An untitled paper on developing basic writing skills

By Jen Munson
1997

---

*Note — Please see MLK for related materials, such as tables, that are not included in the web version of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 1995, I served as the writing tutor for the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP). I was hired to supplement the instruction students were receiving in two different sections of Composition 099, the college's remedial writing course. Through my sessions with students, I began to notice that the students from one class seemed to be doing better than the students from the other class. I decided to investigate the teaching methodologies of the two teachers involved and try to link students' successes or failures to the methodology used by their respective teacher.

I also investigated each students' academic background, reviewing Nelson-Denney scores, SAT scores, and overall high school averages. I hoped that an understanding of each students' previous academic standing would help illuminate any areas of improvement, or, at least, point to possible reasons for lack of improvement. I sincerely hope that my research will prove valuable to future COMP 099 instructors and EOP administrators, that they may best serve this student population.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do basic writers become better writers? What instructional methodologies best serve their needs? Does a classroom focused on regularized repeated drafting increase their skill levels or does a more varied instructional approach, consisting of less repetition and shorter writing assignments, serve them better? Which, if either, of these approaches increases the students' confidence as writers? Also, how do reading comprehension levels effect writing improvement when writing assignments are based on students' interpretations and evaluations of texts? These are the questions I am posing for my research.

For my study, I enlisted the aid of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students who were placed in two sections of Composition 099, the State University of New York at Cortland's remedial composition class, by their placement exams. My interest in these students grows out of my attachment to them. As their tutor I have spent a great deal of time with each of them and have been overjoyed to see some of them become better writers and clearer thinkers. I have also felt the pangs of defeat when I have seen some of them fall by the wayside and flounder. I intend to do a meaningful evaluation of the EOP writing curriculum and pinpoint what activities are most beneficial to this specialized group of students. I hope to not only educate myself as to what did and did not work for students but, perhaps, enlighten others as well who are faced with the task of educating basic writers.

(Back to Top)

EXISTING LITERATURE

Skilled writers have been studied by various people, using a myriad of methods and in almost every setting, but basic writers, sadly, have been neglected. Perhaps this is due to an academic elitism on the part of the researchers or, more likely, it grows out of the researchers' frustration in determining where to start; both students and teachers want to find that one factor which is the root of the basic writer's problem and just fix it. Teachers are frustrated when faced with the daunting task of editing a basic writer's paper and students are disheartened when they see all the red pen marks marring up a paper they thought they did well on. Basic writers have a plethora of problems and the task of deciphering what they are, where to begin, and how to best handle them can be overwhelming.

Carrell and Monroe, in their research article entitled "Learning Styles and Composition" (1993), contend that basic writers may be allocated to the "basic" status because of a personality type which does not perceive or think in a way which easily lends itself to traditional modes of discourse. The more popular belief is that basic writers are products of environments which are not conducive to education, such as inner cities or poverty. The conventional methodology for teaching basic writers is based almost exclusively on basic skill instruction (Allington,1988). Grammar drills and worksheets tend to be a way of

life for basic writers. Teachers, at a loss for a better explanation, assume that student error is based in a lack of control over the rules of writing. Therefore, the teachers hope that if the rules are drilled into the student enough, the student will somehow integrate them and be able to recall them when faced with a problem.

In his article "The Study of Error" (1980), David Bartholomae argues instead that basic writers "lack choice and option, the power to make decisions about the idiosyncrasy of their writing" (305). Basic writing, he contends, "is a variety of writing, not writing with fewer parts or more rudimentary constituents" (304). Basic writers are not the same as beginning writers; their sentences are not the same as the elementary school student because the ideas behind their writing are more complex. The basic writer's errors occur in the translation from thought to text. In his attempt to express himself, the basic writer falls into personal grammatical idiosyncrasies which lead him astray. The key to improving student writing is to recognize error patterns within a student's text and search for the cause of the error. The cause of error falls, roughly, into three main categories - errors caused by idiosyncratic grammar and rhetoric, typographical errors, and errors caused by dialect interference (307). What Bartholomae is arguing, simply, is that basic writers fall into their own grammatical constructions because they lack exposure to and experience with a variety of acceptable grammatical constructions. In other words, they are attempting to stuff their complex ideas into constructions they are familiar with but which do not serve their needs. The result is error.

"Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," (1978) by Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, agrees with Bartholomae's theory that error is based on "intralingual" mistranslations, caused by idiosyncratic grammar and dialect interference. They contend that the only way to improve basic writers' skills is to help them "discover a new strategy (rather than memorizing one new item)" for dealing with specific grammatical problems (211). Increased skill, then, is the product of the dialogue between the teacher, who identifies patterns in student error, and the student, who searches for strategies to deal with error.

In her groundbreaking work Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy admits that when faced with the task of teaching basic writers one can be thrown by the errors which pervade the writing samples. She believes that the study of error cannot be the central point of the classroom but, at the same time, argues that some class time must be relegated to studying the specific problems of the students. She suggests that the teacher enter the classroom on the first day with a set agenda, a set methodology on how to deal with error. The method she suggests is the building of scaffolding or what Mike Rose called "the sequencing of schemata" (Rose,1983). Rather than attacking random problems at random times, she begins with the basics of writing - syntax, punctuation, etc, and builds up to more complex ideas such as organization and the composing process. This allows the students to rebuild language structure for themselves. Her theory assumes that the reason for the basic writers' problems lay in gaps in their language scaffolding; everything built above the gap is shaky if not already collapsed. If, for instance, they never learned sentence structure they cannot grasp paragraph organization.

This unfamiliarity with grammatical constructions is only enhanced by traditional methods for teaching basic writers which "separate the intimately related processes of reading and thinking from writing" (Rose,1983). Basic writing courses focus on improving grammar without acknowledging that students learn grammatical and syntactical construction from reading texts rather than doing worksheets. A complex sentence within a text teaches students form, function, and applicability whereas a complex sentence on a grammar sheet simply teaches form and offers the student no help in determining proper usage. Texts focused on sociocultural issues and problems not only teach text structure and higher order thinking, but also motivate students to write by asking them to draw on their own backgrounds and knowledge. Once this process is begun, the students can learn how to create a dialogue between themselves and the text in which they ask questions and critically examine the issues at hand (Gentile and McMillan,1991). In Beyond the Culture Wars: How the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education, Gerald Graf argues that this method of teaching is conducive to both critical and creative thinking skills, and necessary at every level of the American educational system. Rather than insulate the student from the conflicts within society or academia, he believes students should be exposed to the controversies and taught how to form and defend their own opinions.

In "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," Mike Rose argues that basic writing courses must be based in the demands of college course work. Basic writing courses must serve as a bridge between secondary school writing and college writing and must acquaint students with the forms of writing expected of them in college. He cautions that if teachers insulate basic writers from complex, textually based, assignments, they will set their students up for future failure because mastery of a simpler form (ie. the personal essay) does not guarantee success in more complex forms (ie. the

expository essay):

> So we might guide a student to the point where she writes with few errors about her dorm room, but when is asked, say, to compare and contrast two opinions on dormitory housing, not to mention two economic theories, the organizational demands of comparing and contrasting and the more syntactically complicated sentences often attending more complex exposition or argument put such a strain on her cognitive resources and linguistic repertoire that error might well reemerge (Rose,1983).

He believes, therefore, that a basic writing curriculum should rely on texts from a variety of disciplines and "rich" assignments that systematically develop students' "structural, rhetorical, [and] stylistic facility."

My study jumps off from this point to examine the successes and failures of a textually based basic writing composition course. I will examine how a text-based curriculum effects student writing, paying close attention to students' reading comprehension levels and the readability of the classroom text.

(Back to Top)

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in my study were the twenty EOP students who placed into Composition 099, a developmental prepatory course aimed at preparing students for SUNY Cortland's required two-course sequence in composition. The Educational Opportunity Program is a state mandated program which is "designed for motivated applicants from New York state who have the same potential as other Cortland students but due to educational and economic disadvantage have not realized the same academic achievement" (SUNY Cortland Catalog,1996). Admission into the program is decided by an EOP committee which works separately from the college admissions office.

The EOP freshman student population for the 1995-1996 school year consisted of 40 individuals, twenty of whom were placed into COMP 099 and were used for this study. Of the twenty students used for this study, five students were ESL (English as a Second Language) who had been in the United States for at least two years and had received ESL training in high school. The Students' native countries were Turkey, Peru, Vietnam, Germany, and Saudi Arabia.. The remainder of the students were native speakers, although several of the students were bilingual. The study group consisted of nine females and eleven males and the racial make-up of the class was a as follows: seven Caucasians, five African-Americans, five Hispanics, two Middle-Easterners, and one Asian. With only a couple of exceptions, the students were products of economically deprived urban areas.

According to their Nelson-Denney reading scores, their reading comprehension abilities ranged from as low as third grade to as high as eleventh grade. The mean reading level of the students was seventh grade. Most students, including ESL students, fell between seventh grade and tenth grade. The mean SAT verbal score of the students was 300, with only one person scoring above 360. The average SAT verbal score for 1994 nationwide, however, was 423 (College Board of New York).

After being placed in COMP 099 because of their entrance exam scores, the students were divided into two sections of COMP 099 by the permissibility of their schedules, with the split being 9/11. Both sections worked from the same text, Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing, edited by Gary Colombo. The methodology of the instructors, however, differed greatly. Both professors used techniques such as multiple drafting, peer editing, and teacher editing; the differences lay in their procedures for teaching writing and the construction of their writing assignments.

Students in Class X were responsible for five written assignments: four essays (2-5 pages) and one in-class essay (see Table 1). The four essay assignments required multiple drafts and students were given up to three weeks to complete their drafting process. During the three weeks of drafting, students would meet with peer revisers at least twice during class time, meet with the COMP 099 writing tutor three times (1 hour sessions), and meet with the teacher for a writing conference at least once. All due dates, including draft due dates, were clearly delineated in the syllabus students received on the first day of class (Appendix A). The teacher also used a grading rubric which clearly indicated where students had done well and where they had lost points (Appendix B). This rubric was handed to students with copies of each draft read by the teacher.

(See) TABLE 1: CLASS X WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Students were also responsible for twenty reading assignments, all from their text Rereading America:

Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing. Teacher X used the idea of "sequencing schemata," or "building scaffolding," by asking students to draw on personal knowledge in assignments one and two and then analyze texts in assignments three and four. Papers were to be typed and all drafts were to be handed in with the final draft.

Teacher Y had a different approach to teaching writing. While she included peer editing, multiple drafting, and teacher editing, she added freewriting, journal writing, and computer training (see Table 2). Students in Class Y were responsible for eight freewriting/summary activities, eight journal entries (both reader-response and specific questions tied to their readings), three essays, and one in-class essay. While most activities were completed in a class period, essays were allotted anywhere from three days to two weeks for completion. The teacher would also accept another draft after the due date but most students did not take advantage of this opportunity. Students were supplied with a detailed rubric for grading; each time a draft was submitted to the teacher she would fill out the rubric and return it and the draft to the student (Appendix C).

(Back to Top)

(See) TABLE 2: CLASS Y WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Class Y also spent one hour a week in the college's computer lab where students learned how to use word processing computer programs. Teacher Y believed that "knowledge of computers for word processing [was] necessary for success at college" and that learning computer editing encourages students to revise their papers (syllabus,Appendix D). Students were required to read seventeen articles from the class text Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing.

My role in this study was that of tutor. I saw each student for either thirty minutes or sixty minutes per week, in which time we went over their written assignments together. I followed the tutoring principles found in Muriel Harris' work Teaching One-To-One: The Writing Conference, and did not correct their papers; I was there to teach them self-editing skills and other writing process skills such as brainstorming, outlining, and getting started techniques.

DATA COLLECTION

For my research, I collected four different types of data - entrance/exit exams, writing samples, student surveys, and my tutoring journal. The first type of data, entrance/exit exams, consisted of two exams. The first exam served as the students' placement exam and was administered in the Summer of 1995. Exams were graded on a scale of 1 to 6; a score of three or below placed their writers into COMP 099. Two English instructors, not associated with the EOP program, graded the exams and were asked to examine the following aspects of the essay and base their grades on successful usage of them: focus, audience, voice and tone, purpose, organization, content, language, and surface correctness (Appendix E). The rubric consists only of labels; it does not assign point value or weight to any section over another, nor does it clearly define the criteria for acceptable performance in any given area.

The test consisted of a reading sample, Claire L. Guadiani's "White Collar Looting," which was 835 words in length and, using the Fry method, placed at the thirteenth grade reading level. Students were asked to "write a letter to a college financial aid officer explaining white collar looting and giving your reaction to President Guadiani's article. In the course of the letter, summarize, paraphrase, and quote from Guadiani's article" (Assignment sheet,Appendix F). They were also asked to document the article when necessary. One hour and thirty minutes was allotted for the completion of the assignment.

The exit exam was administered at the end of the first semester, when the students had completed COMP 099. Theoretically, if the students had improved they would place higher on their exit exams and, at least, be ready to enter COMP 100. The assignment for the exit exam closely mirrored the entrance exam. While the specific article changed, now Ivan Strenski's "Let's Get Serious About Civility," length and readability remained the same, as did the writing assignment (Appendix G). Exams were graded by the same teachers who graded the initial exams and their evaluations were based on the same criteria as before. Results were then compared to determine who had improved and who had not. Improvement was determined when both teachers agreed upon a given student's grade and that grade was higher than the grade achieved on the entrance exam.

The second form of data collection was the students' own writing. Writing samples were first analyzed by type of assignment - freewriting, journal, essay. Because the only type of assignment shared by both classes was the essay, I chose to narrow my focus to two essay assignments (using both the first draft of

each essay and the final draft of each essay) from each class and two students from each class. Students were selected on the basis of their exit exam results. One student from each class who had demonstrated improvement in his/her exit exam was selected, as was one student from each class who had not demonstrated improvement. All four students examined had reading comprehension levels above the class average

Student papers were then evaluated according to a 130 point grading rubric which examined organization, grammar, structure, and thinking skills by myself and a fellow teacher who had not been involved with the students previously (Appendix I).

Student surveys were administered at the end of the semester (Appendix H)> My purpose for including student surveys was to gather a sense of how the students saw themselves and their progress. I also wanted to gather their views of the classroom - what they found helpful and what they found confusing, and see if either class format elicited a common response by its students.

The final form of data collected was my tutoring journal. Entries were made after every tutoring session and recorded the length of the session, the material covered in the session, and any comments about problems or successes with the assignment or class format. The journal, in this study, serves as a guide to determine student participation and common difficulties.

DATA ANALYSIS
Comparing the pretest and post-test scores, I was struck by the overwhelming lack of improvement. Of the seventeen students tested (three were unable to be tested), the two independent graders could only agree that three students had shown improvement - one in Class X and two in Class Y, hardly a trend. That means that only 18% of the student population had demonstrated improvement. The graders were unable to come to agreement on the remaining 82% (see Table 4).

(Back to Top)

(See) TABLE 4: RELATIVE SUCCESS PER CLASS ON POST-TESTS

Grader A, in her evaluations, complained of the students' lack of original thinking and their heavy dependence on plagiarism. In her opinion, only two students were ready to move on to COMP 100 (one from each class). The remaining students were unable to achieve a score of four, which would indicate their readiness fro COMP 100. Grader B, however, awarded ten fours and one five. When I discussed her evaluations with her later she confessed that she probably would not have been so "generous" (her word not mine) if she had not known these were post-tests. She, in a sense, felt the students should be rewarded for their effort. It is interesting to note that Grader A, on the pretests, tended to grade students higher than Grader B, whereas in the post-tests Grader B awarded markedly higher scores than Grader A.There is, I believe, an explanation for such discrepancy in the grading. The rubric which guides teachers' evaluations of these exams is insufficient; it allows for too much discretionary judgment. While it is impossible to eliminate all subjectivity in the grading process, a great deal of it can be filtered out through an effective grading rubric agreed upon by all interested parties. The present guidelines are simply inadequate for a fair evaluation of student work. The rubric (Appendix E) consists of ambiguous headings such as "voice and tone" and "language" and gives no clear explanation as to what those headings mean, nor does the rubric break those headings down into essential components and assign value to each component. Such looseness in the grading process connotes an ambiguity about the necessary levels of achievement for COMP 100. In other words, there is no agreement as to the achievement standards prerequisite for COMP 100 - what must a student need to know to enter into and succeed in COMP 100? Without an answer to that question grading becomes highly discretionary, dependent upon the mood and philosophy of any given teacher, and a student who is truly unprepared for COMP 100 may be pushed into the course and suffer because of his unpreparedness.

However skewed the grading may have been, there is general agreement that the tests were disappointing; students had not shown much, if any, improvement. Either one or two factors is responsible for this lack of improvement. The first possibility is that there really was no improvement in student writing skills, but I do not believe this to be the case for all the students (at least I hope this is not the case). The other possibility is that the nature of the test itself is not fair. These are students who have been working on process writing and the nature of the exam does not allow for process writing. That is why I decided to examine the work of four students in depth. Improvement or no improvement, an examination of students' written work should help clarify the exam results.

Both myself and another grader examined two essay assignments from each student. We also compared the first draft of each assignment to the final draft, to determine growth. There was far less discrepancy in grades between myself and the other grader. This was due to a comprehensive rubric which allocated specific point values to a determined set of criteria agreed upon by myself and the other grader (Appendix I). We fell within ten points of each other every time so I averaged the grades and converted them into percentiles (see Table 6).

Each Student A represents a student who, it was agree upon by the examiners of the pre and post-tests, had demonstrated improvement. Student B represents a student from each class that the graders could not agree upon but whose reading average, according to their Nelson-Denney exams, was no lower than ninth grade. None of the students were ESL students.

An examination of the paper scores shows no improvement in writing skill chronologically; students did not necessarily do better on papers they wrote later in the semester. A pattern does, however, emerge when we compare grades to the type of writing assignment. The grades for both the first draft and final draft of the personal essay assignment were higher than the first draft and final draft grades of the assignment which required analysis of a written text. Using Fry's formula, I evaluated the readability of the texts used by each class. The students in Class X's papers were based on "Easy in the Harness: The Tyranny of Freedom" by Gerry Spence and was placed at a ninth grade readability level. Class Y's texts, "The Achievement of Desire" by Richard Rodriguez and "Learning to Read" by Malcolm X, tested at the tenth and twelfth grade levels, respectively.

In Class X, both students were evaluated by their Nelson-Denney scores as having an eleventh grade reading average. Since the piece their essays were based on placed in the ninth grade, we can assume their difficulty did not arise from their inability to physically read the text. According to my tutoring journal, however, they did have difficulty with the text; I spent no less than two sessions with each student discussing the meaning of the text itself. While the students were able to read the words on the pages, they had a great deal of difficulty extracting meaning from the text. They were so wrapped up in trying to decode the text that they could not find the message of the text as a whole. They could not, in essence, see the forest through the trees.

Not only were the concepts behind the text incredibly difficult for them, the task of writing a critical essay was overwhelming. Since the students had never entered into a critical dialogue with the text, they could not externalize such a dialogue into an essay. Student A who, according to my tutoring journal, was a diligent worker and did no fewer than seven drafts of the paper managed to raise his grade to an 82. Student B, who also worked quite hard on the assignment, producing five drafts, was unable to improve his grade. He simply was unable to synthesize the material and his paper remained mere paraphrasing of the original text.

Since readability is not the issue with Class X, I would venture to argue that the students' difficulty with the assignment arises from a lack of knowledge about the form of the critical essay and the inability to evaluate a text critically. There is, also, a lack of familiarity with the form of the text, a political tract arguing the intricacies of "freedom." While the students may be able to understand the words on the pages, they may not be able to comprehend the meaning of the text because it is so far removed from their experience. All of these factors combined may make writing a critical essay an almost insurmountable challenge for the basic writer.

The students in Class Y had a phenomenal amount of difficulty with their text-based critical essay. Their first problem, clearly, comes from a lack of reading comprehension. The texts they read, by Malcolm X and Richard Rodriguez, placed at the twelfth and tenth grade readability levels. Student A, who read the article by Malcolm X (twelfth grade readability) only had a tenth grade reading level. Student B scored at the bottom of the ninth grade but was asked to read and critically evaluate a tenth grade level text (note that students chose the article to evaluate from a list of texts assigned as class readings). Upon reading the students' first draft essays, it became clear to myself and my fellow grader that the students had no idea what they had read, let alone how to synthesize that information and critically examine it. Their papers are sheer reiteration of the original text at best and garbled nonsense at worst. During tutoring sessions we would spend most of our time deciphering the text at hand and this afforded us little or no time to work on the writing itself.

Students' low grades were also a product of grammatical error. While the grades certainly are higher in the personal essay category, the first draft grades are still strikingly low. I used the personal essay as a control group. This assignment required no references to texts; students were to write about what they

know - their own experiences. Neither the tutoring sessions nor the classroom sessions were dedicated to deciphering text but were, instead, spent on grammar and organizational development. Here in the personal essay we see the best examples of what Bartholomae described as "idiosyncratic grammar." Student B from Class X offers a prime example of this problem in the first draft of his personal essay "The Game":

> As the game was about to start the coach explained to me that I was better than the other player in everything we did. During the game he proved it to me as I embarrassed the other kid out on the field by getting twenty tackles and 1 sack and comparing to his 5 tackles and no sacks, everyone saw who was better, but to me it was not about who was better, it was to prove that just because I did not play for a great team that I was not any good.

During the tutoring sessions I would have Student B read his paper aloud and force him to read what was on the page, rather than allowing him to go from what he thought he wrote. When confronted with his own garbled text he would always go into "Well, what I meant to say..." His difficulty lay in getting that "what I meant" into an acceptable and understandable grammatical construction; he could not translate the text in his head onto the blank page. After five drafts Student B was finally able to transform his roughly outlined ideas into the following:

> As the game was about to start, the coach explained to methat I was better than the other player in everything we did. During the game I proved it to myself. I embarrassed the other kid by getting twenty tackles and one sack compared to his five tackles and no sacks. Everyone saw who was better, but to me it was not about who was better. I worked hard everyday to prove to people that no matter how injured or how much pain you feel, you should never quit.

While this final draft is not error free, it does show marked improvement from the first draft. Student B's ideas are much clearer and his syntax and grammar no longer hinder understanding for the reader. But Student B's improvement bears out Bartholomae's hypothesis that improved usage in one written form may not translate into other written forms - the corrected usage may not actually be internalized, because in later assignments Student B fell back into his idiosyncratic grammar.

The final form of data collected was student surveys (Appendix J). Surveys were handed out during the final tutoring session and students were asked to make comments where they thought appropriate (see Table 7).

(See) TABLE 7: STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Thirty-five percent of the students responded that they viewed themselves as writers but none of them said they wrote in their spare time. And while they all believed that their writing had improved since high school, only 28% of them thought their writing was adequate for the work force. Paradoxically, 78% of them believed their writing adequate for college level work. One student added that "The classes that require writing assignments I average a B" (errors are hers). Another student volunteered "I haven't had any yet (writing assignments) but I think I improved. Student B from Class X, whose work we examined earlier, stated in his survey that "in my other classes the assignments are sufficient enough for my teachers." Either the students are doing remarkably well in their other classes or the classes are not concerning themselves with students' writing skill.

(Back to Top)

CONCLUSION
While my findings agree with Bartholomae's thesis that student error is usually an error in translation from thought to text and that basic writers do not lack the cognitive skills required for forming complex ideas, I feel that the EOP students in this study have much deeper problems. Their problems stem, in part, from illiteracy; they are not reading anywhere near grade-level and are, therefore, unable to interpret texts designed for the freshman of average ability. Shaughnessy and Rose have the right idea about "building scaffolding" and "ordering schemata" but my EOP freshman need to start lower down on the scaffolding than writing errors; they need to go back to basic reading skills. I feel it is impossible to improve writing skills for these students in a curriculum based on critical textual analysis - it is simply way to high up the scaffolding for them. What they do need is intensive language training which centers on reading comprehension, critical thinking skills, and writing skills.

The college cannot expect to bring students from a fifth grade reading comprehension level to a comprehension level adequate for college in fifteen weeks, four or five hours a week. Seventy-five hours of study, not even two full weeks worth of work, is not going to give these students the skills they need to succeed in either college or the work place. If the school chooses to accept students with such low skill levels then they are obligated to provide the services necessary to help that student succeed. Otherwise, we play a cruel joke on students, who have already been done a great disservice by the American educational system, by enticing them with the possibility of a college education but dooming them to failure.

Throughout my experience as the EOP writing tutor I was struck by the anger and resentment my students felt. They became discouraged and began to give up; they felt that their teachers and I "had it in" for them, and that our expectations were unreasonable. Nearly 65% of my students stopped coming to their tutoring sessions and had to be forced into attendance. While it certainly may be possible that some of them just did not like me, their comments, instead, reveal frustration over their academic failure.

One student in particular stopped coming to her tutoring sessions because she thought I was being unfair when I criticized her work; she had always been told she was an exceptional student. Joni (not her real name) had graduated in the ninety-fifth percentile of her class with an 89 average. She wanted to be a doctor and her teachers had encouraged her in this pursuit. The problem, however, was that she would be considered by some as functionally illiterate with a fourth grade reading comprehension level and a 98 reading rate. The average college textbooks, like newspapers and magazines, are designed for at least a sixth grade reading level. How does a student with such low skill levels graduate the top of her class? Is there any wonder why she became so angry and distrustful of her college teachers' evaluations when they revealed her below average achievement? I do not believe that COMP 099 is designed for this level basic writer and it does them no service.

Two years have now passed since these twenty EOP students were freshman and eight of them have been asked to leave the school because of academic failure - 40%. The split is right down the middle, four from each class. Such a failure rate supports my belief that these students are unprepared for college level work. Both Student B from Class X and Student B from Class Y were among those asked to leave. These students are not uneducatable but they do need more help then COMP 099, as it is presently designed, can offer them. Firstly, they need a course to boost their reading comprehension because a writing course based on text evaluation is doomed to failure if the students are struggling to simply comprehend the readings. Once students are to a level where they can understand what they read, they can be instructed in modes of discourse. Certainly I agree that reading and writing go hand in hand for any level student, but is it fair of us to ask them to critically evaluate a text when they do not have the skills to comprehend the text at face value?

POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
My study raised several interesting possibilities for further research. The most striking figure I came upon was a comparison of student reading comprehension levels, as determined by their Nelson-Denney scores and their verbal SAT scores, and their high school averages. How do students who score in the elementary and early secondary grades for reading comprehension, and fail to break 300 on their verbal SAT scores, pass high school with averages in the mid to high eighties? Are they being graded on their academic achievement? If so, is the curriculum "dumbed down" to a level which permits functional illiteracy? Or are the students products of an overcrowded, under-endowed classroom which grades on behavior rather than academics?

I would also be interested in following my twenty EOP students further. Are their skill levels adequate for college level work and what is the nature of the writing they do for other classes? If their writing is adequate, then what exactly are the college's standards - how well prepared for the work force are students from SUNY Cortland? If their work is not adequate, then how well do the EOP students of my study do at SUNY Cortland and beyond?

REFERENCES
Allington, R.L. (1988, Spring) "looking at Special Instructional Programs for At Risk Learners." The Reading Instruction Journal, 31, pp.36-41

Bartholomae, David. (1980, October) "The Study of Error." College Composition and Communication, pp.253-269

Carrell, Patricia., Monroe, Laura B. (1993) "Learning Styles and Composition." The Modern Language Journal, 77, pp.148-162

Colombo, Gary ed. Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing Bedford Books: Boston 1995

Graf, Gerald. Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education W.W. Norton: New York 1992

Harris, Muriel. Teaching One-To-One: The Writing Conference NCTE: Urbana 1986

Kroll, Barry M., Schafer, John C. (1978) "Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition" College Composition and Communication, pp.242-248

Rose, Mike. (1983, February) "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal" College English, 45, pp.109-128

Shaughnessy, Mina P. Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing Oxford University Press: New York 1977

State University of New York at Cortland Catalog: 1995 Cortland, New York: 1995

(Back to Top)