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TEACHING BASIC WRITING IN THE MIDST OF THE GREAT LITERACY
DEBATE

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
Robin Mooneyham Archibald
September 1999

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ABSTRACT

Literacy is a hotly debated topic among educators. A review of the literature will find educators expressing many differing concepts of literacy—arguing about what literacy is, what literacy does, and how literacy ought to be taught. This thesis explores the concepts and issues of literacy in an attempt to find a place from which to shape a sound pedagogy for teaching literacy to low literacy level college basic writers. However, the many issues surrounding literacy will force any investigation of literacy onto a circuitous route. The journey of exploration found in this thesis leads through scholars' concepts of literacy, through social constructionist theories of literacy, on to case studies of the literacy backgrounds of five basic writers, and on to the consideration of students' literacy backgrounds as a starting place for helping students acquire new literacies in the basic writing classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student reading the texts intended to prepare me to be a teacher of college level reading and writing, I noticed that the term "literacy" was used frequently but with many different indications. What did these educators mean when they used the word "literacy?" I realized that many who used the term "literacy" did not define the term for themselves or for their readers. Intrigued with this characteristic of the literacy discussion, I began to think and talk about literacy, and realized that I, too, was unclear on exactly what I meant when I used the terms "literacy," "literate," and "illiterate."

But I was preparing to be a teacher of writing, and would be responsible for teaching students who had been placed in literacy remediation classes—basic writers. Surely I needed to understand literacy in order to create a pedagogy that would most effectively teach literacy. To understand literacy, I began with the problem which first came to my notice and which troubled me most—what educators meant when they used the word "literacy." I began by asking the question "What is literacy?" But my pursuit of this question quickly found me in a morass of divergent ideas and

theories surrounding the . . . concept? skill? practice? Is literacy a concept? a practice? a skill? What is literacy? And when is literacy? At what level skill with the acts of reading and writing is one considered literate? The troublesome issues multiplied quickly as I also discovered that ideas about literacy in our society are heavy with values, expectations, and beliefs.

This thesis is the recounting of my struggle to get a handle on literacy, for myself, for my teaching, for my students. I quickly found the question "What is literacy?" unanswerable. I could observe and discuss how the term is used by educators, but there was no consensus on what literacy is. Thus I could not come up with a definition that would be a starting point for a pedagogy for basic writers. Unable to answer my question, I was forced to change my question. Since literacy seemed to be different things to different people, a social constructionist approach seemed best. I tried to understand literacy by observing it as it was practiced by individuals or groups, shaping the question "What is literacy for _____?" This new approach could only give me observations of literacy as it was lived by various individuals or groups. But with the impossibility of defining the term for pedagogical development, perhaps the most useful thing I could do to teach basic writers was to

know more about the literacies they practiced and the literacies they would need to acquire, as well as more about the values, practices and expectations for literacy in education, which, as I discovered, can be very confusing.

The chapters of this thesis tell of my journey into literacy and their content unfolds much as I encountered the information in my investigation. Chapter One attempts to answer the question "What is literacy?" by examining the writings of literacy scholars for their uses of the term "literacy." Differing theories and beliefs will be revealed, exhibiting the conflicts in the literacy debate and the difficulty educators have in defining the concept. Chapter Two introduces the social constructionist approach with an investigation of the literacy of colleges and universities. This investigation will allow me to try and discern the acceptable uses of reading and writing in the college, as indicated by the college's tests, statements, and texts, and present these uses as a "definition" of literacy. Chapter Three presents the ethnographic study of language as a way to observe reading and writing as they are used by individuals, an approach that moves away from trying to define literacy and presents reading and writing as the meaningful cultural practices of groups and individuals. Chapter Four presents my case studies of reading and writing

in the lives of five basic writers. I look at these writers' uses, values, and expectations for literacy as a way to understand the unique ways they have experienced reading and writing. In Chapter Five, I consider the literacy backgrounds of these writers, their values and uses for language, as I think out loud about their position in the literacy debate and how to teach them the literacy they will need.

As my chapter summaries indicate, this thesis moves rapidly through several approaches to literacy. In my effort to understand literacy and the teaching of basic writing, I've been forced to become ever more specific, moving from a look at the many ideas in the literacy debate, to trying to isolate a literacy-in-use through social construction theory, to the observation of five basic writers' individual uses for literacy. It has been quite a journey. I have answered some of the questions I started out with and opened new areas in which I will continue to think.

A Background for Current Concepts of Literacy

What is literacy for latter 20th century Americans? Deborah Brandt says current concepts about literacy are an accumulation of ideas, beliefs and values from ages past, when needs and practices of literacy were different from our day. Practices of literacy often overlap, such as when a

youngster uses a writing slate-type toy to shape letters while also using a computer keyboard. The layering of values and practices for literacy can fill current concepts with conflicting ideas (Brandt, *Accumulating* 649). As Harvey J. Graff notes, current concepts of literacy often involve ideas that have little or nothing to do with the acts of reading or writing:

Dictionary definitions frequently go beyond the basic ability to read and write, and include such elements as learning, education, instruction, liberal education, literature, and literary qualities, polish, and articulateness. . . . The literate and the illiterate tend to be diametrically and dichotomously opposed: with respect not only to reading and writing, but also to a range of personal, cultural, and communicative characteristics. (*Legacies* 373-374)

In its most basic form, literacy is the learned skill to recognize graphic symbols that (in the case of the English alphabet) represent the variety of speech sounds used to name objects or concepts and decipher these symbols to obtain meaning. At an earlier time in history, the skill of literacy was judged by an individual's ability to derive meaning from sounding out a simple line of letters, or by an individual's ability to shape and combine letters for meaning, even if that ability went only as far as the inscription of the letters of one's name. But 20th century increases in the amount of print encountered in everyday

life make rudimentary deciphering and inscription skills insufficient for the rapid intake of print needed to read signs, forms, instructions, and various necessary or desired information given in print form. But how much skill is needed? In a society very concerned that none be left illiterate, what is literate and what falls below the mark?

The confusion of ideas about literacy in our society has led literacy workers to try to formulate definitions of literacy that reflect its practice and not the values often associated with it. The following survey of literacy definitions will demonstrate the struggle of literacy workers to express literacy for latter 20th century culture. From the late 1970's, The National Health Survey defines literacy as "reading ability comparable to that of the average child entering fourth grade." A decade later, The National Assessment of Educational Progress tried to describe more concretely the literacy skills needed to do daily tasks. It describes literacy as "the ability to perform reading and writing tasks needed to function adequately in everyday life (filling out a driver's license application, reading a train schedule, writing a check, applying for a job, or reading an article in the newspaper)."

A literacy definition devised by UNESCO goes further in expressing what skills or knowledge may be needed by individuals to participate in their worlds:

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills toward his (sic) own and the community's development. (Winterowd 5-7)

The definitions above are based in the functional concept of reading and writing, a view that reading and writing are learned mechanical skills that allow an individual to conduct activities and achieve desired ends involving the use of print. The authors of the UNESCO literacy definition have grounded their definition in the functional skills of reading and writing because of the tendency for unrelated characteristics or attributes to be mixed into the concept of literacy.

In the struggle to understand literacy, some have decided not to attempt to define it at all, but rather to observe how it is used in the lives of individuals and groups. Literacy scholars who have studied the use of language in groups propose that acceptable literacy is the demonstration of effective communication within one's group. If an individual speaks, reads, and writes in a way that

communicates effectively with others in the group, he or she is considered literate. Ross Winterowd presents this view of literacy with an excerpt from the *Windward Islands Newsday*, a Caribbean Island newspaper that, he says, "counts as high literacy" for the island society:

St. Maarten's Jaycee Bryson Elected 'Jaycee of the World'

by Defender

During the Jaycees International world congress which was held in Osaka in Japan, Mr. Franklin Bryson was nominated as most outstanding Jaycee of the world. Can you imagine all what you can achieve by being an active and sincere Jaycee? . . . He is showing all the inhabitants of this island that idle and careless words and talking get you nowhere, but to participate and be active, someday you will reap your reward with joy.

Though other societies might denigrate the writing for its grammaticality or style, the article communicates effectively to readers (Winterowd 6).

Why is literacy so difficult a concept? Why do we argue about it so fervently, care about it so deeply? If literacy was nothing more than a tool used to achieve an end, we would not care about it in the ways we do. Literacy matters so much because for many it is wrapped up in beliefs about the ideal existence for humankind. Robert Pattison says our ideas of the merit of literacy emanate from the concepts of John Locke. "For Locke, language is before anything else the means by which the mind makes ideas known to itself . . .

the means of self-realization. . . . The better a man knows the habits and skill of language in this view, the closer he is to a personal knowledge of the truths of the universe" (146).

The belief that literacy changes us for the better can be traced to shifts in thought between the 18th century and the industrial age. In a historical look at literacy and schooling, Jenny Cook-Gumperz says that in the 18th century, literacy was the domain of the home, and its teaching to the young was the responsibility of the older members of the household. By the industrial age, reading was taught in the workplace because it was believed that the ability to read morally enhancing literature would make better workers out of industrial employees. This ideology led to the assumption that society would benefit if all were educated to a norm of literacy and standardized into normative beliefs and values via chosen texts which reflected the beliefs of the society (29).

Ideas and values for reading and writing from earlier eras can linger in current ideas about literacy and add not only to a problem with our concepts of literacy but to the tests we devise to evaluate literacy levels. Suzanne de Castell and Allan Luke feel that our lack of understanding about changing societal values connected to literacy may be

behind the fear of a literacy crisis in the United States. Recent findings from literacy tests administered to public school children seemed to indicate diminished literacy levels. A furor in the press followed, with many lamenting over the inability of schools to teach literacy and casting blame on educators' curricula and methods. But after their research into literacy training and expectations over the last hundred years, De Castell and Luke say that the results of current literacy testing are questionable because literacy instruction has always occurred "within a substantive context of values" that has been changing since the inception of American public education (159). Current literacy testing may be based in part on ideologies from other eras which exist alongside current conceptions and ideals for literacy, causing most literacy testing to be confused and off the mark: "[C]ries of falling standards and widespread 'illiteracy' among today's graduates appear vacuous given the non-comparability of 'literacy' as defined by the public education system since its inception" (173).

Harvey Graff corroborates this conclusion in his cultural and historical observation of literacy:

Discussions about literacy . . . founder because they slight efforts to formulate consistent and realistic definitions of literacy, have little appreciation of the conceptual complications that the subject presents, and ignore the vital role of sociohistorical context. . . . Discussions about

literacy levels rarely pause to consider what is meant by literacy. (Legacies 3)

In my investigation of literacy and the teaching of basic writing, there is much evidence of the confusion wrought by the fact that those who discuss literacy and establish evaluations and criteria for it have not paused to consider what they mean by the term. This thesis is the outcome of my pausing to consider what I and other educators are talking about when we talk about literacy and to bring my thoughts to the teaching of literacy in the basic writing classroom.

THE CONCEPT OF LITERACY

To explore what educators mean when they say literacy, I will examine literacy discussions found in the writings of three literacy scholars. As noted in the introduction, the concept of literacy is problematic. Examination of the three works that follow will focus on some of the problematic aspects of talking about literacy. The three works examined here represent three types of literacy discussion often found in the literature. In the first work, author Barry Sanders proclaims a literacy crisis and presents his ideas on why we find ourselves in such a crisis. In the second work, author E. D. Hirsch, Jr. argues for a certain kind of literacy he feels will solve many societal problems and argues for its adoption as a national curriculum. In the third work, author Robert Pattison writes critically about many beliefs surrounding literacy and seeks to discredit them while presenting his own theory.

Each author's work is susceptible to problems common to the literacy discussion, such as writers' failure to clarify their use of the term "literacy," writers' concepts of literacy that go beyond the "basic skills" definition, and writers' assertions of cognitive ability presented without

supporting evidence. In my effort to problematize the discussion of literacy, I will summarize each work and note where these problems occur.

Barry Sanders and The Literacy Crisis

In his book *A is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word*, Barry Sanders proclaims a literacy crisis. He speaks frequently and with evident alarm about this "literacy crisis" without describing the crisis or showing its consequences, except to assert that gang violence is the outcome of this "literacy crisis." Sanders use the terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" quite often without defining his terms or offering a criteria by which a judgment for literacy or illiteracy can be made. The following is a summary of Sanders' chain of reasoning for the "literacy crisis." It starts with the paucity of breastfeeding mothers and ends with gang violence.

In Sanders' view, literacy has its basis in orality, and essential experiences with orality begins shortly after birth. However, says Sanders, in our day, newborn children do not receive the important beginnings of literacy growth because some women do not breastfeed their young. Breastfeeding is the beginning of orality because the infant

hears sound and associates it with an other. Soon, further stages of orality are entered into through "play, fairy tale, and song." But formula feeding, and later, the separation of the child from the mother during preschool attendance hurt the child's chances for building literacy: "These two areas—early education and formula feeding—reinforced each other, and represent a collusion of events that ultimately helped to undermine literacy" (193).

For Sanders, a function of literacy is its provision for the development of the inner self. When a person learns to read and write, says Sanders, she also learns to abstract symbols from real objects, and this leads to the ability to abstract self from the world. This ability to abstract self from world gives literate children the chance to develop an inner sense of self (61). Sanders feels that the shape of text also facilitates this development of the inner self. In the middle ages, the letters that made up a text were given continuously, with no separation of word. Soon, word separation was used, followed by paragraphs, indexes and tables of contents. These space and form markers gave the text an "architectural" shape. According to Sanders, this architectural shape for the written word became a metaphor for space and ordering for the reader's own mind to model,

and into which people could then order their own consciousness (136). In our day, Sanders believes, television and computer use reduce the individual's interaction with texts, damaging the individual's ability to form an inner self. "Locking students onto a screen . . . destroys their literacy by robbing them of the internalized text as a psychosocial frame of reference" (128). Sanders believes gang violence is the consequence of illiteracy among the young. In his view, young people who are unable to form an inner self become personally frustrated and this frustration leads the young to form gangs and commit acts of violence.

Sanders does not propose pedagogies or schooling to turn the "literacy crisis" around, but these solutions can be inferred by inverting his assertions of what the culture is doing wrong. To correct behaviors that hurt literacy growth, we will need to breastfeed the young, keep them at home instead of sending them to preschool, and stop television watching and computer use.

Summarized briefly, as I have done here, Sanders' ideas tend to sound like the conjecture of a passionate but loosely-reasoned and irresponsible scholar. His assertions are validated neither with hard evidence nor even with an observation of the circumstances he describes. While reading

Sanders' assertions, I wondered why preschool attendance would be detrimental to verbal interaction with others when the child will be interacting with not just one mother, but multiple adults and children. I wondered, too, why the forms and markers found in television production and the form of graphics and texts found on computer sites might not just as well lend their frameworks to the structuring of an inner self.

Like many who write about literacy issues, Sanders uses the term "literacy" in his work without explaining exactly what he means by the term. When he uses the term "literacy," does he mean the ability to painstakingly sound out letters to get the meaning from a simple phrase like "See the dog run"? Does he mean the ability to read quickly and understand the medical-warning insert in a new prescription? To read and understand a cryptic personalized license plate? To write a composition worth at least a grade of D in a freshman composition class? To read and correctly fill out a job application? To read and understand a scholarly work in geophysics? And what does Sanders mean by the term "illiteracy?" Does he mean no ability at all to decipher letters and words? Does he mean the lack of a certain level of skill in reading and writing? What level? Does he mean

the lack of a certain level of skill with certain kinds of texts?

Sanders says the literate experience of abstracting symbols from real objects helps the individual abstract self from world, which will lead to the development of an inner being. And he believes that the architectural form of text gives a framework that will enable the literate individual to order thought processes and consciousness. With these beliefs, Sanders' ideas about literacy go well beyond the basic skills definition of literacy to assert theories about the cognitive effects of reading and writing. But he does not support his theories with validating research.

Sanders' theories about a literacy crisis seem to be based on little but his own reasoning, a reasoning to which I have trouble giving my credence. Yet his ideas seem to have gained credence with some part of the public. During a sports game I recently watched on television, several youth-directed commercials were aired featuring a young, ethnic sports hero holding a book and encouraging young viewers to get literate, not violent. I do not know how young people viewing the spot are supposed to understand the connection between a lack of reading and violence.

E. D. Hirsch and Cultural Literacy

Educator E. D. Hirsch, Jr. also thinks a lack of literacy is hurting the young, but his ideas differ from Sanders' in many other ways. In his book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, Hirsch proposes a certain kind of literacy, cultural literacy, and argues for its inclusion in a national curriculum. At the outset of his book, Hirsch does define his term "cultural literacy" for his purposes. He describes cultural literacy as "the network of information that all competent readers possess." Hirsch's concept of literacy has to do with a reader's ability to recognize contexts and infer meanings from a text, though these meanings may not be directly stated in the text. This background information allows readers to grasp messages and meanings that are not stated in the text, but are important for full understanding of the text:

It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read. (2)

Hirsch feels that those who do not have the appropriate background knowledge to understand the terms and discussions found in the media will suffer from this lack, and will be

unequal in educational and economic opportunity to those who do have the knowledge. In an attempt to standardize the knowledge he feels is necessary, Hirsch has initiated a list of "most important terms," entitled "What Literate Americans Know," and argues for teaching the terms as part of a national curriculum.

Hirsch does define his use of the term "literacy" within cultural literacy, but cultural literacy is a collection of information, not the skill of reading and writing. He often uses the terms "literacy" and "literate" without specifying cultural literacy. What does he mean by the terms "literacy" and "literate" when he uses them in a statement like "literacy has declined even among children from literate homes" (115). Is he talking about background knowledge for the terms on his list? I could certainly question Hirsch's use of the term "literate" as I did Sanders' use of it: does he mean the ability to painstakingly sound out letters to get the meaning from a simple phrase like "See the dog run"? Does he mean the ability to read quickly and understand the medical-warning insert in a new prescription? To read and understand a cryptic personalized license plate? To write a composition worth at least a grade of D in a freshman composition class?

To read and correctly fill out a job application? To read and understand a scholarly work in geophysics?

Hirsch refers to newspaper reading as the prime example of how background knowledge aids the individual in comprehending text. Is the ability to read the newspaper the minimum required level of reading skills Hirsch demands?

In his argument for making cultural literacy a national curriculum, Hirsch can only assert what he believes will be the advantageous outcome of such a program. He can present no research findings to support his assertions. His (seeming) evidence of the failure of the schools is given in a chapter in which he bemoans the sad lack of knowledge of highschoolers and college freshman because, in several instances he recounts, high school students did not know the things he feels they should. Hirsch doesn't take into account whether they desire or value this knowledge, or feel it is relevant for their lives. He presents his list of terms as a general list of background knowledge that will be beneficial to all in American culture as they seek to communicate and receive communication.

Hirsch's ideas have gained credence among some literacy scholars. And although I have many reservations about his ideas, I do feel he makes some notable points. A reader with contextual background knowledge for the topics covered in a

text will be able to make many more connections and inferences and better understand the text than a reader who lacks the topical knowledge. But like Sanders, some of Hirsch's ideas seem to be based on personal opinion, and he does not provide evidence to validate them. Three of Hirsch's assertions that seem the most unfounded are 1) that all people educated to his terms will experience them, and therefore interpret texts, in the same way; 2) that knowledge of the terms on his list will equalize society; and, 3) that communication based on common knowledge of his terms is more effective than other communication.

Hirsch assumes that all people educated to his terms will know them in the same way, interpret, value, and experience them in the same way. But people with different experiential backgrounds may not experience Hirsch's terms in the same way. It would seem that in order for people to truly "share" knowledge, they would also have to perceive those knowledges through shared experiences and commonly held values. If knowledge is not interpreted or understood in a similar manner is it in fact "shared?"

Hirsch says "the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation, the transmission to children of the specific information shared by the adults of the group or polis" (xvi). But adults transmit more than information

to their children—they transmit values, attitudes, and assumptions. Hirsch seems to feel that the world is made up of information which will mean the same for all because there is no experience or value involved in its knowing. And in the interpretation of written texts, Hirsch seems to forget that a skilled reader needs to be able to pick up and correctly respond to any number of rhetorical signals that writers give readers to instruct them in how to interpret the text, such as signals for irony or sarcasm.

Hirsch assures us that with "universal literacy at a very high level" we can "achieve not only greater economic prosperity but also greater social justice and more effective democracy" (2). However, there is no evidence for such a claim. If all Americans were educated to the terms on Hirsch's list, (presuming the terms are the knowledge possessed by the economically and politically powerful), would inclusion in the ranks of the powerful automatically follow? Hirsch's ideas are based on the assumption that his cultural literacy is somehow the direct link to political and economic power. But economic and political power is gained, held, and wielded in ways that ensure that all will not have inclusion. Shared understanding of the terms and contexts by which the powerful in the society construct themselves may begin to give the not-powerful words to

speaking, but will they be given a voice and be heard? And if Hirsch's terms and their contexts and uses are those that reflect the experience of the powerful, can they reflect the experience of the not-powerful? In such a situation, the not-powerful will either begin a revolution or develop a language and uses to express their own experience, and in so doing, still will be a separate class.

In one of his arguments for the need for all to share the common background knowledge of cultural literacy, Hirsch uses an example from his father's life. Hirsch's father and his colleagues, who worked in the commodities business, were "literate," says Hirsch because each possessed the same background knowledge of Shakespearean phrases. Hirsch recounts that his father could write or say to a colleague "There is a tide" to indicate that a sale or purchase should be made immediately, and the colleague would understand because he possessed the background knowledge for the Shakespearean passage referred to by the phrase "There is a tide." The passage, from William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar reads as follows:

There is tide in the affairs of men / Which taken
at the flood leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the
voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in
miseries. / On such a full sea are we now afloat, /
and we must take the current when it serves / Or
lose our ventures

Act 4 Scene 2

Hirsch insists that, as a communication, this expression was much better than the communication "Act now!" because it carried "the persuasive force of a proverb" as well as "a lot of implicit reasons [recognized only by those familiar with the story] why immediate action was important" (9). But I find Hirsch's tone in this argument troubling. What is wrong with "Act now!" especially for those who are experienced in the commodities business and are already aware of the need to act opportunely in buying and selling? Could Hirsch's preference for the Shakespearean passage be simply an expression of elitism—the literary literate valuing the conceptual layeredness of poetic expression and the exclusiveness of the club of those who have been educated to such artistic appreciation? Wouldn't "Act now!" have been just as effective for the purpose—quick communication—in the situation?

Like Sanders', Hirsch's assertions seem to be based on personal assumptions, beliefs, and ideas. It seems that those who want to proclaim literacy crises or reforms have little to offer in research findings to back up their assertions or claims. In the third work I will examine, literacy scholar Robert Pattison expresses a view of literacy that is radically different from Sanders' or

Hirsch's, but like theirs, his arguments emanate from his own ideas about literacy.

Robert Pattison and Critical Literacy

Robert Pattison writes about societal beliefs surrounding literacy mostly for the purpose of debunking them. His book *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* is "a critique radical of the term literacy and its popular uses which are usually unfounded in fact and destructive in practice" (vii). In the work, Pattison uses alternate historical and cultural situations to show the unfoundedness of arguments that writing "has altered the ways men think, that it has given birth to history, skepticism, and science; that it has changed the political structure of the West . . . opened for examination the inner life of man . . . fathered modern science and technology, and [was] a necessary cause of democracy and the industrial revolution" (40-41). After he debunks as many ideas about literacy as he can, he proposes the literacy he feels is most beneficial to humankind.

Pattison defines his concept of literacy at the outset of his book. For Pattison, literacy is consciousness of the relationship between the world and language—an individual's awareness of thought, speech, and their relationship to

action, as well as an awareness of the problems that arise in that relationship.

Pattison cites the poet Homer as his example of a truly literate person. Though Homer could neither read nor write, he was a successful storyteller and poet. According to Pattison, Homer's skill with language was evidence of his awareness of the problematic nature of rendering experience in language and of his ability to overcome the problem. Agamemnon, on the other hand, was an illiterate, says Pattison. The story of the Trojan War shows the character Agamemnon as insensitive to language, either ignoring warnings and messages that should be considered, or uncritically accepting false messages and taking action from them, only to meet difficulty. He was unable to correctly conceive of his world through language and respond appropriately, showing true illiteracy in his insensitivity to "speech, thought, and their relation to action" (16).

Pattison recognizes the basis of literacy in the basic skills of reading and writing, and admits that the skill is a very necessary one needed to achieve tasks in most modern societies, but he rails against the "mechanical literacy" of "contemporary middle-class America" that, he feels, emphasizes correctness so heavily that it does away with the sense of critical consciousness that should be a part of

language use. Pattison closes his book by proposing the literacy he feels will benefit individuals the most. In this three-part literacy, students will 1) be taught correct mechanical English (necessary to maintain "social order and economic prosperity"); 2) be allowed to use the literacy of the "Age of Rock" (their own vernacular and way of experiencing the world through language); and, 3) be taught what Pattison calls "critical literacy."

Pattison does not clearly explain what he means by the term "critical literacy." His writing about critical literacy seems to indicate that critical literacy has to do with critical consciousness of language, as per his literacy definition given at the opening of his book, and with the manipulation of the world through language. Pattison does not give any idea as to how critical literacy might be taught, but he mentions the intensive study of Milton, Aeschylus, and culturally revered texts as that which will produce critical literacy. Though Pattison roundly and acerbically criticizes many beliefs and theories about literacy, his own ideas about his preferred literacy and the way to teach it are not very clear either.

The theories of Sanders, Hirsch, and Pattison are only some of those that swirl in The Great Literacy Debate, but they are representative of the arguments of those who write

about literacy. Many scholars have tried to identify the essence of literacy for our culture with little agreement. According to Sylvia Scribner, "conflicts and contradictions are intrinsic to such an essentialist approach" (72). In "Literacy In Three Metaphors" she groups ideologies of literacy in three metaphorical categories according to their essential characteristics. These are: 1) literacy as adaptation—a view that encompasses the realm of functional literacy, 2) literacy as power—a view of literacy in which the growth of literacy equals the advancement of a group, and 3) literacy as a state of grace—a view that literacy improves the mind and spirit of the individual through study of history and culture found in books. Also found in this view is the belief that literacy causes cognitive development.

Each of these ways of considering literacy for education and social policy poses problems. Scribner points out that though the functionalist approach appears to be so practical and straightforward as to eliminate problems, "attempts to inventory 'minimal functional competencies' have floundered on lack of information and divided perceptions of functionality" (73). The basis of functional literacy seems to me to stem from the human need to make a living. I might devise a definition that reads: "the ability

to read and write at levels sufficient to maintain the economic stability to feed, cloth, and shelter self and dependents through productive gain." But what are the minimum or the required skills to be productive and economically stable in our society? The ability to fill out a job application? To understand and follow simple instructions? Read street signs or map to find one's way? But these questions do not take into consideration the desired profession or lifestyle of the individual. He or she may want a profession that requires high levels of proficiency with reading and writing.

A definition of functional literacy given by Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman mentions the "objectives" of individuals, broadening the scope of functional literacy: "The possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing" (17). Other definitions of functional literacy include the ability not only to pursue personal goals, but to contribute to society. The range of literacy needs of different individuals in pursuit of their various self-determined objectives is vast. The concept of functional literacy may

be useful as a starting point in some literacy discussions, but the consideration of what "functioning" involves for the many people in their many groups makes discussions of functional literacy as difficult as any other discussion of literacy.

Scribner's second grouping of literacy ideology, "Literacy As Power," comprises the theories of those who believe that literacy will bring social change to poor and politically powerless groups who, as they gain literacy, will gain the ability to change their worlds. Oddly enough, the literacy theories of both E. D. Hirsch and Paulo Freire fall into this category, though they differ very much in other areas.

In Freire's Marxist theory of literacy learning, developed among South American peasants, language and reality are dynamically interconnected. Humans first get to know the world through touch and their ability to manipulate the physical world, then to name it. "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world . . . this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world" (35).

As literacy learning begins, learners begin to move from reading the world to reading the word and making

connections between the two, a process of critical consciousness of the world. A part of this process is the human ability to both make meaning for the world through dialogue with others and to hold the world in mind, abilities which enable them to imagine other situations, possibilities and outcomes. "In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscience, practical work" (35). Reading the word and the world with critical consciousness enables oppressed groups to see their oppression, and the ability to imagine other situations, possibilities, and outcomes will, according to Freire, result in action for social change and liberation.

Freire's views on literacy learning have been accepted and successfully used for literacy training in societies similar to the one in which he began his work. But Scribner reminds us that such literacy training programs have not validated the theories behind them: "Movements to transform social reality appear to have been effective in some parts of the world in bringing whole populations into participation in modern literacy activities. The validity of the converse proposition—that literacy per se mobilizes

people for action to change their social reality--remains to be established (76).

Scribner's third category, literacy as a state of grace, finds its roots in beliefs that a person who could read religious texts, and later, the texts of Western humanism, was a "cultured" individual with access to the best and highest of human knowledge. Under this view of literacy are also found the literacy theories of scholars like Jack Goody, Ian Watt and Walter Ong who theorize that the removal of language from the immediate and inner (spoken, resonating) to the outer and decoded (symbols on a page) enables the mind to free itself from the immediate situation and think abstractly, thus increasing intellectual capability. Sanders can be found here, too, with his belief that reading and writing bring form and order to thought processes and to the psyche, allowing the individual to develop a satisfying inner self. And this theory particularly riles Pattison, who argues against it vehemently.

The theory that literacy improves cognitive abilities is very attractive to various groups. For educators of a reforming bent, the perceived differences between the literate and the illiterate life, and the fearful consequences for illiterates, will support a moral crusade

to reform the problems of illiteracy. For the powerful, a belief that literacy improves cognition may be attractive because it supports a gatekeeping system that keeps economic and political power in certain groups, including or excluding individuals from these power-wielding groups based on judgments of literacy and perceived worthiness and right.

Researchers who refute improved cognition theories are Beth Daniell, Sylvia Scribner, and Michael Cole. In her article "The Situation of Literacy and Cognition: What We Can Learn From the Uzbek Experiment," Beth Daniell provides another hypothesis to challenge Walter Ong's interpretations of Alexander Luria's Uzbek experiments. In Ong's interpretation of Luria's tests performed during the Russian revolution, he interprets illiterate peasants' responses as the portrayal of the situational thinking he believes to be characteristic of orality. Answers given by literate subjects, in contrast, Luria interprets as reflecting the characteristics of the abilities of the literate mind: analytical, sequential, and abstract.

Daniell points out that the original study, performed in 1931 and 1932, was intended to study the cognitive effects of social and cultural change during the revolution. Contradicting Ong's theories of cognitive change, Daniell hypothesizes that the revolution caused social upheaval in

the lives of rural peasants and responses elicited from illiterate peasants did not show cognitive differences, but rather, peasants' awkward responses, different from those of their wealthier, schooled counterparts, were produced by the sudden awareness of a new and unfamiliar power and social order. Daniell argues that the way people use language tells more about their social and political situation than about their cognitive development.

In another study designed to test the validity of the theorized cognitive differences between illiterates and literates, Scribner and Cole conducted a study among the Vai, a people of Northwestern Liberia. The Vai learn one or more of three possible literacies: their own script, Arabic, or English. These literacies are used in various ways and for various reasons in Vai society. The Vai study did not provide conclusive evidence for general increased intellectual abilities. Although literate Vais showed greater capabilities in various literate tasks because of their skill, Scribner and Cole concluded:

[T]here is no evidence that writing promotes 'general mental abilities.' . . . There is nothing in our findings that would lead us to speak of cognitive consequences of literacy with the notion in mind that such consequences affect intellectual performance in all tasks to which the human mind is put. . . . Quite the contrary: The very specificity of the effects suggests that they may be closely tied to performance parameters of a limited set of tasks. (69-70)

And so The Great Literacy Debate goes. Theories of literacy and its effects are posited by one researcher and soon refuted by another. Conflicting concepts of literacy and its effects fill the literature, and literacy scholars will continue to argue about what literacy is, how literacy affects the mind, about what has caused the "literacy crisis," or whether there is a literacy crisis at all. We may never fully articulate the acts of reading and writing in the human experience in their effects, value, and potential for individuals and societies.

But we must teach it.

The many concepts of literacy that exist in the culture can easily become a part of an underlying and unrealized belief structure of those who teach literacy. Simultaneously held beliefs about literacy may in fact be conflicting and cause problems in teaching situations, as shown in a literacy-teaching study set at the University of Michigan. Deborah Williams Minter, Anne Ruggles Gere and Deborah Keller-Cohen directed a literacy training program in which undergraduates worked as literacy tutors to disadvantaged children from a nearby public school, tutoring the children in an after-school program in reading and writing at the

local community center. The tutors attended a concurrent class in which they discussed literacy and its teaching.

In their work with the undergraduate tutors, Minter and her colleagues noted differing concepts coexisting in the discussions and writings of the tutors:

Like Walter Ong, David Olson, Jack Goody and Eric Havelock, some undergraduate discourses described literacy as a set of transferable skills that restructure consciousness and enable analytic thought. . . . This hierarchical view of skills conceptualizes literacy development in terms of the individual, with no reference to social context. . . . Other undergraduate discourses, echoing Deborah Brandt, Shirley Bryce Heath, Brian Street, James Boyd White, and Jay Robinson, described literacy as sets of practices that change with the circumstances of their use . . . emphasiz[ing] a social constructionist view. (671)

And tutors themselves realized conflicting ideas about literacy that caused tension in the learning situations they constructed with their tutees. Renee, an undergraduate tutor, found herself frustrated with her tutee when the girl resisted doing the reading and writing assigned in her school class. Renee's remarks to her tutee, starting with "how important it is to be able to read," and ending with "it's important to go to college." showed that she conceived of literacy as a part of advancement of schooling. Because of Renee's underlying belief, she interpreted her tutee's resistance to reading and writing as a refusal to believe in the importance of schooling, though the girl's reasons for

resisting reading and writing may have been from a cause unknown to Renee.

Sarah, another tutor, found herself focusing on the grammatical errors in a story written by her tutee, seeing grammatical errors as an indication of a lack of literacy in the child's work, and failing praise the successful handling of other complex tasks of literacy the child had accomplished in writing her story.

Differing concepts of reading and writing were noted even in the differing physical locations of the literacy program. As the tutors moved between the public school, the community center, and the university they were "confronted with multiple and often competing conceptions of literacy arising out of the conflicting goals, practices, and systems of belief inherent in those different contexts in which they worked" (672).

As we can see, conflicts in our conceptions about literacy are found in academic debate as well as in public school literacy teaching programs. How do those responsible for teaching literacy negotiate the many problems surrounding the concept and carve out a solid concept from which to teach? When I began my research, I had a vague impression that if I researched the field of literacy studies, I would be able to find a "best" literacy and

develop a best method for teaching it. My research thus far has served to disabuse me of that notion, but I am not yet ready to give up the search for something that will help me shape a goal for literacy teaching in the basic writing class. Perhaps a good move at this point will be to direct my search to the college. It is the college that has evaluated basic writing students as having insufficient literacy, so the college has a standard by which it ranks students' skills. This standard is the college's definition of literacy.

THE LITERACY OF THE COLLEGE

An institution's standard for literacy, established by the use of entry level tests or other indicators, can be viewed as the institution's definition for literacy. This view is centered in social constructionist theory where "entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers" (Bruffee 774). In this case, the community of like-minded peers, an institution's administrators and faculty, construct their literacy by agreeing on testing or other indicators that express the accepted literacy for entry into the college. If I can discern the essence of what the college desires in literacy skills through their tests, or through other indicators like English department statements or text books, I will have the makings of a definition of literacy. And if I can know what literacy the college wants its basic writers to acquire, I can use the knowledge to help me design a goal for my basic writing class.

In the following, I discuss college entry tests as indicators of college literacy. Other indicators of college literacy include objectives statements from English

departments and textbooks, and these will follow in my discussion.

The Entry Test As Indicator of the Literacy of the
College

In my examination of college entry tests, I looked at the verbal sections of the ACT, at the California State University English Placement Test, and at the Accuplacer, a placement test created by Educational Testing Service. For each test, I examined the technical manual sent to me by the testmakers. Although the technical manuals occasionally offer sample questions to illustrate testing methods, most information about the test and its methods is given in narrative form. I found that after reading the technical manuals for the three assessments, I had only a vague idea of what the assessments tested. An occasional sample test question was offered as illustration, but in-depth explanation of testing methods and information that would validate the methods were not given.

After reading the manuals and feeling dissatisfied with the information offered, I felt the manuals were not intended to explain and validate testing methods but only to assure administrators and teachers that the tests are effective and needed for evaluating skills. In short, the purpose of the manuals seemed to be more for sales and

marketing of the assessments than for validation of their assessment claims. In one example, the ACT manual, after briefly stating what its English Test and Reading Test evaluate, only assures the reader that the test questions are devised by educational professionals, as though this fact is enough to validate the test and its findings.

The brief descriptions of the English Test and the Reading Test on the ACT read as follows: The English test measures "understanding of the conventions of standard written English (punctuation, grammar and usage, and sentence structure) and of rhetorical skills (strategy, organization, and style)." The Reading Test measures "reading comprehension as a product of skill in referring and reasoning" (4-5). The questions on the ACT are multiple choice and the testmakers do not offer evidence to show how the questions test for the skills they say they are testing.

The California State University has devised an English Placement Test that consists of two subsections entitled Reading Skills and Composing Skills, and a forty-five minute essay on an assigned topic. The manual for the CSU EPT says the Reading Skills portion of the test asks the student to analyze ideas in the passage, understand context, and recognize logical relationships. The Composing Skills section is designed "to assess the student's command of

syntax and usage, ability to revise and edit college-level material, and understanding of paragraph development and logical support" (5). The essay is read and scored by two faculty members who both use the same holistic scoring guide that "helps define writing quality" and scores students' abilities to "write on the assigned topic, address all aspects of the topic, and support their generalizations with specific examples. Such matters as clarity of thought, fluency, careful organization, development of ideas, and the use of clear and precise language—all have an important influence on the score given by each reader" (7).

The CSU EPT Reading and Composing Skills sections seem similar to the ACT Assessment's English and Reading Tests; however, the terms used to describe such tests are very general, so it can be hard to tell if the tests are very much alike. To really know what the tests are testing, an investigator would have to put the questions of the tests side by side, devise criteria for analysis and analyze the questions closely against each other. The fact that it is so hard to describe precisely what verbal skills sections of tests are testing is an indication of the complexity of the workings of language and of the testing of literacy.

Another entry test, devised by Educational Testing Services and the College Board, is called the Accuplacer.

The Accuplacer is advertised as a computer-adaptive test that provides accurate placement for colleges. The test seems to be marketed to community colleges. The language use section of the Accuplacer is entitled "Verbal Assessment, " with the subcategories of tests entitled Reading Comprehension and Sentence Skills. The Accuplacer advertises that with only 20 questions per category, the test "cuts down on test administration time." The ACT and CSU EPT sections average 40-60 minutes for their verbal skills categories. With its section entitled "Sentence Skills," and its shorter format, the Accuplacer could be testing for different skills than the ACT or CSU EPT. The differences between the Accuplacer and the tests used by four-year colleges may indicate a different literacy level accepted at community colleges.

Can I know from the little information given me by the assessment manuals, what the assessments are testing? I find I can only reiterate the statements of the ACT, the Accuplacer, and the CSU EPT, with their use of similar terms to describe the things they test: conventions of standard written English, rhetorical skills, reading comprehension as a product of referring and reasoning, reading skills, composing skills, language usage, clarity of thought,

fluency, careful organization, development, and the use of clear and precise language.

These general references to specific tasks and skills don't really give me an idea of the language use being tested. Again, to precisely describe what is being assessed, individual test questions would have to be closely analyzed. The terms above refer to many skills associated with reading and writing. And many of the literacy concepts discussed in Chapter One can be found in the reasoning for testing for these abilities.

What literacy is being tested for with these assessments? And is the literacy tested for the literacy of the institution? If, as social contraction theory proposes, the literacy of a group is unique to the needs and uses of its particular members and their interactions, then it is odd that so many universities use tests devised by other groups such as American Collegiate Testing or the Educational Testing Service. It seems that the individual institution in this case is giving away its power of decision over what literacy is unique to its practices and goals. The goals of an institution's English department, expressed in its objectives statement, is often in conflict with the messages communicated by the institution's use of the assessment.

The use of entry tests does not seem to be a straightforward indicator of literacy standards. Some oddities of note in the CSU admissions policy are based in the fact that ACT and SAT scores are used as admissions criteria when the school will also administer its own placement test. The CSU booklet stresses that its EPT is for placement only, not acceptance. Entering students who have received a certain score on the ACT or SAT are exempt from the EPT and allowed to enter freshman composition classes. Given this fact, I can only suppose that the Reading and Composing Skills sections of their EPT, although they sound similar to the ACT, are in fact designed to test at a lower level of skill so that students who did not pass the ACT can be placed in levels of courses appropriate to their skills. It is the use of the written essay in the EPT that poses problems. If a certain score on the ACT or SAT can exempt a student from the EPT, both multiple choice and essay portions, then the institution is indicating their belief that the standardized multiple choice tests they accept are indicators of a student's ability to "do the work of the university," or, to read and write . . . how? To write successfully to the criteria they have established for the essay test on the EPT? And are the criteria for the scoring

guide for the EPT the same as the English Department's objectives for freshman English?

The use of the assessment for entry into freshman composition classes indicates the institution's values and uses for language. Is the ability to analyze ideas in a passage, understand context, and recognize logical relationships the kind of reading the student will be asked to do? Is the ability to recognize and make correct choices regarding stylistic blunders and grammatical mistakes, to recognize and make correct choices regarding strategy, organization, and style the kind of writing the student will be asked to do? Correct choices on a standardized test are an indication of the student's ability to recognize certain representations of error, recognize corrections, and perhaps even to avoid or correct similar errors in his or her own composing process. But are these the writing skills the university wants?

Just what does the university want? The ACT Assessment says it tests students for the skills needed to do the work of the university. Patricia Bizzel seems to be in agreement with the theorists of the ACT test when she says the forms of literacy preferred in school are "the ability to use Standard English. and, more important, to think in academic versions of the ways associated by Great Divide theorists

with literacy in general—to generalize, to reason abstractly, to evaluate evidence and critique ideas, and so on” (131). College entry tests are indicators of what skills the university wants at the outset of the college education, and, according to the makers of standardized tests, the skills students need to perform the work of the university. If so, these tests indicate what skills and tasks the reading and writing class will build on. But do the tasks of the freshman writing class really require the skills tested on the standardized tests? Tasks for the freshman composition class include learning and using the revision process, learning to engage the text through writing and rewriting, reflecting, analyzing, arguing, persuading, developing ideas, and quoting with meaning. In today’s composition classroom, much weight is put on the process of writing and revising. Are the skills tested on entry tests needed to learn the revision process?

I’ve used college entry testing to indicate expectations of literacy in the social groups of universities and to show the mixed messages conveyed by these groups’ expectations and goals for literacy. The terms used by the test-makers for what language skills are being tested refer to a complex web of linguistic, social, cultural, psychological (to name only a few) aspects of the

human experience. Testing is an enormously complex issue and the validity of these tests could be argued endlessly.

One argument could be fashioned on the social construction theory of creating value. Testmakers and the institutions that use their tests act as social groups creating a value and a standard for literacy. The test contents are the product of agreement about what is "right," "correct," "worthy," or "good" to the group who has devised the test and to those who uphold its validity. The testmakers have created their own literacy by making knowledge of and ability with these particular topics and skills the gate through which the student enters the group or is marginalized.

But remember Ross Winterowd's excerpt from a Caribbean island newspaper article that counted for high literacy on the island? The language use in the article exhibited fluency, rhetorical skill, clarity of thought, and development for its culture. The creators and evaluators of standardized tests could be accused of interpreting the above terms in ways precise to a culture they themselves have created and uphold by withholding entry through testing. The testmakers will argue that their tests evaluate and uphold the use of "Standard Written English, but arguments for "Standard Written English" as the "right

English" do not stand up as well as they used to now that other dialects of English are being accepted as valid for various groups.

The need to assess the skills of incoming students is seen as necessary by most institutions. But assessment can also be seen as the act of one group (the institution) asserting its literacy as dominant by requiring all members (or wanna be members) of the group to use it. If entering students do not pass the test (possess the particular literacy tested for), they cannot join the group (take Freshman Composition like everybody else) and are placed in separate classes until they are remediated.

Some literacy scholars are critical of institutions' perceived need to test. In his discussion of the politics of writing assessment, John Trimbur expresses his view that assessments reflect social anxieties and are essentially political:

[W]hat authorizes and in a sense produces (and is produced by) writing assessment is the persistence of literacy crises in American education. . . . These crises have less to do with how well students read or write than with the cultural anxieties that are attached to literacy and with how educational discourse serves to displace social tensions into the realm of literacy. . . . [T]he political forces calling for accountability in writing instruction today thematize current cultural tensions. (47-48)

For Trimbur, assessments are a sociopolitical tool of the school to gain favor in communities who fear the literacy crisis (a sort of "We'll identify those illiterate Johnnies and Janes, and take care of the problem once and for all" guarantee), and to assure the business community that those who graduate will have adequate communications skills for the workplace.

For whatever reasons colleges test incoming freshman, the tests act as separators—those who don't pass the tests are excluded from the mainstream. But colleges and universities, as institutions of higher learning need to uphold a standard that makes them separate and "higher." If their ideas about the abilities they desire from their members are confused, and if their standards have been formed by groups other than themselves, at least they have registered their educational accountability and high standards to a society concerned with literacy.

English Department Statements as Indicators of the Literacy of the College

What do the objectives and goals statements of various English departments show about institutions' goals for literacy learning? The English department of the University of North Dakota states its objective for freshman English this way:

"We aim to teach thinking through reading and writing. . . . by emphasizing the process of revision. . . . [T]exts become dynamic . . . if we are prepared to see reading and writing as activities that can transform themselves and the institutions that form the "text" of our communal lives. We invite you to help us invent and reinvent the university as an institution."

UND's goal for the freshman English class comes from its use of *Ways of Reading* as the required text. But UND uses the ACT as the test for its incoming freshman and the ACT does not test a student's ability to reinvent the university. In a further contradiction, students with a score of 27 or higher on the ACT are exempt from taking freshman composition. An admissions advisor told me the university practices this decision because students with such scores on the ACT "already know what they need to know to pass English 101". She also indicated that exempting some students from English 101 would help the budget. With the differing objectives of its English department statement, its use of the ACT test, and its 101 exemption practices, UND gives very mixed messages about what literacy it values.

At the University of Minnesota at Moorhead, the objectives statement for English 101 and 102 reads: "In these classes you will be asked to read and write with thoughtfulness, skill, and honesty; to think critically; to

develop and defend your assertions; and to make use of library sources, which requires crediting the writing of others in a responsible manner." This statement reflects this university's literacy expectations, and the university does use the ACT test to assess students' abilities, but the ACT does not test the requested abilities to read and write with thoughtfulness and honesty, nor to think critically. Part of the problem with these terms used by English department to describe the kinds and qualities of reading and writing they expect the student to do is the ambiguousness of the expectations and the validating of when such reading and writing has been achieved.

At Northwest Technical College in East Grand Forks, Minnesota, the basic writing course is titled Fundamentals of English, but it's course code is Communications 121. The goal of basic writing courses at this institution is not to prepare students to do the work of the university, but to ensure that students have the skills considered important in the workplace—communication skills. At this institution, writing is viewed strictly as a tool of communication. The institution's list of goals for its basic writing course reads:

1. write complete sentences
2. organize single paragraphs
3. analyze communication situation
4. identify topics/narrow topic selection

5. write supporting details
6. correct run-on sentences/sentence fragments
7. display responsibility
8. write clear sentences
9. organize multi-paragraph papers
10. demonstrate editing process
11. demonstrate revision process
12. demonstrate drafting process
13. analyze prewriting process
14. analyze communication barriers
15. analyze communication audience
16. analyze communication message
17. analyze communication purpose
18. write topic sentences
19. use correct internal punctuation
20. practice team editing
21. practice team writing
22. edit pronoun usage
23. edit subject/verb agreement
24. edit internal/external punctuation
25. utilize outlines
26. use appropriate end punctuation
27. demonstrate sentence variety
28. use unbiased language
29. use appropriate pronouns
30. write audience sensitive materials
31. write various formats
32. use reference materials
33. distinguish sentence types
34. demonstrate multi-clause usage
35. understand sentence construction
36. edit spelling errors

Many of these goals have to do with grammar, sentence structure, paragraph unity, clarity in communication style, recognition of sentence level error, and identification of audience, all of which are important for writing a message to a reader. Missing is the insistence on critical thinking, analysis, thoughtfulness, or inventing the university. The basic writing courses at this college are administered by

the technical college, but, interestingly, the freshman composition courses required for many of the majors are administered by the English department at the nearest Minnesota State University, and are taught with this department's goals which are influenced by theories of increased cognitive abilities and expect students to exhibit analysis and critical thinking in their reading and writing. If a basic writing course is meant to remediate a student to have the skills to succeed at freshman composition, the emphases of these two courses do not align and give confusing messages.

Textbooks as Indicators of the Literacy of the College

My search for the literacy of the college has not gone well so far. But I have yet to look at textbooks as indicators of the literacy of the college. Three such textbooks, each intended for teaching the basic writing student, and each vastly different in approach, are *English Brushup* by John Langan and Janet Goldstein, *The Least You Should Know About English* by Teresa Ferster Glazier, and *Ways of Reading* by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky.

English Brushup is "a quick and practical guide to the grammar, punctuation, and usage skills that students most need to know." The text is a workbook of sentence level

error. The introduction to *The Least You Should Know About English: Writing Skills* says the book is intended for "students who need to review the rules of English Composition and who may profit from a simplified approach." The book "stresses writing [and] thinking." It contains exercises for learning grammar, punctuation, and usage rules, introduces thesis and topic sentences, paragraph development, assigns simple topic essays and gives 5 paragraph essays as sample assignments. *Ways Of Reading* is a reader full of syntactically and ideologically complex essays. The goal of the approach, as explained in the introduction, is for the student to read the essays aggressively and enter a conversation with the texts by reading, writing, and rewriting, and by bringing personal experience to bear on the discussion. Personal and academic growth is expected as the result of this engagement. The topics and the complexity of the issues covered in the essays are considered by Bartholomae and Petrosky to be appropriate for a college education.

A teacher's choice of a textbook becomes part of her goal, method, and the literacy learning for the class. Which of these textbook approaches to writing would or should the basic writing teacher choose? Punctuation rules? Thesis and

topic sentence development? Or written verbal engagement with complex ideas? The teacher's choice of pedagogical method for initiating writing practice becomes, in part, her goal for the class and for the literacy the students will learn. If a teacher uses literary reading and analysis as her method for initiating writing, then her literacy goal for the class is the written analysis of literature, for this is the use of language they will practice.

Unfortunately, my look at textbooks don't give me any more indication of the literacy of the college as any of my other my investigations. Textbooks are as varied in goal for the literacy of the university as any institutional testing or department objective.

The small amount of information I am able to present shows that universities' uses of tests combined with objectives statements and textbook choice can send a confused message to students and teachers. The problem may emanate from the differing ideas about literacy held by individuals in English departments, in administrations, in testing organizations, and in general society. Institutions' messages about the literacy they value reflect the conceptual conflicts found in the Great Literacy Debate. I had hoped that understanding the literacy of the college

might help me develop a goal for the basic writing class,
but this does not seem to be the place to start.

THE LITERACY OF THE COMMUNITY

When I try to think about what to teach basic writers, I don't get very far, and not only because of the many conflicts in the literacy debate and the confusing messages communicated by institutions of higher learning. It seems I'm starting at the end of the equation and leaving out what comes at the beginning—the skills of the basic writers I must teach. If, as in my social constructionist premise for looking at the literacy of the university, a social group constructs its own literacy by its use and acceptance of certain uses of language, then in the many groups that comprise a society there must be many ways of using language that are unique for the group.

In the controversy about literacy, some researchers have not sought to define or argue for certain theories, but simply to observe literacy in practice. These researchers use ethnographic study to observe the language practices of individuals and groups. Stephen North describes some characteristics of ethnographic study:

Ethnographic inquiry produces stories, fictions. Ethnographic investigators go into a community, observe (by whatever variety of means) what happens there, and then produce an account—which they will try to verify or ground in a variety of ways—of what happened. . . . The stories constructed from such inscription are useful because they help us to understand what happened,

and to some extent what happens, in the places the Ethnographer studies. (277)

The information gained from the ethnographic study of language practices can open new areas of knowledge about literacy and its practice by groups and individuals. In the following, I will look at three ethnographic studies to help me understand how ethnographic study gains information and how this information is put to use by the researcher. In the first two studies, researchers Shirley Brice Heath and Andrea Fishman observe language use in groups and offer insight into differences between groups in their uses and values for language. In the third, teacher John S. Lofty observes how cultural values for time usage influence his students' attitudes toward writing. Examining these ethnographic studies of the language use and values of groups will help set the stage for thinking about the uses and value for literacy that basic writers may bring with them.

In the first study, students in Shirley Brice Heath's anthropology and linguistics classes who worked as school teachers and mill foremen expressed frustration at their attempts to communicate with their employees and students. They felt these problems in communication had begun after

desegregation, when blacks and whites were suddenly mixed in the classroom and in the workplace.

Communication was a central concern of black and white teachers, parents, and mill personnel who felt the need to know more about how others communicated; why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work. . . . They brought a central question: What were the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings? (2)

Her students' questions about the differences between language interaction in the home, the school, and the workplace prompted Heath to begin an eight year ethnographic study of the language acculturation of children in two small communities in North Carolina. Her observations, while not scientifically grounded, open many new considerations for teachers with classrooms full of students who may come from very different cultural backgrounds than themselves.

The following excerpts from Heath's work express some of the many differences in societal and verbal interaction that Heath observed between the two communities. Her study shows that young children do not enter school as blank slates, but in fact bring with them a very complex tradition for language use that is strongly tied to the practices of social interaction learned in the group.

Heath performed her study by spending years as a participating member in the homes and social lives of the North Carolina Piedmont communities of Roadville and Trackton. An example of the differences in the language and acculturation practices she observed in the two communities can be found in her chapters titled "Learning How To Talk in Trackton" and "Teaching How to Talk in Roadville." The differences in the way she has titled her two chapters depict the differences in the way the two communities interact linguistically with young children as they grow and learn the highly socially-prescribed language practices of the community.

In Trackton, children exist in the group from birth. Babies are constantly in the arms of some member of the community as the events of daily life take place in community. There is rarely silence and the baby is rarely with only one adult. As soon as the baby starts cooing and babbling, the adults respond to the child with face play. But unlike parents in some communities, when the children of Trackton start to make their first words for things they want, adults do not repeat the child's sound again and again, attempting to make it a strong label for the object, or even indicating that the child has made meaning. To Trackton adults, "the response carries no meaning which can

be directly linked to an object or event; it is just 'noise'" (76). Heath interprets the adults' response, or lack of it, to infants first words as reflecting a value for children to learn a world in which situations will be varied and insecure. "Some residents of Trackton can talk about the fact that daily life in Trackton brings many situations, and yet none can be faced each time with a secure sense that a particular response will bring a specific result" (84). Trackton resident Annie Mae expresses this value as she talks about her expectations for the learning and growth process of her grandchild Teegie:

He gotta learn to know 'bout dis world, can't nobody tell 'im. Now just how crazy is dat? White folks uh hear dey kids say sump'n, dey say it back to 'em, dey aks 'em 'gain 'n 'gain 'bout things, like they 'posed to be born knowin'. . . . Teegie . . . gotta be keen, keep his eyes open. . . . Gotta watch hisself by watchin' other folks. Ain't no use me tellin' 'im: 'Learn dis, learn dat. What's dis? What's dat?' He just gotta learn, gotta know; he see one thing one place one time, he know how it go, see sump'n like it again, maybe it be de same, maybe it won't. He hafta try it out. (84)

The value for "learning to talk in Trackton" is displayed when boy babies are old enough to be mobile and on their own. At this time, they enter the community "stage" on which they become players in a game in which "communication is the measure of involvement . . . Young boys learn from an early age to handle their roles by getting their cues and

lines straight and knowing the right occasions for joining the chorus" (79). In their interactions with the adults in the community, boys choose newly acquired utterances that can communicate multiple meanings and practice using these utterances to "learn the variety of meanings a single utterance can have, as they elicit different interactional responses to the variations of intonation, tone, and voice quality they give these favorite expressions" (81).

The children of Roadville are brought up into different linguistic traditions of their society. Heath points out the difference by noting the difference in the expressions for the growing of children: in Trackton, children "come up," in Roadville, children are "brought up." From the beginning of their lives children in Roadville are taught what is "right" and what is "wrong."

In Roadville, children are not held in adults' arms and surrounded by the community group all the time. Rather, Roadville babies are often with their mothers or other women who take the role of helping the young mother and teaching her how to care for her baby. Babies are kept in the group or put down for naps according to the beliefs of the community about what is best for babies.

Roadville's infants' cries are acknowledged and responded to as explicit indications of need. And adults

respond enthusiastically to babies' first utterances: "When the baby begins to respond verbally, to make sounds which adults can link to items in the environment, questions and statements are addressed to the baby, repeating or incorporating his 'word'" (122).

"As adults talk to their children, they teach them how to talk and how to learn about the world. They sort out parts of the world for them, calling attention to these, and focusing the children's attention. Children learn the names of things; they then learn to talk about them right" (127).

A young Roadville mother reflects on what she feels is her role in helping teach her young son:

"I figure it's up to me to give'im a good start. I reckon there's just some things I know he's gotta learn, you know, what things are, and all that 'n you just don't happen onto doin' all that right. . . [W]e try to tell'm 'bout things, 'n books, 'n we buy those educational toys for 'em (127-128).

Heath's observations of the differing ideas and values for language practice between the communities of Trackton and Roadville establishes that even young children entering school already have certain traditions and practices for language. Educators may often perceive of children as "blank slates" that will simply take in and imitate the language use introduced in schooling situations. But underlying differences in language expectations may inexplicably show up and frustrate teachers and their students when students don't respond in expected ways to teaching practices the

teacher feels to be straightforward and comprehensible. Unexpected responses by students to teachers' prompts may lead teachers and other students to think these different responses are indications of lower intelligence and abilities. In her work on the social construction of literacy, Cook-Gumperz says:

"Children may come to school as competent speakers of language, but their competence takes the form of a variety of dialects. What these dialects are affects the way children are judged, not only in their speaking performance, but also in matters of attitude and motivation" (8).

Teachers in Heath's anthropology classes realized how they might have misjudged student behaviors in the way Cook-Gumperz describes. After their study of Heath's findings of linguistic difference, the teachers realized that students' responses that had formerly seemed to communicate students' poor attitudes and motivation, may in fact have been differences in patterns of response. After a training period to help them recognize cultural and language use differences, teachers examined their classroom evaluations and comments from mixed race class sessions following desegregation. Teachers found that their comments such as "doesn't know how to answer a simple, direct question" (black student) and "shows no imagination; answers are

always minimal" (white student) might reveal the teachers' unrealized acts of:

"distinguishing social and academic behaviors which differed for the black and white working-class students . . . [and] recorded primarily attitudes or activities which centered around patterns of responding to and using oral and written language (267-69).

The purpose of Heath's ethnographic research seems to be knowledge and understanding—knowledge that there are differences between groups' uses and values for language and understanding of just what those differences are. As a result of greater knowledge and understanding of the differences between Roadville, Trackton, and their own values and uses for language, teachers and mill foreman made some adjustments in their teacherly and managerial communication styles.

Heath's study involved study of the language practices of communities. In the next ethnographic study I will present, Andrea Fishman observes the uses, values, and expectations of reading and writing in an Amish family—the Fishers. In the Fisher family, books and reading are prominent. But in her observations of the Amish culture's expectations for reading and writing, Fishman sees many differences between Amish values for reading and writing and

mainstream American culture's values for reading and writing.

Fishman's study focuses primarily on the literacy practices observed in the raising of Eli Fisher, a preschooler, and the youngest of the six Fisher children. Eli, Jr. cannot yet read, but in the Fisher household, he is included in family literate activities as though he can. Togetherness and community cohesiveness are valued in Amish culture, and this value is reflected in the family's evenings spent gathered together in the sitting room playing games, working, or reading aloud to one another. The Fishers' family literacy practices include reading the Bible and other religious instruction, and reading and writing letters to and from relatives. Eli, Jr. is encouraged to "read" from the children's books he knows. The family treats Eli's recounting of the pictures and familiar stories in his books as reading. He doesn't know that he is not reading as the other members of the family do. When the family reads the Bible, each family member is given a verse to read. When it is Eli, Jr.'s turn, another reader will read his verse slowly, stopping every few words so he can repeat them. In this way he also "reads" with the rest of his family.

Although the Fisher family's use of literacy may seem like the literacy practice of many Christian American homes, Fishman notes these differences:

While Eli, Jr., like his siblings, is learning the necessity and the value of literacy, what literacy means to him and the ways in which he learns it may differ in both obvious and subtle ways from what it means and how it is transmitted to many mainstream children, just as Eli's world differs from theirs, both obviously and subtly. (30-31)

She goes on to describe how Eli's school experience will be different from the school experience of many young children. When Eli, Jr. enters the Amish Old Order one room school, the values and the contexts for literacy will be the same ones he has learned in his family home. In school, he will be expected to memorize texts, to respond to the information in texts with yes/no answers, and to empathize with the characters in stories, just as he has been taught to do in his home. He will not be asked to be critical, to imagine other possible interpretations, or to discuss the texts. In his education, he will never be asked for the third person singular essay because it is habitual in the Amish use of language to experience as much as possible in the first person plural, reflecting through their linguistic practice the societal value of the group (36-37).

Introduced into a mainstream public school, Eli, Jr.'s teachers might expect him to experience confusion and

frustration when the uses, expectations, and values for language in a mainstream school are suddenly so different than those that he has learned at home.

Like Heath's observation of language difference in communities, Fishman shows that the uses, expectations, and values for reading and writing in the home may be quite different from those which may suddenly be introduced when the child begins to attend school, or when the school's language practices are different from those in the home.

In the last study I will cite, teacher John S. Lofty studies constructs of time in a Maine fishing community in hopes of understanding his students' resistance to writing multiple drafts of their papers. Lofty's students enjoyed discussion but strongly resisted writing, especially rewriting. "My students wrote scant amounts in moody silence, responded indifferently to encouragement, and studiously refused to write more than a single draft (39). To look for causes for his students' resistance, Lofty conducted observed community activities and discovered fundamental cultural differences between the way he was expecting his students to write multiple drafts of a paper and the way islanders accomplished their daily tasks. It was these differences he suspected might be at the foundation of his students' resistance to writing multiple drafts.

In his study, Lofty found that in the daily life of the fishing community, much of the islanders' time is taken up by manual tasks. Tasks are prioritized according to real need, and a task is performed until it is satisfactorily complete. Lofty quotes the often repeated island phrase "Do it until it's done. " When a job is done satisfactorily for the need, no more time is allotted to it, because the worker must move on to the next task that must be done. Islanders do not watch the clock while involved in hauling lobster pots or raking blueberries. Lofty felt that his students, in keeping with the island way of completing tasks, wanted to apply themselves to writing a paper in one sitting only. After applying themselves until the paper was "done," they saw no reason to return to it, just as their parents applied themselves wholly to building a shed until it was done, or canning the summer's produce until the task was complete.

Lofty observed that the islander's time constructs were a deeply ingrained system of values and a way of creating identity. To ask his students to re-engage a task they felt was complete went against the community's constructs not only of time, but of culture and of being. Lofty felt that "a significant part of [his] students' resistance to writing was embedded in the tension they experienced between how time was constructed and valued in the home and how it was

constructed and valued in the school" (Lofty 40). Students in any writing class may resist rewriting; writing is hard work and once a draft is complete, most students do not want to return to the draft to rewrite. All teachers of writing must deal with their student's reluctance to rewrite. But Lofty's study helped him understand a particular, and perhaps more deep-seated reason for his student's resistance—their cultural identification with the way of doing things in the working-class island society. Lofty used his discoveries to initiate a conversation with his students in which both could acknowledge the differences in culture in their approach to tasks and negotiate a new classroom culture.

The ethnographic studies described above can help teachers better understand themselves and their students and to begin to make constructive changes in their teaching. There will be no end to literacy theories and prescriptions based on researchers' personal opinions, viewpoints and assumptions. As the many theories about literacy are argued and contradicted, it is perhaps ethnographic researchers who have chosen the most effective path to teaching—by acknowledging literacy's complexity and learning about its use in societies. To understand the experiences and practices of others is not only productive for teaching and

learning, but, as in the teaching theories of Paulo Freire, the students' lives and experiences become an important part of the learning done by both teacher and student.

While scholars argue about literacy, students are entering basic writing courses. Basic writing teachers are aware that the students who come to them are underprepared to do the reading and writing tasks of the university, and that they are responsible for remediating students' skills. These two bits of information, akin to the "blank slate" concept of teaching young children, are often the starting point from which teachers begin to teach. But reading and writing did not begin for their students the day the inadequate test score was handed down and they were enrolled in remediation classes. Literacy learning has been going on all their students' lives. Basic writing students, too, have a background of language use that may make it difficult for them to negotiate the new uses and expectations for language in the college or university. I would like to find out about the way the students that come to my classes have experienced reading and writing. Knowing how they have used reading and writing in their lives will give me a place to start as I consider the literacy-teaching goal for my basic writing class.

READING AND WRITING IN THE LIVES OF FIVE BASIC WRITERS

In an attempt to better understand basic writing students' uses, values and expectations for language, I set out to interview five basic writers about their reading and writing in their younger years. Before interviewing my subjects, I explained to each that I was asking questions about printed material, reading and writing, and their homes and families because I believed that every family had a unique way of using reading and writing. I assured them I wasn't forming judgments, just gathering information that I thought was very interesting.

At times the interviews were frustrating, both for myself and for the student. In spite of my attempts to help my interviewees be comfortable and speak frankly, I felt the students were influenced by my English teacher lifestyle and values. I wondered if I was getting answers that were shaped for approval. I often felt I wasn't "getting enough"—the student did not recall details, was not reflective enough to go "in depth." My subjects did not want to be as exacting in their memories of reading and writing in their homes as I wanted them to be. They often did not recall the scenes of their living rooms. I could probe, but the students' often short, simple recounting did not seem to reveal much I could

use. On their part, the students would sense my need for more, and, feeling there was no more to give and not understanding how all this could be so important anyway, would get frustrated with me. They had not read ethnographic studies to understand how interesting and how important the small details of their lives could be!

Rather than pushing for something I could see they were not willing to give, I took what I could get. Sometimes their stories seemed to change. At best, my questions could give me only a general idea of how writing and reading were used in the lives of my subjects. Through my research I hoped to be able to identify the uses, values, and expectations for reading and writing that has shaped the literacies of these basic writers.

I believed, at that time, that I would find in the reading and writing practices of basic writers particular traits that were the root cause of their lack of literacy skills. I imagined homes where there were few books or magazines, where people rarely read or wrote, but my findings did not agree with my expectations. what had made them basic writers.

In his chapter discussing the need for schools to begin teaching cultural literacy, E. D. Hirsch says "Historically, as the school curriculum has become more incoherent,

literacy has declined even among children from literate homes" (115). What does Hirsch mean by "literate homes?" As we have learned from social constructionist theories of literacy, the many different types of homes and their inhabitants' ways of reading and writing are all literacies, so what is a "literate" home? What is an "illiterate" home?

When the five subjects of this study were growing up, would an educator visiting their homes have judged their environments to be "illiterate?" In each home environment, reading and writing happened. If homes can be judged "literate" and "illiterate" what behaviors determine a "literate" home? Is "literate" determined by what parents read? By how much they read? By why they read? By how much of a certain kind of reading? These students came to college and were not considered adequately "literate" to be in mainstream English classes, whereas others passed the test. Did something "go wrong" with the reading and writing in the homes of these five that set them off the course to literacy? If so, what went wrong?

The following is a narrative of the information I gained from five basic writers when I asked about their involvement with reading and writing in their homes and communities. Three of the subjects are male and two are female. Of the three males, two are Caucasian and one is

Hispanic. Of the two females, one is Hispanic and one is Native American. The male and female Hispanic students attend a college in Southern California, the two Caucasian males attend a college in North Dakota, and the Native American female attends a technical college in Minnesota.

In the following, I look at the literacy backgrounds of these students as individual literacies shaped by the uses and values of reading and writing experienced in their homes and communities.

Amanda

Amanda is a bilingual 20 year old woman who speaks Spanish and English. She was born in the United States and is first generation American. Amanda's grandmother came to the United States from Mexico when she married an American man. Her daughter, Amanda's mother, was sixteen. Neither woman spoke English and learned to speak it with the help of the husband's three American daughters who lived in the home.

Amanda lives with her mother and a younger brother and two younger sisters. As a child, Amanda would sometimes have to translate printed material that came in the mail for her mother and father. Amanda's mother went to a community college to become a medical assistant. She had some trouble writing English, but has learned to do it better because of

her studies and her work. Amanda's mother writes to fill out forms in her job as a medical assistant. The writing her mother does in the home is letter writing, which she does in Spanish as she writes and receives letters to communicate with relatives in Mexico. Amanda's maternal family all live close by, but her father's family lives in Mexico, and her mother writes regularly to them and receives letters back, also written by female family members. Amanda's father had a high school education and worked in construction until his death when Amanda was 18. When her father was alive, he would also write an occasional letter to his family, but letter writing was most often undertaken by her mother and other female relatives.

When she was about eight years old, Amanda's parents began to encourage her to write notes to her relatives at the end or in the margins of these letters. Amanda enjoyed these times of writing at the kitchen table with her father or mother nearby, helping her to spell Spanish words. After her tenth birthday, Amanda and her female cousins in Mexico began exchanging letters in Spanish. Although her parents encouraged her to read English, so she would do well in school, they also have chastised her for having to ask for so many words while writing letters in Spanish, saying she needed to learn Spanish better. During her letter-writing

years, Amanda also began to write in a diary in English, but diary writing was always personal and secretive, and never shared. Amanda has only seen her mother write a letter in English on one occasion, and that was when her mother was the head of the Hispanic PTA and an Hispanic teacher was in trouble with the school. Amanda's mother and other Hispanic parents wrote letters in support of the teacher.

In Amanda's home and in the home of her grandmother, who lives next door, reading materials around the house are Spanish and English newspapers, Spanish and English magazines, and Spanish romance novels. During her school years, Amanda would go to her grandmother's house after school. There, she would translate the English newspaper horoscope for her grandmother. Amanda would skim the newspaper headlines, but did not read the articles. She would read the classifieds and the obituaries.

In Amanda's house, the dining room table usually has a newspaper and two or three gossip or women's magazines on it. In the morning, Amanda's mom reads the Spanish newspaper at the table. Her mother sometimes reads romance novels in the evening. Many evenings, there are relatives over and the TV is on. People sit about the living room, either watching television or reading the Spanish or English magazines, newspapers, or novels that are lying about.

Amanda remembers a short time during her childhood when her mother would read to her at bedtime. She would read from a book of Spanish girl stories. During the summers, Amanda's mother would get a flyer in the mail announcing summer programs at the public library and take Amanda, her siblings, and her cousins to the library. For Amanda, the best part of going to the library was looking at the pictures in books along with her female cousins and discussing the pictures together. Sometimes they would read books together, reading the same page silently and waiting until everyone was done before turning the page. Sometimes they would listen together to book tapes through the earphones.

At home, Amanda and her siblings would play "office," a game of pretending to work in an office. In this game the children would write down appointments and compose sentence memos.

When Amanda was younger, her family would attend Catholic mass, sometimes attending a mass in English and sometimes attending a mass in Spanish. She would read prayer books, songbooks, and the service programs. Amanda went through a confirmation class and often was asked to write responses to questions in her lesson or to write out the prayers she had memorized.

Amanda's mother and father were on a soccer team. The team's game schedules would come in the mail. After church on Sundays, the members of the soccer team would meet in the park to play soccer, then go to a member's house to socialize. There were many children present and Amanda enjoyed these times very much.

Amanda remembers buying her first book, a Sesame Street book, at the school book fair when she was in kindergarten. She was put in a "Spanish track" at school and was in classes with other Hispanic kids. The classes were taught bilingually and did sometimes did not cover the same material as the Anglo kids. She remembers that in reading class, they read some of the same books as the Anglo kids but did not go as fast. She remembers going to the school library to check out books. She liked to read The Babysitter Club books when she was about 12.

Amanda's Uses, Values, and Expectations for Reading and Writing

Amanda talks about her bilingualness as a life of negotiating between the two cultures in which she exists. Both at school and at home she and the people around her are speaking and writing in both languages, and participating in both worlds. And though she feels comfortable moving between the two worlds, her placement in non-mainstream reading and

writing classes throughout her elementary schooling made her feel an otherness that was like a barrier to being mainstream.

For Amanda, reading and writing are a natural extension of being in community, and negotiating between two worlds is a part of the practice of that community. Letter-writing is done in Spanish to retain ties with family in Mexico. For her mother and grandmother, reading for entertainment is done in Spanish, and reading for information is done in English. But Amanda reads for entertainment in English, her strongest language, and will read in Spanish only if she is interested in an article in a Spanish newspaper.

Reading and translating are done to help the family members around her. All parts of Amanda's life have been lived with a lot of family all around. Her reading and writing practices, which for so many are solitary endeavors, have been very much involved with family: translating for her parents and grandmother, reading and writing letters together, reading library books with cousins and playing "office" with siblings. Although Amanda has a past filled with reading and writing with others, she also enjoys the solitary writing she does for her freshman composition class. She is a thoughtful person who likes to write her thoughts down in solitude.

Mark

Mark grew up in a rural area in the northern midwest. As a result, he wasn't around other kids much when he was young. As a preschooler, he was with his mother most of the time. Mark's father went to two years of technical college, then started and developed his own tool and dye company. Mark's father was not around the house much when Mark was young, but he started to be around the house more when Mark started junior high school. Mark's mother went back to college when he was young, then went on to graduate school to get her M.A. in Social Work. Mark helped his father build shelves in the coat closet to hold all his mom's books. Mark has three siblings: the oldest went to technical college and the next in age, twins, both recently finished college.

Mark's mom occasionally read him bedtime stories. Mark's mom liked to read, and when Mark was very young, he would be curious about what she was reading and she would read it to him for awhile. But what she was reading never interested him. Mark's mom went to the library a lot and would take him along. Mark was never interested in most books, only the ones about cars and airplanes. He would examine the pictures and read the accompanying text to find

out something about the vehicle. He did not check out books because he had seen all he needed to while at the library. When he was in elementary school, Mark's mom would occasionally buy him a book, but the book would sit on a shelf without him ever reading it, so she stopped buying them. Mark never had a subscription to a mechanical magazine, but he would buy auto magazines at the grocery store when he would go with his mom.

Mark started school "too young" and had to take first grade twice. He remembers that the second time around was boring. In his years in public school, Mark says he would only read when reading was assigned. At times Mark liked what he read, but this did not prompt him to read on his own. When he got to about age 11, Mark wanted to stay up and watch television. He and his dad would watch television while his mom would read romance novels in the same room. Mark theorizes that he wanted to be grown up, like Dad, and watch TV. Reading was equated with his mother and his childhood. Mark wanted to work or play or watch television like his dad.

When Mark and his dad did things together, it was always fixing mechanical items, building, or sports. At about age eleven, Mark started working on cars and transmissions with his dad or his uncle who was a car

mechanic. His uncle had transmission manuals which had diagrams but which were hard to read. With his father or uncle he would read the instruction manuals only when they needed to because they didn't know something about fixing the car. He enjoyed working on mechanical things because he did it with his dad. When Mark's mom went back to graduate school, his dad took care of him. During this time, Mark "grew up" in his dad's shop. The male workers there taught him how to weld, and as well as teaching him many other things. He helped his dad build the house they live in as well as their vacation cabin. He and his dad would go play football or baseball when his dad got home from work.

Mark feels he is a "doer" and is proud of the way he started working young, in his father's company to earn his own money. He would also mow lawns or cut wood around the neighborhood to earn money. He would see something he wanted to buy and make the money to buy it. He and his Dad "do more things than just reading."

Mark did not write except for school assignments, and for these he waited until the last possible moment and wrote the absolute minimum. He would struggle to get a few ideas that the teacher wanted down on paper and turn it in. What he wrote never meant anything to him. His extended family and friends lived locally, so he never corresponded with

anyone. Twice, he faked a note when he played hooky from high school. And he would write a note to let his mom know where he was when he went to friend's house when she was gone.

Mark's mom read romance novels, magazines, and how to and craft books. Mark remembers her writing to friends and writing notes in Christmas cards. She would do this at her desk, which was in a small area between the kitchen and the family room. When she went back for her Masters degree, she would read textbooks and write papers on the computer they got. Mark does not remember his father reading the newspaper very much, and he did not read magazines or books. At his father's company, Mark would see his father write out an order or an estimate for work. When Mark's dad got home from work, he would watch the TV news. When Mark became a local high school sports figure, his father would read the home town newspaper when Mark's name was on the sports page. Mark, too, would read a column on the sports page if the headline interested him. Mark finds it hard to get interested in what's in newspapers. He feels this is because he doesn't have the background information for the incidents that are happening in the world. He has little interest in world sports.

Because he became a high school sports hero, Mark says, his teachers oftentimes did not work him, or other sports figures, very hard. He explains that in his small town, if you were a name in sports, you were the "upper class." Once, a high school science teacher gave Mark a C in chemistry when Mark was flunking the class. Mark had approached the teacher to say he might drop the class because he knew he wasn't doing well enough. He wanted some feedback on dropping the class, or some ideas that would help him with his work, but the teacher said he would give him a C. Mark says teachers made sure athletes wouldn't fail. They reminded sports stars to get their work in, accepted late work, and made "extra adjustments" for sports stars.

Mark's dad went to a two year technical school and started out as a tool and dye maker, but worked his way up to civil engineer and built his own company. Mark did not really want to go to college. He has already had job offers because he has already had years of experience working in his dad's company. Mark would rather go to a technical college. He is in a four year college because his parents wanted him to go, because he won a track scholarship, and because he recognizes that now he will have a lot competition in his field from four year engineering graduates.

Mark feels his parents were lenient with him regarding his schoolwork. He was doing well in sports and spending a lot of his time there. They were pleased that he was making a mark in sports. His mother would sometimes say she wished he would read more, study harder, but this always made him mad, and he resisted her. It was the things he did with his dad that gave him self-esteem. Mark thinks that maybe his dad didn't put a lot of importance on school because he himself had done well with just technical school training and hard work.

Mark's Uses, Values, and Expectations for Reading and Writing

Though Mark seems to be a person with an active thought life and a tendency to be reflective, he values doing, not reading. The parts of his life that he is proud of and remembers happily are times when he and his dad or another man built something or fixed something, or when he earned money by the work of his hands. When he rested, he watched TV or tinkered with more mechanical objects. The reading Mark's mother did was involved with her particular interests: a graduate degree in social work and the fiction that interested her. This reading did not involve him and he was not interested in it.

Mark's uses for reading and writing: When Mark did read, he read mechanical magazines, instructions for mechanical work, the sports page, and assigned school reading. The reasons Mark reads are to gain the information he needs, or to learn about what interests him. For Mark, reading is only necessary when you don't know something and the only way to get to know it is by reading. Reading is a tool to reach a goal, but it is also the last and least favorable alternative. Writing is what he did when assigned to do it in school, and he did not put much time or effort into it.

For Mark, reading is associated with what women do. Reading isn't productive; it is a waste of time better spent doing something productive with your hands, like making something or earning money. Mark seems to hold an ethic that may be part culturally transmitted belief and part personality make-up. He frowns on "just sitting and reading" and sees such use of time as laziness.

Juan

Juan came with his mother and two sisters to the United States when he was nine. For three summers he worked alongside his mother picking grapes in Southern California. His mother married an American man of Hispanic background and now Juan has seven siblings. Of those seven siblings

one, his older sister, is in a four year college. Juan says this sister is his role model. Another sister has an AA degree. A brother has a certificate in computers. Three other siblings have dropped out of high school, and one is still in high school. Although Juan's high school grades were low, when he decided to apply for college, he was admitted. a gang he became involved with while in high school.

Juan usually made bad grades in high school, but when he was a junior, he had a creative writing English class. In that class, the teacher used creative works by Chicano artists and writers for the text. Juan was inspired by the works he studied and tried to write creative pieces about his life as a Chicano. For the class, Juan wrote a poem about being Mexican that was published in the school paper. That semester he got an A in his English class, the only time he ever got a good grade in high school. That year he also began, on his own initiative, to push for a Chicano Pride day. The day was granted to the students, and Juan and a group of other students were responsible for organizing the day's events. Most of the details were taken care of by spoken arrangement, but he did write an advertisement for the school newspaper. The creative writing class and the subsequent Chicano Pride day were the beginning of Juan's

desire to come to college. He wants to get a higher degree, then return to the Hispanic community with the skills to help with the problems he sees there.

In his public school, most of the children were Hispanic and Juan had classes that were taught bilingually and which delivered materials too slowly for Juan. He remembers getting very impatient and frustrated with how slowly the teachers went. Sometimes he would get into trouble by starting to mimic the teacher and be the class comedian.

Juan's mother had the required third grade education in Mexico. She now works as a maid at a small hotel and though she speaks English, she is most comfortable speaking Spanish. They speak Spanish in the home. Juan's stepdad is Hispanic American and bilingual. His stepfather earned his high school GED and drives a bus for the school district. Juan's birth father lives in Mexico where Juan visits him every other summer. His father works as a hand on a small rancho. His father has a third grade education but has worked as a police officer. His father is a significant member of the community and is respected for his wisdom and his verbal ability in reasoning through problems. He is sought out by members of the community to settle disputes or

give advise. Juan admires him very much and, like him, wants to be both respected and of help to his community.

When Juan was first in the United States, he and his mother and siblings lived with his aunt and her children in an apartment. He and his mother and siblings shared one room. When Juan wasn't in school or picking, he was in the care of his aunt or her daughters. He remembers a Spanish newspaper that was always somewhere around the living room and dining table. It came out twice a week, and he was often sent to buy it from the corner store. He would read the headlines as he walked home, and, if a headline interested him, try to read the story when he got home. But newspaper stories were confusing and lost his interest. As he learned more English in school, it became harder to read and understand the Spanish newspaper. A friend of his aunt's sold a line of Spanish cosmetics and perfumes similar to Avon, and the sales magazines were also around the apartment. Sometimes he would look at the pictures of the women in these brochures and read the names of the products.

Juan's aunt wrote and received letters from relatives in Mexico. When a letter would arrive, his aunt and mother would sit around the dining room table and his aunt would read the letter out loud to his mother and they would talk about the situations and people mentioned in the letter. The

letters usually came from female relatives. News about his father or other relatives and friends was received this way, via others who knew of them and wrote about them in the letter. Juan's mother wrote relatives in Mexico occasionally, but it was her sister who took care of most of the writing to be done. His aunt would write and ask his mom what she wanted to say and then write it in the letter she was writing.

When Juan's mother got remarried, they moved into a small house with his stepdad. On weekends, his stepdad would buy the weekend edition of the Mexican newspaper as well as the Sunday *Los Angeles Times*. The sections of both papers would lie around the house during the week and on weeknights for the rest of the week, his stepdad would read the newspaper for a while, then look at the TV guide that came with it and choose a show to watch on TV. His mother would buy Spanish women's magazines and read them at the kitchen table. Occasionally, she would cut out a recipe. She wrote more letters after her remarriage, and would occasionally cut out a health tip or other useful information from the magazine and send it with her letter to relatives in Mexico. Juan would spend about 20 minutes looking at his homework and doing a little of the reading or other work, but go outside as soon as he could to play with friends. He and his

friends hung out around the neighborhood and the nearby mall. He liked to spend most of his time outdoors, and was usually with friends in the evening, coming in late to watch a little TV before going to bed.

He and his siblings of the same age were older when the second set of siblings began to arrive. At that time, there were a few storybooks around the house, but he was too old for these and didn't pay any attention to them. His stepdad would occasionally buy him a comic book when he was at the drug store picking up a prescription. Juan liked to read comic books and traded them with other boys.

Juan's Uses, Values, and Expectations for Reading and Writing

For Juan, reading and writing have been for the gathering of information, as in reading the newspaper or the TV guide, for creative self-expression, as in when he wrote his poem and the copy for his Chicano Pride day advertisement, and for communicating with family and the cultural community of Chicanos.

In each of these uses is an inherent value for informing self and others, maintaining cultural, family, and friendship ties, and self-fulfillment through artistic expression. Juan is very involved in the Hispanic community, and if he has an expectation for reading and writing, it is

that these will be tools he can use to accomplish his ends to organize the community. Juan values his father's position of leadership in his community and the verbal skills his father uses in his position. Juan expects that he will have a similar position of respect and leadership in his community. He is a strong and charismatic speaker and reasoner. But these skills are as yet verbal; he doesn't have a good command of the skills of written communication, though he says he would like to be a better writer so he can go into the law profession.

Brian

Brian was raised in a mid-sized farm town on the northern great plains. Bryan's mother has a B.A. Since Brian was small, she has been a supervisor in a hospital supply department. She devised a filing system so innovative the system was published in a professional journal. Brian's father owns a mattress company which he took over from his father. He did not attend college. Brian has a brother and a sister. His sister went to college and has a degree in business. His brother helps with the mattress business.

Both parents began their day by reading the local newspaper over coffee at the breakfast table. Brian wasn't up because his school didn't start until 9:00 a.m. and his parents let him sleep in. There is usually a newspaper and

one of his mom's trade journals on the kitchen table, as well as whatever junk mail or coupons have come recently. When Mark eats breakfast, he eats fast, and just glances at the headlines of the paper, or the interesting junk mail.

After school Brian was at sports practice. He played whatever sport was being played at any season and was at school until dinner time. After dinner his mom and dad had a rule that the TV would be off for two hours while Brian and his siblings did their homework. But there were three TVs in the house, and Brian could always sneak off to another TV and watch without being caught. He did not usually finish his homework.

On weekends Brian would go with his dad to their mattress factory and play on the machines. During the warm months, Brian would go with his dad or with friends to the local sports events. On summer weekends, the family went where many people of the northern plains go, to their lake cabin. There were some books and magazines at the cabin, ones Brian's mother had read and left there. His mom would read novels and magazines while they were at the cabin. His dad would fish during the morning and then have some project around the cabin to keep it up or improve it. His dad would have a hunting or home repair magazine around and would read these when he wanted to relax. Oftentimes, relatives would

come, so it was a social time. Mark would fish with his dad and play with other kids who were there.

Brian remembers that his dad read manuals for the new machines at his business. He had a secretary who took care of the book work and correspondence. Mark says the end tables in his living room had lots of books and magazines on them and that the sitting room had two large bookshelves full of books, but says it was only his mom and his sister he ever really noticed reading books. He thinks the books were mostly his mom's and sister's old textbooks from college. Both his mom and his sister read novels, women's magazines, or trade journals and work related books.

Brian was held back in the first grade for the reason that he hadn't matured enough to go to second grade. When reading is assigned at school, he does as little as possible just to fulfill the assignment. Brian will occasionally flip through his dad's magazines on hunting and snowmobiles. He is very interested in snowmobile racing, and would read the newspaper want ads to see if there were any ads for snowmobiles. He remembers his dad encouraging him to read these ads because "at least it was reading," and he "would do better in school if [he] read more."

Brain's Uses, Values, and Expectation for Reading and Writing

Brian's main use for print, his own or others, is to avoid it. He had very little to say about reading and writing in his life and very few memories of its use in his home. Brian is not the type to do the sitting still that reading usually requires. It is his habit to avoid whatever tasks might require writing or reading. If he does have to do them, like in his composition class, he does them as quickly as he can and doesn't go back to rewrite. He just skims to make sure there are periods and capital letters at the sentence breaks. Although Brian reads signs, headlines, and schedules as a matter of daily function, he worked very hard to give me the impression that reading and writing were beside the point in his life.

Mark and Brian are similar in that both are very interested in sports and mechanics. For both, reading and writing is something that women (mothers and sisters) do, not what men (fathers) do. Men fish, hunt, snowmobile, and do things with mechanics. This "type" of male predominates in the northern midwest, although there are certainly many types of men. It is possible that Brian and Mark have developed the way they have because of identification with their fathers, but both, too, may not be readers by nature.

Tanya

Tanya is a 25 year old woman who lives in Grand Forks, ND. She is enrolled in technical college in a chiropractic aid major. Her mother is a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe; her biological father was a Metis (mixed blood French and Indian). Tanya lived the first 11 years of her life on a reservation and attended a reservation school. Her father worked in construction and was gone many months of the year, traveling the near-by states to work jobs. At that time, her mother worked at a restaurant. When she was 10, her parents divorced and her mom eventually married a Caucasian man who worked as a laborer for the railroad. They moved to Grand Forks. Her mother then got her GED and went to the technical college to follow a course in food management and later got a job as the cook at a sorority house on the state university campus.

Before she was ten, Tanya's mother was gone many afternoons and evenings and Tanya and her two female cousins would go to her grandmother's house, which was nearby. She and her cousins were supposed to do homework when they got home from school. Everyone in the house would always be in the kitchen/living room area. The girls would sit at the kitchen table to do their homework. Homework was a mixture of play and girl-talk and they only got some of it done.. It

was more fun to talk, look at the magazines that were lying around, or watch TV. Her grandmother had diabetes and circulation problems in her legs and couldn't be on her feet too much. During the day she sat and watched TV. It was usually on when they were in the kitchen area and when their Grandmother would start talking to a friend, they would change the channel and watch a show they liked. Their grandmother was usually in the living room and kitchen area, talking on the phone, or talking with friends and family members who dropped by. Because of her grandmother's poor health, she would direct the girls in fixing most of the dinner. They would walk to the grocery with a list and get what was needed. Her grandmother was not supposed to eat too much salt or sugar, so she taught the girls to look at the list of ingredients on prepared foods and watch for where sugar or sodium fell in the list. They would eat dinner, then watch play make believe games, tic tac toe, and Chinese checkers in the winter, or play outside in the summer. After play they would watch TV with their grandmother until they fell asleep in the living room.

Tanya remembers that her grandmother had magazines and newspapers around the house. Sometimes her granddaughters would talk her into buying fashion magazines. Occasionally, her grandmother would buy the local town paper if it looked

interesting or if there was a column by a local Native American columnist. Tanya would read the headlines on any one to these papers, and if the headline piqued her interest, read the article.

One of Tanya's cousins had a bookshelf with books and when they were at her house, Tanya would look at the books whose covers attracted her. She might start to read the book, usually would not borrow it to read. She read at school when she was supposed to and sometimes at home if she was assigned to read a book. Occasionally she liked the story in a book. She remembers liking *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and a book of Native American creation tales.

Tanya's grandmother would buy the National Inquirer if a story on the front cover interested her. A Native American newspaper was distributed free in local businesses in all of North Dakota and told of activities and political news important to Native Americans. When friends and family were over, they would discuss whatever topics were of concern to them, but the paper was not used for reference. To Tanya, talk always seemed more important to the group that was there because everybody always had opinions to express, and would usually have more details and information, gathered from friends and relatives than the newspaper would give.

Sometimes in the homes of the town or in the local hall, the locals would hold singing and tale-telling nights where people would gather and sing the traditional songs in the Lakota language while beating the skin drums they held in their laps. Sheets of paper with the words were handed out so others could sing the songs. People would tell stories about the history of the tribe or Lakota stories about how the world began or how an animal got its stripes or its characteristics. Tanya liked these gatherings very much and remembers the stories about the buffalo and the prairie dog. Once a year all the families would go to Grand Forks for the Wacipi, a weekend of Native American activities and traditions at the university. It was a gathering of Native Americans tribes from all over North and South Dakota and it was exciting for Tanya because there would be so many people and her family would see friends and relatives who no longer lived in the area. A program was distributed with a schedule of events and information about special activities. Her aunt would read the program and the family would decide which events to attend.

When Tanya was nine, she and her two cousins entered a Wacipi contest for children to write a creation tale, and they took turns reading it before the audience. As part of a school project when she was twelve, she began an exchange of

letters with a pen pal from a Native American tribe in Arizona. She wrote and received letters several times that year, telling about herself and the history of her area and her tribe.

Tanya's Uses, Values, and Expectations for Reading and Writing

Tanya has used reading and writing for a number of different purposes. Like Juan and Amanda, her life is lived very much in a cultural community and many of her uses of reading and writing as a young person were to participate in her community and culture. For Tanya, reading and writing are ways to learn about and participate in her heritage, to teach others about it, and to have personal artistic expression.

Do these case studies show what went wrong to make Tanya, Brian, Mark, Juan, and Amanda basic writers? Not really. Each possessed the literacy skills they needed to conduct their lives. They had their particular uses for reading and writing, and they had values and expectations for those skills that were in alignment with their uses of them. There was no daily task nor desired end that they were unable to do because of a lack of skill with reading and writing. The only place where their literacies became an issue was at school. At school, they were tested and graded,

and their scores occasionally missed the mark. I say "occasionally" because most of the time, most of them received passing grades. Some of the time, some of them even received grades of B and an occasional A. But one day, they tried to join a group whose uses, values, and expectations were not the same as theirs, and they, suddenly, became the "underprepared."

TEACHING LITERACY AND BASIC WRITING--WITH MUCH STILL UNKNOWN

When I set out to interview my five subjects, I hoped I might be able to isolate certain characteristics in their literacy backgrounds that led to their placement in basic writing classes. I thought if I could isolate characteristics of their literacy uses or values that had caused them to miss the mainstream, I could use this knowledge as a starting place from which to develop a pedagogy for remediation. As I look back over my interviews, I see that in each case, values and uses for reading and writing have a part in what might have set the student off the course. Mark, Brian, and Tanya do not value reading and writing and don't see much use for it. Juan and Amanda seem to value writing, and also seem to like it for creative outlet. Juan was too busy doing other things to get the experience with writing that might have changed his academic course. It was Amanda's case that was most surprising to me.

While interviewing Amanda, I felt surprise that she had not passed the test. In her account of her use of reading and writing in her youth, she seemed to use the skills a fair amount of the time. She did not avoid or dislike reading, as Mark and Brian did. In fact, she seemed to naturally enjoy reading and writing. Before my research, I

would have assumed that a child who liked to read and write would grow up with the literacy skills that would steer her smoothly into the educational mainstream.

Amanda's situation leads me to wonder if her bi-lingual education and community somehow shaped her development. Some education researchers propose that students placed in non-mainstream classes designed to remediate lower level skills are in fact being placed in a track that will hold them at the level of the class instead of remediating their skills. Amanda never did get into the mainstream, or at least not into the college mainstream. I did not ask what kind of English classes she had in high school. Were her high school classes segregated according to skill or language background as her elementary classes were? Has she ever made it into the mainstream? Or might her elementary school experience have set her on a track that could not even be remediated by mainstream high school English courses? I tried to keep my study focused on home literacy and so did not delve into her school background. But I feel that Amanda's schooling certainly has played a part in shaping the literacy she brings with her to college.

I wonder if family expectations for her future affected Amanda's literacy growth. She told me that adult family members sometimes say to her "Why do you want to go to

college? Why don't you get married and have children?" Most of the members of her family have high school educations and working class jobs. It is unusual for someone in the family to go to college. Amanda has one uncle who has a college degree and works as an engineer in a successful firm. He is the only family member who has encouraged her in her studies. He has particularly encouraged her in her writing, telling her he writes frequently in his job and that the skill is very valuable. His words are the ones she thinks of when she is writing her composition assignments.

Like Amanda, Juan seems to enjoy writing and to have a natural skill for it. He learned in high school that writing was a way of expressing himself as a member of his ethnic culture, and this was a positive experience. But where Amanda read books and the newspaper, Juan's life was filled with activity that did not involve reading and writing. But there are similarities in Amanda's and Juan's background of community and family values. They come from similar Hispanic communities and families in which higher levels of reading and writing skills were not needed or valued by significant numbers of their members. I know that Juan's lack of reading has contributed greatly to his lack of skill, but if he had had more reading and writing experience, I doubt that he would be in the mainstream. His bi-lingual schooling

combined with the values of his community would have shaped his literacy growth much as Amanda's has. Richard Rodriguez' arguments for formal English education could be argued here, but I don't know if I would be the one to argue for it. Amanda and Juan are so much a part of their families and ethnic communities that it is difficult for me to picture how such an educational arrangement would have worked for good in their lives.

If Amanda's and Juan's parents have values and expectations for jobs which do not require college or writing, these values can also be literacy values which were transmitted to them. If their families used reading and writing for letters and newspaper articles, and not for acquiring college degrees or high-paying jobs, they may never have made the connection of reading and writing to higher schooling or career jobs. If adults have a strong value for a college education for their children, they will communicate these values to the child through words and actions and attempt to influence the child's values and efforts toward the things they feel the child will need to go to college, such as good writing skills, math skills, or good grades.

Ross Winterowd says families who value literacy become literate and take their reading and writing skills for

granted. But "change the cultural orientation by a very few degrees, and reading and writing are no longer taken for granted, are not even necessarily valued accomplishments" (xiii). Winterowd goes on to recount the case of a student in his class who could not remember reading anything except the sports page, and whose parents, though professional and college educated, also did not read, except for keeping a subscription to Newsweek. The student was not able to do the reading and writing required for his college classes and soon dropped out. Winterowd theorizes that the problem was a simple one: The student's family did not value literacy, thus, neither did he. Winterowd's conclusions support my observations, but I have to add that I think his reasoning from point A to point B is very simplistic. Adults do communicate values that shape their children's attitudes and behaviors, but I think there are many other factors that need observation and analysis to provide the data to make informed statements about such cases.

Amanda's and Juan's communities' values for reading and writing might have influenced their own, but what about the cases of Mark and Brian? Both students had at least one parent who used reading and writing in the workplace, had a college degree, and valued a college education. However, in each of these cases, the son did not seem to inculcate the

value. Yet Mark and Brian are in college because their parents wanted them to go to college, and because they themselves know they will need a college degree to get the jobs that pay the higher wages they desire. So, though neither Mark nor Brian seem to value literacy skills very highly, they both value a college education for what it will bring them.

The equation of parental values and the resultant skill levels of the offspring may not be as simple as Winterowd describes it. It's possible that when Mark and Brian worked fixing machines with their fathers and other males, they both acquired a value for hands-on labor and associated this work with masculinity. Both had mothers who actively encouraged their sons' reading and writing. Could it be that Mark's and Brian's manual labor experiences with their fathers created a strong association between hands-on work and masculinity? Did reading, which was valued by their mothers, have an aspect of femininity? Yet, according to both Mark and Brian, their dads did express desire that their sons go to college. We don't know just how the message was communicated. Educators have noted that while many parents encourage their children to read and write, the same parents rarely model these activities. Parents who encourage reading and writing but never model it are parents who feel

that educational success, believed to be brought by pursuit of the three R's, is very important for their children's' eventual success in their careers. But these parents have not experienced the need to read or write while earning their own livelihoods.

The reasons why each of my five writers do not possess the reading and writing skills of those who passed the entry tests are numerous and complex. Yet one simple reason for lower literacy skills that educators may not acknowledge is the individual's natural like or dislike of reading and writing. Though it is true that someone like Amanda, who likes to read and write may still end up in basic writing classes, certainly a part of the reason Mark and Brian are basic writers is because they have avoided reading and writing. Both express an antipathy for the acts of reading and writing, and parental value, however it was communicated, could not affect their dislike.

Another characteristic of Mark's and Brian's attitudes toward reading and writing is that they really didn't believe reading and writing would be of any use to them. Attempts to make students believe that the literacy of the university is very important to their lives can be difficult when nothing in a student's life experience has shown this to be true. Mark and Brian seem determined to be coolly

unconvinced about the necessity or the benefits of the reading and writing they do in school. Brian and Mark have seen nothing in their experience that has given any indication of reading and writing's importance to the comfortable middle-class lives of themselves or their fathers. They would need very convincing "life experience" evidence to value the reading and writing the university asks them to do. But the environment of freshman composition classes is not taken from working life situations, so their college experience of assigned writings will not convince them of the importance of writing for their lives. And their feelings on this issue may be correct. The amount of reading and writing needed for various jobs can be quite different. Depending upon the duties of the jobs they will hold, they may never need to write more than sign their names, create lists, fill in order forms, or enter enough computer information to make slight changes in computer-generated form letters.

Like Mark and Brian, Tanya has not had much parental modeling of the use of reading and writing for career success, and she does not believe writing will be important to her chosen career. She enrolled in technical college because she wants to be a chiropractic assistant. She has come to a technical college in part because she does not

want the work of the university. A technical education has been good enough for her mother to make a living and a technical education is what Tanya sees for herself. To have to take a writing class seems contrary to the point of going to a technical training college. When Tanya envisions her job as a chiropractic assistant, she sees herself aiding patients while they use the office chiropractic devices, and maintaining the devices. She was very angry at being required to take a writing class and during the term she continued resentful and very resistant to the work.

Of my five subjects, Juan and Amanda seemed to have a belief that the work they do in the university is important, that it will serve them well in their lives. I'm not sure how they have come to be of this mind, but they seemed to have the willing suspension of disbelief held by some basic writers. Though they have had no positive modeling experience, they are willing to believe that what they learn in a basic writing class will be good for them. I suspect their belief may be due to their acceptance of the claim that the university is the way to rise in economic and political power, and to the motivating messages of the Equal Opportunity Program and its counselors whose efforts are directed at motivating underrepresented students to succeed

in the university. As a teacher, I would like to learn from these counselors.

In addition to the values and beliefs about reading and writing students bring with them into the basic writing classroom, they also bring feelings. These feelings make differences in the teaching and learning that goes on. Some basic writing students seem to come to class with an anticipation that what they will learn will help them achieve their goals. These students participate willingly in the learning situation the teacher constructs. Others, like almost half the students in a technical college basic writing class I recently taught, do not believe what they will learn will be of benefit to them. These students bring anger with them to the basic writing class.

When I was hired to teach the technical college basic writing class, the dean who hired me warned me that students at a technical college could be especially resentful of having to take a writing course. They have come to a technical college to get hands-on training for a particular field, and they want to get this practical training and get out and get a job. But, she assured me, if I told them the following, they would realize that having strong writing skills was of great value to them, and they would participate willingly in the course. I was told to tell them

this: Every two years the college brings to the campus a professional from the field of every major offered by the college. The professionals are put through a very thorough questioning to ascertain what skills they use on the job. These skills are then incorporated into the curriculum for the major. Each of those professionals puts writing high on his or her list of essential duties for the job. These professionals say writing skills are very important to their success in their positions.

The first day of class, I told my students this very thing. About half looked at me as if they would believe *that*, maybe, in another lifetime. The other half looked at me like I was full of it. I was, after all, just another one of those in the long line of teacher-types with a vested interest in making others believe that the things I value, which they have gotten along just fine without, are truly necessary and valuable for their lives as well. By the third week of the term I realized my talk had not convinced the students who had come to the class angry at having to enroll in it. They remained angry and were all too willing to express their anger in the course.

Though my students' anger and resistance made teaching the course very difficult, their feelings were understandable. Basic writers may be angry or resistant

because of their understandable frustration with the expectations and demands of schooled literacy, which they may never have understood and feel has been imposed on them without holding meaning for their lives. Unfortunately, the work of the basic writing classroom is the literacy of others—of the university—and not the literacy of the students' lives. And basic writers may feel denigrated because what they are, and what they have been, is not good enough for those frustrating others who want something that may seem of little importance to the basic writer.

Basic writers may also bring the frustration of not knowing why what they write is not good enough. Their writing has always gotten them by for their purposes, and they may even have received acceptable grades on high school writing assignments. David Bartholomae points out that basic writers are not completely unskilled at writing tasks, in fact, they can write an approximation of many mainstream writing tasks. They are on the margin because their style of discourse approximates the mainstream, yet falls short in various ways. Bartholomae seeks to blur the distinctions between the mainstream and those who have been relegated to the margin, pointing out that the errors made by basic writers are made by all writers. The more experienced writer recognizes a problem and fixes it, whereas the basic writer

may not possess the ability to recognize or fix the error. Students who have been marginalized may be frustrated with the vagaries of literacy evaluation. Bartholomae says:

We act as though we can be fairly confident in marking the boundary lines between those students who can read and write with fluency, yet the question of what this fluency actually is, like the institutional processes that determine who is included and who is excluded, remains largely unexamined (Margins 67).

Basic writing students' anger, frustration, values, expectations, beliefs, and desires for reading and writing are a part of the basic writing classroom and the teaching and learning that goes on there. What can a basic writing teacher do when faced with a classroom of students with varying abilities, emotions, and willingness to learn?

Many basic writing teachers attempt to make the assigned reading and writing somehow meaningful for the student. To engage the basic writer meaningfully in the work of reading and writing, some teachers assign reading and writing in areas of interest to the student. In basic writing classes with a large minority population, the teacher may assign a text like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* or other reading involving the lives of minorities. While reading the text, it is hoped, the student will become involved because she is reading about personal or cultural experiences similar to her own. Assigned

writings are designed to require some use of the student's personal experience as a part of the text. Assignments to encourage student involvement also include assignments to read and write about minority issues, to write to a friend about a current issue of concern, to argue about an element of the students' lives and concerns. When I worked as a tutor for basic writing classes that used these tactics, I observed that the methods were effective for involving minority students in the reading and writing of the class.

Another way of involving students in the reading and writing of the class is to bring students' community writing practices to the classroom. In their study of community and school-based literacy practices, Roz Ivanic and Wendy Moss say:

The educational context demands specific conventions for writing, specific purposes for writing and types of writing, specific ways of writing, specific ways of learning to write, specific criteria for successful writing. These are often very different from the practices of most of the communities using the school. This approach devalues the practices of the community, implying that they are inappropriate where it really matters—in school (196).

Ivanic's and Moss' strategy for moving adult students from the literacy of the community to the literacy of the school is to work from the literacy the students bring with them from their homes and communities. They feel that schooled literacies are imposed and measured by the

contrived and artificial values of schooled literacy, leaving the student powerless and his or her work devalued. The situation puts the institution and the teacher in a position of hegemony over the practices of the student and his or her community. And imposed writing separates literacy from the autonomous, self-generated writing of the community. Self-generated writing used in the classroom need not be measured by the standards of schooled writing, but as the community would judge it, "in terms of whether it achieves the purpose for which it was intended" (201).

Using a self-generated writing that emanates from community practice may be useful in the basic writing class. The educational process can begin with a literacy the students are already comfortable with. For students like Juan, Amanda, and Tanya, writing done in community was also an enjoyable way to interact with others. Basic writers have had an uncomfortable relationship with the imposed writing of the school, and using self-generated writing may help them cross the boundaries into academic writing without discomfort. And the literacy basic writers have used in their lives is self-generated and functional, in the sense that it is used to achieve goals and desires. Though the concept of functional literacy is a difficult one because of the varying activities and goals of individuals, at its

foundation, as John Oxenham points out, literacy is functional; it has been a tool of societies, used and developed only as it has been needed:

Literacy appears to flourish when large, complex states and cities are organized together with a good deal of craft, industry and trade. . . . Small-scale civilizations, whether sedentary-like the islanders of Fiji-or shifting-like the tribes of Central Africa-or nomadic, like the Touareg of North Africa or the Masai of East Africa, do not appear to create literacy for themselves, very possibly because they simply do not need it. (58)

In their study of the Vai, Scribner and Cole also viewed literacy as a tool used by a group for specific purposes: "as a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it. Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (Psychology 236).

My subjects have used literacy in the specific contexts encountered in their daily lives: to aid memory, to communicate with those not present, to express ideas, to obtain information, to dispense information, to entertain themselves or others. Amanda, Juan, and Tanya have used writing to communicate with family, to inform or organize others in the culture, or to participate in cultural traditions. Typical writing assignments intended to engage

these writers would be to assign writing to be featured in a class-created publication. Self-generated writing meant to reach out to community, inform, entertain, teach cultural traditions, or express self could be written, edited, laid out, and published by the class. Texts for the class might involve minority experiences. Another approach to such students might be to start with a metacognitive approach to language use differences. Students would be assigned to investigate and write about the use of language in their own homes or communities, then compare these uses to other kinds of language use.

Reading and writing assignments to bring Mark's and Brian's community uses and interests to assigned writing would be a bit more difficult. Mark's and Brian's experiences with literacy haven't brought them positive response or certain purpose, such as community interaction. They have rarely been entertained by reading and writing, and they haven't had response from an audience in a satisfying communication exchange. But each of them has read manuals to find out information, and the reward of finding out something they wanted to know has been one small payback from reading. Self-generated writing built around finding and dispensing information that interests them would be a way to start their writing process. Students like Mark and

Brian might be engaged if an assignment were devised in which they would need to research and then write to inform an interested audience about something that interests them very much—perhaps the snowmobile industry, since Mark and Brian are both interested in snowmobiling. A feature about snowmobiles with pictures or a multi-media display for presentation would make research and writing more engaging for them, and they would enjoy teaching others about the sport through publication.

Such assignments would align with the values, uses, and expectations students like Amanda, Juan, Mark, Brian, and Tanya already have for reading and writing, and be meaningful. But their teacher will soon need to move her basic writers up the ladder of complexity in their assignments. How does she achieve this? Community-based writing in a class publication can teach grammar, audience awareness, rhetorical devices, tone, editing and rewriting, but it may not give students experience in other, more complex tasks that may be asked of them as they progress through their courses. As we have seen, college writing assignments involve many tasks with differing purposes and goals. Identifying these goals is a part of the problem in identifying the literacy practices of the college, the issue

that once again brings me back the problems of teaching the literacy of the college in the basic writing class.

If, as Scribner and Cole found in their study of the Vai, literacy skills are task specific, what specific literacy task are we training our students to do? This question has to do with whose literacy we teach and what literacy we teach, as well as to the values and expectations for literacy. There is a wide disparity between the goals for writing in many college composition classes and the goals for writing in the community and in the workplace.

Today's college curriculum seems more focused on job training than on a liberal education in the humanities. Most students go to college to pursue a certain major so they can begin a career in the field and earn a decent wage. Though colleges still require general education courses meant to give a broad base of knowledge, the emphasis is on the student's education in a particular field. The majority of contemporary jobs are performed in a business setting where employees will use the communication conventions of business. But a college composition teacher may assign writing centered in literary analysis, not business writing. It seems that just as college entry tests may not reflect the skills needed to perform the tasks of the freshman composition class, the literacy tasks of the college

composition class may not prepare the student for the literacy tasks of the work place. If literacy is "a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it. . . . applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (Scribner and Cole, Psychology 236), then what set of practices and for what specific purposes in which specific contexts of use are we teaching basic writers?

When I taught my basic writing class at the technical college, I was awash in possible goals for the course. When I asked other basic writing teachers what they were teaching and what textbooks they were using, I found a very mixed bag of goals and methods. One used a basic writing textbook based on a surprising array of writing tasks, from creative to informational, but none which required analysis or research. The teacher supplemented her text with such a tall stack of handouts instructing the various forms and conventions of business writing, that her goal actually seemed to be to teach business writing. She believed that since many of the graduates of the technical college would be involved in business, business correspondence was important to teach. Another teacher told me she had the students do nothing but learn to write grammatical and

organized paragraphs and learn to submit them via the laptop computers and Internet links they all had. Her goal, it seemed, was to teach correct grammar, paragraph organization, and some computer skills. When I was hired to teach my course, it was too late to order texts, so I fumbled along with Xeroxed copies of assignments from a text made up of lessons on topic choice and paragraph development and gave model papers that were little more than five paragraph essays. During the course of the term I was frustrated and dissatisfied with my attempts to teach. But what would I choose as my goal for a basic writing class the next time? In the future, I will teach as all basic writing teachers teach, by choosing the methods and the goals that I favor to give my students experience with the reading and writing I feel will somehow be useful to them in their lives, professions, and in their university work. But what an enormous variety of skills I have to choose from.

At this point in my work, I had hoped to have worked out for myself an approach to literacy learning in the basic writing class and a sure method for teaching literacy. But I find I have no solutions for teaching that seem in any way exceptional. In her concluding remarks for *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy says "[O]ur examination of the writing problems of unprepared college freshman has

revealed such a complexity of problems and possible solutions (and such large areas of pedagogical ignorance) that a search for The Answer begins to seem an inefficient way to start thinking about a course (or courses) in basic writing." She goes on to explain that she is unable even to propose a specific course plan for basic writers because of the many variables found in the individual problems and proclivities for learning students bring with them to the classroom and the many different areas of strengths and weaknesses of teachers. She concludes: "We are, in short, too much in the dark to be evangelical. At best our awareness of these variables should make us sensitive to the worth of *various* methods and more clear-eyed about what we can and cannot expect of ourselves and our students" (284).

After my research into literacy and the teaching of basic writing, I have come to many of the same conclusions. I have no answers. But I am now well aware that not only do basic writers bring with them many differing characteristics to their writing, they also bring with them unique values, uses, and expectations for reading and writing, and oftentimes negative emotions that will affect the teaching and learning.

I wish I had an answer for the struggles of the basic writing classroom, both the students' and mine, a way that

would make the forward progress into the literacy of the university smooth and predictable. But I don't. In the end, I feel like Madge the manicurist from the old Palmolive dish soap commercial, advising her dry-skinned clients "Try everything." I feel like my research has taken me through a little bit of everything that I can now use to inform my teaching. Although I have not been able to develop a concrete pedagogy for teaching basic writers, my teaching will now be informed by literacy theory, the observations of ethnographic research of literacy practices, and my own research into the literacies basic writing students bring with them. My research has shown me the importance of understanding and situating my pedagogy within these several areas of literacy and its teaching. As a college literacy teacher, I will need to constantly negotiate between the literacy expectations of the institution, of my students' future employers, and of my students, bringing them from the literacy they have known into the literacy of higher education, of their future professions, and of their future dreams and goals, though neither of us may know at the time what those goals and dreams will be.

In my teaching, I know I will use all of these informing entities, keeping all plates spinning at once. But my research into the literacy backgrounds of five basic

writers has given me a place to focus my teaching. My teaching will now become oriented on individual student experience because I do feel that the teaching of new literacies must start from the literacy experience of the student. I know now that basic writers are not blank slates or empty bank accounts into which I can simply deposit a new and unfamiliar literacy. Basic writers come to me with unique personal literacies that can be built on meaningfully to increase the literacy skills of the individual. My ideas are not earth shaking, and when I try and put them into practice, I may be left with more questions than solutions. In my attempt to teach literacy skills to basic writers, I will, like most basic writing teachers, try everything. But my approach to my basic writing students and my creation of assignments will emanate from knowledge of their individual experiences, uses, and values for reading and writing.

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