# Transfer Institutions, Transfer of Knowledge: The Development of Rhetorical Adaptability and Underprepared Writers

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This essay describes the results of a scholarship of teaching and learning project examining the transition of underprepared first-year writers at an open admission institution as they struggled to translate their first-semester instruction into second-semester success.

"It takes time to get a feel for the roles that readers can be expected to comfortably play in the modern academic world."

**Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction"**

Although transferring to a baccalaureate program is not a universal goal of two-year college students, many enter open admission institutions intending to pursue a four-year degree. *Change,* a publication of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, reported in 2006 that "40 percent of all first-time freshmen begin their postsecondary careers in community colleges" and that 79% of those students planned to go on for a bachelor's degree. The same survey data showed that 15–20% of students who began at a two-year college actually went on to complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Doyle). These numbers reveal, fairly dramatically, that, despite their plans for degree completion, many students who begin their studies at two-year institutions are at risk for probation, suspension, and dropping out of higher education.[1]

How do we explain these numbers? Patrick Sullivan's opinion essay, "Measuring 'Success' at Open Admission Institutions," in the July 2008 issue of *College English* can contribute to our professional understanding, as teachers at two-year institutions, of this low level of degree attainment by students who begin their careers at our campuses. Calling for a reassessment of what constitutes success for students enrolling at these colleges, Sullivan persuasively argues that students at open admission universities have often invested less and prepared less for the goal of "obtaining a bachelor's degree," a phrase that he believes our students use in different ways than students who begin at selective and residential baccalaureate-granting universities.

Sullivan's essay provides an important context for understanding student writers at open admission institutions; they may intend to pursue upper-division

coursework but are still learning what it means to achieve a college degree, as they further refine their expectations and struggle to meet the demands of higher education. We strongly concur with Sullivan's analysis of the "personal and academic skills and attitudes" that students bring with them to their work at two-year institutions and of how they are different from students at more selective institutions; at the same time, we hope to extend Sullivan's discussion with our current essay. In addition to the differing levels of financial, emotional, and psychological commitment required in advance of students' enrollment in four-year institutions (versus two-year institutions), we need to consider the sometimes significant, but not insurmountable, gap between the precollege preparation of our students and the reading and writing skills necessary for transferring to four-year institutions.

What we hope to do in this essay is make clearer the needs and abilities of a specific student population with whom many of us work at the two-year college. Kelly Ritter, in her September 2008 *College Composition and Communication* essay, "Before Mina Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale, 1920–1960," calls for research into the "silent or invisible student populations that are at risk of being forgotten through the convenience of standardized histories and limiting labels" (39). We respond to Ritter's call for a "re-definition of *basic* in composition studies using local, institutional values rather than generic standards of correctness" (12) by reevaluating the skills and needs of beginning college writers at open admission, two-year institutions. These students can occupy a misty netherland where they are neither basic writers nor proficient college-level writers. Many of these students leave high school with an emerging understanding of academic writing and, thus, test out of developmental and nondegree preparatory courses. At the same time, they lack the more advanced critical reading skills and rhetorical strategies necessary for enrolling in and successfully completing most writing-intensive college courses. This often-ignored student population may be ready for degree-credit writing courses at open admission campuses while remaining unprepared for the core first-year composition course required by most four-year institutions. Thus, this group of students enters its first year of college on our campus—and at many other open admission institutions across the country—with standardized test scores that are acceptable for admission to higher education. However, these scores also suggest that those students aren't able to perform critical reading tasks, even though they may comprehend basic (generally, informational) college-level texts at the level of "literal recall," "low inference," and "high inference" (*Achieve* 16). The additional skills of analysis and interpretation that require more complex cognitive skills are still developing in this student population, which may not be immediately obvious from the students' ACT or other placement test scores. Furthermore, this student population may be able to punctuate sentences correctly and adhere to conventions for standard written English usage, even as they are still developing the higher-order analysis, thinking, and organizational skills that are required in college-level writing.

With so much attention paid to defining basic writers, the language and semantics of basic writing, and the sorts of educational experiences that may or may not benefit students who are unprepared to do college-level reading and

writing, the student we address faces very particular challenges to success in his or her college career. In this essay, we describe the results of a scholarship of teaching and learning project that conducted a qualitative study of the writing development of 21 student writers during the first year of college, tracking their progress in an English 101 course[2] and following them as they moved into the core, transfer-level composition course. We use the writing of three students as case studies to illustrate the challenges that beginning college writers face as they transition from introductory to degree-requirement composition courses and attempt to meet the demands of increasingly complex reading and writing tasks.

Our classroom research reveals that students who straddle the basic/developmental writing and college-level writing borderland struggle to translate instruction into rhetorical adaptability. When faced with challenging new reading and writing tasks in the core, transfer-level composition course, students in our study reverted to rhetorical strategies typical of pre-English 101 instruction. Our findings emphasize the importance of cultivating students' metacognition as part of the writing curriculum, highlight the benefits of process pedagogy at all stages of precollege and first-year college composition, and argue for text-based writing assignments in introductory writing courses.

Although, admittedly, it is difficult to characterize "prevailing views" in any field, in composition/writing studies it would be fair to assert that influential voices within the field (Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans, 1994; Downs and Wardle, 2007) have resisted the assumption that first-year composition courses prepare students for writing in the academy, even as others have explored the necessity of this position (Knodt, 2006). For example, Downs and Wardle proposed that instructors might approach first-year and sophomore-level composition courses as "Introduction to Writing Studies," rejecting the idea that "[w]hile some general features of writing are shared across disciplines . . . these shared features are realized differently within different academic disciplines, courses, and even assignments," rightly calling it a "category mistake" to assume that first-year composition can prepare students for all of the rhetorical demands of their college educations (556). However, it is our contention that our writing program at a two-year, open admission institution, and at others like it, must necessarily bear the responsibility of preparing students for the academic writing that they can expect to do in their college career after—or concurrent with—their first-year composition course(s). It is precisely this challenge—to help students cultivate a rhetorical adaptability that will take them into their future coursework—that we take up in this essay.

## Method of Study

Our project began with the development of a redesigned English 101 course focused on bridging the gap between precollege writing and the core composition course. We approached our classroom research and the design of the bridge course with recommendations by research in the field of writing and the recommendations of our disciplinary organizations in mind (Writing Study Group of the National

Council of Teachers of English Executive Committee, 2004; Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000; see also Heaney, 2006; Maloney, 2003). Recognizing, as April Heaney does, that at-risk student populations "experience higher levels of frustration with critical reading and academic writing" (29) than their academically better-prepared counterparts, we structured the course around critical reading and source-based writing, specifically on the topic of cultural identity and academic literacy.

This emphasis in form and content reflects contemporary disciplinary trends outlined in Lunsford and Lunsford's 2008 *College Composition and Communication* essay "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life: A National Comparative Study," a replication of a 1986 study of "error" in student writing that examines the shifts in the last two decades in demands placed on students in their writing courses. The authors observe that the contemporary trend in writing instruction in the United States is academic writing that is research- or argument-focused, with the majority (473) of the 877 essays that they studied asking students to make supported or marginally supported arguments. In their quantitative study of error, two major findings are relevant to our current discussion. First, the average length of student essays analyzed had doubled during that time period, from approximately two pages to a little over four pages. Second, the sort of essay that students had been assigned changed dramatically: "Although the first study included some reports and a fair number of readings of (mostly) literary texts, the majority of the papers were personal narratives" (793). As Lunsford and Lunsford note, contemporary writing instruction has replaced personal narrative and literary analysis with argument and research, suggesting that "student writers today are tackling the kinds of issues that require inquiry and investigation as well as reflection and that students are writing more than ever before" (Lunsford and Lunsford 793). Given the heavy emphasis on research and argument that Lunsford and Lunsford document, nearly all college students can expect to do writing that takes a position and that engages with the ideas of others.

Most important, our research methodology was designed with both the recognized practices in our field and disciplinary conventions in mind, including close reading of texts (student writing), discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis, the inclusion of student assignments designed to measure metacognitive dimensions of the writing process, and a portfolio assessment that documented student growth over two semesters. Our study uses student writing as evidence for the conclusions that we draw. Perhaps most crucial for the purposes of the present discussion was our collection of the first essay from the students' English 102 class that addressed the targeted learning outcome. Of the twenty-two students who were initially enrolled in the fall English 101 course, fourteen students completed the specified assignment in the spring.[3]

Over the course of two semesters, the research team (the two authors, the English 101 instructor whose course we studied, and a tutorial writing specialist) used a rubric to evaluate the learning outcome: "Independently adapt a self-generated text's thesis, structure, and style to a particular writing task defined by

audience and purpose." Each level of performance was characterized not just as "meets" or "exceeds" expectations but was judged by our assessment of the student's readiness to move into the core writing course. The research team met twice per week in the Fall 2007 semester to analyze each student's writing and document the student's growth over the course of the two English 101 assignments, according to their success in each of the five features (audience, purpose, thesis, structure, style) described on the rubric. The collective judgments about each student's fall semester writing were then used as a basis for contrasting with the student's first essay in the core writing course, in conjunction with instructor narrative assessments using our project rubric. We made holistic judgments about the students' achievement of the learning outcome as demonstrated by their English 102 essay, designated by the various instructors of those courses.

For the purposes of this essay, we discuss our findings drawn from our analysis of the first essay from the transfer-level course (English 102) that our English 101 students completed. Although we encourage readers to consider the limitations of generalizing from our small sample, we also see our analysis as part of the tradition in writing studies research that values discourse analysis, close reading, case studies, and other sorts of established, qualitative research methods that are used widely in the field of composition studies.

## Audience and Purpose: Case Studies in Rhetorical Choice

The key observation of our research team's study of student writing involves the challenge that students face responding to new rhetorical situations with appropriate college-level reading and writing strategies. When moving into the more advanced writing course, students struggled to translate their English 101 learning into rhetorical flexibility—that is, the ability to make appropriate choices for (and determine the contours, shape, and demands of) new writing assignments when the purpose, audience, and, subsequently, structural and stylistic conventions had changed. Similarly, students had difficulty completing writing tasks that required accompanying college-level reading strategies. If the primary goal of our project was to measure the learning outcome that we initially posed as our research question (i.e., adapting an essay to the demands of a specific writing task), by all objective measurements, most students failed to achieve this outcome. Of the fourteen students who moved into the core-level composition course, ten received assignments that mirrored the types of source-based writing tasks that they had completed in English 101 (meaning that we were unable to measure, really, their ability to adapt to new sorts of writing tasks). Four students received an unfamiliar type of writing task that required critical analysis of sources, and they subsequently failed to meet the expectations for their English 102 assignment targeting our learning outcome.

More specifically, ten students wrote argumentative essays that required them to conduct independent research, take a position on a topic, and support that position with evidence. Students had practiced this sort of rhetorical task frequently in the English 101 course (which didn't necessarily demand that students read their

source material critically, simply that they comprehend its content). Similar source-based research assignments are common in the transfer-level course, both on our campus and at most institutions (as Lunsford and Lunsford documented). Of the ten students, nine completed the new research assignment at a proficiency level that met or exceeded their performance on the less difficult final source-based essay in the bridge course—although most of them tended to report on information rather than analyze sources. The remaining student did not demonstrate proficiency at adapting to the expectations of a college audience in English 101 (which she was taking for a second time), and she did not pass the core transfer-level course.

More interesting, perhaps, were the students who were faced with an entirely different sort of task that required them to adapt to a new rhetorical situation and engage critically with an unfamiliar text. In the bridge composition section that we studied, both marginally prepared and more advanced students for this level struggled to adapt their rhetorical choices to new writing tasks, specifically those that asked them to do independent research, read sources critically, and formulate a thesis independently. We have chosen to focus in detail here on three of the students whose English 102 assignments required them to tackle writing assignments that were very rhetorically difference from those that they had successfully completed in English 101. Not surprisingly, we concluded that underprepared students (if these students are representative) have difficulty adapting their reading and writing strategies to meet the needs of a college-level academic audience that they have not previously encountered.

### Whitney: A Case Study in Rhetorical Regression

Whitney tested into a nondegree credit basic writing course but chose to enroll in English 101. At the beginning of the semester, she struggled to make the transition to college-level writing and thinking. In the first paper, she was asked to synthesize two sources in response to the writing prompt "What is an educated person?" Whitney's thesis statement, "Therefore, Richard Rodriquez and William Cronon both discuss the importance of being and [sic] educated person, and also what it means as well," displayed an attempt to find commonalities between the two sources but, like the rest of her essay, tended toward shallow comparisons. Her essay explicitly failed to meet the demands of the assignment of synthesizing two sources; instead, she used precollege strategies, such as listing, summarizing, and reporting on information rather than analyzing and taking an independent position. Whitney represents many underprepared students who enter college with the understanding that academic writing means summarizing the ideas of others rather than developing a complex thesis based on evidence. Thus, in the early 101 essays, the main point of her entire essay and subsequent topic sentences for each paragraph became secondary to reporting on assigned readings.

Her metacognitive awareness of the writing process was also at a considerably novice level. When assessing her final portfolio, Whitney wrote that a strength is that "I do maint [sic] points very well and that I stick with them," even as she said

later that she still needed to work on this: "sometimes I forget what my point was." Her understanding of revision was also at a very emerging level. In describing her revision process, Whitney noted, "My last paper did not have any main points in it at all, I thought it was to hard to put in main points. Then I figured out the different topics that I stuck with and put main points in." For her, they were less important parts of the essay that she could add to later drafts. Whitney's self-evaluation for the course portfolio further revealed an evolving but inadequate rhetorical knowledge of controlling ideas. She identified creating and adhering to main points as one of her strengths—although her actual essays produced throughout the study suggest otherwise.

Whitney's self-analysis of her final essay demonstrated an emerging understanding of college-level paragraphs, organized around key supporting points that advance the thesis. She clearly recognized that the paragraphs of her essay entirely lacked main points and instead focused on general informational topics. Nevertheless, she was unable to transfer that knowledge successfully to her own writing, because she tried to insert argumentative topic sentences into the essay *after* drafting it rather than developing the essay based on a thesis statement and supporting points. Thus, over the course of her first semester, Whitney began to develop a sense of what the main points of paragraphs should look like in a college essay (using assertive topic sentences), but she still struggled to adapt her writing process in a way that would allow her to structure an essay on a new topic with new demands using that knowledge.

Like many marginally prepared students on our campus, Whitney made substantial progress toward writing at a college level during the bridge course while still retaining some precollege writing strategies. Whitney especially progressed in her use of specific evidence in support of her claims. Although the thesis of her final essay is not quite at a college level, it takes a position rather than stating a topic: "Language use is adapted differently with different people, with different language, and with different discourse communities. Realizing how language adapts to different situations and different discourse communities is shocking." Her understanding of *how* to take a position is limited, and she relies heavily on a precollege strategy, by focusing on a directional statement that presents a list of topics for each section of the essay. Furthermore, Whitney, like many developing college writers, mistakes editorial commentary or value judgments for analysis. She did attempt to deal with abstraction in her thesis, in contrast to earlier essays that were more informational and less complex, and she goes on to support this thesis more successfully than in her earlier work, using specific examples such as "That brings me into my polish [sic] speaking language. I speak it very slow and soft and I am not confident in what I am saying." She provides similar examples for her analysis of her language adapting at home with her family and with her boyfriend.

And yet, it is apparent from Whitney's final paper that managing any kind of evidence that isn't personal example is still a struggle and thus signals the difficulty that she subsequently faced with managing a complex text in the core transfer-level course. For example, in her discourse analysis paper, Whitney organized her paper

in a way that is intuitive for novice writers but that more sophisticated writers eventually move past, especially in their management of sources. When conducting self-analysis, she understood paragraphs as units of meaning, but when attempting to integrate outside field research, she simply let it stand as independent paragraphing, using topic sentences that report on her methods for conducting research rather than advancing the thesis: "I had an interview with my polish [sic] speaking grandma" and "I had another interview which was my boyfriend." Even at the end of the bridge course, which was focused on critical reading and source-based writing, Whitney was struggling to manage information that she didn't generate herself.

Predictably, Whitney completely failed to meet instructor expectations in a transfer-level course assignment that asked her to analyze a scholarly article critically, take a position on a text, and find and integrate sources independently into an essay. It's important to note that Whitney met instructor expectations on the first few assignments for the second semester course, which asked her to take a position using familiar strategies used in the English 101 course. Whitney performed the least successfully on an assignment also undertaken by two of her other 101 classmates who ended up in the same 102 section (Jana and Sarah, discussed in the following section). This assignment asked students to "select a critical article [from a shared class text on the *Harry Potter* series] and develop three questions about the article that encourage analysis and discussion. As the assignment explained, "For each question, you will write a one-page (exactly one-page) response." Students were asked to incorporate examples from the article and from one credible outside source to support their response to the questions. Whitney ignored assignment instructions by beginning her paper "To start off with I will provide a brief summary of the article 'Controversial Content in Children's Literature' out of the book *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter.*" Rather than write an analysis or argument, Whitney responded with unsupported opinions and relied heavily on popular culture rather than on outside credible scholarly sources to support her claims:

> "I feel that personally this issue of Cedric's death should not be an issue."

> "For instance, I was watching a C.S.I. show and there was a scene during the show were [sic] the detectives were at a dumpster pulling out a dead prostitute."

> "I really don't feel that teenage boys are going to get lost in the fantasy of Harry Potter and start to believe in an evil force or stat [sic] to join forces with an occult or cult."

Whitney failed to adapt her writing according to the assignment instructions and regressed to informal academic tone, although her instructor reported that she successfully completed argumentative essays that did not require independent analysis of sources.

### Jana: A Case Study in Rhetorical Conservatism

Surprisingly, even students who demonstrated better preparation for the transfer-level course did not demonstrate a proficiency in adapting their writing strategies to

unfamiliar academic tasks, although they completed earlier assignments with a fairly advanced level of proficiency when asked to take a position using familiar strategies from the bridge course. Jana provides a fascinating example of a student who was highly successful in English 101, even at adapting to the purpose and audience of college-level writing assignments. However, her self-assessment survey reveals that she had a low level of metacognitive awareness about her own writing—that is, she could define the terms "purpose" and "audience" in a rote way but was unable to self-assess those features effectively in her own writing, a limitation that we argue prefigured the challenges that she faced in the English 102 course. For instance, when asked to "briefly describe how you made decisions about the following elements as you drafted this essay," Jana's analysis of her purpose is disconnected from the requirements of the assignment and instead focuses on her thesis: "This is a big one, I use this [sic]. I figure out what point I am trying to get a cross [sic] with this paper. I work it out from there usually." Her description of how she makes decisions about audience suggests a similarly incomplete understanding of college-level writing strategies: "I basically base it on either the students or the teacher, [sic] it helps a little but not that much." This disconnection between Jana's performance on fairly straightforward college writing tasks in English 101 and her awareness of her own rhetorical strategies is indicative of what becomes a later problem with a more difficult English 102 essay, where she failed to meet expectations for most learning outcomes because she was unable to adapt to the demands of an unfamiliar assignment that required her to find and analyze a source independently.

Interestingly, in the English 101 course, Jana successfully analyzed and synthesized two sources assigned by the instructor. She was able to offer an intermediate-level thesis that responded to the writing prompt and achieved the purpose of the assignment, which was to synthesize two assigned texts. Her thesis for essay two, "Rodriguez and Cronin [sic] both discuss the importance of being not only educated but also being a part of society," recognizes that she needs to pull out similar features of the two texts on education. She broke her thesis into subtopics that analyzed commonalities between the two texts while taking a position. For the bridge course assignment, Jana clearly understood the writers' arguments and organized her essay using a complex structure that synthesized the ideas of both writers in each paragraph rather than addressing each text in two completely separate sections of her essay, as less advanced writers in the same class tended to do. Her topic sentences organized her essay around themes that the two assigned readings shared:

> "both are stimulating [sic] quick to discuss what it means to be a truly educated person."
> "Rodriguez and Cronon discuss that you must learn everything that has been learned."
> "Being free is an important part of both the *Hunger of Memory* book by Rodriguez and *Only Connect* [sic] by Cronon. It is important because of the contrast with this issue."

> "Another very important contrast that is made by both Rodriquez [sic] and Cronon is ethnicity and heritage."

For many underprepared college students, the intellectually sensible way to organize texts is by summarizing what each writer says—even though the task of synthesis demands that they integrate the two sources at a more sophisticated level. In this sense, Jana's organizational strategy showed her to be writing at an advanced level that demonstrated readiness for English 102.

In contrast, Jana was unable to analyze sources in the transfer-level course when required to find them independently. In completing the same assignment on the critical article on the *Harry Potter* series that Whitney was asked to do, despite having succeeded at an intermediate to advanced level in the bridge course at analyzing assigned course texts, Jana reverted to pre-101 rhetorical strategies. In addition, she failed to meet instructor expectations for addressing the purpose and scope of an unfamiliar but only slightly more difficult analysis assignment in English 102. For example, Jana did not pose a critical analysis question about the scholarly essay, as the assignment directed, nor did she assert a thesis that made an argument in response to the question, failing to respond to—or perhaps accurately interpret—the assignment prompt. Surprisingly, she didn't have a thesis statement. Besides making these misjudgments about the purpose of the assignment, this student writer made inappropriate decisions about audience needs, such as including an online "Wiktionary" definition for the term "death." In short, she focused on the topic of the article (death), not on the text, and primarily discussed her feelings about death rather than engaging analytically with the independently located text.

Jana also demonstrated a disjunction between her performance on the English 101 essays and the English 102 assignment in her ability to make judgments about conventions and adhere to sentence-level expectations, diction, and style. For example, in her work for the bridge course, even in the earliest essay that we studied, she achieved a command of formal academic tone and style on a par with or beyond that of her classmates. By contrast, in her 102 essay, she frequently relied on conversational and informal language, such as "So, I guess that" and "Let's just say that." She often directly addressed the reader with phrases such as "I will give you something else to consider." Her multiple misjudgments in tone reveal a lack of rhetorical knowledge about how to address a college audience—a misjudgment demonstrated much less frequently in her work for the 101 course. She repeatedly used second person "you" and directly addressed the reader, such as imploring her audience to "imagine" particular scenarios. She also failed to find scholarly sources, as required by the assignment, and used inappropriate metarhetoric (such as "In an article I was reading").

Jana and Whitney were not the only students to cling to precollege writing approaches. Jana reverted to informational writing instead of applying the new techniques that she had learned in the bridge course; Whitney appeared to return to an informal tone, use of popular rather than academic research sources, and editorial commentary instead of analysis. Sarah, another student from our study enrolled in the same 102 course, remained attached to her own precollege rhetorical tool: a

five-paragraph essay format that she had used successfully in high school. Sarah's reliance on the five-paragraph structure limited her ability to develop her ideas fully in the English 101 course. In the next course, that same strategy made it impossible for Sarah to adapt her writing to address the needs of a new audience and adhere to the requirements for the article analysis assignment.

To us, these are instructive examples because of the disconnect between the expectations of the assignment and the students' ability to achieve them, especially given their previous performance on essays that required them to use formal academic tone and meet a demanding rhetorical purpose, such as analysis and synthesis. In our notes about Jana's overall English 101 development, we commented on her improvement through the writing process and her ability to proofread and minimize sentence-level errors and indicated that she seemed ready to move on to English 102. Although she did retain the ability to cite correctly in MLA style, Jana was unable to apply much of what she had learned about academic writing conventions in the bridge course when faced with a new (but not especially complex) type of source-based assignment the following semester. It is notable that the English 102 instructor reported that Jana was able to transfer her knowledge of college-level rhetorical strategies and writing conventions to other, more familiar types of assignments.

### Melanie: A Case Study in Literacy, Technology, and Metacognition

Melanie is an appropriate example of an advanced basic writer/novice proficient writer whose work reveals how students may not appear to be "at-risk" in their early coursework, but, as they move into new rhetorical tasks and more demanding coursework—and, in this case, new writing environments—their risk for probation and suspension increases dramatically. As an English 101 student, Melanie earned high grades but moved into an entirely online English 102 course that required writing and reading strategies that were very different from those that she used in 101 and coupled those demands with the reading and writing intensity of online learning. She eventually dropped out of the course, but not before completing the first two assignments. Cynthia Selfe has argued that writing teachers have an obligation to pay attention to the ways that "technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country" (414). Melanie's performance in the bridge and online 102 courses is a clear illustration of this relationship between literacy and technology.

In English 101, Melanie, like many of her peers, made substantial progress toward developing college-level writing strategies while still demonstrating an incomplete understanding of academic writing conventions. For example, her second essay used an inappropriately informal tone and showed a weak command of the content of the reading. Melanie was able to write a thesis that supported a claim about the two assigned texts: "In the articles 'Only Connect' and *Hunger of Memory*, Cronon and Rodriguez describe that becoming a member of society is very important in becoming a well-educated person." Even though the wording is

shaky, Melanie offers a somewhat complex idea, that education is an initiation into a society, and the bulk of her essay demonstrates some of the important cosmetic features of academic writing, such as topic sentences, transitions between ideas, and relatively error-free sentences. However, she often used summary rather than analysis and struggled to make substantive connections between the two texts. Melanie's final essay in English 101 made these same missteps—with a distracting and inappropriate use of metadiscourse and conversational tone. As a result of her ability to write a satisfactory thesis and support it with examples from a text, she passed the English 101 course with a relatively high grade, even though some of her work did not demonstrate substantial thinking about the texts under discussion. However, this inconsistency persisted into 102 and was indeed part of the explanation for her failure to complete the core course.

At the time of our initial analysis of Melanie's work, we were curious about what it was in the final English 101 assignment that led her to regress in her command of formal academic tone. A close analysis of her work reveals why Melanie can be characterized as an at-risk student writer, namely, her still-emerging command of judging audience and purpose. For example, although the final assignment on discourse communities for English 101 asked students to analyze their own language use—an assignment that should have signaled expectations for formal academic tone and analysis—Melanie mistook the assignment as an invitation to discuss both personal experience and personal feelings about language. Her self-assessment noted, "I just wrote as I would normally talk in a group of people," revealing that she had enough understanding to characterize her tone accurately but not enough rhetorical knowledge to recognize that it was inappropriate for the assignment. Consequently, when Melanie was asked to complete a difficult assignment in the transfer-level, online English 102 course, she made missteps similar to those of Sarah, Jana, and Whitney.

Two major misconceptions reveal themselves in Melanie's approach to the online 102 assignment: First, she used an informal tone for a formal essay assignment, an "Exploratory Essay" that asked her to chart her thinking process as she researched a topic during the second phase of a research process. Second, this metacognitive assignment demanded that students demonstrate a sophisticated and advanced level of self-awareness, because they needed to document their reading and writing process as they conducted research and worked toward a larger research essay. However, Melanie reverted to a precollege rhetorical strategy, reporting on information, specifically, how to care for the elderly and working in a nursing home as a nursing assistant, rather than a discussion of the multiple perspectives that her research process *should* have revealed to her as she engaged in investigation and inquiry about the topic.

## Our Classrooms

Based on these findings, we advocate an expansion of the professional definition of "underprepared" or "at-risk" student writers. The current disciplinary under-

standing accounts only for students who place specifically into noncredit college courses; in fact, many students whose test scores, and perhaps even timed writing samples, place them into degree-credit courses may not bring with them the sorts of sophisticated reading and writing skills that instructors expect for college-level coursework (see Ritter, 2008). Our study revealed four major challenges that underprepared students face in adapting their reading and writing strategies as they move from introductory classes into core transfer-level composition courses and that are relevant to thinking about pedagogical approaches to both of these courses:

1. When faced with an assignment that was perhaps different but not necessarily more difficult, students floundered or failed to make suitable judgments about how to meet the needs of the reading audience.
2. These developing writers struggled to take a position on a *text* instead of using the text to report on information or support a claim; they reverted to the precollege strategy of commenting on the ideas or topics in the sources versus analyzing the sources.
3. Students were fairly successful at analyzing and synthesizing sources from shared class readings; however, they struggled to analyze independently located sources and seemed to have difficulty transferring college-level reading strategies to new, unfamiliar texts.
4. Particularly telling is the reversion to high school rhetorical strategies. When they encountered something new or different, these students didn't build on the strategies and techniques that they had learned in English 101; they instead reverted to precollege strategies, even though, according to the 101 and 102 instructors, these same students had performed adequately and sufficiently at a college level on more familiar assignments.

All of the students that we studied entered the English 101 course ostensibly vetted by standardized test scores as prepared to do college-level work; nine out of fourteen students in our study successfully completed the first source-based writing assignment in the core transfer course when faced with a writing task that required them to take a position and support a thesis with evidence. Similarly, three out of the four students who struggled to adapt to an unfamiliar sourced-based writing task in the core course successfully completed other argumentative writing assignments that were similar to those from the 101 course. The other student dropped out of the course before completing other assignments.

Although these numbers may be dismaying from an instructional perspective, because they suggest that students were ill-prepared for new rhetorical situations and writing tasks, we can be heartened by Lunsford and Lunsford's findings that the majority of programs in the United States are asking students to do argumentative writing with or without supporting evidence. That is, these students are prepared to do the kinds of writing that they are most likely to encounter in their college career. In this sense, our instructional design was successful. A bigger challenge is how to design learning experiences that cultivate rhetorical adaptability and the ability to analyze a text independently because so much of the work that students do in the first year of college and beyond requires a solid foundation in these skills.

From a pedagogical perspective, we argue strongly for providing underprepared and at-risk student writers with writing courses that engage students in critical reading, writing from sources, and taking a position on complex topics, as David Bartholomae argued as long ago as 1993 and Rodby and Fox claimed again in 2000. Our study has shown, and James Gentile has noted, that a challenging college-level reading and writing assignment "calls the student to move beyond the self; to think in the context of others, and of texts, and of ideas; and then through that process, to move back to the self, informed and critical" (325). Similarly, Patrick Sullivan has claimed that, in a college-level composition course, "having a student read, consider, and respond to multiple readings grouped around a thematic question or issue would be ideal, in my judgment. The primary goal, regardless of the number of readings assigned, is to introduce students to an ongoing conversation that is multilayered and complex" ("Essential" 17). We concur with Gentile and Sullivan that adapting to academic writing tasks and developing college-level thinking depends heavily on a student's ability to use appropriate reading strategies to move beyond precollege approaches (such as reporting on information) to analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Source-based writing is a major focus of core transfer-level composition courses and writing-intensive classes in the disciplines, and yet many (if not most) students enter open admission two-year institutions still developing the ability to understand, critically read, and write about academic texts, or, at least, their ACT scores suggest this.[4] For example, when reading assignments are disconnected from writing tasks in introductory composition courses, students miss a key opportunity to develop the critical reading and thinking skills that are necessary for successfully enrolling in higher-level college courses. Our analysis of students' source-based writing suggests that underprepared students develop critical reading skills slowly, over the course of more than one semester. Therefore, text-based writing assignments in introductory composition courses play a crucial role in preparing students for more advanced coursework, both in English and in other disciplines. Furthermore, we argue that many underprepared students cannot successfully make the leap to source-based writing assignments in transfer-level courses without first receiving multiple opportunities to write about reading, discuss college-level texts, and think independently and critically about what they read.

Our study also reinforces the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition," which asserts knowledge of processes as an important learning outcome for first-year composition. Our English 101 students who moved into English 102 sections that emphasized student conferences, process pedagogy, and portfolio assessment were better able to meet instructor expectations, especially when their initial efforts were wildly off-base. Similarly, many of the students in the English 101 class who made the most progress toward developing the writing skills necessary for enrolling in the core composition course also spent the most time working on multiple revisions of each essay. Underprepared writers are still developing the ability to adapt their rhetorical strategies to college-level writing situations, and they understand how thinking, reading, and writing at a college-level

are substantively different from what they did in high school. Therefore, timely instructor feedback and multiple opportunities for revision provide students with the rhetorical knowledge that is necessary for making the transition to transfer-level composition courses and other disciplines that require both the same type of skills and new and different skills (see Durst in Smagorinsky 2006). Adaptability and intellectual agility require that students can make judgments about new tasks that they haven't encountered before.

In 1975, rhetorician Walter Ong perceptively observed that "Writing calls for difficult, and often quite mysterious, skills. Except for a small corps of highly trained writers, most persons could get into written form few if any of the complicated and nuanced meanings they regularly convey orally" (57). Our current study must be framed by an awareness that we do not live in a world or work in institutions where clear communication of ideas can remain a mysterious skill for the few, and we, as English teachers in the two-year college, are explicitly charged with its demystification. We recognize that the cultivation of rhetorical adaptability is a lifelong process; more advanced students bring with them a greater comfort level with texts and ideas than the students that we have identified as "underprepared." This may be a frustrating acknowledgment for writing instructors who work with at-risk student populations. However, we are heartened by the recognition that instruction *does* make a difference for students in remedying a lack of preparation to make an academic argument, knowing that, when those students are prepared to take on the sorts of writing tasks common in academia, they can meet that challenge.

**Notes**

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2. Our three-sequence course, English 098: Basics of Composition, English 101: Composition I, and English 102: Composition II, does not easily divide the student population based on placement as developmental; that is, English 101 students are a border student population who demonstrate the ability to use standard written English (sometimes not) but who lack the more sophisticated critical reading, writing, thinking, and research skills that would prepare them for the core course.

3. Three students failed or withdrew from 101, one completed 101 successfully but did not enroll in 102, one student completed 102 but not the designated assignment, one student retook 101, one student transferred to another institution, and one student enrolled in 102 but left the course before completing the designated assignment.

4. For example, the average ACT score in reading for developmental and bridge course students on our campus is 18 (out of 36), a score that ACT's "College Readiness Standards" indicate will prepare students to "Identify a clear main idea or purpose of straightforward paragraphs in uncomplicated narratives," "Locate simple details at the sentence and paragraph level in uncomplicated passages," and "Draw simple generalizations and conclusions . . . in uncomplicated passages" (see www.act.org/research for more).

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