writers? We considered oral communications—either in person or by telephone—but we know that is logistically impossible to do on a regular basis. We have come to see, as the most viable means of communication, writing a report to each 101 instructor each week on each student. The Dialogue Sheet we use has a space marked for instructors to respond to our comments, which we often lace with questions to stimulate dialogue.

We see these Dialogue Sheets as mediators: between Studio and English 101, between Studio leader and 101 instructor, between the student and the academy. In each Studio small group, we try to pull commentary out of the students as much as possible, information that teachers working with much larger groups of students in the classroom often find difficult to obtain on a regular basis. To the instructors, we can pass information about the students' life circumstances, writing/learning processes, and written products that come to light in the context of a small-group meeting—information that can help an instructor understand the difficulties a student might be having, as well as strengths in the student's writing and group interaction perhaps also less likely to emerge as clearly in the larger class. Concomitantly, we ask questions that we hope will elicit information from the instructor to help *us* work with the student more effectively and which will help teachers problematize and push their ideas about student writing.

We hope 101 instructors within this Studio process will break the cycle of the general stereotype that students who don't/can't make it in higher education are those without the right backgrounds. This stereotype is prevalent and widespread, but it does not give teachers any good basis for teaching: no one teacher would be able to supply such a background even if we knew that the lack of this background adequately described student problems. So we hope our 101 teachers will use information from the Studio Dialogue Sheets to see their students as intelligent individuals and to resist tempting stereotypes that might well become self-fulfilling prophecies. The Dialogue Sheets can help teachers begin to recognize the complexities of student writing in ways that may be very unfamiliar. They may make teachers' jobs seem much less efficient and much more chaotic when the limitations of institutional standards for describing student writing are, in a sense, called to our attention on a weekly basis. Though our procedure is not perfect—we have been successful in generating Dialogues with some instructors though certainly not all—we continue our commitment to the idea and continually discuss ways to make what are sometimes monologues become more dialogic, and thus a means of basic teacher education in our program.

6. Too Student Centered? "Mere Therapy"?

In an educational system where curriculums are geared almost completely—as most are—toward subject matter, any program that openly addresses students' needs is going to *seem* too student centered and, thus, have to answer to

the charge “mere therapy.” The Writing Studio *is* student-centered, particularly in the way it addresses the politics of the position of the student and of student writing. Therapy? Perhaps. But if so then it is, as much as anything, a kind of therapy designed to get both therapists and patients aware of the past and present influence of the institution within which both work. Thus the Studio moves beyond the usual text-focused needs of student writing to explore ways in which writing programs can address the psychic needs of students and teachers, needs constructed by institutional preference for narrow assessment and treatment of the disembodied deficiencies of student texts. (See Grego and Thompson for further discussion of the institutional politics of emotion and writing.)

Thus, teaching in the Studio requires constantly developing abilities and ideas. Studio staff leaders must be able to act on their feet by postulating connections between needs and the complex local factors of each student writer. Studio group-work thus requires and builds a knowledge of the social dynamics of small-group work, background knowledge of the academic institution, and a repertoire of ways of responding to student writing—all ready to be pulled, on the spur of the moment, from a critical consciousness developed through the experience of working with student writers. With four to five students and one hour per week, there’s not a moment to waste. As the students enter the room, the leader must be alert and ready to listen deeply to see what lurks under the discussion table, what needs to be—respectfully and intelligently—put on the table so that students can better understand assumptions that influence their writing. Specifically, the leader must connect what is said with who is doing the saying, using background information, personal and social, and then bringing the possible connections or underlying influences into the light of discussion. Rather than dominating the responding themselves, Studio leaders see their responsibility as modeling how to initiate and exchange ideas for other students and ultimately for themselves.

Yes, Writing Studio teaching *is* concerned with relationships and the positive use of emotional energy. As one Studio Staff member, Mary Alm, has expressed it:

We recognize that conflict springs from many sources; we continually work at channeling it into a streambed that has direction rather than either dam(n)ing it or letting it run itself out, aimlessly and wastefully. Literacy-teaching is a nested concept in Studio instruction. The Studio is about reading and writing one’s self in/on to one’s world—this new academic world in which students find themselves; and it is about reading and writing the texts presented by that world. The Writing Studio aims for growth in understanding, particularly understanding of the paradox of social construction: i.e., that we must exercise our opportunities to discursively construct our world at the same time we are recognizing how we are being constructed by it.

7. What Institutions Need

To readers who might be interested in adapting or creating a program like the Writing Studio, we emphasize the need to look carefully at your own academic context—at other institutional programs and their history, students, and teachers. As we have come to know other basic writing programs in our region, we have seen that every situation is unique. A first-year composition teaching force of largely graduate assistants (like ours) requires different considerations than, say, college faculty or adjuncts. In addition, the community college with virtually open admissions has different needs and resources than the large university with admissions restrictions and other programs that siphon off students with non-traditional backgrounds, such as life-long learning programs for adults, or provisional programs for less academically-prepared students.

At the University of South Carolina approximately 1700-1900 students enroll in English 101 each fall. Our previous WPT identified varying numbers of students for placement into our English 100: Basic Writing course, in part depending on departmental resources available for teaching the course in any given year. Since 1988 the highest total number of students placing into basic writing was 237 (in 1988-89), the lowest 84 (in 1991-92). The Writing Studio enrolled 80 students in Fall 1992, 70 in Fall 1993, and 83 in Fall 1994.

During its first year, 94% of the students participating in the Writing Studio program passed English 101, most with grades ranging from C to B+. Out of the 80 students who placed into the program, only 9 failed English 101. Out of that 9, 4 students received Fs in all their courses, indicating that their first semester in college posed problems that went beyond needing extra help with writing. The remaining 5 Studio students (6%) thus indicated the program's true failure rate that first year. Due to the anonymity of the students required to allow us to legally and ethically check their records, we are not able to identify the specific reasons for their failure, though we know that these students did pass other courses in the fall semester. In the second year, all students who participated in the Studio passed; and for the third year, which ended in December 1994, Studio students had a 95% pass rate.

At the end of each fall term, we have collected surveys from the students involved and their 101 Instructors, asking all to comment on their experiences with/in the Studio. Of the first year's (1992) student surveys, 51 of 56 were very positive after students overcame their initial fears that the Studio might be the "same old kind of remedial work" many had been required to do in the past. When asked what they had expected, some were relieved that they were not stuck in large classes. They were pleasantly surprised at how helpful the Studio was for their 101 courses and for learning to write for different professors. Several suggested that their classmates would have benefitted from the Studio. (The five who were generally negative about the Studio the first year demonstrated a self-fulfilling prophecy: they didn't expect the Studio to help; thus it

didn't.) At the end of the second and third years (1993 and 1994), the student surveys were virtually all positive, with only one or two exceptions from students who were not able to commit themselves fully to Studio work. This we took as evidence of our concerted efforts to present more initial information about the Studio and to encourage volunteers. The series of quotes that we used in *Writing At Carolina: The Student's Guide to Freshman English 1993-94* illustrates the kinds of benefits students perceived:

- I was rather impressed by the actual work on our papers instead of the grammar and writing drills. The drills haven't worked in the past 12 years, but I think the Studio has helped me in ways that drills can't.
- We all spoke of ways to revise our papers. It helped to improve my writing. We heard one another's papers and gave our view on them.
- I learned a lot of things that I thought I had learned in high school but never quite understood.
- A pretty cool place.

The Instructor Surveys have given us good ideas and insights into Studio procedures and philosophy from the institutionally-influenced point of view. We continue to see how training for "basic teaching" needs to break through stereotypical and institutionally blind views of students and their writing problems. For example, from the first-year Instructor Surveys, we learned that about half thought we would be working basically with grammar and mechanics. They sometimes questioned why the Studio didn't focus more intensively at this micro-text level of writing (though we did spend lots of time at that level with different student groups at different times), but at the same time they commented that their students' participation in the Studio helped them see the need for making assignments that could be clearly explained to their Studio group. In response, we have explained the Studio in greater detail during teacher-orientations and used the Dialogue Sheets more intensively to enlist teacher support and cooperation.

Whenever a course becomes an institutional fixture, as basic writing courses have, we run the risk of allowing institutional labels to render invisible the richness and complexity of the backgrounds that all students bring into the academy. Our foray outside the classroom, moving inside Writing Studio small-group instruction, has repositioned us to ask—and begin to suggest answers for—the what-if questions of Bartholomae, Elbow, and others. *What if* we had no separate basic writing course? Whether or not readers see the Writing Studio we have described here as a viable possibility for their students, teachers, and institutions, we assert that the process of slipping outside the traditional slough of familiarity can enlighten and enliven the theories and practices which inform our writing programs, and can move us to integrate research on and learning about writing within those programs. Providing such sites, and finding ways to organize and disseminate the results, describes today's challenge to writing program administration.

Notes

1. See articles and conference presentations by Joseph Harris, Patricia Bizzell (in the *Journal of Education* "Symposium," Harris et al.), Min-Zhan Lu (also in the *Journal of Education* "Symposium," Harris et al.), Thomas Fox, David Bartholomae, Peter Elbow.
2. Joseph Harris and Min-Zhan Lu have used this word to deny "monolithic" definitions of academic discourse or writing, to describe instead a world of various perspectives and voices with which student-writers become familiar as they make their way into the academy. We have taken this word and applied it to our own position in the academy as teachers of writing who do not want to be tied in our curriculum, our pedagogy, or our assessment methods to upholding a falsely monolithic vision of academic writing.
3. We attribute this phrase to Gordon Wells (of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), in his plenary presentation on "Research, Inquiry, Hegemony" at the NCTE International Conference, New York University, July 7-9, 1995.
4. Since Fall 1992 at least one other large state University (Michigan) has also experimented with portfolio assessment for incoming students writers.
5. This assumption is at the heart of most writing process pedagogies and research methods which rely on students' "rhetoric of composition" for either research or instruction/learning purposes. Our open use of what students say about their writing/writing history has led us to look, actually, *less* at "writing development" and *more* at the institutional culture which fosters the student rhetorics of composition which we see every fall semester. See "Repositioning Remediation: Renegotiating Composition's Work in the Academy," Grego and Thompson.

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