A CASE STUDY OF THE READING/ WRITING MODELS OF A BASIC WRITING STUDENT

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Calvin, whose essays contained so many commas that I accused him of inserting them at random, blurted indignantly the following rule: "Commas go after every four inches of writing, more or less"—something he credited to a past English teacher. After regaining my composure, I rechecked his essays: He had indeed placed commas at four-inch intervals, except where doing so would have meant bisecting a word. I prefer to think that Calvin had somehow misunderstood his teacher. However, the fact remains that Calvin had conscientiously followed what he trusted was his teacher's advice on comma placement while I had instinctively prejudged him as being lax.

I offer this example in order to frame my suspicions about how we, as teachers of literacy, are too ready to assume that what we teach is what students learn. Even more significant may be our assumption that what we teach is what students need to learn and that students who don't learn it have neither the motivation nor the capacity to become literate.

The findings of the present case study suggest that we should reexamine the way we presently teach reading and writing and that because students have been determined by the testing instruments a college uses to be unskilled readers/writers does not mean that they should also be considered static learners, inherently

resistant to change or maturation in language use, and "knowing nothing" or "starting from scratch." Instead, this case study suggests that students' reading/writing models can be difficult for classroom teachers to detect, without close, consistent observation and that teachers, despite their good intentions, can remain blind to the real needs of their students.

Mina Shaughnessy considered the greatest barrier to our work with basic writers to be our "ignorance of them and the very subject we have contracted to teach" (4). Stephen Dunning accused us of much the same when he criticized the profession: "I can think of two reasons why English teachers have failed to meet the common expectations for literacy . . . . We didn't try, very hard, and we didn't know how, very well" (13). More recently, some noteworthy work done by Glynda Hull and Elaine Lees has addressed related concerns from different perspectives, again suggesting that things are not so simple as has been commonly assumed.[1]

THE ORIGINAL STUDY: AN OVERVIEW

The present case study was drawn from a broader naturalistic study that revealed the reading/writing models of four basic writers, their assumptions and attitudes, and the instruction that may have shaped those models.[2] I have validated the findings of the original study by casting students' self-assessments of their literacy performance against their revealed assumptions/attitudes and my eyewitness observations of their performance. Although I found certain similarities across the four writers, it would not be reasonable to generalize the findings to all basic writers or to assume that they would employ the same reading/writing models. Even so, I found one student who was typical of many basic writers.

Guided by ethnographic techniques specified by Stephen Wilson (259) and Egon G. Guba,[3] I designed this study to allow me to act as teacher, participant, and observer—simultaneously assigning tasks, interacting with students, and noting how students responded. The role of the researcher as teacher, as well as participant/observer, has certain recognized strengths, given the educational environment of the study (Perl 53). For this study, I decided that the presence of an observer (other than the teacher) could strain the candid, collaborative teacher-student relationship on which success pivots. Stephen North, commenting on the prob-

lems that outside researchers entering the school setting present, observes that "except for teachers, adults simply don't hang around in instructional settings very often" (290). Preferring to keep the degree of disturbance as low as possible, I adopted what Wilson called an attitude of "disciplined subjectivity" in noting students' responses (260), cautiously attempting to represent students' perspectives as authentically as I could. Thus, I fixed my sights on describing, not proving—blocking the "teacher" in me from trying to succeed in a particular pedagogy and the "researcher" in me from trying to prove a favorite bias.

The resultant trust that developed between student and teacher in such an atmosphere was responsible, in large measure, for overcoming the slight initial disturbance posed by audiotaping and videotaping procedures. Any remaining anxiety was diffused by my established reputation on campus as one who routinely videotaped students giving class speeches or other presentations. Therefore, my methods appeared less obtrusive to students, providing me a viable means of capturing some nuances of students' outward reading/writing processes for repeated analysis later in the study.

I used office conferences as well as the classroom to collect data, relying on open-ended data-gathering techniques which required students to read and write, and to think aloud, or comment about themselves as I observed. Although students had a good deal of say in choosing tasks to work on—including assignments from other courses—all students were required to keep journals for everything they read and were required to work within the academic parameters of an on-going developmental literacy course in the College. The mass of data which accumulated over the semester provided a rich cross-section of work to study—not just a few short, focal activities conducted in a special laboratory set aside to conduct the research.[4] Furthermore, I was subject to none of the artificial time constraints evident in similar research done by Janet Emig (30-31) or Mike Rose (390).

THE PRESENT STUDY: DOTTIE

In this case study, I will focus on some of the educational/psychological contexts that influenced the tacit reading/writing model of one student, Dottie, as revealed during one semester at a public, two-year college in southern New Jersey.

Dottie is a 19-year-old high school graduate who attends college part-time while she supports herself as a waitress. She had moved from school to school most of her life and had a long history of remediation focused on literacy skills development. She had done poorly on the reading comprehension, sentence skills, and writing sample components of the New Jersey Basic Skills Test, and was, therefore, required to take remedial work in college. Dottie had registered for my developmental writing course. From the first days of class she showed signs of friendliness, the promise of building a good rapport, and a willingness to be open—or at least talkative—about herself during office conferences. She was also taking an English composition course and a psychology course that semester which promised to be helpful in getting a broader view of her performance outside the developmental writing course.

The data I gathered from Dottie came from classroom work, homework, journals, and office conferences. Table 1 lists key materials I selected from a much larger portfolio of her semester's work. I gathered Dottie's education history, conducted protocol and post-hoc sessions, watched Dottie interact with her peers, and interacted with Dottie in conference.[5] As I used open-ended literacy tasks, following the research techniques of Janet Emig (29-31) and Sharon Pianko (7-9), data began to mass, cluster and point direction: composing, revision, cohesion, and structure.[6] I also gathered all the writing Dottie did in her psychology course and her English composition course, even though most insights about work in those courses came from written products reviewed in post-hoc sessions. Almost immediately, I was surprised by the amount of teacherly advice Dottie had retained over her years of education; she appeared to have listened to her teachers.

My first important discovery, what I have come to refer to loosely as Dottie's "teacher-transmitted maxims," demonstrates the stress she works under: As carefully as Dottie tries to follow her teachers' advice, she shows little improvement in reading or writing. The reading/writing model that emerged when I compared my observations of Dottie's performance to her education history and to statements she makes about herself revealed some startling things, dramatizing for us how our criticism or advice can short circuit our students' attempts to experiment with new conventions, even when we have the best of intentions. Paradoxically, what Dottie achieves so well is really quite poor reading/writing.

Table 1
Material Selected from Dottie's Portfolio

ATTITUDE-GATHERING DEVICES
- Hartwell and Bentley Attitude Survey (*Open* 32)
- Daly and Miller Writing Apprehension Measure (242-49)
- Free writing:
  1) What is an essay, paragraph, sentence? (Hartwell 5)
  2) Why and how do people read and write? (Hartwell 5)

JOURNAL ENTRIES ON BOOKS READ
- *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Cain, James M.
- *The 39 Steps*, Buchan, John
- *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl, Viktor E.
- *Death be not Proud*, Gunther, John
- *Love*, Buscaglia, Leo

ARTICLES READ
- "Six Steps to Put People at Their Ease"
- "Not too Much Pepper, Thank You"
- "Fresh Isn't Always Best"
- "Guard Dogs"

ESSAYS/PAPERS
- "Death"
- "The Reason I'm in School"

SENTENCE COMBINING EXERCISES
- Deluxe Pizza (Daiker, Donald A., et al. 17-18)

TESTS
- New Jersey Basic Skills College Placement Test
- Degrees of Reading Power ("College Board")
- Lamm Cloze (148)

WRITING DONE IN OTHER COURSES
- Psychology: "Motivation and Emotion"
- English Composition:
  - "Why Walter Mitty Daydreams"
  - "Qualities of Being a Mother"
  - "How to Live a Happy Life"

MAXIMS

As the semester continued, I discovered that Dottie has a large and troublesome store of maxims that control her reading and writing performance, but one thing that runs through all of them is her fear of collaborating with her peers—she calls collaboration "cheating" or "copying." In small-group classroom discussions she was guarded, reserved, and distanced, fearing ridicule for saying "something stupid." In workshop writing sessions, she was careful not to consult with classmates nor copy their ideas. In both situations, she denied herself the psychic comfort of feeling part of any group—something she laments having missed, given her history of school transfers. More important, she denied herself the benefits of learning with and from others and testing her ideas on her peers.

For reading, she holds three maxims which significantly impede her growth. First, she thinks that "real reading is done in school" under classroom conditions and does not think reading at home for pleasure is "real reading." When she was a child, she read comic books; and until a few years ago she used to read women's magazines. But she especially liked to read Steinbeck on her own because she liked "sharing the writer's experiences and discovering what the writer knows." However, she has now stopped any personal choice reading in order to "spend more time on school reading." Second, she thinks that "giving the correct answer to the teacher's questions on what you have read proves that you've done your work." Similar statements offered in other sessions reveal Dottie as someone who sees reading as test material from which she must gather data and prepare herself, anticipating the questions her teacher will ask, and which in order to answer correctly, she must remember lots of details. Certainly, this is not an uncommon "school reading" orientation. Third, Dottie often reminds herself to "read slower; don't put in words that are not in the book." She remembers only one teacher ever telling her to read faster—a teacher whose kindly manner impressed her greatly and to whom she felt very close. Most times, however, I discovered her reading word by word. More important, she believes that there is a right way to read which teachers know all about, but that sometimes she can not be sure of which way—fast or slow—a teacher will expect her to read because she has discovered that teachers can contradict each other. Clearly, each of these

maxims places great importance on procedures, not content or comprehension, and give over a lot of control to teachers.

Similarly, Dottie's maxims for writing underscore procedures and teacher control more than content. First, Dottie thinks that every essay must have an introductory paragraph with a thesis breaking the discussion into three body paragraphs; it must also have a concluding paragraph that restates the thesis; and the essay must be five paragraphs long. Apparently, what Dottie really learned is that all thought breaks into thirds and that she must repeat things after she's already presented them. Indeed, her papers show such constraints. Below are three samples of introductory paragraphs, as well as the patterns she most commonly used to structure the discussion of her thesis, paragraph by paragraph, within the body of three of her essays.

> 1) I find that there are many qualities to being a mother, but I feel the three most important qualities are patients, caring, and being able to listen and give advice to your children.
>
> 2) There are three reasons why Walter Mitty, in James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," daydreams. These reasons are the attitude of his wife, the attitude other people show toward him, and his dull and boring world.
>
> 3) There are three things that are necessary to live a happy life. The things necessary for a happy life are a decent job, companionship, and time to myself.

Clearly, Dottie follows a formula for her theses, one that assumes that discussions are obligatorily sectioned into thirds and are satisfactorily exhausted in three paragraphs. Likewise, below, Dottie applies transitions in formulaic fashion to introduce segments of a discussion, suggesting her trust that such transitions establish coherence, while repeated key words—the same textual features she relied on to reconstruct the line of an argument in several other tasks—fail to inform her writing.

1) One reason . . . ;
   Another reason . . . ;
   Finally . . . .

2) Most important . . . ;
   Next . . . ;
   The final . . . .

3) Most important . . . ;
Next . . . ;
The last . . . .

More harmful, however, is her willingness to dismiss her spontaneous urge to chunk ideas into smaller units—something I discovered while tracing her thoughts in several think aloud writing tasks. Dottie had previously claimed that it was necessary to paragraph whenever starting discussion of a new subject or writing about something different. In one protocol when Dottie started writing a paper about her reasons for being in school, she produced an introductory paragraph followed by two paragraphs of reasons why she liked school. Then, she wanted to follow them with several paragraphs—each detailing a different course she was taking and her reasons for taking it. Instead of yielding to her urge to paragraph with each course, she fused three course discussions into one without the benefit of a common thread of thought or smooth transition. The treatment of each course was lean, even while Dottie worried that she had written too much—betraying what I, at first, thought was her significant struggle between length and elaboration. As she explained the dilemma, she only had room enough in this essay for two more paragraphs—one discussing all her courses and one for a conclusion. The one very long paragraph she had forced the course discussions into effectively devalued whatever emphases she first thought smaller units would lend to her ideas.

In another essay I was puzzled over why she was not satisfied with her paragraphing. She had become obsessed with the need to compress her seven paragraphs into five, merging paragraphs without apparent sense. She defended herself with claims that she saw noticeable similarity in content—a similarity I found difficult to trace. Later, however, my questioning revealed that she had not followed her own impulses, but that her true motive for forcing seven paragraphs into five was due to her English composition teacher's maxim: "Essays are composed of five paragraphs: introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion that restates the thesis."

Aside from the impact of her teacher's instruction, at those times when Dottie allowed herself to paragraph according to impulse, although her paragraphs were not well developed and full of insightful elaboration, they showed she had some stamina for

complex thought. However, when she followed her teacher's five-paragraph dictate and mechanically merged paragraphs, she traded the potential for development in each paragraph for conformity to an artificial structure. From a broader perspective, she seems to have done herself a disservice: The outside structure she was forced to impose limited her access to the structure she had generated from personal insight, not only robbing her of the command and resultant self-satisfaction inherent in pursuing one's hunches, but also robbing her of the energy needed to explore them. In effect, then, following her teacher's dictate detached her from the intimate avenues only she could discover and encouraged her, instead, to behave as though her paragraphs were, indeed, no more than what she had once characterized them as—"a bunch of words."

Second, Dottie has what she considered a "teacher-instilled" sanction against repetition, expressed as an exaggerated fear of repeating words too often, causing her to recast sentences just to avoid repetition. Too often, the result was an unfortunate deletion of important semantic ties and key words. Her written responses to assigned reading were full of detail. However, even when she tried to make an important point, the details in her writing were juxtaposed in sentences lacking connection. Reactions to the content of the text appeared as short statements of opinion which failed to show her true understanding of the text:

> The articles was talking about (different) chemicals in different food, and how people are very scared about eating these (foods). This (article) (it) author is trying to tell people that since we started using (these chemicals) all of them we are living longer.

However, she would be able to express herself aloud quite clearly during my office conferences where we talked about the readings. When I asked Dottie to comment on the changes she had made between a finished draft she turned in and a rough draft I had not seen, she revealed the deletions (within parentheses above) that she had made. Dottie said that one occurance of *different* had to be cut, so she arbitrarily chose the one before *chemicals*. However, she did not recognize that doing so obscured the article's point that certain chemicals in combination cause problems in humans. The striking of *foods* and *these chemicals* causes am-

biguity for the reader. However, the striking of *article* for *it* would have been a good choice, had Dottie not replaced *it* with *author*. She revealed that she didn't want to use *it* because a teacher had once told her she was using *it* too much. The resulting two-sentence sequence is poorly connected and actually misleads the reader by a shift in subject focus. Other responses to reading showed that Dottie would state a thesis and list propositions and subpoints, but would fail to show connection between each of the propositions, except by using enumeration, as seen previously. Even if her paragraphs clustered to make sense at the local level, she failed to establish coherence at the global level.

Compounding this is another maxim: "Don't write run-ons; be more careful about punctuation; use more periods." This combined advice caused her to persist in producing disconnected writing; but more important, it caused her to delete important relationships that she actually saw between ideas, making her appear less articulate than she is. Curiously, Dottie maintains obvious repetitions in the three introductory paragraph samples previously presented. Here, when she is controlled by a rigid formulaic model for introductions, its dictates clearly override any sanctions against repetition in other situations.

Third, in her English composition class, her teacher taught her not to use parentheses in formal writing. However, neither I nor her psychology teacher placed such a restriction on her. Finding herself caught in the middle, she continued to use parentheses in my class and in her psychology class but not in her composition class. Not surprisingly then, Dottie had reconciled the contradictions by resorting to playing teacher-pleasing games, learning that writing means discovering what teachers want and then giving it to them, no matter what the pedagogical contradictions.

Dottie revealed a final writing maxim when recounting how her composition teacher always criticizes her writing: "Shorter sentences produce fewer errors." This maxim markedly constrained her tendency to produce right-branched structures, when right-branched structures actually would have brought her steps closer to writing maturity. Lester Faigley reports that student writing shows an overwhelming 70% of sentences branched to the left (free modifiers placed before the main clause) while the sentences of professional writers branch mostly to the right for ease of reading (197-206). Her English Composition papers bore unexpected evidence of advice her teacher had given her to avoid sentence

structure errors by shortening sentences. He took one long, poorly punctuated structure whose ideas Dottie has, at least, tried to connect, and he cut it into three short, correctly-punctuated sentences, but whose ideas he had, notably, failed to connect:

Dottie's original
One reason is that she was divorced when I was about twelve years old, so being a single parent made it much harder to take care of me, so she would have to work overtime after work and sometimes Saturday.

Teacher's revision
One reason is that she was divorced when I was about twelve years old. Being a single parent made it much harder to take care of me. She would have to work overtime after work and sometimes Saturday.

Throughout the semester, her teacher broke her structures into shorter sentences, whether or not they were poorly formed, claiming that such sentences would make her writing clearer. Rather than show Dottie how to connect her ideas better, her teacher simply mouthed the maxim that short sentences generate fewer errors.

Dottie, however, was beginning to experiment on her own in my class, generating parenthetical afterthoughts, branching her sentences to the right:

I think that would drive me crazy, having to be careful and stay in bed.

Dotties's performance is best seen in the following passage. Dottie writes:

Having both sound and picture on was like heaven, because everything seemed to come together. For example, when Bill was knocking on his older daughter's door, you know its her door because you see her, if you didn't have the picture, you wouldn't have known who's door he was knocking on.

Dottie first wanted to enclose *you know its her door because you see her* in parentheses, but didn't out of fear of breaking her teacher's rule against using parentheses. When her teacher returned the paper to Dottie, the teacher had called the juncture between

because you see her and *if you didn't have the picture* a run-together sentence fault. Although following her teacher's corrections would make a readable sentence, that sentence would not reflect the relationship of information that Dottie sensed would be handled by parentheses—a rhetorical consideration for Dottie, and a good one. Therefore, while Dottie tried to respect her teacher's ban, she was penalized because she produced an unconventional string. More important, however, is that her teacher proceeded to criticize Dottie's writing without bothering to discover the rhetorical decisions that led to Dottie's final product, nor the message Dottie intended. Dottie is maturing as a writer, but she is still forced into choosing correctness and security over growth in writing because of the very constraints that her teacher placed on her. Ironically, in some of her papers, her efforts to avoid errors hidden in long sentences actually caused her to produce fragments, and, in turn, more criticism from her teacher.

Overall, then, Dottie is driven to doing "things the right way," especially to be perceived by her teacher as "doing things the right way" as to avoid criticism. In the process she only exacerbates her lack of self-confidence by thinking she must continue to distrust herself. Her writing is constrained by maxims that place her focus on surface features, at the word and sentence level. But more important, she is controlled by the need to be right more than the need to expand and exhaust her ideas, or to experiment—something that Donald Murray reported in his own research subjects.[7]

DOTTIE'S MODEL FOR READING

For Dottie, doing "school reading" tasks triggers old fears of giving the wrong answer, fears of appearing "stupid," and fears of teacher criticism; it conjures little of that excitement she previously told me she got when she used to read Steinbeck on her own. Instead, consistent with maxims reported earlier, she always expects to be tested on what she reads and she reveals a process for dealing with her expectations. First, she checks for comprehension questions so that she can find the answers while she's reading, instead of hypothesizing her way through the argument of the text. If there are no questions, she checks the first paragraph for a thesis, and looks for familiar transitions at the start of each paragraph to get a sense of the text. Transitions of enumeration, boldface

headings, and repetition of key words all serve to clue her to major segments of the text.

Generally, she reads slowly (except for books she likes), reading for details and meaning (as she claims), using context to decipher new vocabulary. She is quickly aware of when she has misread a passage. And although she misreads or omits some words, she does not misread punctuation and rarely loses the meaning within the sentence. However, her attention to details of argument will often deny her a global view of the text. At such times, if the text is not marked by those familiar transitions mentioned above, she gets lost, unable to grasp even major points.

In several reading protocols, when Dottie was given an article that lacked a rigid, obvious structure, she had trouble following the line of argument. The articles had many short paragraphs breaking the discussion into many sub-units, rather than into a few long paragraphs, each corresponding to and headed by a transition of enumeration. She found it difficult to separate important from minor points. At times, she could recognize word repetition across paragraphs, but could not reconcile several discussions going on at the same time across the entire article.

She rarely reads at home anymore, though she says she likes to because she can set her own pace, and, therefore, feels no stress. When she does read at home, she reports that she reads word by word and for the sole purpose of learning something—as in doing homework or preparing for tests.

DOTTIE'S MODEL FOR WRITING

Before she writes, Dottie wants to be told exactly what to do, to have her writing topic chosen for her, and to be reassured that she is doing things right. Instead of looking inward for focus, she expects her teacher to get her started.

She described writing as: "Putting down on paper something that comes into your mind, but not always the first thing you think of"—revealing some degree of self monitoring in the initial stages of writing. She follows no written outline, although she monitors the suitability of information against the thesis as she goes along, rereading her paper often; she does not think out her paper first, then write. She also can exclude irrelevancies while writing. Whenever she discovers new ideas mid-way in the writing that have potential to change the direction of her text, she examines

but generally rejects them. Sometimes, however, she gets new insights, and gives herself permission to sway from the thesis to test out what she really wants to write. Mostly, however, she gets bogged down with details at the expense of exploring different facets of her thoughts.

When Dottie got back a psychology paper she wrote on the "psychological aspects of emotion and motivation," her teacher criticized her for not stressing the psychological side of the situation enough and for being too general without offering enough of her opinion. In another assignment, her teacher asked her to write a response to an article. Dottie, however, discovered that she didn't agree with the sentiment of the assigned article but wasn't sure she had the liberty to disagree with the text—especially, since it was something her teacher had assigned and, as she assumed, obviously wanted her to learn. Although she was quite articulate when talking to me about the assigned reading, her personal conflict seemed to constrain her written commentary. She produced a paper that stuck to facts, hiding her personal response and any deep explanation of the text that required her constructing a personal point of view. Through private discussion with her, I discovered that Dottie was afraid of her teacher's criticism of her work; her experience at writing for her psychology teacher made her afraid to go deeper in explanation, where she indeed could have. Dottie never gave herself the chance to investigate the real demands her teacher was placing on her.

The difficulty she has in connecting between propositions and sifting through a mass of details to find the more important points obviously causes her trouble in her psychology papers as well. Although she struggles, she fails to underscore the importance of certain statements and fails to follow through with her ideas, especially if her ideas disagree with those of the text. Sometimes, in a pinch, she copies a line straight from a book without having digested it first. However, when she does not copy, and in cases where she explains her ideas aloud to me, she often shows that she understands the material but has failed to make a personal response to it. What personal response she does offer in her psychology papers, she curtails greatly. Interestingly, although she is unwilling to collaborate with her peers or copy their thinking, she thinks little of copying from a text. And her failure to make a personal response to her reading is borne out in her reading-response journals as well. What I have seen of Dottie's behavior

and thinking convinces me that she is hesitant to commit herself, afraid of being wrong.

Even though her papers are already long, she lengthens them still, misinterpreting her teacher's request for "elaboration" as "lengthening." She adds to her ending, but rarely adds substance, drawing from stock opinions, rather than exploring details of an issue to discover a more complex personal response. For instance, she complained about how tough it was to write conclusions even though she has a standard formula she uses that simply allows her to repeat the thesis. The evidence from her protocols and post-hoc interviews suggest her problem is exacerbated by her distance from the text. She has yet to interact in earnest with the thought content of the text.

Her paragraphing is worth a brief look. She characterizes the paragraph as "a bunch of words put together to form one idea." This seems to do her an injustice. Although her paragraphs may not show a topic sentence, are not well-developed, and lack insightful elaboration, they clearly show her working at a higher level than what her statement suggests. When she writes her first draft, she fights her natural impulse to paragraph. In revision, she forces everything into five paragraphs. Had she responded to impulse, as I observed her in protocol sessions, she would have chunked ideas in sequence, presenting generalities followed by supporting specifics for the benefit of her reader—a sensitivity to audience needs. The forced five-paragraph model she follows instead actually weakens her because she never brings herself to the threshold of decision-making for alternative paragraphing that responds to a variety of contexts.

Also, her concluding paragraph develops in the revision stage, which suggests that she is trying to assess the content of the essay so that she can insert an appropriate ending. Aside from paragraphing, her revision step shows her inserting missing words, commas and periods, condensing sentences, and checking for spelling. Although she sometimes restructures sentences in the paragraph, she generally restructures them where she first placed them in the paragraph—no rearrangement. Mostly, though, her revision stage is not characterized by a revision of thought.

Her English teachers' advice on structure and punctuation seems to have caused her to shorten sentences rather than search for stronger structures to carry and arrange her thought. Although she naturally writes sentences by attaching afterthoughts to the

right, she punctuates them incorrectly, producing comma splices, which in turn reduce her grade. She handles the problem by shortening her sentences. Her fear of testing newly-learned punctuation or sentence structures stems from a long history of criticism.

READING/WRITING CONNECTIONS

Let me now underscore some connections between aspects of her reading and writing models. I think what at first may have been admirable in Dottie's reading behavior (previewing passage-end discussion questions before reading) has actually backfired for her. The circumstances around such behavior have created a dependency in Dottie that actually thwarts her ability to generate her own ideas about text. For instance, once she had an elementary school teacher who caught her sneaking the classroom reading text home. Dottie wanted to practice the next day's reading lesson in order to save herself the embarrassment of answering questions wrong. Her teacher explained to Dottie that she wanted her to feel the surprise of the stories they read in class at the same time that everyone else in class would. However, after Dottie was caught and chastised, she continued to sneak the book home because she knew she would be criticized anyway if she answered her teacher's questions wrong.

Although her teacher's prohibition was misguided, it was the emotional climate surrounding the situation, as well as Dottie's resolve to succeed, that actually calcified a useful and good prereading technique into an obligatory and enslaving one. Dottie had lost perspective, drawn to cling tightly to her successful reading method because it was the only one she knew she could depend on to work—in spite of her teacher's advice. Although her prereading technique created a purpose for reading, Dottie's sole dependence on such questions kept her from engaging in other important cognitive activities with the text—activities that her teachers did not invite either.

Many of her teachers' testing practices, in a number of schools, forced Dottie to look for detail instead of global meaning and caused Dottie to suffer in the long run when she generalized this behavior to her writing. Not really engaging actively with the text, just answering questions generated by someone else, had discouraged Dottie from hypothesizing for herself the content of the reading. But more important, I think she was denied the insights that come

from personal reflection and discussion centered on exploring the consequences of the text's thesis and subpoints. Her writing, therefore, bears the effects of such deficiencies. Dottie had a tough time finding focus for her writing and, without prompting from a teacher, she often failed to persevere with the discussion of a thought in her papers, relying on ideas borrowed from a book or using stock responses to give her papers a look of completed thought.

Dottie's almost exclusive focus on details in the text blinds her to distinctions between important and less important information. Her reading response journal entries seemed geared to help her pass tests full of questions about isolated minor details, even though in my class I never give tests nor focus on details in discussion. Her journal entries focused on isolated details, missing a comprehension based on connecting information and generating thoughtful response to the text. In her formal writing, as well, she is weak in generating, connecting, and significantly extending ideas. However, she can present facts, and whether she follows her teacher's five-paragraph model or her own impulsive paragraphing, she presents information in discrete but often unrelated units.

The expectations and the subtle influence of answering publisher-prepared reading comprehension questions have also taught Dottie to work hard to avoid being wrong in her writing, such questioning procedures in reading encouraging a narrow right/wrong view of responses, even in personal response situations.

Finally, even though she admits that noting repeated key words in a text helps her comprehend what she reads, she incessantly ferrets out word repetition in her own writing—her fear of being considered repetitious seemingly overruled by her fear of being misunderstood.

To conclude then, Dottie is in many ways typical of "basic skills writers" I have seen in my classes. Her attitudes and performance give rise to three issues of particular importance. First, Dottie is in a double-bind: The more she tries to learn, the less she learns. Second, teacher behaviors which are well-meant, sincerely trying to help, don't help. In fact, they may even encourage her to continue to access dysfunctional behaviors (for example, although my course is structured to encourage collaborative work, she continues to request assigned topics—a request I deny her—and she con-

tinually looks at me when she should be talking to members of her discussion group). Last, her problem is not a matter—or at least not just a matter—of "acquiring skills" but rather a matter, for the most part, of accessing skills she already has. One might, of course, begin to list "skills" that Dottie might acquire: Her syntax suggests she is ready to learn the use of the colon. But Dottie has, in essence, all the skills and capabilities she needs in order to work toward academic success; unfortunately, she sees academic tasks in ways that don't allow her to access those skills and capabilities. I think the real problem is metacognitive, not cognitive, and an attempt to focus on skills acquisition—to teach the colon, for example—would paradoxically enforce the negative metacognitive models of how one does school tasks that Dottie has already internalized.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Dottie's case shows us that we may be paying too much attention to the wrong things. We should reconsider how we "teach" reading comprehension. In the past, we have relied too much on reading drills, stock questions, and standardized tests instead of letting students read the books they want, developing naturally the domain knowledge necessary for comprehension and higher-order reasoning. When I allow my basic skills students to do a lot of reading in their field of choice, I find that they tacitly internalize the discourse conventions of the field and that advanced reading (and thinking) within the field becomes easier for them. There is no need for me to motivate them to read. My job is to introduce them to field-related reading that addresses issues in their field through a different frame or discipline. The unfamiliar discourse conventions of the new field are tolerable because students can continue to draw a good deal of information from domain knowledge where experience has placed them in control. Although they may struggle with the new conventions of thought, they feel secure enough not to resist exploring how the new field informs issues in the old. Eventually, they internalize some of the new discourse conventions, giving evidence of such in both speaking and writing, adding to their repertoire of skills accessed for comprehension and higher-order reasoning.

Unfortunately, Dottie was denied this chance for developing critical thought, even though at several junctures she revealed her

reading interests to past teachers whose own agenda for teaching reading/writing blocked them from giving Dottie the help she really needed. Discouraged, she amputates school literacy from real world literacy and concedes to the authority of teachers. She keeps her distance, waiting for the text, or teacher, to tell her the important things to say and think—failing to explore her own avenues of thought and point of view triggered by the text. She engages in little of the inferencing, analysis, and synthesis that grow out of topic knowledge or deep familiarity with a discipline—what Nancy Stein calls "knowledge of specific domain" (43). Placing Dottie in a "critical thinking skills" course (a popular solution for some literacy teachers these days) would only serve to perpetuate her problems.

At this stage of our pedagogy, we need to train ourselves to assess literacy tasks in other ways than to test decoding and other such low-level activities, thereby, balancing the perspective of reading and writing we transmit to students in the future. By doing so we may help to reduce the negative effects of the right/wrong view that our students' past teachers may have inadvertently transmitted. If we recognize, first, that literacy skills develop at an uneven pace, then we should be more patient with a student's tenuous hold of skills still under development, watching them try to comprehend, create, and convey meaning in any text. If we help them discover the writing conventions that will do justice to their intended thought, then they will see better the need for punctuation conventions. In fact, while we've been busy all through high school teaching punctuation conventions, students have been learning, "punctuation is very difficult, so always keep your sentences short."

Dottie, who I think is a typical product of traditional literacy training in our schools, shows us that we will only intensify our students' suspicions about the uselessness of reading/writing in the real world if we continue as we have; that we will sabotage attempts to show writing as thoughtful work—something someone has worked on for a long time in order to communicate to one's audience—and will prove that writing is strictly an academic exercise. She shows us that good techniques or formulaic ways of approaching text backfire when they are allowed to override the reasoning mechanisms of the students themselves in favor of direct "teaching" of the teacher's particular agenda. Teachers' preconceptions for the outcomes of a literacy task often get in the way of

learning. But Dottie also reminds us that the situational/psychological climate remains a primary influence, perhaps even more lasting in terms of results than we have previously thought.

We should downplay our role as examiners and substitute too much paper marking with a focus on discovering and preserving our students' sense of important thought. Throughout conference sessions, peer review, or collaboration, our focus should be on strengths to be developed rather than counting errors to be corrected.

If we have learned anything from Dottie, it is that we can not assume remedial students are not driven by the same wish to learn that we are. Neither should we assume that such students have no personal purpose for reading or are unmotivated. Certainly, we feel that Dottie might have learned to express more of her personal tastes academically, and learned to take more control of her own education, had she been permitted to view the few reading choices she did make with more sensitivity from her teachers or even as legitimate school work. We should do everything possible, in spite of curricula cluttered with requirements and recent cries from some of us in the cultural literacy camps, to give students a wide selection of reading from which to choose. A good deal of reading should follow students' interests and should reflect subjects they would normally choose for themselves.

Finally, Dotie reminds us that we should, by no means, give students cause to distrust our motives. We should downplay any unnecessary, unreasonable or interfering conformity to classroom literacy activities that threaten to convey to students that reading and writing are primarily testing situations, not experimental situations in which they can explore thoughts or writing conventions they have recently noticed in the texts they've been reading. Dottie's school experiences should encourage us to look deeper at the intents and strategies of students as they wrestle with the writing tasks before them. We should urge them to evaluate the rhetorical problems they create for themselves as they write, letting them see that grappling with such problems is crucial for writing development.

We have been too quick to assume we know what motivates our students even though, when we are pressed to explain, we must admit that we have no satisfactory explanation of how our students become literate. Also we have been too quick to assume that what we do to our students is what really matters. Instead,

it may be that the intentions students impute to what we do matters more than what we actually do. In essence, we need to reexamine our cherished biases about literacy as well as our sentimental view of our role in students' development.

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Notes

[1]See Glynda Hull. "The Editing Process in Writing: A Performance Study of More Skilled and Less Skilled College Writers." *Research in the Teaching of English*, 21 (1987): 8-29.

[2]Gene LoPresti. *Four Basic Skills Students: A Naturalistic Study of the Reading/Writing Models They Bring to College*. Diss. Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1987. This study describes how complex variables interact to create highly individual and unpredictable models of reading and writing that tacitly control poor reader/writers. It considers three questions: Precisely how do poor reader/writers read and write poorly?; do basic reader/writers display consistent reading/writing processes?; and are weak reader/writers governed by well-intentioned maxims that actually stifle their writing?

[3]See Egon G. Guba. "Naturalistic and Conventional Inquiry." Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Boston, 1980.

[4]Students were asked to read and compose in front of the researcher, in class and in conference sessions, while being audiotaped and videotaped. Students were asked to externalize their thoughts while they read and wrote aloud and after they had read and written silently. Other sessions surveyed perceptions/memories about reading and writing, using open-ended interview techniques. The study revealed facets of students' reading/writing models as well as the assumptions, attitudes, and past instruction that encouraged them. The findings were validated by considering students' articulated beliefs about, and assessments of, past/present literacy performance against their observed performance. For a further discussion of procedures and a description of specific reading/writing tasks I found to be useful, see LoPresti, Gene. *Four Basic Skills Students: A Naturalistic Study of the Reading/Writing Models They Bring to College*, (12-41).

[5]On the usefulness of think-aloud protocols and post-hoc interviews, see Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "The Pregnant Pause: An Inquiry into the Nature of Planning."

[6]For research techniques used, see Janet Emig, *The Writing Process of Twelfth Graders*, and Sharon Pianko, "A Description of the Composing Process of College Freshmen Writers." For the focus I set on each cluster of data, see Donald H. Graves, "Break the Welfare Cycle: Let Writers Choose Their Topics,"

for composing; Marlene Scardamalia and Carl Bereiter, "The Development of Evaluative, Diagnostic, and Remedial Capabilities in Children's Composing," for revision; Michael A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English* and Ann Matsuhashi, "Pausing and Planning: The Tempo of Written Discourse Production," for cohesion; and Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem" and "A Process Model of Composition" for structure.

[7]See Donald M. Murray. "How the Text Instructs: Writing Teachers Writing." Paper presented at the Third Miami University Conference on the Teaching of Writing. Oxford, OH, 1988.

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