Writing Partners:
Service Learning as a Route to
Authority for Basic Writers

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ABSTRACT: *This article looks at best practices in basic writing instruction in terms of non-traditional audiences and writerly authority. Much conventional wisdom discourages participation in service-learning projects for basic writers because of the assumption that their writing is not yet ready to "go public." Countering this line of thinking, the author argues that a service-learning project called Writing Partners offers a promising pedagogical approach. Through Writing Partners, college students in basic writing classes write letters to and mentor disadvantaged elementary school students. Participants in many service-learning experiences encounter the (silenced) discourses of race and class in programs where the "served" are often racial minorities and/or less socio-economically privileged than their "server" partners at colleges and universities. However, participant positionalities in the Writing Partners project are much more fluid, for the basic writing students must simultaneously negotiate their "server" positions relative to the elementary school students and their "less privileged" status in the university. As BW students become more aware of their audience's needs by corresponding with their young partners, they develop increased authority as writers.*

KEYWORDS: *academic discourse; authority; basic writing; confidence; service learning; university-K-12 collaboration*

My paper is a piece of classic persuasion: I want to convince compositionists and service-learning practitioners that basic writing instruction and service-learning projects can go hand in hand. This article is about the potential of service-learning in basic writing classes; it is about how basic writing students can serve as not just competent, but excellent, mentors through writing; it is about the kind of confidence *through* authority that basic writing students can obtain from this type of service learning. Specifically, I assert that the Writing Partners project described in this article is a viable and effective service-learning venture for students placed in basic writing classes.

Writing Partners is a program developed by Write to Succeed, an organization started by a group of graduate students in Rhetoric and Com-

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position in 1997 with the goal of enhancing college education and serving children in local communities by fostering mentor-like relationships through literacy. In the Writing Partners project, first-year college students and third- through eighth-grade students exchange hand-written letters over the course of a semester. Many times, at the end of the semester, the grade-school students come to the college campus for a culminating event (for more information, see www.writetosucceed.org). This series of writing assignments, which is also a service-learning activity, can help basic writing students gain confidence as writers and accrue a greater understanding of discourse communities, both of which can help students better negotiate the pull between home literacies and school literacies. In short, Writing Partners makes a space for using home literacy in a college class, thus honoring or acknowledging it),while also helping students to see the range of rhetorical choices available to them as they face the next several years of writing for academic audiences. In short, students write for school (academic essays, daily homework, etc.) but also write letters to people from their home discourse communities (as part of a larger essay assignment) and to their elementary school writing partners. By including living, breathing audiences other than their teacher, the basic writing students are forced to make conscious choices about diction, syntax, and tone based on their knowledge of non-academic discourse communities.

Confidence *Through* Authority

In "Composition's Word Work: Deliberating How to Do Language," Min-Zhan Lu updates the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication proclamation that students have a right to their own language (Committee on CCCC Language Statement). Lu states, "I argue that composition studies in the twenty-first century needs to foreground students' right to deliberate over how they do language," as a central part of a student-centered, transformative pedagogy (193). I see Writing Partners as consistent with the kind of critical or transformative pedagogy that Lu and others (Adler-Kassner and Harrington, Ashley and Lynn, Hindman) suggest. Writing Partners offers students a vehicle for becoming aware of the range of rhetorical choices they can and do make as writers inside and outside the academy, and, as Lu says, "[for] retooling the tools one is given to achieve one's ends; and more specifically, retooling the tools according to not only one's sense of what the world is but also what the world ought to be" (193). One of the key components in a student's ability to "retool" is a sense of authority as a writer.

In discussions of basic writing, scholars and practitioners often look for places to disrupt the hegemony of the instructor's inherent authority in the classroom. Instructors are vested with both the "authority of office" and the "authority of expertise" (Mortensen and Kirsch 559). The academic hierarchy sets them up with the "authority of office": the power to set the course agenda, determine the grades, etc. Their own experience and knowledge base grants them the "authority of expertise." In any given basic writing classroom, the students are not vested with institutional power, with "authority of office." The presence of student "authority of expertise" in the average basic writing class has shifted in the last decade or two with assignments that acknowledge and draw upon students' home languages or their knowledge of pop culture and technology, for example. However, as Hannah Ashley and Katy Lynn point out, even creative assignments designed to tap into students' knowledge bases can end up being "subtly assimilationist," leaving students without a feeling of mastery over the writing that would enable them to mine their own authority (5).

Rosemary Arca highlights service learning as a particularly promising pathway to authority for basic writing students. In "Systems Thinking, Symbiosis, and Service: The Road to Authority for Basic Writers," she offers a succinct definition of the kind of authority that "we want our basic writers to realize": "that sense of potency as a writer who not only has something important to say but also has the skills to say it well" (141). I concur with Arca's definition, but I'd like to extend it by focusing more on the writer's relationship to the audience. In most basic writing classes, the only audience is a teacher who has a better command of the conventions of academic discourse than the students. In the Writing Partners project, however, the audience does not have more knowledge of writing conventions than the college students.   Because the audience consists of elementary school students, the locus of the authority is different. The Writing Partners project casts students in the role of authority—as the ones with insider knowledge about college—even before they write the first letter. The assumption is that the basic writing students *can* and *will* teach their elementary school writing partners about college and college-level activities. In other words, basic writers gain confidence as writers *through the authority* bestowed upon them by the setup of the program.

This confidence, as I will show below, helps students feel more like authoritative "school writers" while still maintaining room to critique academic discourse and compare it to other literacies. For example, when writing letters to the elementary school students, the BW students are free to

complain about the burdens of college and/or the constraints of writing for a teacher. While these Writing Partners letter drafts and final copies count as daily homework, they look very different from the rest of the homework assignments students get during the semester (e.g., reading responses), thus providing students with a range of texts to reflect upon at various points during the term. At about midterm, I ask the students to complete an in-class writing in which they reflect on what they have learned from Writing Partners. And at the end of the semester, students write a summative letter about their writing processes and products.

Overview of Methodology

Buoyed by previous positive experiences with Writing Partners in first-year composition classes, I decided to study the effectiveness of the program for basic writers. I engaged in a fairly simple data collection effort: gaining permission to retain formal papers, in-class reflections, and Writing Partners letters from students in my summer section of English 1 (basic writing). My plan was to analyze the data organically and see what themes or connections arose. I presented my initial findings in 2006 at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Gabor), where I got helpful feedback suggesting I collect more data. Thus, I collected papers, letters, and reflections from a subsequent section of English 1 during the spring semester; this second time I had developed several codes or categories to use in analyzing data. For example, I was looking for evidence that students could identify their own rhetorical strategies and provide a rationale for their choices. I was also looking for markers of their confidence or a sense of their own authority. Although this last category sounds fuzzy, the main criterion was evidence of self-reflection and/or meta-cognitive commentary on their own writing (to their writing partners) that identified a sense of pride, accomplishment, or knowledge.

In order to better understand what was at stake for the students in these basic writing courses, it is important to know something about their situation in the university.

• According to state law, students are "disenrolled" from the university if they do not pass all "pre-baccalaureate" classes, such as English 1 (basic writing), during the first year of college. After "disenrollment," they can attend a community college, pass basic writing and first-year composition, and then re-enroll. However,

only roughly 4 percent of disenrolled students return to the university. In my summer section, all of the students had failed basic writing twice, so this class was effectively the students' last chance to remain in college. In my spring semester class, many of the students had failed basic writing in the fall, while others were enrolled in basic writing for the first time. The stakes were equally high for both groups, though, because the spring semester students were coming to the end of their first year of college—the deadline for passing all "pre-baccalaureate" courses. For this group, a summer session would not be available due to budget cuts.

• Although I did not survey the students for demographical data, I learned about their backgrounds from class discussions and conferences. In the summer section all but one of the students was a first-generation college student, and all but two identified as working class The class profile for the spring section of English 1 was similar.

• Both classes (summer section and spring semester) wrote letters to elementary school students at Title 1 schools (schools in which at least 40 percent of the students fall under one of the federal definitions of "low income"). The summer students wrote letters back and forth to third graders at a year-round school where 34 languages are spoken. The spring semester students exchanged letters with fifth graders in an honors class at a Title 1 school where 31 languages are spoken. While only one of the basic writing students had attended the elementary school we partnered with, many of them had gone to Title 1 schools, had been on free lunch programs, spoke other languages in the home, and had encountered peers with a multitude of linguistic backgrounds. (Again, this information comes from class discussion and conferences since I did not survey the students for demographical data.)

• Near the end of the term (for both the summer and spring classes), the elementary school students visited our college and were treated to a tour of the campus—designed and narrated by my students. It was the first time on campus for all of the students from both schools, many of whom had not known that there was a university in their home town.

• The course includes three essays that receive comments from peers and the instructor. Students then revise those essays as part of a final portfolio that is submitted at the end of the term to a grading

committee made up of basic writing instructors who will decide if the portfolio passes or fails the class.

In the two classes I discuss in this article, the common assignment was "Essay Three: Reflection and Analysis: Choices We Make in Different Discourse Communities," in which students wrote a letter to a professor about their most significant experience in college to date and then wrote a letter on the same subject to a friend or family member outside the university community. The essay prompt asked them to compare and contrast their rhetorical choices in each letter. In order to prepare to write this letter, students read an excerpt on discourse communities from Thomas Deans' textbook *Writing and Community Action* to give them some common vocabulary to discuss their writing strategies. Along with Deans' chapter entitled "Writing in Academic Communities," the students read, annotated, and discussed (in small groups and as a whole class) John Gonzalez's short piece "College Brings Alienation From Family, Friends," Richard Rodriguez's well-known "Aria: Memory of a Bilingual Childhood," along with Victor Villanueva's response to Rodriguez, "Whose Voice is It Anyway?" Gonzalez and Rodriguez get at a similar issue: how formal education tends to assimilate students into a culture of reading, writing, and speaking that is very different from their home culture patterns. Villanueva pushes readers to contend with what they have to give up in order to assimilate. The daily writing assignments and in-class discussions allowed students room to explore their own point of view on these issues and how that point of view is informed by their own experience. In these discussions, I pushed them away from either/or analysis of the assigned readings and asked them how they might maintain home literacy while also mastering academic discourse. While students did not always incorporate these themes in their Writing Partners letters, most of them did talk about the paradox of writing to a non-academic audience as part of a college class. While these readings and writings did not enable students to resolve their own complex questions of assimilation, the range of texts they produced in the BW class helped them move into this discussion more easily and resulted in some insightful responses, detailed below.

Those Who Have Authority Can Share It

In almost every letter to their writing partners, my students assumed a voice of authority. The responses from the elementary school students, asking more questions about college from these "authorities on college"

solidified this sense of confidence in the college students. Another significant trend I saw in my students' writing was the move to share their newfound authority in writing. For example, one of the students, Jasmine (all names are pseudonyms), wanted to help her writing partner feel the same level of confidence that she was beginning to feel. Gaining a sense of authority in her own voice, she worked to encourage her third-grade writing partner to take control of *her* writing as well, to "[bring] out my writing partners personality more. I want her to put more of her voice into the letter." In this case, the student set specific writerly goals for her third-grade partner and asserted that she did in fact have the ability to help her achieve these writing goals.

In another instance, a student named Daniel cast himself as a teacher of writing in a general sense: "I see my writing as an opportunity to help these kids with their writing skills because they are writing about their interests and not about boring stories in some English book." (While he was talking about the elementary school students, I think this point applies to his own experience in English classes as well.) In "From Mystery to Mastery," Kate Chanock points out that although college students are considered adults, they are often asked to complete childish assignments. In fact, Writing Partners is often initially perceived as a childish assignment because students handwrite and decorate letters. Many students in both sections questioned the validity of handwriting for a college class; they felt that they had left handwriting and art projects behind in junior high, if not elementary school. However, Writing Partners not only gives students the freedom to explore topics and avenues of inquiry that interest them (and their elementary school partners), it also places them in the position of adults who mentor, take responsibility for what they write, and encourage those less experienced.

This more adult writing self was manifested in some of the rhetorical strategies that the college students used to solicit the third graders' opinions on "college-level" topics. It is common knowledge that the most confident teachers are not the ones who keep tight reins on their students but the ones who share authority with them. I saw this kind of sharing-of-authority-based-on-self-confidence occurring in the Writing Partners program. For example, a student in a colleague's class that was also doing a Writing Partners project wrote to her partner about a college essay she was writing. In her letter, she says, "I had to make up a new proposition, or law, for [our state]. I decided that [our state] should make an underground subway system to lessen traffic on the freeways. When you drive around town with your family, do you ever get stuck in traffic?" Here, the college student is valuing

the third grader's experience and implying that the child has a valid opinion on a sophisticated topic like urban planning.

In a letter to his writing partner, Raymond, a student in my spring semester class, lays out all of the arguments for his second essay (on video game literacy) and recounts his peers' comments on his draft. After doing that, he solicits his writing partner's feedback on the topic: "Have you ever heard of World of Warcraft or do you play it? Do you play a lot of video games because I do? I had to do a report on video games and the effects it had with the players that play them. I said that video games did not affect the people who play them. But other people disagreed with me. They said it affects the players greatly. It makes them dumber and lazy, and players should be reading books instead. What do you think? Do you think that video games harm the people that play them or it doesn't have any effect on them?" In this letter, Raymond first surveys the grade school student ("Have you heard of," "Do you play"), trying to find a point of common interest and tap into the fifth grader's knowledge. Then, he explains his own personal involvement and introduces the fact that he is in the midst of revising this essay; he is at a point where he can actually incorporate his writing partner's perspective into his essay. I can imagine that the fifth grader was honored that a college student would consider using his opinion in a college paper, and my student must have felt a sense of authority over his writing when he offered that chance to a youngster. Note that he does not just ask, "What do you think?" in a cursory or off-handed manner. He follows up with a question that guides his writing partner's answer, asking his partner to choose either "harm" or "doesn't have any effect." Referring to this letter in an in-class reflection, Raymond writes, "[my writing partner] showed me how far I have gotten as a writer." I would disagree slightly, arguing that the *act* of writing to a fifth grader is what helped this student move forward as a writer.

In several instances, I could see the cross-pollination of the Writing Partners letters and the formal essays and informal in-class assignments. In the case above, the student uses his letter to sort out ideas for his essay. Conversely, another student, Star, used an in-class freewrite as a sort of rough draft for her letter. In her freewrite, she discusses the importance and fun of serving as a role model for fifth-grade children who are not inclined to think about college. In her last letter to her writing partner, Star expresses these thoughts (almost word-for-word from her freewrite). Instead of ending there, Star directs the fifth grader to engage in reflection, just as she had done in her freewrite. She ends her letter to her writing partner with the following questions: "How do you feel about writing partners? What has it taught you?"

Star assumes an almost teacherly authority, asking questions about learning from writing. In all of these examples, the college students are implicitly or explicitly expressing their authority as writers and willing the elementary school students to share in their newfound authority through writing.

No More Apologies: Reflections on Growth

When I introduced Writing Partners to the students in both classes, I told them that one of the ways this project constitutes service is that the children we would be writing to probably did not see themselves as college-bound and that we could encourage them to re-see themselves and their possibilities for the future. In over half of the students' letters and reflections from both classes, they claim to be helping their writing partners see themselves as potentially college-bound. For some of the basic writing students, this was the first experience where they felt they had achieved a tangible goal through academically sanctioned writing. In other words, many of the students in both classes commented (in class discussion and informal daily writing) that they had received negative feedback on their writing in school-based assignments in the past. In general, they had not achieved the goal of impressing the teacher—or the goal of passing the course.

The sense of defeat when it came to writing was present from the first day of the summer session class in particular. When I collected the in-class writing done on the first day, students handed it to me with apologies: "I'm really tired, so this is not my best writing"; "I didn't know we were going to write today, so I wasn't really in the right frame of mind"; "I know this is really bad, I'm sorry, I hope you can help me." I had heard these apologies from basic writing students in the past. It had become almost second nature for students in this course to apologize for their writing, to feel like they had to make excuses for its quality, to take no pride in it, to express no authority as writers.

However, when the students started writing to an elementary school audience instead of to me, they assumed a position of authority in their letters, because—I assert—the elementary school students represented an unthreatening audience. The basic writing students "knew more" just by virtue of being older and having had more experiences. Given that they could occupy a position of authority in these letters, I observed them writing comfortably in the *context of a writing class*. When they got letters back from their writing partners, they could see evidence that they had communicated clearly through their writing: their questions were answered; their stories garnered responses; their jokes were acknowledged.

Students from both sections called the experience "fun" when asked to reflect on it. For example, one of the students, Noah (all names are pseudonyms), stated, "I believe that [Writing Partners] is making this summer session more fun than what I was expecting. Because not only are we practicing our writing but we are having fun doing it." After we read the letters from the third graders aloud in class, Noah wrote: "Some of the questions they asked me were funny. Like this one I got from [my writing partner], he asked me 'Do you have recess in college?'" When Noah read this to our class, we all laughed. But in his reflection, he cast this seemingly silly question in a different light: "When I read this question it made me feel that I was making him think about college. I think that it is a good thing that he is thinking about college at so young a age." Note that, in this reflection, Noah uses language that points to his own authority: "it made me feel that *I was making him think* about college." Noah's experience with Writing Partners compelled him to claim agency in writing explicitly, and I believe that other students felt a similar sense of agency although they may have expressed it more implicitly. In my experience, most basic writing students do not refer to themselves as agents when they discuss writing for college classes; they tend to focus on what they have been told about their writing by previous teachers and not focus on their own authority as thinkers or writers.

For Noah, the confidence that he gained in helping his third-grade writing partner think about college appears in this reflection he wrote about one of his academic essays:

> I am not sure what voice I have created throughout this essay because I still am not sure what voice means. I read the link that is in the web ct assignment. From what I read to me voice was kind of like the way we have to think of audience. I am not sure if I am right but I am trying all I can to try to define the word voice. I think It is the way I phrase my sentences and who I am trying to explain something. I might be wrong but at least I tried. [. . .] I think voice means audience. Because the link about voice deals with trying to express the way I write in different forms of writing. I understand that I need to find my own voice to express my points of views or thoughts to my reader because that way it will become more of my own way of writing. And that will make me understand what I want to present in my essay. So I can present my essay with authority.

In this reflection, Noah starts with the standard apologetic rhetoric: the phrase "I am not sure" appears twice in the first sentence. In the middle of

the passage, I can see his confidence grow, though it is still tentative: "I might be wrong but at least I tried. I think voice means audience." By the end of the reflection, he moves to a place where he can articulate an authoritative plan for his writing: "I understand that I need to find my own voice," which is a far cry from "I am not sure." And, at the very end, he sums up his plan by stating that he needs to exercise his voice in order to "present [his] essay with authority." I think Noah will ultimately succeed in college because he has demonstrated the ability to think critically, to synthesize experiences, even though he has not yet demonstrated consistent control over the scribal skills of Standard Edited English.

Next to "it is fun," "learning about audience" was the most common response to the in-class freewrite asking students what they had learned from Writing Partners. For example, another student, Gabriel, asserts: "Writing Partners has taught me to cater my language to my audiences." While at first this may seem like a generic answer, I want to mention a few things that stand out to me about his response. He chooses a unique and exact verb: "cater." He may not have learned this kind of verb choice through the act of writing to a fifth grader (for example, he never used this verb in any of his letters), but he has been guided to actively think about his audience before making his word choices. In this case, he knew that I would be the reader of this in-class exercise, so he picked a verb that would be understood and appreciated by his intended audience. Furthermore, on his hand-written response, he had crossed out a misspelling of "language" and written the correct spelling next to it. On the day we did this reflection, I called it a "freewrite" in the syllabus and in my own lesson plan notes. Given the connotation of "freewrite," most students did not take the time to self-edit their work. Gabriel, however, did—another sign that he is absorbing the conventions of academic writing, which always call for proofreading. This is a practice I had all students engage in before sending the letters off; I emphasized that we needed to model good "school writing" for our partners. Finally—and most significant for me—he pluralizes "audience." This choice shows me that he acknowledges that different rhetorical situations call for different writing conventions.

His awareness of writing conventions for different audiences is also explicit in Essay Three, the one in which students wrote two different letters about the same subject: one to a professor and one to a family member or friend at home. In his opening paragraph, Gabriel explains that he has written to a professor and his older sister, and he introduces the concept of discourse community as the driving force behind the two different approaches

he took in writing the two letters. He states: "The source or root of these changes is in discourse communities. Discourse communities cause changes, such as language choices and structure, in how we communicate or write to our audiences." He follows this point with several examples of specific vocabulary choices that he makes, indicating that a professor would expect and appreciate words that his sister might have to look up in the dictionary, thus alienating her from the reading experience and possibly causing her to tease him for using such language. His most powerful example, though, is his comparison of his greeting rather than the examples in which he contrasts his vocabulary choices. Here is a lengthy passage from an even longer section in which he examines the conventions of greeting and titles:

> In both letters I addressed or greeted both my audiences by using titles to show respect to my elders. In other words, in both letters, I used words or titles to show respect to my sister as well as my professor. In the letter addressed to my sister, I addressed my sister by saying "Dear Manang Cris" while the letter addressed to my professor I addressed my professor by saying "Dear Dr. Loo." *Manang*, in my native language of Ilocano, means sister. It is used as a sign of respect to those who are older than you and are female. Also, giving the title of Doctor to an instructor shows respect to my elders. *Manang*, and Doctor were both used in my letters to show respect to those who I am writing to. In my culture, not saying *manang* to my elders is as disrespectful as not using "Dr" or "professor" when speaking or addressing my instructors.

Not only does Gabriel identify the different ways that he addresses his letters (earlier in the semester, he might have left it there), but he also analyzes why he has made these choices: codes of respect in different discourse communities. Suspecting that I (his professor audience) will not be familiar with Ilocano, he takes pains to explain not only the meaning of the word *manang* (which he appropriately italicized as a foreign word in an academic paper although he did not italicize it in the actual letter to his sister) but also the connotations of its use. In order to help his academic audience understand the impact of not using *manang* in the letter to his sister, he makes a comparison that his audience will understand: "In my culture, not saying *manang* to my elders is as disrespectful as not using 'Dr' or 'professor' when speaking or addressing my instructors." He thereby displays an ability to analyze the expected conventions of his home literacy and demonstratea that he

can work within the academic discourse community as well by tuning in to markers of respect and expected vocabulary choices, just as he initially did in his Writing Partners letters with greetings and vocabulary choices appropriate to his fifth-grade audience.

Ellen, a classmate of Gabriel, uses her letters, her reflections, and her formal essays to sort out her claims about authority to compose in academic and non-academic settings. In other words, she explores the simultaneous pull of home literacies and academic literacies. Ellen responded to the in-class prompt "What have you learned from Writing Partners?" by stating that answering questions with her writing partner in mind helped her "answer in the most clearest way I can to make my explanation understandable." Again, the third essay is optimized to reiterate student learning as Ellen discusses two letters she wrote about joining clubs at the university, one to a friend at home and the other to her Communication Studies professor. She starts by discussing the beginnings of her letters: "The way I classify my Professor as Ms. or Dr. has already shown a difference of how I would classify my friends at home with nicknames like Sensei, Napkin, and Square Bear." In a particularly insightful moment, Ellen describes the role *kairos* (i.e., choosing the argument that best fits the time, place, and audience) plays when she communicates in various discourse communities: "Even small aspects of the conversation are adjusted to fit the right time to speak, the right words to say and even the right tone to use. I find myself already changing my tone of voice and attitude towards my highly educated Professor." To "make her explanation understandable," as she claims Writing Partners has taught her to do, Ellen offers a specific example. She notes that in her letter to her friends at home, her descriptions of student clubs at the university do not have to be very clear; she elaborates: "[w]ithin my discourse community at home, my slang, anecdotes and inside jokes make explaining situations and feelings much easier than properly describing each aspect to my Professors at school." She then quotes her own letters, contrasting the word choice and tone:

> "I didn't feel like I was ready to join one yet, but I know I'm not about just ignore it and never try ya know, I just need to pull a sensei," is a quote from my letter to my friend Rosemary or "Square Bear," and is assumed that she is already aware of that phrase and its meaning that I need to be open minded and give things chances before turning them down. That non-descriptive sentence is dramatically different when I wrote to my Professor to explain the same idea as I

wrote, "This even opened my mind to giving groups on this campus a chance at showing me their goals and interests," and even further into the essay [letter] I had to explain more.

Ellen's claim that Writing Partners has prompted her to be more descriptive is certainly evident in her essay. While I include the long passage above to show how the lessons of Writing Partners transfer to formal essays, I want to note that Ellen claims also that "writing these letters allowed me to take the time to look deeper into the goals of each class." She refers to the need to examine the goals of assignments in a letter she wrote to her writing partner. In the course of explaining what she does in her Public Speaking class, she breaks down assignment goals, ostensibly to answer her partner's questions about what she does in college, but also as a cue to herself that she is able to critically examine assignments and make sense of what they are asking her to do; for example, she writes, "Even for a speech class we have to explain what were arguing through an essay." In the passage above, she states that she is looking into campus clubs' goals and interests before deciding which one to join. Writing Partners is helping Ellen develop the habit of critically examining assignments before responding and investigating the goals of organizations before committing her time and money to them.

Finally, Ellen exhibits a growing confidence, the sense of authority that I have been stressing throughout this article. In Ellen's case, though, the authority cuts both ways: she acknowledges that she knows what it takes to be a successful college writer while at the same time asserting the value of her home literacy. In a freewrite, she claims, "Writing Partners make me feel more sure of myself as an individual and as a student." This dual role is expressed again at the end of Essay Three: "Professors may be able to crack codes and analyze stories, but they won't understand my inside jokes and anecdotes as well as my friends unless I properly explain." These two sentences point to both her confidence and her developing capacity to construct herself as a student through writing.

Negotiating Academic Discourse

While academics may generally agree that *academic discourse* is loosely synonymous with Western patterns of argument and use of Standard Edited English, its role in basic writing instruction is highly contested. In the Spring 2005 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Caleb Corkery asks readers to consider the possibility that the perennial basic writing assignment—the

literacy narrative—actually distances some students from academic writing, instead of serving as a bridge between their home literacies and those of the academy. Corkery writes, "Literacy narratives are likely to be more meaningful to students who already feel the potential power of school literacy than to those students who already feel far from participating in it" due to their home culture being richly oral-based instead of print-based (58). I found myself agreeing with Corkery that the traditional literacy narrative is still a form of academic discourse if for no other reason than the audience—the teacher—is an authority on academic discourse. Even though the assignment might invite students to use narrative instead of exposition or research-based prose, it does not ask them to examine when, where, and why they use writing conventions, let alone interrogate the ways in which academic writing has been used as "a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize" and can "become a territory that limits and defines" students' possibilities for expression and communication (hooks 168).

Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington reject many such assignments because they fail to raise students' awareness about the ideologies surrounding academic discourse. These authors lament that

> [i]n many articles, identification of what basic writers lack is followed by a "logical" next step, a discussion of curricular strategies meant to alleviate the problems identified in the research. Yet, these strategies also perpetuate the view of autonomous literacy because they concentrate on developing acumen with those conventions, but not necessarily understanding them. [. . .] Instead the focus is on facilitating students' movement from one discourse (their own) to the other ("academic" discourse as it is defined in class), as painlessly as possible, through the development of particular writing strategies. (20)

Adler-Kassner and Harrington's claim is that assignments that acknowledge students' home discourse(s) still do not do enough to critically examine and compare the conventions of academic discourse to those that students may use with friends and family or in the workplace. As I allude to above, some basic writing teachers strive to have their students master academic discourse without feeling the need to interrogate its underlying ideology. Others like Adler-Kassner, Lu, and Ashley and Lynn are adamant that basic writing be taught as a political act/activity. Of course something as complex as basic writing pedagogy can never be reduced to a choice between two approaches.

Teaching academic discourse occurs along a continuum; Writing Partners is but one node along the continuum, one space of resistance to or relief from academic discourse—one space where students can "retool" and examine their language and their authority, and, thereby, potentially retool their experience of studenthood.

Service-learning scholar Nora Bacon's work is instructive here in regard to negotiating language, authority, and studenthood; she states, "[O]ne important effect of integrating nonacademic texts into the writing class [is . . .] if students write in more than one genre, in more than one rhetorical context, they have access to a *comparative* view of discourse—which is an essential step toward a *critical* view" (606, emphasis in original). I'd like to rephrase Bacon's statement to suggest that writing in different contexts gives students access to a comparative view of authority—not just discourse—which can lead to a critical view of authority. For example, I discuss Ellen's final draft of Essay Three above; at the end of her paper, she gets at the kind of identity/agency/authority negotiation that can lead to an awareness of the range of positions students can occupy in the academy and the ways in which academic discourse compels them to give up their home literacies and assimilate. She concludes her final essay of the semester with this sentence: "Professors may be able to crack codes and analyze stories, but they won't understand my inside jokes and anecdotes as well as my friends unless I properly explain." Here she refuses to completely give in to the pursuits of "cracking codes" and "analyzing stories." She reserves some of her rhetorical power, some of her writerly self, for telling "inside jokes and anecdotes" using discursive conventions that professors "won't understand."

Ellen's example shows that writing in different rhetorical situations can lead to the critical notion of writerly identity that Bacon describes. Ellen shows her ability to "effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one" (Carter 94). This alone would be encouraging to me; however, when looking at Ellen's entire sentence, one can see that she not only recognizes the different positions she can occupy as a writer, she also asserts her authority to choose among and move between those positions. She states, "[professors] won't understand my inside jokes and anecdotes as well as my friends unless I properly explain." This sentence can support at least two interpretations. First, Ellen's main point is that she has to be sure to give adequate explanations for her claims. Read in this vein, her sentence suggests that she is assimilating the conventions of academic writing, and, by extension, capitulating to them. She is

deviating from her previous habit of not explaining things fully in order to comply with academic standards from the English 1 Grading Rubric ("clear development, providing relevant specific details"). On the other hand, this sentence also illustrates Ellen's authority: her ability to write in her home discourse and her authority to choose whether to explain the inside jokes and anecdotes. Her professors cannot gain access to that knowledge without her explanation. Thus, Ellen has embraced her mutable position and asserted that academic writing conventions needn't be her only mode of communication or her only avenue for making knowledge.

Writing Partners and Basic Writing: A Conclusion

While most of my students had much more lived experience in common with the grade school writing partners than I did, at first they did not understand how to turn their knowledge about the audience into writing strategies. Like bell hooks' "ethnically diverse group of students in a course [she] was teaching on black women writers," my ethnically diverse group of students who knew many home discourses initially "never [realized] that it was possible to say something in another language, in another way" (171-72). But the letter format gave my students a school-sanctioned place to exercise their rhetorical muscles by calling upon discursive patterns outside of Standard Edited English. Many students began their letters with salutations such as "Wassup?" While making use of slang greetings and casual tones, they wrote clear and straightforward sentences consistently—sentences that were far less scrambled and convoluted than the sentences in the rough drafts of their essays: their approximations of academic discourse. The specter of the "teacher-as-audience" or of "the academic-insider-as-audience" loomed so large for these BW students, who felt like such outsiders at the academy, that they got distracted from writing clear sentences by the fear that their discourse was not sophisticated enough for an academic audience. But because the elementary schoolers viewed my students as experts on college and college-level writing, the students could relax and express themselves clearly in their Writing Partners letters.

I end on a note of confidence, inspired by the students I have seen do encouraging and impressive work through Writing Partners. While I would love to claim that 100 percent of the students in these classes passed at the end of the semester, that was not the case. However, only three students in each class failed the final portfolio, which is better than average at my institution, and amazing (to me) given some of the barriers they overcame.

For as Deborah Mutnick points out in "On the Academic Margins: Basic Writing Pedagogy," many basic writing students face "linguistic prejudice," "racism" and "class discrimination" at the university (194). Of course, I cannot correlate participation in Writing Partners and students' success on the final portfolio (especially given my small sample); but I do know that the Writing Partners program provided students with an audience that was not perpetrating (even unconsciously) race, class, or linguistic discrimination. In fact, the elementary school students approached the BW students' writing from a stance of admiration (just for making it into college) rather than from a position of suspicion or even neutrality. As I have shown, this led to student confidence, which in turn led to my confidence in the program.

My enthusiasm is also informed by the scholarly conversations about basic writing and transformational pedagogies like service learning (see, for example, Adler-Kassner and Harrington, Carter, Cushman, Hindman, Kraemer, Pine) and challenged by Lu's suggestions that students can retool not only language but also their relationship to it through innovative basic writing instruction. Among the ideas and goals I have as I embark upon a semester of teaching basic writing, helping my students to feel some confidence as writers and to take some pleasure in the act of writing is paramount. For me, Writing Partners is a partial step toward meeting these goals. Through writing to their partners, students learn the importance of sentence editing and of thoroughly explaining examples, and they develop a feeling of confidence as writers. Writing Partners helps these students connect powerfully with an audience through a school writing assignment. Of course, it does not achieve *all* of the learning goals for the course, but one assignment is not meant to. What Writing Partners does do is provide students with a meaningful audience who sees them as authoritative writers and thinkers and thus helps them to perceive writing as a multifaceted, purposeful act.

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And, finally, I want to express my thanks and respect for all of the college and elementary school writing partners.

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Appendix
Essay Three:
Reflection and Analysis: Choices We Make in Different
Discourse Communities

Now that you have written about your own experiences in both academic English and in your "home register," write a three- page essay in Standard Edited English. In Essay Three, your job is to compare and contrast your experience of writing the same letter in two different literacies. In addition to using your own reflection on your writing process, you are also required to refer to at least two class readings to further explain your point.

Analyze how your "voice" and language choices changed in each essay you wrote. What prompted that change? What effect do you think these changes would have on your audience? Is it easier for you to make a claim about your own experience when you write in Standard Edited English or in your home register? If so, why is that?

Readings for Essay Three

- "Discourse Communities," Tom Deans (handout)
- "College Brings Alienation from Family, Friends," John Gonzalez (handout)
- "Aria: Memory of a Bilingual Childhood," Richard Rodriguez (handout)
- "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?" Victor Villanueva (handout)
- "English and Englishes," *Keys for Writers*, Ann Raimes

Format Requirements for Essay Three

- Three pages
- Typed, double-spaced, page numbers on all pages except the first page
- First page: in the upper right-hand corner, put the following info: your name, the date, English 1, and "First draft" or "Portfolio draft"; below the list on the upper right-hand side and in the center of the page, put your title—choose a title that could go only on your paper.