

From: *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 35(1), 5-18

***Skills, access, and ‘basic writing’:
A community college case study from the United States***

MARY JANE CURRY

Open University, United Kingdom

Abstract

As policymakers in many parts of the world, including the United Kingdom, push for widening participation in higher education, the preparation of diverse students for the communicative demands of the academy becomes increasingly salient. As greater numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students, who may be unfamiliar with the conventions of academic communication, enter higher education, discussions about explicitly teaching academic literacy have increased. A ‘skills’ conception of learning concurrently dominates governmental and policy discourses. In response, this article argues against the use of the skills model in teaching academic writing by drawing on a case study of a ‘basic’ (pre-university level) writing course for English language learners (ELLs) at a U.S. community college. In particular, it examines the use of a version of the ‘skills model’ to teach writing to ‘non-traditional’ students. It concludes that in the context of this case study, in which students had varied backgrounds and educational goals, the skills model was insufficient for teaching writing and helping students gain access to the discourses of tertiary education.

Introduction

As we move into the new century, skills and learning must become the key determinants of the economic prosperity and social cohesion of our country. Knowledge and skills are now the key drivers of innovation and change. Economic performance depends increasingly on talent and creativity. And in this new economy, it is education and skills which shape the opportunities and rewards available to individuals. (David Blunkett, UK Secretary of State for Education, (DFEE, 2000, p. 3))

In the past decade, as the pressures of the ‘knowledge economy’ increase, a strong policy drive toward increasing participation in lifelong learning and higher education has emerged in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world (Woodrow, 2002). Although more students are participating in post-compulsory education, in general ‘the students recruited have not come from a sufficiently wide cross-section of the community’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 3). Thus attracting and supporting ‘non-traditional’ students¹ remain important issues. Beyond recruitment, the nature of the educational provision offered to ‘non-traditional’ students (McGivney, 2001) is one key to whether students are successful in negotiating the communicative demands of the academy—chiefly through academic writing—and can persist in education. With an increasingly diverse student population, whether students’ pre-existing forms of oral

¹ Stereotypically, ‘traditional’ students are considered white, male, Christian, middle-class, and native-English speaking; whereas the ‘non-traditional’ category encompasses students of colour, more women, non-native speakers of English, handicapped students, students of various religious affiliations, and those in the first generation of their families to enter tertiary education.

and written communication fit comfortably with those of the academy becomes crucial to students' success (Doloughan, 2001; Lillis, in press).

The skills discourse

UK government discourses often link widening participation to 'skills shortages' in the economy (Clarke, 2002; Coffield, 1999). The 'skills' discourse also informs the structure of the national curriculum into 'key skills' (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/curriculum_literacy/intro/nqf/). It carries through to the emphasis on study skills that many educational institutions have adopted in trying to prepare 'non-traditional' students for academic success. Similarly, tutors frequently express concerns about the academic writing of their students by referring to their perceived shortcomings in the traditional cluster of writing skills of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. That the notion of skills seems central to many of these discourses has prompted this response to what I see as a worrying trend in terms of efforts to prepare students to participate in the communicative practices of the academy. In this article I draw on a case study of the student experiences within a 'basic writing' course taught to non-native speakers of English at a U.S. community college. By offering a rich description and analysis of the shortcomings of the skills model of teaching academic writing, I hope to highlight issues of concern to educators and policymakers who are involved in widening participation in post-compulsory education in many contexts.

The recent history of widening participation in the United Kingdom shares similarities with the historical expansion of higher education in the United States. An ideology of educational opportunity evolved in the United States as the doors of the academy were pushed open, first around 1900, by the requirements of business and industry for trained workers, then at mid-century by government policy for veterans, and later, by demands from racial and ethnic minorities, women, and working-class students. After World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, popularly known as the G. I. Bill of Rights, provided access to higher education to three million veterans (Aronowitz, 1997). In the 1960s and 1970s, higher education again grew in response to the requirements of the economy, the Vietnam War, and students' increasing demands for access. Most of these students enrolled in state universities and local community colleges, which because of open access policies continue to be 'the most common point of entry into college for those groups that have traditionally been excluded from higher education' (Brint and Karabel, 1989, p. 35; Woodrow, 2002).²

UK further education (FE) colleges resemble U.S. community colleges in that they are usually open-admissions institutions that fulfil multiple educational functions (Dougherty, 1994).³ Figures 1 and 2 delineate the chief possible routes to and through post-compulsory education in the United Kingdom and the United States respectively.⁴ FE and community colleges are also allocated fewer resources than

² Community colleges enable students to earn secondary school equivalence qualifications in adult basic education, lifelong learning, vocational training programs, and general education courses that count toward an associate's (two-year) degree transferable to four-year institutions. However, less than 25% of community college students make the transfer into four-year institutions (Dougherty, 1994).

³ The U.S. system does not distinguish between 'further' and 'higher' education; community colleges are considered a (low-status) part of higher education.

⁴ These figures are simplified representations of complex and fluid structures that are difficult to map given the range of degrees and qualifications available and overlap between institutions. My focus here is on the access function of U.S. community colleges, which are most comparable to U.K. FE colleges.

other institutions, yet are frequently the chief providers of education for English language learners (<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/esol/front.htm>) as well as for students deemed to need remedial or ‘basic’ education in literacy and numeracy.

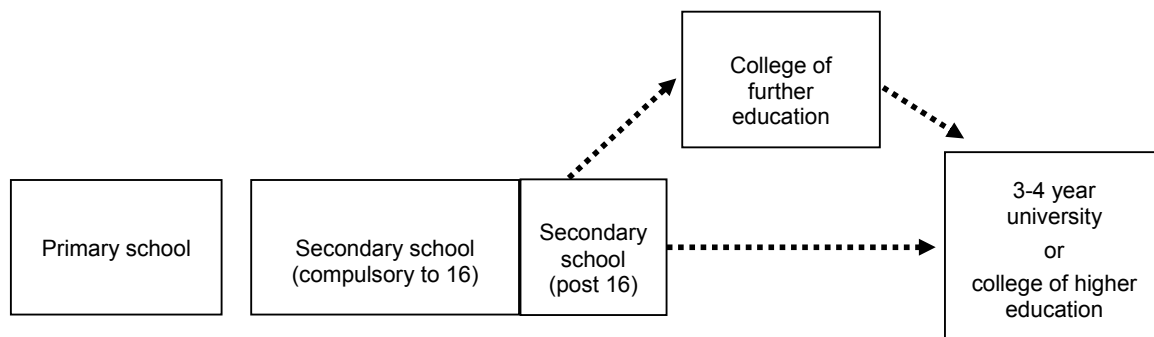


Figure 1. Routes through U.K. post-compulsory educational structures

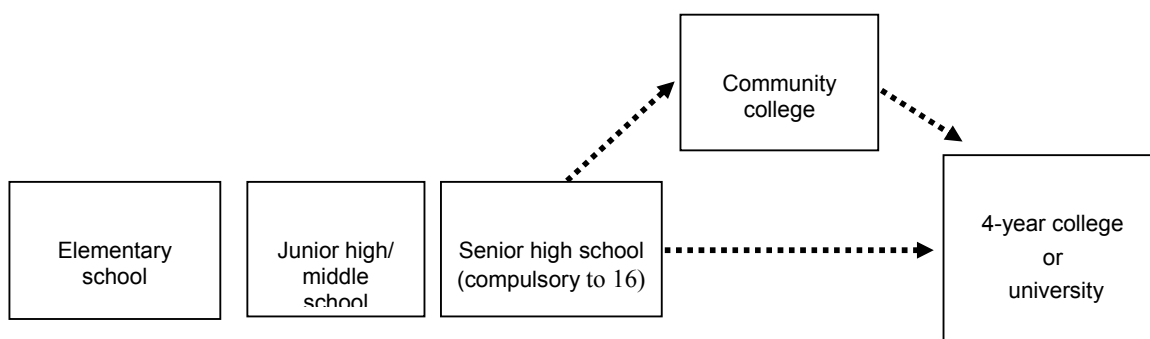


Figure 2. Routes through U.S. post-compulsory educational structures

In an elite educational system, assumptions that students learned the discourses of the academy through ‘osmosis, through exposure to the informally constituted community of scholars, academics, and their books’ (Malcolm, 2000, p. 19) was based on ‘traditional’ students, who tended to have both the family and academic background to ready them for the academic and cultural conventions of university (Gee, 1996). The increase in ‘non-traditional’ students entering further and higher education in the United Kingdom, South Africa, and other countries has prompted greater discussion about ways to teach academic writing, as evidenced by the growing number of publications, conferences and academic associations dedicated to this topic (Coffin et al., 2003, Ch. 1). Aspects of teaching academic writing under debate include using other text types besides the traditional essay, such as reflective journals; increasing students’ awareness of the writing conventions of different disciplines; increasing the amount and variety of writing required within the disciplines; and providing stand-alone writing courses, thereby moving writing tuition out of study skills centres and

into the mainstream curriculum. While these discussions are occurring in the academic field, a more traditional view of writing and literacy practices as discrete skills continues to hold sway in government discourses of education and economic development (Doloughan, 2001).

As a former teacher of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) and writing to native and non-native speakers of English in various adult education settings, I am interested in how (and if) students learn academic discourses. Given that the literature—and my own teaching experience—demonstrate that this process is complex and difficult, it is clear that academic literacy tuition requires knowledgeable teachers who have sufficient time to dedicate to the task. However, the working conditions of the multitude of part-time teachers at community colleges, adult education centres and, increasingly, universities frequently have a negative effect on the quality of education provided to ‘non-traditional students’. These conditions may therefore militate against the aims of government and institutional policies to widen participation in post-compulsory education.

In this case study of a writing course at a U.S. community college, I examine the curriculum, including writing assignments; the tutor’s feedback on student writing; and students’ responses to the course. I contend that the teaching writing as a set of discrete skills limited the participation of the diverse students in this particular class in the writing practices of the academy (Jones, Turner, and Street, 1999). Further, for the less-prepared refugee students, the use of this model reinforced academic writing as an ‘institutional practice of mystery’ (Lillis, 1999) and functioned as a barrier to higher education. Before discussing the case study, I will review the relationship between the massification of higher education and the teaching of academic writing in the United States, where the study took place.

The history of writing instruction in the United States is closely entwined with its social history, including increased access to post-compulsory education. From early on, writing instruction has comprised a distinct part of the curriculum in all strata of tertiary education, including elite universities (Rose, 1985). Indeed, ‘freshman composition’, or first-year writing, has become the most-required course at U.S. institutions of higher education (Crowley, 1999). U.S. students beginning their course of study often take placement examinations in writing and mathematics (e.g., Losey, 1997).⁵ Students categorised as ‘underprepared’ may then be required to enrol in pre-college, or ‘basic’ courses. English language learners are often placed in these courses, either into segregated ESOL courses or into mixed classes.

Basic writing is intended to prepare students to pass tests that certify equivalence to secondary (high school) education, enrol in college transfer courses including freshman composition, or enter vocational training programs. Because of high drop-out rates in basic education courses and the difficulties that many students encounter in these and subsequent courses (Sternglass, 1997), debates about the functions and place of ‘remedial education’, including basic writing and ESL are ongoing. A central question is whether basic writers should be mainstreamed into higher-level courses or continue to be offered separate courses that ‘shelter’ students as they enter institutions of tertiary education. The ‘abolitionist’ view of basic writing sees it as perpetuating the segregation of non-traditional students (Shor, 1997). Proponents of retaining basic education point to the historical role it has played in supporting access to tertiary education for under-prepared students (Greenberg, 1997). Whilst in principle I support the maintenance of basic education as a way in to tertiary

⁵ Because there are more than 3,000 institutions of higher education in the United States and very little standardisation in programmes, it is difficult to generalise across institutions.

education, I would advocate for improvements in the quality of instruction provided to the students and in working conditions for staff.

The case study

The ethnographic study of one semester of Basic Writing 3 (BW3) took place at Monroe Technical College, a U.S. community college.⁶ The course was offered free to students in the Alternative Learning Division (ALD). Such courses carry no degree credit, enrol the most non-traditional students, and are taught mainly by part-time tutors. BW3 was populated by 18 English language learners who came from Russia, Korea, Japan, Sierra Leone, Laos, the Dominican Republic, Taiwan, and the United Arab Emirates. Students' ages ranged from 18 to retired (with no age given). Some students had taken Basic Writing 3 in previous semesters. The tutor, George Cleary, worked as a part-time tutor at multiple jobs—including teaching writing at MCC to native-English speakers and English to migrant Mexican farm-workers--and as a medical interpreter. He had taught English overseas for many years but had little experience or training in teaching writing to English language learners.

Basic Writing 3 displayed characteristics common to English as a second language and basic education courses at community colleges, including increasing numbers of English language learners (Smoke, 1999) and a reliance on part-time instructional staff (Brill, 1999). Less typical was the wide range of educational attainment levels and future goals among students: two-thirds had first degrees from universities in their native countries. Of these students, five also had postgraduate degrees, including three Russians with PhDs. Some of the well-educated students were living in Monroe because it houses a large research university with which their family members were connected. Many of the students, including the focal students in the study, had aspirations to continue in tertiary education, whether at vocational, undergraduate, or postgraduate levels. Others, including three of the Russians, were retired and simply wanted to improve their English. Because of changing trends in immigration patterns, such student diversity is increasingly coming to characterise many institutions (Grubb, 1999), adding to the challenges of teaching a diverse student body.

The course met twice a week for a 15-week term, during which I gathered data through observations and audiotapes of the classroom, student questionnaires, and interviews, which I conducted twice with the instructor and once each with two administrators. I also interviewed six focal students in the first year of the study and one year later, and again three years later, with four of the focal students. I also collected writing samples, institutional documents, and the course textbook. The events of the semester challenged my initial goal of understanding how students learn academic argumentation. Importantly, the enacted curriculum in Basic Writing 3 shifted from a primary focus on writing to one dominated by an English grammar curriculum, as I explore below. Students clearly learned some aspects the 'hidden curriculum' related to this shift (Curry, 2001), for example, that the tutor rewarded the questions they posed about grammar and word meanings.

After the first few weeks of the semester, students began to drop out, with 75% of the students ultimately leaving the course (and in some cases, the college). The refugee students, who most needed assistance, were the first to drop out of the course and the least likely to re-enrol in basic writing or other courses. They cited difficulty in understanding the assignments and following what was going on in the course as the main reason for leaving. These students had full-time jobs and the least

⁶ Institutions and participants in this study have been given pseudonyms.

amount of time to come to the college to use the computers or seek academic counselling. In addition, many highly educated students dropped out of the course. For example, from frustration and boredom, Katarina, a Russian with a bachelor's degree in engineering, left in the middle of the semester and waited until the following term to begin vocational courses in preparing tax returns.

The enacted curriculum of Basic Writing 3 evolved into a predominantly skills-based approach to writing instruction. For instance, Cleary, the tutor, frequently extracted the grammar and sentence-level writing exercises from the course textbook, leaving aside the more integrated activities that were based in the book's readings on contemporary issues. He supplemented these exercises with decontextualized fill-in-the-blank tasks focusing on grammar and punctuation that he had created for a composition/communications workbook that he was writing. Cleary's focus on grammar echoes the kind of approach that Lea and Street (1998) call the skills model, which they propose 'has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts' (1998, p. 158). The skills model is grounded in a view that language is a transparent medium with which to convey pre-existing thought (Turner, 1999). It uses discrete activities such as exercises that highlight particular aspects of grammar, lexis, punctuation, and spelling, based on the belief that students need to master these skills before they can begin to write discursively.

Along these lines, Cleary asked students to do grammar activities separately from written assignments, rather than focusing on grammar in the context of making meaning in writing. Cleary's writing assignments centred on paragraphs rather than full essays. As a result, students wrote less text and thus created less writing for Cleary to mark, which was important in his work life as he was not compensated for time he spent out of the classroom. Table 1 lists all the writing assignments he made during the semester:

- Write one paragraph on:
 - A description of your room or house
 - A dynamic description
 - Your country/hometown
 - A 100-word synopsis of a textbook article on divorce
 - A description of your native language
 - A recipe from your country
 - A childhood remembrance
 - What is the computer to you?
- In-class essay on topic of choice
- Research paper, three to five pages, on topic of student's choice.

These assignments did little to introduce students to academic writing. Their brevity precluded students from gaining practice in structuring and developing extended ideas or arguments, creating transitions between sections of an essay, or sustaining the task of writing over time. In fact, during the class as he gave students' work back to them, Cleary sometimes chided students who wrote texts that were longer than he requested. However, in one instance Katarina responded to Cleary's admonitions to keep her essays short by asking, 'How can I express my thoughts there on a small paper?' (Classroom transcript, 4 February 1999).

The quantity of writing Cleary assigned students to do was considerably less than students would be required to do in university-level writing courses. However, he

believed that students would be able to move from writing short texts to writing longer pieces. In discussing his approach to teaching, Cleary used this metaphor for writing: ‘The paragraph is the brick that builds the building of writing. And if you can produce a good paragraph you can produce any length of document’ (Interview, 9 February 1999). For students in Basic Writing 3 who did not hold the goal of continuing in higher education, such as the retired Russians, these activities provided enjoyable writing practice in English. But for students preparing for degree courses in higher education, writing short pieces on topics such as providing ‘a recipe from your country’ gave them practice that was only loosely related to academic work.

In the same way that writing isolated paragraphs do little to help students to learn to write extended discourse, Cleary’s unrelated assignments did not support students in building toward a larger academic project, which is a common progression in U.S. writing courses. In the middle of the semester students were assigned a three-to-five page research paper on a topic of their choice. By this time only seven students remained in the course, most of whom planned to go to university. Most students wrote descriptive texts characteristic of much lower-level types of writing assignments—indeed, even of primary-school assignments. For instance, one student described the solar system while another discussed the advantages and disadvantages of various U.S. states as tourist destinations. Only one student, Minji, wrote a paper approximating what she might need to do at university. Her topic, ‘Effective Teaching of Musical Instruments for Preschoolers,’ was related to her goal of earning a second bachelors’ degree and becoming a music teacher. Minji was one of the students who had previously taken BW3 with another teacher; in addition her husband was a research sociologist at the university who helped her with her English writing.

Tutor Feedback on Student Writing

Besides making these brief assignments, Cleary’s feedback on students’ writing did not support them into more complex and developed academic writing. He provided little formative written or spoken commentary on students’ writing; his feedback came at the level of corrections to surface-level features of their texts. Extract 1 exemplifies his spoken, in-class feedback.

Cleary: I have the papers from last time and I am going to spend a little bit of time with you right now, just a second, okay, not much time. . . . Suk-yu, uh just no spaces right here, like that. Make sure this is the same kind of letters as down here, okay. Now let me see, what else. Yeah, I want you to recopy this with these corrections, okay, but I don’t think you should have a problem to understand. They’re suggested corrections, they’re not exactly, you know, as it should be done.

. . .

Now, when I give you the papers back, I want you to correct these papers for me, okay? Make sure that you go through them and correct them.

(Classroom transcript, 4 February, 1999)

This extract demonstrates how, in offering students feedback on their writing, Cleary directed his attention to mechanical issues such as capitalization rather than to the writing process as meaning making. Although he asks students to ‘correct’ their papers, his notion of students returning to work on their writing seems to be limited to superficial aspects of presentation. Indeed, Cleary focused heavily on the tidying up

of students' first drafts. He explained that a cleaned-up typescript allowed him to 'read the meaning':

That's really good, because you went back and took something and corrected it and gave me a copy. Now I can read the meaning. I don't have to think too much about all the mistakes. I can just read it and go, ooh, that's nice, yeah. Then I can appreciate your writing more. (Classroom transcript, 25 February 1999; emphasis added)

In this example, instead of using the revision of drafts of essays to help students develop meaning and clarify their thinking, Cleary conveys the notion that meaning is fixed in the students' first drafts and obscured by their linguistic errors rather than an ongoing process of development. Further, research has demonstrated that students sometimes respond to repeated correction of error by writing simpler rather than more complex sentences, thus limiting their possibilities for expressing complicated ideas in complex prose. As Rose (1983, p. 115) points out, 'Just about the only rhetorical connection the correctness model establishes is the negative sociolinguistic one: don't err lest ye be judged'.

Analysis of the Curricular Shift

My analysis of this case study ultimately centred on understanding the events of the semester, as the data I gathered did not support my initial interest in how students engage with academic argumentation. As noted, 75% of the students dropped out, in perhaps a manifestation of agency in face of instruction that was not tailored to their needs, goals, or abilities. The four students who continued longest in the course, Minji and the three siblings from a middle-class family from the United Arab Emirates, continued on to universities the next year (where they were all required to take additional preparatory ESOL writing courses).

I concluded that one of the factors in the shift in Basic Writing 3 from a writing curriculum to an English-language course was the tutor's lack of training in teaching writing, particularly to ELLs. Cleary's extensive experience and training in teaching English as a foreign/second language did not seem to transfer to teaching writing to English language learners (nor should we expect that transition to occur without training). Early in the term Cleary explained what he planned to highlight in the course: 'The most important things for me right away are the sentence fragments and the run-on sentences' (Interview, 9 February 1999). He thus adopted a skills approach from the start. He seemed not to recognise that many of his students were heading for more advanced courses where they would do extended analytic forms of writing. Late in the semester he set the remaining students to work on hyphenating compound adjectives, as in Extract 2, from the workbook he was writing:

- | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------|------|---------------------------|
| 6.1 | an East Asian war | 6.6 | North Indian desert |
| 6.2 | gold and ivory ornaments | 6.7 | a trust me smile |
| 6.3 | a don't lie to me expression | 6.8 | the car is well made |
| 6.4 | a thirty two inch nail | 6.9 | a glass lid kettle |
| 6.5 | cherry and blackberry filling | 6.10 | an eleven year old victim |

This exercise exemplifies Cleary's focus on decontextualized examples of linguistic usage. Activities of this nature could certainly be used to help students edit a final draft of a paper. But to make such activities the foundation of a writing course distorts

the message to students of what writing in academic contexts entails, moving the focus away from making meaning as a consequence of engaging with academic readings, ideas, and discussions related to particular disciplines to focus on surface-level features of writing such as hyphenation.

A second factor in the course's shift to a skills curriculum was that Cleary had learned little about his students' backgrounds and purposes for taking the course. Information was not provided to him, for example, about students' educational attainment levels or future goals. He therefore was not able to draw on students' strengths or weaknesses in designing and implementing the curriculum. Connected to this lack of specific knowledge about the students, their identities as English language learners were a third factor that drew the focus of the curriculum toward English language skills. Perhaps because of Cleary's experience teaching English abroad, his notion of his students' identities seemed coloured by their status as ELLs (for more discussion see Curry, 2002). Cleary explained the academic level at which he saw his students:

Most of these students are pretty elementary. Because obviously an American by this time has seen twelve or thirteen years of continually reading, writing English, and these people coming from a second language have a lot to overcome. They have all the concepts down, they're wonderfully agile mentally, but they have a real problem converting all of those into standard English writing. It's a real skill. (Interview, 9 February 1999)

Cleary seems not to distinguish between being a native speaker of a language and acquiring proficiency in academic writing, which resonates with his allegiance to a skills model. The idea of 'converting' concepts into English hearkens back to a translation model of teaching English (Khanna et al., 1998) that recapitulates the view of language as a transparent lens onto thought. Cleary's view that an American secondary school graduate would be automatically able to 'convert [concepts] into standard English writing' perhaps represents a misplaced faith in the academic writing abilities of U.S. high school graduates, one belied by the history of basic writing and first-year composition courses. It also demonstrates a lack of understanding that writing in a second language demands more than linguistic proficiency; it also requires a knowledge of the specific context of writing context, including aspects such as the author's purpose, the audience, appropriate style and linguistic register.

The institutional context

It may be tempting to see the almost 'worse-case' scenario of Basic Writing 3 as idiosyncratic, a case of bad luck for a group of students in a poorly taught course. However, the extent to which the instructor alone was responsible for the shift of Basic Writing 3 to a skills course is arguable. Like Cleary, others at Monroe Community College also saw ELLs as requiring different kinds of academic work than native English speakers. Dean Ricardo Garcia explained this occurrence as common in the Alternative Learning Division:

The philosophy that we've had is that at a certain point you break out of ESL and then you go into the basic ed. When we offer the writing class they tend to be filled by ESL, ex-ESL students, and then we tend to treat it as an ESL class. I mean, we shouldn't. It should be a writing class. (Interview, 22 October 1999)

The institutional environment thus supported the shift in the curriculum from writing to grammar on the basis of the students' identities as different from 'traditional' students. The dean's familiarity with this trend was indicative of other failures of the administration to support BW3. For instance, few students had been offered the opportunity to create a Personal Learning Plan, which was division policy; nor were they offered much other academic advising. Cleary was hired three weeks after the term had begun, and was given little orientation, training, or support throughout it. As a new tutor in the Alternative Learning Division, Cleary was never observed in his teaching, whether for formative or evaluative purposes. Likewise, students were not asked to complete questionnaires about the course and Cleary's teaching, a common practice in U.S. tertiary education and in other divisions of Monroe Community College. Further, as a part-time tutor working on an hourly basis, Cleary suffered from a shortage of (paid) time to plan the course, respond to student writing, and meet with students. He lacked an office and keys to classrooms. After the semester Cleary identified the kind of support he would have wanted:

One of the major improvements I would say in this whole teaching business is give a specific outline of a course and pass it on, pass on maybe a syllabus, a completed syllabus from previous semesters. And keep refining that syllabus with a couple of focal points. Just give me a general outline of what's expected by a certain date, make it sequential, make it realizable, [with] goals and objectives. (Interview, 19 June 1999)⁷

In the U.S. system, part-time adjunct instructors like Cleary are in a double bind. Traditionally, lecturers maintain almost complete control over the syllabus and content of their courses, operating with few constraints whether from internal or external assessors. This practice has contributed to academic freedom, yet it assumes that the instructor has the appropriate content knowledge as well as time to plan the course. In the case of adjunct instructors like Cleary, however, such freewheeling practices can translate into a lack of support, as he indicates, which then affects the quality of instruction.

Replacing the Skills Model

Having critiqued the skills model to teaching writing, the question remains of what more appropriate approaches might be successful in contexts like Basic Writing 3. In Lea and Street's (1993) tripartite taxonomy, the academic socialisation model is proposed as some improvement over the skills model, with a focus on the 'acculturation of students into academic discourse' (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 172). Beginning academic writers are seen gradually to gain experience with the types of writing they will need to undertake in their disciplinary courses, in a process of being 'scaffolded' by the tutor, who is seen as more expert (Bruner, 1983; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The socialisation model assumes that students are uniformly aiming toward a common goal, that of learning academic discourses. Basic Writing 3, however, was heterogeneous in terms of students' backgrounds and future goals—and the particular combinations of these embodied in each student. The course

⁷ In U.S. institutions of HE, there is little systematic external checking of course syllabi, exams, etc.; individual lecturers/tutors are usually left on their own to design and deliver courses.

encompassed students with low educational attainment levels but high aspirations, such as the immigrants from Laos and Sierra Leone, who wanted to be a police officer and a lawyer respectively. It included students with high educational attainment and low aspirations, as in the case of the retired Russians. In between these poles fell the students who persisted the longest in the course and subsequently entered university programmes, as well as other students who dropped out. This diversity in BW3 carried through to the types of writing that interested the students. For example, Olga, the student who wrote about U.S. states as tourist destinations, was a retired Russian with a PhD; she was comparing Texas and California in order to plan her vacation. In this way the basic writing context involved non-academic types of writing, with which some students were satisfied.

It is possible to build, however, from non-academic writing tasks to more extended analytic and argumentative texts (Curry, 1996; Kutz, Groden, and Zamel, 1992). Lea (1998) distinguishes between the 'reformulation' and 'challenge' approaches that students may take toward academic literacy. She describes adult Open University undergraduates who brought their life experiences to bear on literacy activities on courses students had frequently selected especially for their relevance to their life situations. If the use of students' life experiences is carefully built into curricular tasks, a course between 'reformulation' and 'challenge' can be navigated.

The academic literacies approach comprises the third aspect of Lea and Street's (1998) taxonomy. Academic literacies concentrates on the 'student's negotiation of conflicting literacy practices' (p. 172). By drawing on students' experiences and backgrounds, the academic literacies approach offers students the possibility of engaging with the dominant discourse practices of the academy by examining and challenging the ideologies and values they represent. It may require, however, that tutors possess a level of awareness of the functions of academic discourse that will enable them to subject such discourse to critical scrutiny by students at the same time that they are attempting to learn it. It is not obvious that BW3 tutor Cleary, for example, possessed this knowledge or awareness.

Conclusion

This case study raises a number of issues to consider in providing academic writing tuition to 'non-traditional' students. In classrooms such as Basic Writing 3, where students bring great variation not only in linguistic and cultural backgrounds but also in educational attainment levels, teachers are presented with greater challenges than with more homogenous groups of students. A prime concern is the quality of the teaching, one that Kennedy echoes in discussing widening participation in the United Kingdom (for a discussion of U.S. community college teaching, see Grubb, 1999):

Sadly, the quality of teaching for new learners is not of universally good quality. . . . The reasons for this include the recruitment of inexperienced teachers, a lack of support for the expanding number of part-time teachers, and insufficient sharing of learning materials amongst teachers. A high proportion of classes are taught by staff who do not possess specialist qualifications in teaching basic skills or teaching English for speakers of other languages. (1997, pp. 80-81)

The factors that Kennedy cites here are strikingly similar to those I have identified in the BW3 case study. With increasing numbers of 'non-traditional' students in higher education, the training of their tutors in methods of teaching academic writing,

including issues specific to teaching ELLs and of multicultural pedagogy (Nieto, 2002), thus becomes increasingly important. Knowing one's students is also crucial: tutors need the time and resources to learn about students' educational backgrounds, career or vocational objectives, and reasons for study (Lillis, 2001; Rose, 1989). This information can enable tutors to design and build curriculum not only to respond to students' needs and interests, but also to draw upon students' strengths. As the goal of widening participation often results in larger class sizes and the increased casualization of labour, however, this goal may be even more difficult to attain than previously (Grubb, 1999).

The improvements I am advocating, based on this case study of BW3 and my teaching experiences, accord with the recommendations of the UK's Working Group on English for Speakers of Other Languages (<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/esol/front.htm>). The issues that have emerged here may be useful in contemplating the provision of dedicated writing courses to students entering tertiary educational institutions: teacher training and support, student-based curriculum development, and institutional practices including hiring. If the goals of widening participation are to be met—for more, and more diverse, students not only to enter but to stay and succeed in tertiary education—better educational provision based on a fuller understanding of the students themselves and the communicative demands they face in higher education is required.

As I have tried to demonstrate, the skills model of teaching academic writing was insufficient to meeting this goal in Basic Writing 3. The assumption that students must first master discrete skills and will then transfer this atomistic knowledge into their academic writing is unwarranted. In fact, research in international contexts suggests that few of these types of skills-based activities provide gains in learners' understandings (Hillocks, 1984; Wyse, 2001). Instead, the skills model highlights student error rather than building on students' existing competences (Kutz, Groden, and Zamel, 1992). This approach contributes to the deficit model of certain types of students (Nieto, 2002) and can undermine students' confidence, creativity, and comfort with their own identities (Doloughan, 2001; Lea, 1998). I am not taking a position against the teaching of features of 'linguistic accuracy' such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation (Coffin et al., 2003), but advocating for these concerns to be the final focus of editing specific texts rather than the primary focus of academic literacy instruction.

In addition to speaking to the skills discourse in current circulation, these conclusions respond to the current debates about basic education. Rather than abolish basic education or other institutional structures designed to support students new to the practices of higher education, improvements should be made to instruction in academic literacy practices by hiring well-prepared teachers and providing them with working conditions that will enable them to know their students and to teach them appropriately. As widening participation initiatives continue around the world, these issues are likely to remain salient in many contexts.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the study participants, the journal reviewers and editor, Julia Clarke, Lisa Ganobscik-Williams, Anna Magyar, and Theresa Lillis for comments on earlier drafts, and Sarah P. North for the figures.

References

- Aronowitz, S. (1997). Academic unionism and the future of higher education. In C. Nelson (Ed.). *Will teach for food: Academic labor in crisis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brill, H. (1999, Sept./Oct.). False promises of higher education: More graduates, fewer jobs. *Against the Current*, 35, 34-39.
- Brint, S. & J. Karabel. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1978). The role of dialogue in language acquisition. In Sinclair, A., R. Jarvella, & W. Levelt, *The child's conception of language* (pp. 241-256). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Clarke, J. (2002). A new kind of symmetry: Actor-network theories and the new literacy studies. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 34(2), 107-122.
- Coffield, F. (1999). Breaking the consensus: lifelong learning as social control. *British Educational Research Journal*, 24(4), 479-500.
- Coffin, C., M.J. Curry, S. Goodman, A. Hewings, T.Lillis, & J. Swann. (2003). *Teaching academic writing: A toolkit for higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Crowley, S. (1999). *Composition in the university: Historical and polemical essays*. Pittsburgh: University Press.
- Curry, M.J. (2002). Cultural models in the U.S. writing classroom: Matches and mismatches. M. Graal & R. Clark (Eds.). *Writing development in higher education: Changing contexts for teaching and learning* (pp. 45-61). University of Leicester, UK.
- Curry, M.J. (2001). Preparing to be privatized: The hidden curriculum of a community college ESL writing class. In Eric Margolis (Ed.). *The hidden curriculum in higher education* (pp. 175-192). New York: Routledge.
- Curry, M.J. (1996). Teaching managerial communications to native and nonnative speakers of English. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 59(1), 27-35.
- Department for Education and Employment. (2000). *Opportunity for all: Skills for the new economy. Initial response to the National Skills Task Force Final Report from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment*. Sudbury: Department for Education and Employment.
- Doloughan, F. (2001). *Communication skills and the knowledge economy: language, literacy, and the production of meaning*. London: Institute of Education.
- Dougherty, K. (1994). *The contradictory college: The conflicting origins, impacts, and futures of the community college*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*, 2nd ed. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Greenberg, K. (1997). A response to Ira Shor's "Our apartheid: Writing instruction and inequality." *Journal of Basic Writing*, 16(2), 90-94.
- Grubb, W. N. & associates. (1999). *Honored but invisible: An inside look at teaching in the community college*. New York: Routledge.
- Hillocks, G. (1984). What works in teaching composition: A meta-analysis of experimental treatment studies. *American Journal of Education*, 93(1), 133-170.
- Jones, C., J. Turner, & B. Street. (Eds.) (1999). *Students writing in the university: Cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Khanna, A.L., M.K.Verma, R.K. Agnihotri, S.K.Sinha. (1998). *Adult ESOL learners in Britain*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Kennedy, H. (1997). *Learning works: Widening participation in further education*. Coventry: Further Education Funding Council.
- Kutz, E. Groden, S. Q. & V. Zamel. (1992). *The discovery of competence: Teaching and learning with diverse students*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lave, J. & E. Wenger. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Lea, M. (1998). Academic literacies and learning in higher education: constructing knowledge through texts and experience. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 30(2), 156-171.
- Lea, M. & B. Street. (1998). Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157-172.
- Lillis, T. (in press). An 'academic literacies' approach to student writing: Drawing on Bakhtin to move from critique to design. *Language and Education*.
- Lillis, T. (2001). *Student writing: Access, regulation, and desire*. London: Routledge.

- Lillis, T. (1999). Whose 'common sense'? Essayist literacy and the institutional practice of mystery. In Jones, C., J. Turner, & B. Street (Eds.) *Students writing in the university: Cultural and epistemological issues* (pp. 127-147). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Losey, K. (1997). *Listen to the silence: Mexican American interaction in the composition classroom and the community*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Malcolm, J. (2000). Joining, invading, reconstructing: Participation for a change? In J. Thompson (Ed.). *Stretching the academy: The politics and practice of widening participation in higher education* (pp. 12-22). Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- McGivney, V. (2001). *Fixing or changing the pattern?: Reflections on widening adult participation in learning*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rose, M. (1989). *Lives on the boundary*. New York: Penguin.
- Rose, M. (1985, April). The language of exclusion: Writing instruction at the university. *College English*, 47(4), 341.
- Rose, M. (1983). Remedial writing courses: A critique and a proposal. *College English*, 45(2), 109-128.
- Shor, I. (1997). Our apartheid: Writing instruction & inequality. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 16(1), 91-104.
- Smoke, T. (1999, Sept./Oct.). Preparing students for higher education. *ESL Magazine*, 2(5), 20-23.
- Sternglass, M. (1997). *Time to know them: A longitudinal study of writing and learning at the college level*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Turner, J. (1999). Academic literacy and the discourse of transparency. In Jones, C., J. Turner, & B. Street (Eds.) *Students writing in the university: Cultural and epistemological issues* (149-169). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Woodrow, M. (2002). *Pyramids or spiders? Cross-sector collaboration to widen participation: Learning from international experiences*. Report to the Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education. Available at: <http://www.shafc.ac.uk/content/library/circs/02/he2502/he2502.htm#Subject>. Accessed 21 June 2002.
- Wyse, D. (2001). Grammar for writing? A critical review of empirical evidence. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 49(4), 411-427.

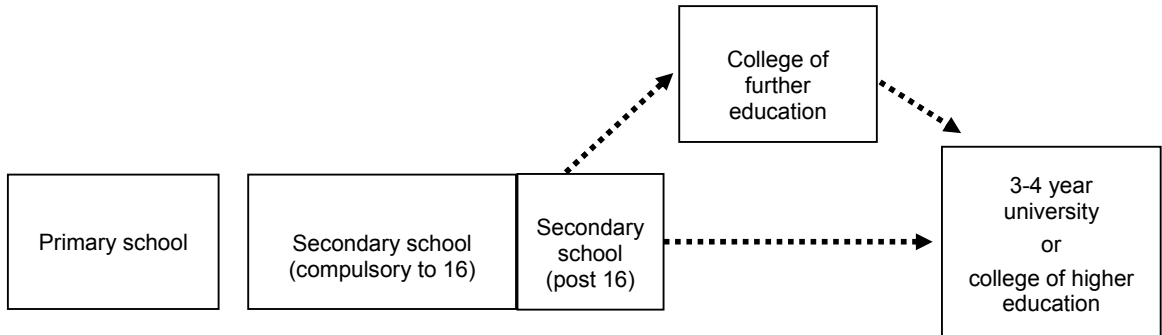


Figure 1. Routes through U.K. post-compulsory educational structures

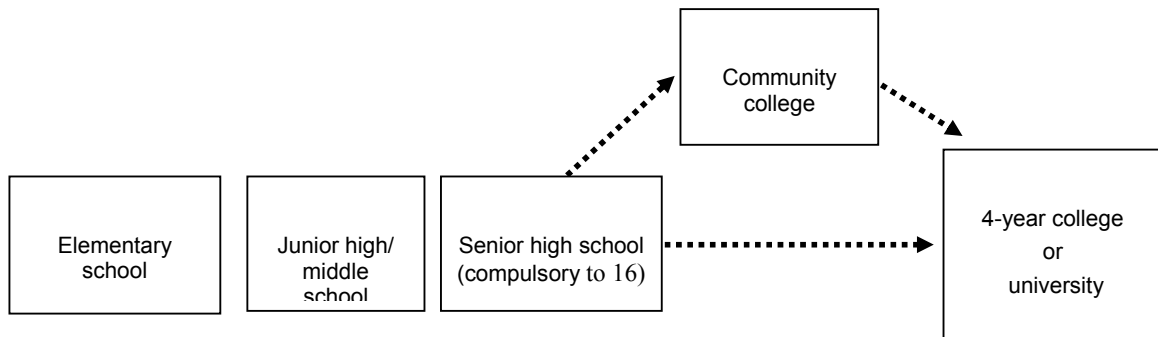


Figure 2. Routes through U.S. post-compulsory educational structures