When he served as poet laureate, Robert Pinsky created The Favorite Poem Project: Americans Saying Poems They Love. Ordinary people—cabdrivers and lawyers and housewives—read their favorite poems and explained, in their own words, what the poems mean to them. For example, a fifth-grade student read “The Sloth” by Theodore Roethke and explained its importance to her. These explanations reveal the strength of poetry, its power to express real emotion in the lives of regular people, not just teachers and critics. Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters seems to be an extension of this project. Pinsky’s openness to new voices, new perspectives, is central to the structure of the book. The brief headnotes at the beginning of each poem are the most interesting things in this book for creative writing teachers because they reinforce Pinsky’s overall approach to literacy instruction within the context of creative writing: learning to write poems begins with reading poems, and finding your own inspiration requires minimal direct instruction.

Pinsky’s headnote on Edward Thomas’s “Adlestrop” illustrates his pedagogical style. “Adlestrop” is a poem about a train having to stop unexpectedly and a passenger stepping out on the platform, waiting for the repairs to be made. Adlestrop is the name of the town, where there is not much to see—just a field, some grass, and some birds. This is the entire headnote: “Freedom includes the freedom to engage the ordinary, to press into it and find its connection to plentitude or mystery. Write a poem about a name or a word.” (34). Pinsky offers just one short sentence of direct instruction, but even here he takes a tentative tone. It is easy to imagine a poet, following Pinsky’s example, might give herself the assignment to write a poem about a memory or about sounds because the closing stanza focuses entirely on the sound of birds.

Perhaps the most prescriptive headnote is about Marianne Moore’s “Silence.” Pinsky writes: “Worth trying: the abstract word for a title; the unexpected dictum from an unexpected character; the enigmatic, playful image; the snap of wit at the end. Or maybe, these elements but in a different order?” (15). These step-by-step instructions are more typical of a standard textbook and feel somewhat out of place here. Even within them, however, his attitude is cautious. He is satisfied to suggest in
the last line that readers may find their own order.

His approach is very different than the one used by another former poet laureate, Ted Kooser, in another recent book on how to write poetry, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*. Kooser does not hesitate to share his opinions and perspectives on particular poems or poetry in general. In contrast, Pinsky rarely shares his opinions, and this may frustrate some readers. Readers may want him to share more of his thoughts on the current state of poetry, how he wrote some of his poems, or how to write their own poems. Only in the short foreword to each chapter does he occasionally use the first person and talk about what a poem meant to him or what he learned from it. He is satisfied just to give “hints” about these things, and some readers may not be satisfied with only hints (xiv).

As a supplementary text for a creative writing course, this small volume would encourage students to continue reading and writing poetry outside of the classroom. It reassures students that they can find their own inspirations for writing poems within the reading of other great poems. This capacity is not gained through prescriptive instructions but by working together with other poets in order to write a new poem. Pinsky remarks, “Imagining an assignment may be the first step to imagining a poem” (xiv). He believes other poets, even student poets, are very capable of participating in the creative process, of working within “this spirit of art” (xiv). He comments directly on this participation when he writes in the headnote to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “Margaret:” “Hopkins had read Campion, Herrick, Johnson, Shakespeare—and he made his unique transforming, original music that grows out of theirs” (90). This is exactly what the structure of the book encourages in other poets, to read great poems and to create their own music from the experience.

**Works Cited**


Rob Wallace
West Virginia State University
Institute, West Virginia

---

**Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms**


At no time during my teaching career has a book landed on my desk at a more apropos time than W. Norton Grubb’s *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms*. It arrived in the midst of a campus debate on whether to eliminate below-ninth-grade-level developmental English and math courses created in response to increased student
enrollment resulting from the economic recession beginning in 2007. Seven years later enrollment has declined, and the community college “completion agenda” and “performance-based funding” have become de rigueur: we are no longer about access but rather graduation rates and job training. In the words of the governor of North Carolina, community colleges should receive funding “not based on how many butts in seats but how many of those butts can get jobs” (Frank). Basic Skills counters these current policies by offering a research-based argument that developmental education plays an essential role in increasing graduation rates and in fostering the community college’s democratic mission.

In truth, there are significant problems in adding too many below-college-level courses. As Grubb explains, “[If students] are assessed three or four levels below college level, there is very little chance they will complete a developmental sequence” (ch.1). Grubb believes that if community colleges become “remedial campuses” they may struggle to fulfill their academic, transfer, or job preparation roles. Despite these potential problems, he makes a convincing argument that ineffective pedagogy—rather than too many courses—is a significant cause of the problems plaguing developmental courses.

In Basic Skills—as in his Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges—Grubb and his research team conducted much of their research inside California community colleges, the largest system in the country and one they feel is “representative of the nation as a whole” (ch. 1). Their central finding was “remedial pedagogy”—described as “behaviorist” in nature, uninspiring, and focused on the transfer of information—is a contagion that pervades developmental courses in writing, reading, math, and ESL (ch. 3). In short, “remedial pedagogy . . . violates almost all of the precepts for good teaching” defined as that which moves beyond information transfer, fosters critical thinking and student engagement, and offers real-life contexts for student learning (ch.3). For example, developmental writing courses continue to rely heavily on a remedial pedagogy that uses “drill and practice,” which breaks writing down into its subsets from part to whole (word-sentence-paragraph approaches) and uses work sheets and computer programs (like PLATO) to teach grammar (ch.3).

In contrast to remedial pedagogy, Grubb discovered innovative departments use an “alternative approach” for developmental writing courses, including ESL, that involves teaching writing as a process, focuses on writing fluency, relies less on textbooks, and uses full-length nonfiction and a student’s own writing as the context for learning grammar (ch. 4). That teaching writing as a process is considered an alternative approach, and that drill and practice still pervades developmental writing courses, should leave TETYC readers shaking their heads and questioning how remedial pedagogy remains the dominant form of instruction, particularly after being discredited by composition research (Rose; Writing Study Group). Basic Skills provides several explanations for why remedial
pedagogy persists: “laissez-faire” (ch. 9) community colleges where students and faculty appear free to do what they want; the lack of basic skills programs, both in terms of courses and colleges (ch. 4); faculty concerns about a lack of time due to high course loads: the reduced time taken to grade a worksheet rather than to comment on student writing (ch. 3); the high percentage of marginalized part-time faculty (ch. 3); and the undue influence of textbook companies on curriculum (ch. 3). In other words, remedial pedagogy infects not only a classroom but also an entire campus.

Grubb acknowledges the challenge in improving student success rates in basic skills courses and admits achieving 100 percent student success is not possible, but he is also steadfast in his belief that simply cutting basic skills courses is not the answer. Grubb argues student success rates in basic skills courses can be improved, but doing so will require changing the remedial pedagogy culture that exists on community college campuses. To this end, Basic Skills offers twenty-one recommendations (ch. 10) for fostering change, including eradicating remedial pedagogy, developing innovative programs, improving placement tests, and assigning full-time faculty to developmental courses. Community college administrators, faculty, and support staff would be well advised to implement these recommendations in their respective colleges. Not to do so threatens one of the community colleges’ central missions: providing students a chance—often a second or third chance—at higher education.

**Works Cited**


Keith Kroll
Kalamazoo Valley Community College
Kalamazoo, Michigan


*Rhetorical Strategies and Genre Conventions in Literary Studies* is informative, incisive, readable, and—while perhaps not written with *TETYC’s* readership in mind—one of the more helpful books for composition teachers that I have read recently. We have all experienced, many from both sides, frustration that can arise when students do not fully understand or meet professors’ expectations for
written work and then “attribute [any] differences to the professors’ idiosyncratic, unpredictable, or even unfair standards” (Wilder 73). Wilder aims to answer that eternal question, “What does the professor want?” She succeeds, as *Rhetorical Strategies* studies writing-about-literature texts, professors, and students to offer answers to that question and practical and theoretical grounds for them.

Wilder begins with archival research. She “analyzed twenty-eight articles drawn randomly from twelve prominent literary journals . . . published between 1999 and 2001” (28) for their rhetorical devices, themes, and structures. Wilder organizes the results into seven “special topoi of literary criticism”: appearance/reality, ubiquity, paradox, paradigm, social justice, mistaken critic, and context. The first four topoi are adapted from Fahnestock and Secor, while the last three were added to describe findings that did not fit into the existing framework. Identification of and direct communication about academic writing patterns also continues the work of Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say*, something of a contemporary composition classic.

Wilder then shares her framework with professors and students in writing about literature survey courses, conducting interviews, studying teaching materials, and organizing grading workshops at a large public university and a small private university. Most of these professors had not explicitly taught generic conventions. Some professors rejected these conventions; others simply expected their students to know them and graded accordingly. Some professors were enthusiastic about explicitly teaching generic conventions from the special topoi, while others were hesitant about or opposed to doing so: “You teach writing about literature, and I teach writing about literature” (Wilder 125, emphases in original). Whether various professors agreed or disagreed with the special topoi, Wilder finds that all incorporated them into their understandings of good writing and—with varying explicitness—treated “special topoi as conventions that members of the disciplinary discourse community come to expect other members” to use (108).

The students in the experimental sections of Wilder’s study—the sections that used the special topoi in their assignments—reported almost universally positive experiences, stating that the special topoi focus made writing instruction easier to understand, covered gaps in their writing backgrounds, and increased their confidence and agency as academic writers. Community college faculty, who often teach students with uneven preparation and little confidence, might find even more marked success than Wilder’s four-year study participants by overtly teaching special topoi and other writing conventions, thus helping our students accelerate “to some degree the traditional long-term immersion and tacit absorption” (130) that have often been understood as the only ways to develop disciplinary writing expertise.

There are weaknesses in *Rhetorical Strategies* as it relates to *TETYC* readers. Though interviews took place at different institution types, both were four-year universities, populated by
different students and professors than community colleges. We may not teach writing about literature as often as we teach other levels of composition, and our colleagues are unlikely to allow students to write research papers in poetic form (Wilder 68) or need reminders “that this could be a person’s first foray into this kind of writing” (95). Some of us, for valid reasons, share “the resistances [of] some literature professors . . . [toward] making disciplinary discourse conventions explicit to students” (26). We are also unlikely to have many students with advanced high school preparation, which describes some students in this study. Despite potential incongruences, Wilder’s study, like two-year college English teaching, prioritizes rhetorical analysis and student learning. Even those who may not agree with or fully relate to Rhetorical Strategies will welcome this focus. Even if it was not written for us, much here can be adapted for community college students and teachers. I have already incorporated Wilder’s special topoi into thinking about my own writing and discussions with composition students, and I am confident that many TETYC readers will appreciate and enjoy Wilder’s book and be glad to do the same.

Works Cited


Abigail Montgomery
Blue Ridge Community College
Weyers Cave, Virginia