*Teaching Developmental Writing: Background readings*

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*Notes*

The first section of the book deals with teachers’ perspectives on basic writing. Mina Shaughnessy presents these 4 questions: What are the signs of growth in writing among adults whose development as writers has been delayed by inferior preparation but who are then exposed to intensive instruction in writing? What subskills of writing, heretofore absorbed by students over time in a variety of situations, can be effectively developed through direct and systematic instruction at the freshman level? What skills have we failed to take note of in our analysis of academic tasks? What goes on and what ought to go on in the composition classroom?

This last question, although the simplest in many ways, was the most interesting. The classroom is a very important place: I like how she comments that teaching writing may be more like coaching football than teaching literature or history or biology.

Mike Rose argues that remediation is a puzzle consisting of “interlocking pieces” which scholars cannot see all at once because “our disciplinary and methodological training and public policy toolkit work against a comprehensive view of the problem.” Rose envisions a democratic philosophy that realizes the promise of a second-chance society. This core value is a guiding principle when I think of education in general.

The second section looks at students’ perspectives of basic writing. The authors cover their own personal experiences teaching basic writing and there is a focus on class discussion of difficult subjects and some of the inequalities in education.

The next section deals with processes of writing and research. I liked the chapter on utilizing a Martin Luther King Jr. speech. I use his American Dream speech for rhetorical analysis in Engl1010, so this was another interesting approach that could be applied to basic writing.

I really enjoyed Jonikka Charlton’s piece. Students were part of a writing studies program (essentially writing about writing). For me it demonstrated that even basic writing students can benefit from exposure to the theory and practice of composition.

The next section was about the intersection of reading, writing, and critical thinking. The chapter on labeling, e.g., “remedial” emphasized how this can lead to low expectations for achievement and a basic skills curriculum with the assumption of low cognitive capabilities from students. The author argues that students can learn the language of academic literacy. This is what I believe is fundamental in Dev. Ed. courses, i.e., teaching academic literacy.

Some studies question assumptions about first-year students and their reading habits (or lack thereof). One of the arguments the authors make here is that we need to help students make connections through their reading to the world around them. I, in fact, try to demonstrate this to students when reading material in the classroom: I make connections; I ask the students questions that make them stretch their thinking, etc. I’m glad this idea is backed up by research.

Section 5 takes a look at teaching and learning with new literacies. While interesting, I wasn’t sure of the applicability of these chapters to my classroom. I did, however, appreciate the term *rhetorical dexterity* that was used to describe how students from non-college backgrounds have to navigate academic literacies. The chapter on ePortfolios reinforced the idea of helping students revise, reflect, and consider other audiences---this is part of the value of this assignment for my Wrtg0900 students.

The next section caught my attention as it deals with approaches to grammar and style. Fearn and Farnan propose the advantages of teaching formal grammar and their study indicates better writing results for students who learned functional grammar. This was really interesting to me as I teach writing and grammar. My plan is to revisit this chapter for a more detailed analysis and I also want to look up some of the references for possible further study.

The other chapter in this section conceptualized grammar as a rhetorical choice. This is definitely moving away from the drill and kill, which has been largely discredited now. The activity used: group activities that focus on texts and how writers use grammar and style.

Part 3 of the book is titled Engaging Difference. What I focused on in this section was chapter 10, English Language Learners. The first article is a reminder to avoid stereotyping ELLs and particularly immigrant students. The other article I enjoyed concerned how ELLs create identity in mainstream English courses as well as the response of students to the label ESL. This is something I’ve been thinking about more recently, so I was immediately drawn to this section. The author recommends that we “move toward identifying these students who write in English as their second language as whole individuals with multiple, sometimes meshing and messy, facets and experiences, and not merely as singular products of their native culture and language.”

The final section is about collaboration, assessment, and change. There was a great article titled *What They Take with Them* which reminded me of how important the work of the writing center is, not only for the student, but for the tutor. The basic finding from a survey of former tutors is how enduring the impact of their experience has been and how positive it was.

Linked to the above article was an interesting position statement on two-year college writing centers with guidelines and best practices. It’s great to know we have an excellent resource at SLCC that adheres to these guidelines. It was no surprise to see our own Clint Gardner as the co-author of the position statement.

Assessment is a thorny issue and the chapter on assessment highlighted how often basic writing assessment is “subject to the changes and whims of an ever-shifting political climate.” I like how the following myths were underscored: We know what we’re testing for; once we’ve agreed on criteria, we can agree on whether individual papers meet those criteria; it’s possible to have an absolute standard and apply it uniformly.

Since we’ve experimented in our department with Accelerated courses it was interesting to read some perspectives. The ALP at the Community College of Baltimore County serves as a model worthy of further study. Another initiative worth looking at is the Stretch Program at Arizona State University. The one year Engl1010 course as a substitute for basic writing proved to have a higher pass rate than regular Engl1010 and could serve as a model.