

## Introducing the Composition Student to the Writer He or She Already Is

STACY KASTNER

*Bowling Green State University*

### Origins of the Assignment

My experience working with first year writers in courses designed to teach critical thinking and composition has introduced me to a mass of young adults who are anxious when it comes to effective written communication in a college classroom. Not only are they troubled about *how* to write to an audience of college professors, but they are also intimidated by having to do so. Self-conscious of themselves as writers, they often forget that they are indeed writing, and communicating effectively through that writing, all the time. I believe that it is not only possible, but also highly effective, to begin teaching the writing process by directing students to their secondary, non-academic, writing. When it is easier to send a friend, a family member, a coworker a text message than it is to call him or her on the phone, our students *are* writers, and they are conditioned to perform in a world that communicates through writing. This writing is constantly in public spaces where student writing constructs representations; our students' characters, very carefully designed, communicate via Facebook, text message, instant messenger, blogs, and so on. Those character constructions form writers who are concise, ironic, humorous, clever—all characteristics that often define good writing in any setting, the college classroom being no exception. Recognition of this by the composition teacher and student alike is an

enlightening concept; it interests the student and rejuvenates the teacher. Recognizing students as writers and encouraging student recognition of themselves as writers creates a unique classroom experience and also structures personal writing goals for students that engage, challenge, and interest.

The student who walks into a composition classroom today is an effective written communicator without the resistance that many students entering a college classroom before him or her held. Yet, many students don't consider themselves writers, even though according to *The New York Times* "18-to-24-year-olds average 790 [text] messages" in just one month (Mindlin 4). While these text messages aren't properly punctuated let alone complete sentences, they are words, or representations of words, and if the intended purpose failed to be effectively communicated, it is doubtful that text messaging would be able to boast the popularity it currently holds. In 2005, Jenn Fishman et al. noted in their results from the first two years of The Stanford Study of writing that current students "are rhetors in both a classical and a distinctly modern—even postmodern—sense: individuals who, singly and in groups, participate in numerous communication situations that involve a dazzling, sometimes staggering, array of literate practices" (245). The informal writing that students are doing all of the time can be a foundation for those students, a foundation that can help bring about the end of struggling with student resistance to writing assignments, a foundation that can offer students confidence in their abilities to argue, to explain, to question, and to reflect in a written form, and it is a foundation that also has practical classroom application.

The most basic aim of a teacher of composition is to present his or her students with the skills to communicate effectively in a written form in a college setting. Students who choose to

reject those skills are often viewed as obstinate, dispassionate, immature, even ungrateful. Yet, their rejection comes with a consequence, and Douglas Hesse discusses that consequence as a “denial of membership” into a community (229). This deserves serious consideration. For college composition instructors, not addressing resistance in students is to allow them to deny themselves a place in the academic writing community, setting most of them up for failure at the undergraduate level and, even if they manage, a rude awakening at best at the professional level. However, considering those students as part of a writing community from the outset, seriously and consciously treating students as writers, will have positive results. Shirley Brice Heath, writing on performance pedagogies, discovered that students in the arts are often referred to as artists; this simple reference invites those same students into the art community, and, in turn, endows them with an “identity” that “carries with it a readiness for taking in information and committing to the rules of the ‘artistic community’” (339). If we encourage our students to look at their writing, considering themselves as writers, even if they are looking at a poorly punctuated, poorly formed text message, we are giving them an identity that is inclusive and that will help begin to erode the barriers that stand between the student and a concern for a well-written essay. While it may not be traditional to encourage students to look to their text messages, Facebook walls, instant messenger chats, emails, and so forth to enrich their written voices in college essays, I agree with Douglas Hesse: “If formal education cannot cite change as its reason for being, I do not know what its justification might be” (230).

Donald Graves indicated in the 1970s that the key to writing with elementary-aged students was designing “a pedagogy that built on skills, strengths, and interests they already possessed” (qtd. in Tobin 6). Similarly, I found success by asking my students to use the

informal, quickly formed, short, choppy, and direct text messages in a workshop in which they discover who they are as persons who produce meaning with words, but also where they find out whom they want to be as writers. Heath's observations found that "[w]hen action and awareness merge, consciousness narrows to focus attention on what is most relevant for the role of participation one is intending" (340). Analyzing informal writing—engaging with informal writing practices— encourages this merging of action and awareness, and this can only benefit our students.

### **The Assignment: Background**

I assigned my students the task to get to know themselves as writers. The most obvious step in this process of discovery was to have students take a look at their daily written productions. I asked them to consider various queries about their writing and about themselves as writers. We spent a week workshopping with student samples of informal writing—text messages, AIM or Facebook conversations, and emails—each student ultimately crafting an identification for him or herself as a writer in the college environment and also identifying what particular habits he or she may be bringing to that environment that would have either negative or positive results. Admittedly, I was concerned about the seriousness with which my students would approach the workshop questions, but I found very quickly that these were questions that they were interested in. The student reflections from this week focused my teaching efforts for the semester.

I began this exercise by assigning an informal writing task. I didn't look at this writing and instead saved it to hand back to my students post workshop so that they might infuse these assignments with their writers' personalities through a revision after our week of discovery. On

Monday, my students came to my class with text message conversations, AIM or Facebook conversations, and an email correspondence with a professor or other authority figure. (I made sure to give students ample notice that they would need these correspondences so that they would all have them available.) They brought their laptops with them to class and opened up a word document questionnaire I attached to an email; students without laptops responded the old fashioned way. This workshop, question and answer reflections and informal writing practice analyses, carried over into Wednesday, and culminated into a full day of free writing on Friday.

The ultimate goals of this week-long workshop were (1) to welcome students into the first year composition course as writers; (2) to increase student confidence in their abilities as writers and to reduce, if not eliminate, preexisting resistance to the first year composition course; (3) for students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their general writing practices; (4) through reflection, to recognize how these strengths and weaknesses should inform the writer as he or she approaches academic writing assignments; (5) to practice effectively manipulating writing strengths for different audiences; and (6) for students to construct personal writing goals to enrich their experience in the first year composition course.

## **The Assignment: Day One**

Day one specifically focused on discovering audience awareness, realizing preexisting writers, and the construction of an academic writing persona. I gave students a series of questions that asked them to analyze their writing and who they were as writers, to test their effectiveness as communicators on unfamiliar audiences, and to recognize the implications of their findings for their academic writing processes. The day culminated in each student very

concisely describing who s/he wanted to be as an academic writer by the end of the course (see supplemental material).

## **Assignment: Day Two**

Day two focused on peer review and revision practices. Students worked in class to review and revise their paragraphs, especially topic sentences, that were addressed to a professor and someone else reasonably older than themselves. Students also analyzed their written tone and reflected upon their abilities to effectively use an academic tone (see supplemental material).

## **Assignment: Day Three**

The final day of this workshop introduced students to free writing and large-scale revision. I handed students back their original informal writing assignments (they were asked to watch an episode of a reality television series where the participants/characters had an argument and then evaluate the use of appeals) and also handed them a new assignment sheet where they were assigned the task to convert this assignment into a formal academic argument. We spent the entire fifty-minute class period free writing (see supplemental material).

## **Assignment Outcome and Course Application**

From this exercise I found creative writers, a varied but surprisingly consistent fear of sounding foreign, a craving for both coyness and cleverness. Uniformly, all of my students found writers in themselves, and found these writers to be both capable and compelling. On Monday I didn't get amazing essays from every student, but I did get some really clever, consciously crafted pieces, and I also got some pieces that revealed struggling writers. In almost every case, I got the work of a writer who was trying to write. The goal of this assignment was not for

students to perfect their writing or even to produce polished writing, but instead, for these students to see themselves as writers, encouraging them to take ownership of their writing in an academic forum as much as they do in nonacademic forums.

My largest success with this experiment was finding an effective and meaningful way to speak with students about their writing. I used the three words that each student used to characterize the voice that s/he wanted to achieve by the end of the semester as an endnote on my more traditional rubric for every formal essay assignment. This generated useful discussion between myself and the individual writers in my classroom that especially enriched student-teacher conferences.

In this exercise—a week-and-a-weekend, but really a semester-long trial—I felt more so than in any of the other three semesters that I have been teaching like I had really taught something about writing. It was rewarding, and I found myself constantly interacting with a writer, a writer’s writing, and a writer’s rhetoric. I have never been in a writing classroom as a teacher or as a student where so much insightful, thoughtful, and purposeful writing practice had taken place. There are many ways that this might be achieved in a classroom, but fundamentally, we must allow the classroom to be the place where students will come *as writers*. A student may come with awful writing yet ambitiously seek to be the next Alexander Pope; it is our job as instructors to be the bridge and show the way(s).

### **Conclusion**

In his article “Teachers as Students, Reflecting Resistance,” Douglas Hesse brings to light that resistance in the academic setting by undergraduate and graduate students alike is a

natural response to anything “new” (225). He outlines the frustrations that college students face when reading difficult texts and concludes that those frustrations are the result of “inexperience” (226). While Hesse’s conversation primarily concerns reading, it is also applicable to writing. If we ask our students who they are as writers, they will give us answers that we can work with as instructors to help translate the goals of academic writing. For instance, one student identified himself as a poet after analyzing his text messages, Facebook posts, and emails. With this self-identified poet, I found it was particularly useful to discuss the art of rhetorical arrangement. Talking about argumentative writing as both an art and an arrangement was familiar territory to this student. It made his Classical Argument essay a less daunting task and allowed him to apply the skills he was confident using in his outside-of-class writing.

Hesse describes the outright rejection of a text as “anti-academic behavior,” yet he also recognizes that “from a teaching standpoint, one employs a different pedagogy if the cause of that rejection is the difficulty of making connections rather than simple laziness” (226). If students are rejecting writing assignments and the writing process necessary for success in college because they cannot connect that process to the process of written communication that they are already skilled in, it is time for a pedagogical shift. In September 2008, *USA Today* consulted Jacquie Ream, an author and past teacher, for commentary in an article “Texting, Testing Destroys Kids’ Writing Style.” Ream commented that “[w]e have a whole generation being raised without communication skills . . . Text messaging is destroying the written word. Students aren’t writing letters; they’re typing into their cell phones one line at a time” (8). Ream’s frame of mind ignores the very real opportunities that those “destructive” text messages



can offer if they are brought into the classroom, analyzed, manipulated, and applied. I am more inclined to agree with Deborah Brandt, who confirms that “problems with reading and writing are less about the lack of literacy in society than about the surplus of it. Being literate in the late twentieth century has to do with being able to negotiate burgeoning surplus” (666). This makes our job as composition instructors all the more important, but ignoring trends of informal student literacies or even looking unfavorably upon them is a *passé* habit. Academic writing will be unfamiliar, intimidating, and overwhelming to most students, but even if the composition classroom asks those students to seek out the writer in their text messages or even Facebook messages for the purpose of pointing out marked differences between tonal qualities expected in the college environment, it is still making more familiar, less intimidating, connections for students to work from. Ong warned that “any kind of genuine sensitivity to literature of any age or culture has become thoroughly impossible unless a person has grown seriously, not phrenetically—reflective about contemporary communications media” (250). Therefore, we need to fully investigate text messages and other multimodal communications as literate practices rather than simply dismissing them as destructive forces to good writing.

### Works Cited

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