Literacy Link

Fall 2010

From the Editors' Desktops

In our behind-the-scenes work on *Literacy Link*, we often find ourselves exchanging stories, such as this one Helen told recently:

"Gaia, my oldest child, is working on her college theater auditions. One afternoon, I hear lines from a recent Donald Margulies's play coming from our living room. When I enter the room, I see her passionately pleading with the fireplace to 'Hear me—just hear me—now!' At least, it looks like she's talking to the fireplace. Her eyes are fixed intently on an empty space about three feet ahead of her, and there is no one else in the room.

'Who are you talking to, exactly?' I ask.

She turns, eyes heavy with the disdain only a seventeen-year-old can muster.

'Don't you get it? This is acting, Mom. You have to imagine someone here, listening to what you have to say—or else nothing you say really matters.'"

To answer Gaia's question, yes, we get it. After all, we teach writing, so we know. Writing is a social act—we always write with an intended (and often imaginary) audience in mind, persuading them to listen to our ideas through the written text. And, if we are lucky, our ideas are not only heard, but given a response; thus writing becomes an intentional conversation, actively engaging both the writer and the reader(s).

However, many of our students don't realize what we learned long ago, that writing is a dialogue. After all, as faculty, most of us expect feedback from our writing: emails, IRB proposals, grants, evaluation reports, CAPC proposals … even articles in *Literacy Link*. Our job is helping students understand this dialogue: how it functions and how it is a crucial part of the work we do here at the university.

This idea of writing as dialogue is central to all of the articles in this issue. The winner of the 2010 Warrick Prize for Research, Dr. Eric Gardner, in "On Hating Writing," discusses not only his dislike of the writing process, but ways that feedback on his writing has pushed him to become a more productive and engaged scholar

Contents

in his field—and a better teacher in the classroom, one who actively converses with students about his writing. In "A Question of Balance: Teaching/Tutoring Voices and Student Feedback," Ms. Holly Bird and Ms. Diane Saylor present a study comparing the feedback they provided to English 111 students as tutors in the Writing Center and as teachers in the classroom. Dr. Drew Hinderer, the 2010 Landee Prize winner, talks about academic honesty, encouraging each of us to consider the feedback we give students in his article, "(Un)Intentional Cheating." And finally, in "Learning To Play the Game: Conversations with Composition Scholars John Mauk and Ann Raimes," our *Literacy Link* intern, Ms. Kirsten McIlvenna, summarizes two scholars' recent visits to SVSU and their thoughts on helping developing writers at our university.

We hope that these articles themselves are a starting part for some good conversations and perhaps inspire your own articles that we can feature in future issues of *Literacy Link*.

Sincerely,

Helen Raica-Klotz

Chris Giroux

Literacy Link Co-Editors

On Hating Writing

Eric Gardner
Professor of English and Winner of the 2010 Warrick Prize for Research

I'll open with a confession—one that tends to surprise people. Often, I find myself hating writing. Don't get me wrong: I love learning, researching, reading, listening, and talking in venues in and beyond my discipline. And I do indeed have those wonderful moments when the words seem to willingly flow onto the page, moments that seem akin to the inspiration promised in the mythos of writing. But even in—and perhaps especially after—those wonderful moments, the frustration and pain of revision (and more revision) eventually intrudes. I hate that.

But I want to argue that admitting and embracing that hatred has made me not just a better writer and a more productive scholar but also a much better teacher and especially, irony of ironies, a better teacher of writing.

So some reflections:

1. *Some students will love writing—but for them <u>and</u> for the rest of us, writing can be a powerful tool.*

A crucial moment in my career came when a colleague from another campus, in the midst of a fascinating conversation, burst out with "Why aren't you writing about this?!" My first answer was that good scholarship takes time—and I still today don't want to de-emphasize the massive time necessary for good research, writing, and revision. But she wouldn't relent: "If you love this stuff, you have to write about it." And thus I was reminded that writing was a tool—indeed, *the* tool—that would allow my participation in my discipline. I could read, think, listen, even talk and teach for my usual fifty-plus hours each week, but my ideas would likely *never* enter the rich swirl of dialogues in my field. If

I really wanted to participate in those conversations—and I did—I had to write more.

In this vein, many of my students—outside of the discipline of English, but also *in* English—have been able to understand the sense that writing can be a tool for the work they want to accomplish. Many also, frankly, felt lesser, even felt excluded when teachers seemed to model only a love that they never felt (or even thought they could feel).

Thinking about writing in this way led me to really consider purpose and audience much more heavily in my teaching (and my own writing). Now, my courses regularly examine why students would or should write the various documents I ask for, and we're honest about the reasons. An analysis of a poem isn't just an exercise in helping students become literary critics: it is a concrete way for me to assess their abilities tied to the course readings and discussion, and it is a way—through various forms of exchange I facilitate—for them to share their ideas with colleagues in the class. An email to me—and I don't think lots of folks think about email as purposeful, transactional writing—is often designed to convince me to do something, but it is also an interaction that helps me judge students' professionalism. Each purpose, each occasion, and each audience calls for specific moves—the use of the disciplinary convention of quoting specific language in the first, for example, or the need for a level of clarity and politeness in the second.

From this forthright discussion of why and to whom they might write, I've added much more thoughtful sequencing to my assignments (like the kind John Bean talks about in *Engaging Ideas*). Most importantly, we've done much more direct discussion of sample texts. Just as my own growth as a writer and scholar led me to go back to the work of literary scholars I really respected and do some in-depth rhetorical analysis—

thinking hard not only about what they said, but how they said it (in both holistic and very specific technical senses)—so, too, have I built direct discussion of, say, short interpretive essays from a journal like *The Explicator* into my courses on writing about literature.

2. *We need to admit that writing—and especially writing well—is difficult, even for experienced writers.*

My students are often so happy to hear me admit that writing isn't easy, isn't (always) magic, is composed of hard struggle and real failure, and rarely happens with the snap of fingers or with a wondrous single draft. I often tell students how my advisor (a powerhouse in her field) took scissors and tape to a draft I'd struggled over for months, a draft of what turned out to be my first article. She wanted to show me ways to rearrange, condense, and cut to get my message across more effectively. Often when I tell this story, my students are wide-eyed; they are also, I think, more than a bit sympathetic. The conversation generally turns not only to how you move on after that kind of shredding (and learn from it), but also how you can take control over your own writing by learning about both writing processes and products.

I've long recognized that writing can be deeply enhanced by collaboration because it offers both "new eyes" and additional help.

I've thus experimented with anonymous peer feedback, with various forms of self-assessment, with asking students to write essays *about* their essays, and with other strategies designed not only to teach revision but to also help students learn to mediate between seeing their writing as a cherished extension of themselves (which I do indeed want) and being able to see their writing as a complex tool that must be honed, adjusted, perhaps even taken apart and reassembled to really work (which I also think they need). In this, we also talk about how the level of attention and rigor

my advisor offered were great, deep, and useful acts of caring—things it took me a while to realize.

I often follow that conversation by showing them whatever marked-up draft of my own writing I'm carrying around in my briefcase at the time. I admit that I both quickly fall in love with a draft and, when rereading it, hate it. They get to see how I furiously cross out, write over sentences, rework whole sections—and they get to know that this marked-up mess may be a fourth draft, a fifth, a tenth. When I talk about how they can learn to do some of this work themselves, I think my students often feel empowered. Many of our students at SVSU intimately understand hard work. They may not love writing, but they can work at it, and, given a set of approaches and techniques, they *can* work both diligently and usefully.

3. *Collaboration is more complex—and more important—than we often suggest.*

Becoming the chair of the English Department was a shock to my writing processes (among other things). Suddenly, I was doing all kinds of writing—from email to formal responses to grade grievances—that both often demanded confidentiality and had to be "right" the first time. I've long exchanged work with folks in my field at other institutions to read and comment upon; I write book reviews regularly to "give back" to the field and to keep my critical reading skills sharp; very few pieces get submitted without my spouse reading them (sometimes in multiple drafts); and I religiously conference with my students, build in various kinds of peer feedback, and, when plausible within my discipline, do group projects. I've long recognized that writing can be deeply enhanced by collaboration because it offers both "new eyes" and additional help.

Thus, suddenly in situations where I simply couldn't collaborate, I had to find ways to create distance from the texts I was working on and to create "feedback." I did the first by forcing myself to pause in drafting, physically get up, and actually leave my desk to walk around campus. (To the biologists and mathematicians who wondered why I was walking round and round their Science West halls, now you have an answer. It also became a wonderful informal way to see folks in and out of my department.) After a couple of brisk circles, it was easier to sit back down and think harder about audience and about just what my writing needed to accomplish. I also thought hard about the kinds of feedback I had received on past documents—and found ways to internalize some of those voices. When I returned to my desk, it became easier to think about what this person or that might say about and to a given sentence—and where scissors and tape might be best employed.

I've thus also found ways to build small "pauses" into the sequences of student writing assignments. I've asked students to analyze feedback they've received. I've sometimes required students to summarize and respond to my comments on their graded papers. I've even sometimes asked students to consider the blunt question "What will Gardner say?" as part of peer feedback activities. I've deepened my attention to talking about collaboration and writing—including much more direct discussion in all of my courses about academic integrity and the differences between helping someone learn to do the work, doing the work together, and doing the work *for* someone. In line with the thinking above about purpose and audience, for example, I explain that all of the preparation leading to a written exam has to be where the useful collaboration takes place—because the purpose of an exam is to assess an *individual's* performance. In short, we talk much more about what good collaboration might look like, what contextual questions figure into such

issues, how to figure out what type of (or even if) collaboration is appropriate to a given task, and how to use "collaborative" strategies even when they are on their own.

I confess that I've been hesitant to write about this subject—and that this piece has been through multiple drafts that I have, indeed, occasionally hated. I've long been fascinated by Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, especially the lines "What we have loved, / Others will love, and we will teach them how" (14.446-47); the first time I read Helen Vendler's 1980 Modern Language Association presidential address on our duty to teach what we love—leading with this very quote—I found myself nodding and smiling, even though Vendler's politics were very different from my own. I have always known that I loved my field,

and I have always loved learning and teaching. I do indeed think we need to trumpet what we love. But in the midst of the trumpets, we need to hear other things, too. I had to come to terms with a much more complex relationship with writing—and I finally recognized that many of my students might have to do the same.

Works Cited

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996. Print.

Vendler, Helen. "Presidential Address, 1980." *PMLA* 96.3 (1981): 344-50. Print.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude* in *The Complete Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan, 1888. Print.

A Question of Balance: Teaching/Tutoring Voices and Student Feedback

Diane Saylor
Instructor of English

Holly Bird
Former SVSU Instructor of English / Current Bowling Green State University Instructor of English

As writing centers are becoming more professionalized, better funded, and more visible in universities, faculty from across the academic fields are joining forces with student mentors by volunteering their time to help staff these centers. At our SVSU Writing Center, this program is called "Teachers in the Center," in which faculty from different disciplines are asked to volunteer two hours a week to tutor students individually on their writing. While student mentors generally go through rigorous training on how to provide effective feedback to students, instructors often receive a more abbreviated version of instruction on how to go about mentoring students since we already have experience evaluating student papers. Instructors, however, can struggle with transferring

their teaching voice into their tutoring voice when providing feedback to students in a writing center. Consequently, we conducted a study to examine how we, as instructors/mentors, change our feedback strategies when we move from the classroom to the writing center.

We conducted our study (which was approved by the SVSU Institutional Review Board) starting in January of 2010 and concluding at the end of March of the same year. After securing permissions from both the director of the SVSU Writing Center and the director of the First-Year Writing Program, we recruited students from our English composition classes and students who came to visit the Writing Center (where we both volunteered as mentors)

to take part in our research. Focusing primarily on research-based assignments, our comparative samples came from two sources: 1) comments made on papers of participating students in our composition classes and 2) transcribed comments from tape-recorded mentoring sessions conducted with participating students in the Writing Center. Our sample size included sixteen classroom papers and six Writing Center transcripts. Though our collection sample was small and would not support any statistically significant conclusions, we looked to our observations to point out trends that our own experience as instructors/mentors could confirm or, in some cases, that could provide insight into the challenges we face as we balance our roles as instructors and mentors.

It is not always easy to know the right way to negotiate our different roles, teacher and mentor.

After the study collection period ended, we compiled and organized our comments from both sources into categories based on criteria taken from Maryann Crawford, Director of Central Michigan University's Writing Center. Briefly, we worked with the following categories:

· **Correcting/Modeling**: making the changes/revisions

· **Emoting**: indicating our emotional response to the text, or a part of it

· **Describing**: defining a problem without fixing it (for example, "CS" for comma splice)

· **Indicating**, pointing out an issue without going into specifics (such as "?" to indicate confusion)

· **Suggesting/Commanding**: making comments that are more directive (such as "You need to cite your source here" or "Develop a new thesis")

· **Reminding**, referring back to something discussed earlier

· **Questioning:** asking questions of the writer, which can be classified in three areas:

–**Socratic:** those "leading" questions that are loaded with an agenda

–**Rhetorical:** those questions for which we really do not expect a reply

–**Real**: those questions that are posed to elicit information or clarity

Finally, we examined our parting comments to our students to determine if they were **Summative** (generally holistic, focusing on the strengths and weakness of the paper as a whole) or **Formative** (focused on strategies for revising the paper). What follows is a brief overview and discussion of some of our findings.

After the study collection period ended, we recorded the amount and types of comments we offered in the two different venues. Then we compiled the instructor/mentor feedback and examined it for patterns to gain insights into how we, as instructors, can engage in effective feedback strategies in mentoring sessions and how these strategies can inform the feedback we give to students in our classrooms.

Overall, we noted that while we use most of the previously mentioned strategies at one point or other, we found that on classroom papers, we relied most frequently on **Indicating** comments to guide student writers to develop or clarify their points. For example, in this excerpt from a student's paper, we indicated confusion by inserting the bracketed question mark and left it to the student to finish her idea: "His father and grandfather were hard workers and expected the same from.[?]." It is not surprising that **Indicating** was our most frequent sort of feedback because it is a strategy we employ to get students to take ownership of their papers and revisions. Even the second most common strategy we noted in our classroom papers, **Suggesting** (for example, "Develop examples to support your point"), works along the same lines while providing more specifics about what

the student needs to do to write a stronger and better supported essay.

In the Writing Center, we were not particularly surprised to find that because of its face-to-face format, we were predominantly using **Questioning** as a strategy to help the student explore his ideas in greater depth. In particular, we asked more real questions (along with a fair number of **Socratic** questions) compared to the feedback we wrote on our students' papers. The following transcription from a Writing Center encounter demonstrates how a direct question spurred the student to come up with more ideas:

> MENTOR. Okay … so the theme is the major idea of the story. The theme is what the story is about. Is it about love? Is it about power? Is it about honor?

> STUDENT. Okay. So I put here they are isolated in a rural country. The daddy is an alcoholic … and he's angry. He has anger in him.

Clearly, with a face-to-face encounter, we can spend more physical time encouraging the student to probe deeper and explore the issues of her topic. When we compare this to an **Indicating** or **Suggesting** comment on a typical classroom paper (which might read "theme?" or, more succinctly, "??"), we observe that real questions can encourage more focused analysis.

However, we were surprised that when we compared our strategies at the two venues, we asked far fewer questions on our classroom student papers. This certainly could be the result of the traditional, one-way direction of feedback—we grade the papers and return them. Why would we expect students to consider seriously questions on their papers if there is no expectation of a consequent exchange of ideas? However, in our interaction with students at the Writing Center, we witness the student's thinking and development as a direct result of this sort of dialogue.

Looking further into our results, we noted that there was more **Commanding** on the papers in the Writing Center than in the classroom—a strategy that might suggest a more directive/prescriptive teaching mode, as evidenced by this excerpt from an interaction with a student in the Writing Center:

> MENTOR [to student]. When you respond to [opposing viewpoints], you do one of several things. First, either you concede to or agree with part of the [viewpoints], which is what you started doing when you said….

The frequency of this type of interaction surprised us since we would expect that our authority in the classroom would lend itself to a more directive sort of teaching strategy than in the relaxed atmosphere of the Writing Center, especially since it could change the dynamic of the mentoring session, making it less a collaborative experience between student and mentor, and more of a passive learning experience between student and teacher. While we are cautious to work within the scope of what a mentor should provide in the Writing Center, we realized that we sometimes need to share knowledge that the student lacks. It is not always easy to know what is the right way to negotiate our different roles, teacher and mentor.

When we looked at the issues we face when going from the classroom to the Writing Center, these are the predominant questions that arise: How do we balance our two voices? How do we put our good intentions to the best use, yet not go beyond what is expected or even desired in the Writing Center environment? In the end, we do not have a clear answer. What does become clearer is that working with the wide variety of students across the curriculum has a positive impact on our teaching strategies. What we walk away with is a sense that the interactive nature

What we walk away with is a sense that the interactive nature of the mentoring session—the use of more questioning to elicit students to engage in their writing—yields a much more effective use of conferences for our own students.

of the mentoring session—the use of more questioning to elicit students to engage in their writing—yields a much more effective use of conferences for our own students. It also makes us aware that if there is the expectation of dialogue between student and teacher (in some sort of face-to-face meeting), questions can be put to effective use as feedback on class papers.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of working in the relaxed atmosphere of the Writing Center encourages us to develop better listening skills in our classroom, which in turn helps us to develop a teaching voice that is less threatening yet still effective and authoritative. Finally, because we examine papers from across the curriculum (and not just from our narrow field), we gain a clearer, more holistic understanding of what sorts of writing will be expected from students during their college career. This also translates to encouraging us to craft assignments to better prepare students for what will follow.

If, ultimately, our real mission as composition instructors is, as Stephen North notes in "The Idea of a Writing Center," "to make better writers, not necessarily—or immediately—better texts" (41), then our experience in the Writing Center reminds us to make use of one of the most powerful tools we have available to us—comments that drive a dialogue between our students and ourselves, and, in due course, between our students and their readers.

Works Cited

Crawford, Mary Ann. "Types of Editing Responses." Central Michigan University Writing Center Handout. Print.

North, Stephen M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. Ed. Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 32-46. Print.

(Un)Intentional Cheating

Drew Hinderer
Finkbeiner Endowed Chair in Ethics and Winner of the 2010 Landee Prize

Last semester, I encountered three cases of blatant cheating in my classes. That is not to say there may not have been more. By its nature, successful cheating is undiscovered cheating. However, these cases were distinctive enough to inspire some insights that, I hope, may be interesting and useful. Specifically, each sheds light on implicit clashes between academic culture and popular culture. I suggest that understanding these differences and explaining them clearly to students may go some way toward reducing the incidence of cheating in our classes.

What, exactly, is cheating? Typical definitions invoke notions of deliberate fraud or deception through the violation of explicit or generally accepted rules or standards for unfair advantage in the achievement of valued goals. (See, for example, Ehrlich et al.'s definition in the *Oxford American Dictionary*. Consider too that influential moral philosopher Bernard Gert has even gone so far as to say "The rule against cheating does seem to have one characteristic that none of the other rules have. One cannot break this rule unintentionally. There seems to be no such thing as unintentional cheating" [108].) Yet such definitions fly in the face of an important fact about the vast majority of academic cheaters in my experience. It is that the most common reason students cheat is that they do not realize that they are cheating.

I am not such a Platonist as to suppose that all wrongdoing is the result of ignorance, but I am persuaded that much of it is. When I encounter a suspected incident of cheating, I always ask the student or students involved to discuss their work with me. Those involved most often willingly admit to the behavior in question, and exhibit surprise but not guilt or shame when I explain that I consider it off-limits. Two recent studies appear to bear this out. In one study, the moral reasoning and sensitivities of cheaters and non-

cheaters were compared. The study found no significant differences between the two groups—everyone agreed that cheating was unethical—but the cheaters' definitions of cheating were more elastic than those of non-cheaters. That is, the cheaters defined what they were doing as not cheating. In another study, reasons for cheating were evaluated. The most common reason for cheating: students did not know that what they were doing was cheating ("Why Students Cheat").

In my East Asian Civilizations/History class, I give six in-class quizzes as well as three take-home essay exams and three in-class objective tests. Early in the semester, I typically give an open-notes quiz on key terms, the purpose of which is to test whether these terms are making their way accurately into the students' notes as well as whether the students can explain and use them. I also allow students to use laptop computers to record class notes. A naturally peripatetic lecturer, I try to monitor the computer users' screens often enough to prevent all but the briefest excursions into activities unrelated to course work. On the occasion of one quiz, however, I found that one of the computer users was simply looking up the definitions of key terms on Wikipedia.

In our subsequent discussion, it became clear that the student did not think what he was doing was cheating. His reasoning was that the (only) point of note taking is to provide convenient access to information that may be relevant to future tasks, such as the take-home essay exams that would be due later. Wikipedia, and the internet generally, provides exactly that—convenient access to information. So the only notes he was taking during class concerned what he thought might be idiosyncratic with me. More generally, his point was that outside of academic culture ("in real life"), access to information has largely come to replace the possession of knowledge. That note taking helps students retain knowledge was, to him, irrelevant. If need be, he could look it up.

A second student offered a related explanation for downloading her answer to an essay question from a commercial website. Her early written work was abysmal, both in terms of grammar and mechanics, and in terms of organization and content. I spent about ninety minutes with her discussing her first essay exam, mostly on mechanics but also trying to explain why unintelligible sentence structure and random paragraphing obscured her efforts to reply to the essay questions I had posed. In this I mostly failed. She was clearly discouraged and unhappy, but also clearly resentful at what she took for mere pedantry. When the next exam came in tightly argued and eloquently written but only tangently related to the questions I had asked, it was obvious what she had done.

This time she was very angry, frustrated, and tearful. "I don't know what you want," she sobbed furiously. "You are so unfair." Clearly, she thought what I wanted was a well-written paper. She had supplied me with one. In every other walk of life ("in real life"), if someone lacks a skill that is required to accomplish a task, one typically hires someone who has that skill. If a circuit keeps blowing in my house, I do not train myself to become an electrician, still less take courses in physics or electrical engineering. I hire an electrician. "I know I can't write," she said. "I was just trying to give you what you wanted."

The third incident occurred in a class in which I divide students into working groups, each of which chooses a topic to research and ultimately to present to the class. I try to avoid the "free rider" problem by meeting with the groups several times during the semester, collecting and evaluating bibliographies along the way, and talking with individual group members about their progress. I also require a narrative of what each student did and how much time was invested. Students are graded individually on their contribution to the group's effort. In addition, I assign three take-home essay exams with the proviso that students are encouraged to discuss the questions with each other, but to maintain confidentiality

> *Students often approach academic work with attitudes and expectations derived from a popular culture that reduces all values to products, to be manufactured efficiently, bought and sold, and consumed.*

once they begin to write. (I do discuss what counts as inappropriate collaboration with examples and in detail.)

Nevertheless, the first exams from one group of four students were nearly word-for-word copies of each other, except that some were spelled and punctuated better than others. The group freely, even cheerfully, explained that they had met in Zahnow Library and discussed the exam questions, working out their answers essentially line by line. Confidentiality had been maintained, they said, because once they had agreed on an answer and began to write, there was no further discussion or editing of each other's work. The students were proud of how well they worked together as a group even though one group member, the best writer, had taken the lead. There was even a suggestion by one member of the group that had she not contributed her relative expertise for the group's benefit, the lead group member would have been perceived as selfish and disloyal.

Now, what should be concluded from examples like these? First, while there are probably students who fit the traditional definition of cheats as intentional frauds, we should not assume that students who cheat do so knowingly. Why? Many students may not understand the goals of academic assignments or even see that they have any point that is not entirely arbitrary. Additionally, students often approach academic work with attitudes and expectations derived from a popular culture that reduces all values to products, to be manufactured efficiently, bought and sold, and consumed. From that perspective, the process of becoming educated is disvalued; only the goal, not education but employability, matters. Accordingly that goal, like any consumer product, should be got as cheaply and efficiently as possible.

As a practical matter, attitudes like these may be too formidable to entirely overcome. But we will certainly make little progress if we assume that students are already at home with the values and conventions of academe. Clearly we need to do a much better job explaining why education, and not merely employability, matters. We also need to explain the conventions of academic culture and important differences between it and popular culture. Specifically we need to make sure students understand what our assignments are for, and how they are related to larger goals of education (not just job training), if we are to reduce the incidence of the sort of cheating exemplified by these cases.

Works Cited

Ehrlich, Eugene, et al. "Cheating." *Oxford American Dictionary*. OUP ed. 1980. Print.

Gert, Bernard. *The Moral Rules: A New Rational Foundation for Morality*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973. Print.

"Why Students Cheat." *Teaching and Learning Bridges*. Teaching and Learning Bridges. Web. 2 June 2010. www.usak.ca/tlc/bridges_journal/vln3_jan_03/vln3_why_cheat.html

Learning To Play the Game: Conversations with Composition Scholars John Mauk and Ann Raimes

Kirsten McIlvenna
SVSU Senior, Professional and Technical Writing Major and Literacy Link *intern*

A few months ago, I was sitting in the Roberta Allen Reading Room with approximately twenty SVSU professors, waiting for John Mauk to give a workshop about his book *The Composition of Everyday Life*, a textbook that is used in many of SVSU's English 111 classes. I was the only student there, and I was honored to interview him after the workshop. A month prior, I had attended another presentation at SVSU, this one by Ann Raimes, the author of the new handbook required for all English 080 and 111 students, *Keys for Writers*. These are opportunities I never would have dreamed I'd have four years ago.

In the Troy School District, English students start on the honors track in eighth grade, and students are selected by their seventh grade English teachers. When I was in seventh grade, I was not selected. I saw my friends move on to Honors English and then into AP English. They read harder books and wrote better papers. I was in the "dumb" class, so I labeled myself a bad writer. The truth is, I just never learned how to write. During my junior and senior years of high school, I had the same teacher for my composition classes. He handed out reading and writing assignments to be done on our own. Regardless of how hard I worked (or didn't work) on a paper, I always received a 92%, without any comments or suggestions for improvement. When I asked him how to make the essay better, he would say "It's good"; I had no idea what that really meant.

I'll bet many students have similar experiences. It's not that they just don't understand writing, but they haven't learned it. They had a bad experience, and quickly labeled themselves as "bad writers"—something that I did upon finishing high school. Luckily for me, I took English 111 my first semester of college three years ago. Through that class, I learned a lot about writing and about myself as a writer. I learned how to expand on and develop my ideas, and how to write in a way that would reach the reader. This class left me wanting more. As I took more writing and English classes, I began to love writing and decided to major in the field. This isn't to say that everyone needs to become a writing major, or even a person who loves writing, but everyone can learn how to write.

One of the biggest struggles students have with writing is that they come into a class with "barriers" that limit themselves, says Mauk, who earned his Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Writing from Bowling Green State University and now teaches English at Northwestern Michigan University. Mauk observes in his classroom that these "barriers" include students thinking that they are "bad writers," that they have nothing to write about, or that they have to have ideas before they can begin writing.

To break down these barriers, Mauk puts heavy emphasis on "invention," the first step in the five canons of classic rhetoric. He defines invention as the "process of developing increasingly complex new ideas." To get students thinking, he uses what he calls "invention kickstarts." The following are examples of such kickstarts:

> Imagine your dog can understand everything you say. It is suddenly crucial that he/she understands cause and effect. Explain.
>
> Why is the pencil a better invention than a car?
>
> What is the significance of a tattoo?

These questions aren't meant to be the basis for an entire assignment, but are to get students thinking. He says that, often, they cause students to "think broadly and sometimes fantastically."

Additionally, Mauk emphasizes that invention can spring from tension. To demonstrate this idea, he told the story of Jack White, lead singer for The White Stripes, who does something at each of his shows to make himself uncomfortable. For example, White would position his amp just a little bit farther away from himself on stage at each concert. Doing something like this makes him work just a little bit harder each time, which, in turn, causes him to play better. Mauk describes this as tension, and "That tension is often where academic invention occurs. Invention makes better composition and more complex ideas."

This isn't to say that everyone needs to become a writing major, or even a person who loves writing, but everyone can learn how to write.

Invention doesn't stop after the writer gets an idea for a paper but continues throughout the exploration process. Mauk believes an effective tool he uses in his classes is "WHWTH?," meaning "What Happens When That Happens?" This is a means of exploring ideas presented in the paper even further. For example, he encourages students to think of words or phrases in the paper as hyperlinks. What happens when you click on that word or phrase? It would take you to another link that would tell you more about that topic. He uses this analogy to help students "crack open" words to develop their ideas further, expanding on their original thoughts. This can be a helpful tool in expanding writer's ideas. "I ask it so much in class that it's annoying," Mauk jokes.

Because the learning process about writing doesn't end with the conclusion of students' basic English classes—they need to continue their writing skills as they write for other classes, across disciplines—Mauk argues that writing for all disciplines is important because it is a way of learning, not just about writing, but about the subject matter. Mauk says that in some classes students are "spewing back information for tests," and he questions whether they are really learning. With only using tests as an evaluation of how much the student learned, an instructor risks the chance that the student didn't actually learn anything but simply memorized the facts or ideas talked about in class. By writing, students can further explore a subject matter and begin to analyze and think critically about it. He aruges it is more likely that students are going to understand and remember a subject if they use "invention" and write a paper on it.

Like Mauk, Ann Raimes said that she finds that a lot of students are scared by academic writing. Having taught English for thirty-two years at Hunter College, she observes that the "challenge is that students see academic writing as unreadable by the unspeakable." The students think that they have to sound academic and often throw in words that get in the way and sound awkward. Raimes asserts that the language skills start to break down when students are introduced to new things. So it's not a matter of whether the student is a good writer; it's a matter of whether the student has learned yet how to write. "Until I was a Yankee fan, baseball was [a] strange language to me," says Raimes. Now, however, as she continues to watch games and learn, she is able to talk about it knowledgably; it is the same process with writing.

Coming into college, I felt the same way about writing as Raimes felt about baseball; it was strange and unfamiliar to me. But as I began to explore and practice writing, things became clearer. Now, maybe I don't hit a homerun with every essay I write, but I'm in the ballpark. Like other SVSU students, I'm learning to play the game.