Taking a pedagogical turn: What happens when the student /teacher conference moves to the center of the basic writing course

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Taking a pedagogical turn: What happens when the student/teacher conference moves to the center of the basic writing course

Abstract
This dissertation examines the redesign of a basic writing course at a large, urban, majority-minority public university in Miami, Florida. In the redesigned course, there are no regular class meetings at all. Instead, small groups of five students meet with a teacher in "writing circles," where they workshop papers. The content of the course is provided by a third-party software program in a dedicated computer lab. The redesign project is examined in light of the particular institutional history of Florida International University, with special emphasis on the roles of space, time, and face-to-face interaction in the teaching of writing to a richly diverse student body.

Support for the course redesign is adduced from the work of other scholars in social linguistics, Teaching English as a Second or Other Language, classroom discourse analysis and composition theory. The study finds that the changes in the delivery methods of the course can benefit teachers, students, and the institution.

Keywords
Language, Rhetoric and Composition, Education, Technology of
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TAKING A PEDAGOGICAL TURN: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE
STUDENT/TEACHER CONFERENCE MOVES TO THE CENTER OF THE BASIC
WRITING COURSE

BY

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BA College of the Holy Cross, 1975

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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September, 2001
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August 30, 2001

Date
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to James Macris, who taught me about language
and
to Don Murray, who taught me about teaching.
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ABSTRACT

TAKING A PEDAGOGICAL TURN: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE STUDENT/TEACHER CONFERENCE MOVES TO THE CENTER OF THE BASIC WRITING COURSE

BY

GREGORY J. BOWE

University of New Hampshire, September, 2001

This dissertation examines the redesign of a basic writing course at a large, urban, majority-minority public university in Miami, Florida. In the redesigned course, there are no regular class meetings at all. Instead, small groups of five students meet with a teacher in “writing circles,” where they workshop papers. The content of the course is provided by a third-party software program in a dedicated computer lab. The redesign project is examined in light of the particular institutional history of Florida International University, with special emphasis on the roles of space, time, and face-to-face interaction in the teaching of writing to a richly diverse student body.

Support for the course redesign is adduced from the work of other scholars in social linguistics, Teaching English as a Second or Other Language, classroom discourse analysis and composition theory. The study finds that the changes in the delivery methods of the course can benefit teachers, students, and the institution.
Introduction

In the summer of 1999 at Florida International University, five pilot sections of a writing course, ENC 1930 Essay Writing were completely redesigned as small-group conference courses. In the new version, there are no classes as class is typically defined. Instead there are two major activities that comprise the new version of the course.

Students spend three hours per week, at whatever times are convenient to them, working with a third-party interactive writing course on CD-ROM (described more fully below). A computer lab is made available exclusively for the use of students enrolled in the course. Once a week, students meet for one hour with their writing teacher around a conference table, in groups of five, called “writing circles.” In these meetings, students bring five copies of whatever writing they have done in the past week, and each student’s work is discussed in workshop style.

The course was ripe for an overhaul. Very few people wanted to teach it; it was staffed almost exclusively by adjunct faculty. Moreover, there were no coherent expectations for the course, nor any supervision. If an adjunct got stuck with 1930 on the schedule, it seemed, well, at least no one would tell him how to teach it. The students who didn’t drop out at alarming rates were as likely to fail the course a second time as the first. Many students I spoke to would not admit to having been enrolled in the course, even after they had passed it. As the new Director of Undergraduate Writing Programs, it seemed like a simple call to me: ENC 1930 was a bad course. No one liked to take it; no one liked to teach it. It just wasn’t working. As the only composition/rhetoric specialist in the Department with supervisory responsibility for five hundred courses on two
campsues, I thought the best way to redesign the course was by addressing pedagogical issues. But when we started to look at the course, it turned out to be much more than just a neglected writing course.

ENC 1930 Essay Writing at FIU was really the locus of a largely unconscious and complicated struggle over language issues in the curriculum. In a sad irony, this course, originally part of a program designed to help underprepared students ease into academic life, rapidly evolved into a daunting gatekeeping mechanism. One might imagine that such a development could occur in an area where the population was more homogeneous and where cultural preferences ran to the red, white, and blue. But how could Florida’s state university in cosmopolitan Miami be a party to this kind of institutionalized unfairness?

In the first chapter, I will show how FIU’s unique and fascinating brief history is a *sine qua non* (1) for understanding what the basic writing course meant to students and the University; (2) for analyzing the impact of the writing circles arrangement of the new version of the course; and (3) for measuring the successes and failures of the approach. The chapter, then, will establish only enough of the past to bring us to the present. The real focus of the project, after all is the theoretical justification for the course design and the analysis of some transcripts of writing circle meetings. But the case of FIU, and in particular, its English Department’s role in language issues in the curriculum, is so unusual that the justification and analysis would be somewhat hollow without a grounding in institutional history. For example, ENC 1930, whose students are placed there by (relatively) low scores on the SAT, carries a higher course number than the
"regular" first-year writing course, ENC 1101 Freshman English. The ostensible reason is to avoid giving the impression—however accurate it may be—that ENC 1930 is a remedial course, since the Florida Legislature forbids the teaching of remedial courses in the State University System (SUS). One important task of this first chapter is to unmask ENC 1930 and reveal its true identity as FIU's basic writing course, and thus to link it and its attendant problems to those of similar courses at other universities.

Chapter Two first considers the writing circles in relation to both senses of Libby Miles’ terms “disturbing practice” (Miles). That is, the reorganization of ENC 1930 is itself a disturbing practice, in that it asks new and unusual things of teachers, students, and institutions. On the other hand, changing over to the writing circles disrupts some existing “disturbing” (i.e. undesirable) practices in the teaching of writing at FIU. In the second part of the chapter, those disturbances are related to composition’s disciplinary history and to pedagogical theory in close analysis of excerpts from audio and videotapes of a number of writing circles.

Continuing with the analysis of the student/teacher conference tapes, Chapter Three further links the writing circles to theories of language. James Gee’s distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘false’ beginners is drawn, and his insistence on the social nature of literacies is tied to the way the writing circles function. A connection is also made between ESOL theory and the writing circles to try to explain how curiously effective they have been for ESOL students despite the fact that no more conscious attention is being paid to their language issues. Then, the nature of the classroom discourse in the writing circles is discussed to determine exactly what effects can be seen as a result of the shift in pedagogy from a traditional lecture-based classroom to the small group
conferences. Specifically, I will look at how the dominant Information/Response/Evaluation instructional sequence described by Mehan and others is harder to sustain in small groups, and how more student-to-student discussion occurs in the circles. I will also try to relate the shift to small groups to FIU’s majority-minority student population.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I examine several areas of future research suggested by the successes and shortcomings of the writing circles approach. First, I use John Lofty’s *Time to Write* and literature on attributes of learning environments to revisit the concepts of time and space, in light of the changes wrought on them by the introduction of the writing circles. Second, I address how diversity issues can be negotiated in new ways (at least at FIU, or schools like it) in small-group, conference-based courses. Finally, I present some assessment issues and problems raised by the unusual structure of the conference course, ending with a discussion of how the writing circles can be seen to uphold Applebee’s call to “construe curriculum as a domain for culturally significant conversations” (Applebee).
CHAPTER I

A REMARKABLE BRIEF HISTORY

History of FIU, Part One

Miami v Florida

The first part of FIU’s history deals with the need for, and the decision to establish a State University in Miami. The region has enjoyed favorable demographics for higher education for almost half a century. Even as recently as 1990, the percentage of adults with a college degree in Miami was half the national average. Moreover, Florida in general, and South Florida in particular, have been experiencing steady and vigorous growth for more than a quarter of a century. But State government is located far north of Miami, in Tallahassee. As the saying in Miami goes, the farther north you go in Florida, the deeper into the South you get. The historical extent of the State’s governmental disdain for the needs of its largest, very Hispanic city can be judged by the existence of the University of South Florida in Tampa, some 200 miles northwest of Miami. It wasn’t until the mid-1960s that local politicians (and the votes of their constituents) accumulated enough clout to be considered a viable political force.

Part One, then, of the History of FIU, will deal with the forces leading to the establishment of FIU, some of the gross details of its planned role in the State University System (SUS), and its curricular offerings when the doors swung open for the first time in September of 1972 to “the largest opening day enrollment [5,667] in the history of
American higher education” (www.fiu.edu/fiufacts). I will try to show that FIU was conceived and operated from the beginning beyond the control of any of its representatives and that unbridled growth has always been FIU’s most positive and negative force at the same time. Managing the University is a little like managing the world economy: no one really knows exactly what it is or how it works, but everybody has a plan.

**Numbers, dollars, and race.** FIU was legislated into existence in 1965, with the first classes held in 1972 (all the statistics in this section come from the University’s website). The original plan was for FIU to serve as a place for Miami-Dade county students to “finish,” after completing the first two years at one of the community colleges in the area. A little less than ten years later, however, in 1981, upper division and graduate courses were added to the FIU curriculum. These were followed by doctoral degree programs in 1984. Following accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in 1986, FIU was classified as a Doctoral I University by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The university’s progress has continued, with several milestones reached within the past year: SACS reaccreditation, the legislative approval of the first public Law School in South Florida, the establishment of a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, and Division 1AA football in 2002. The physical plant of the University has mirrored this maturing process as well. In the three and a half years since I came to FIU, two parking garages, one 1000-bed dorm, and a new President’s Residence have been completed, and ground has been broken for another parking garage, a Health Sciences Building, an Art Museum, another 1000-bed dorm, and a School of Architecture Building.
Currently, there are almost 35,000 enrolled students, 1200 full-time faculty, and over 100,000 alumni. The University operates on a budget of almost $400 million, and employs almost 3000 people, making it one of Miami-Dade County’s 20 largest employers.

At least as far as students are concerned, it would be hard to imagine a more diverse environment. In fact, the concept of ‘diversity,’ which is a majority construct after all, has been rendered nearly meaningless at FIU. Of course, this is true as well at other large, urban universities in California, Texas, New York, and elsewhere. In fact, the students we have at FIU are very similar to the urban commuting students at City University of New York (CUNY), where 44% work part or full time and most are first generation college attenders (Gleason 66). At FIU, the percentage of students holding jobs while attending school is slightly higher, and fully 70% come from minority groups:

- 51% Hispanic
- 15% Black
- 3.5% Asian

Before adding up the totals, it is important to take a position on the home language brought to school by the majority of Black students who were born either in the United States or in English-speaking Caribbean countries. The policy statement of the Center for Applied Linguistics’ Board of Directors of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is clear:

In accordance with its Policy on Language Varieties, October 1996 TESOL affirms that the variety of English known as African American Vernacular English, Black English, Ebonics and sometimes by other names, has been shown through research to be a rule-governed, linguistic system, with its own
lexical, phonological, syntactic and discourse patterns and, thus, deserves pedagogical recognition (www.cal.org).

If we recognize Black Vernacular English (BEV) as a dialect of English and then add the 7.6% cohort of international students, the number of students who bring more than one language to the classroom is a staggering 77.1%. FIU stands today as the largest graduator of Hispanic undergraduates in the country, having just passed the perennial leader in that category, UCLA.

The majority-minority split is reversed, however, when it comes to faculty and staff at FIU. University wide statistics for filled, ranked instructional/research faculty positions, for example, show the following racial mix, by contrast:

- 13.7% Hispanic
- 6.8% Black
- 7.3% Asian
- 64.7% White

Veteran faculty members observe that the faculty has become more diverse recently, thanks to the availability of more minority scholars in recent years. And I should point out that almost 85% of the writing courses at FIU are taught by adjunct faculty, who are not counted in either of the above statistics. In our Department, race statistics for teachers are difficult to keep, with a 35-40% turnover each year, but my impression is that the adjunct numbers fall somewhere between the faculty and the A&P numbers.

**History of FIU Part Two**

Enter the freshmen: Numbers, dollars, race, and writing. The English Department at FIU warrants its own treatment here because of the unusual timing of its founding. For the
first ten years, there were no freshmen, and therefore no freshman composition problem to impact the early staffing of the unit. Those ten years covered a period in which English Departments everywhere else were ramping up to service Johnny Who Couldn’t Read by hiring composition and rhetoric specialists fresh out of the few programs in existence at the time. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) was engaged in crafting a bill of Students’ Rights to Their Own Language. But at FIU, something more like Robert Scholes’ description of the traditional “narrative of English” was being installed (Scholes 22). British Lit was covered from Beowulf through Chaucer and Shakespeare, through the Romantics and Victorians, and into the 20th century. American Lit featured Early and Contemporary periods. Composition, in the absence of freshmen, was allocated no faculty and no resources. As a result thirty years later, FIU is an outlier among Carnegie Foundation Research Extensive universities and universities with a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa: we are the Land Before Composition Time, the only university in its class with a single composition/rhetoric specialist in the English Department, and with no significant commitment to the teaching of writing to undergraduates.\textsuperscript{iv}

The early years of the English Department at FIU reveal two important phenomena, whose legacy for the first basic writers that arrived ten years after the school opened was the kind of ambiguity and confusion about the relationship between expanded access and the maintenance of standards that hobbled CUNY’s Open Admission guidelines (Fox 40-45).

First, writing was never central to the Department’s identity. When the freshmen did finally arrive, there was no one with a research interest in composition to deal with their writing, and the task was farmed out to a few adjuncts. As FIU grew however, more
and more sections went to part time faculty, until very soon, 90% of all the composition
courses were being taught by people with no stake in the intellectual life of the
Department. And those composition courses represented a full two-thirds of all classes
taught in the English Department.

When composition problems—that is, problems caused by the existence of
students who needed to take composition courses—did arise, they were handled in two
ways. At first, a professor of rank or seniority would agree to take a one-course release
and serve as “director of composition,” though the job was never defined.

Responsibilities included: teaching the Composition Pedagogy course, a graduate course
for TAs in the Literature, Linguistics, or Creative Writing MA programs; running
occasional inservice workshops or staff meetings; and resolving student/teacher disputes.

Finally, when the burden of more and more freshman comp courses became too much, an
Instructor (MA in Literature) was hired to do the job. By the spring of 1989, though, the
ever-increasing numbers of incoming freshmen who scored below the Board of Regents’
minimum of 1000 on the SAT prompted a reexamination of the testing and placement
instrument being used.

The story of placement in writing classes at FIU mirrors the story of the
University’s growth. After the first matriculating freshmen were admitted in 1982, a test
for placing students quickly developed alongside the new course offerings. The test,
called simply the “English Placement Examination,” was developed in the STAR
(Student Testing Assessment Resources) Center in the Office of Undergraduate Studies.
The reason for an academic unit outside of English developing a placement test for the
writing courses is that the Writing Lab at FIU was itself outside of, and essentially
unconnected to the English Department. The test is a sadly typical placement test in terms of content. At the top of the document is the title of the office which generated the test. Next to a large five-point star the student sees the office’s acronym with full explanation, followed by the label “Placement Exam—English and Writing.” On the next line, in another font is the redundant “ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS.” I suspect that the redundant title is the result of careless plagiarism, and I further suspect the header from STAR was cut and pasted onto an existing exam. This is confirmed by the addition of the “TIME ALLOTMENT” in the same font as the header. If that weren’t enough evidence, the first question is numbered 26, and the rest proceed up to #65.

It is clear that the test was designed outside the English Department, because only a few years after its institution, concerned members of the Department got together to recommend abandoning the instrument. I hasten to point out that there have always been and continue to be many conscientious faculty and administrators at FIU, people who do have the students’ best interests at heart. Bob Weinberger was one of them. In a memo to other concerned Department members, he criticized the placement test, pointing first to its failure to ask students for any writing at all. The instructions to the student read as follows: “This test is designed to measure your proficiency in standard written English, the kind usually found in textbooks...The underlined parts of the following sentences are possible errors. If there is an error, locate it and mark the corresponding letter on the [machine-readable] answer sheet...”

It would be too easy to analyze the test for the complete failure that it is. Ed White has pointed out repeatedly that among other things: 1) placement tests for writing ought to ask students to do the kind of writing they will be expected to do in class; 2) multiple
choice questions are not good predictors of success in writing courses; 3) placement tests ought to be designed by the stakeholders in the program, not simply stolen from a convenient, machine-readable format; and 4) tests of “Standard English,” whatever that is, are unfair to students for whom English is not a native language (see White, *Teaching* 179 ff for a discussion). This particular instrument is even more incomprehensible than most. It represents itself as a “measure of … proficiency in standard written English, the kind usually found in textbooks.” But then the entire test is made up of sentences not found in Standard English—many of them not found anywhere else in the language at all—because of the errors the testmakers have written in to the sentences.

In *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*, Tom Fox describes a thorny problem that resonates with FIU and its placement exam. He notes first of all that access and standards are bound together inextricably in education. Each threatens the other. The opening of a new state university in a primarily non-English-speaking major metropolis is an important step toward increasing access to higher education. But the sudden influx of tens of thousands of recent immigrants into the ranks of degree-holding American citizens also represents a threatening change. Ira Shor, in “Illegal Literacy,” reminds us that “[a]s the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci argued, when power relations become insecure, questions of language often come to the fore” (Shor 92). And according to Fox, “when access threatens change, standards are always one of the tools used to resist that change,” and further, “these standards are almost always based on the measurement of abilities by ‘standardized’ tests” (Fox 8). In turn, the imposition of standards threatens continued access. This makes for a confusing read of FIU: on the one hand, new access for Miami’s largely Hispanic population (to affordable,
public, State University System higher education) is clearly a good thing. But the standards of that State University System degree must be upheld against any potential watering-down of the curriculum to accommodate the new wave of students. And the English Department at FIU is volunteered for the job, regardless of the fact that its focus on belle-lettres at the expense of composition makes it not particularly well-equipped to deal with issues of written and spoken communication in the curriculum.

The Department as a whole, for example, is not accustomed to thinking of Black students and Latino students as sharing a position of disadvantage with respect to the privileged position of “standard” or “academic” English in the classroom. That is, while it is obvious that Latino students bring another (foreign) language to the school, Black students don’t quite get the same “credit” for Black Vernacular English (BVE). Their shortcomings are perceived to be due to something other than language contact issues, though precise formulations of such shortcomings are not offered. Instead, vague references to a decline in the quality of students is blamed. The work of Shirley Brice Heath, Lisa Delpit, Geneva Smitherman and others on BVE as a legitimate dialect of English, which might serve to elevate the question to a serious intellectual level, has not been part of the Department’s conversation from its beginnings almost thirty years ago to today.

To recognize that we touch one another in language seems particularly difficult in a society that would have us believe that there is no dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel deeply is to be inferior, for within the dualism of Western metaphysical thought, ideas are always more important than language. To heal the splitting of mind and body, we marginalized and oppressed people attempt to recover ourselves and our experiences in language. We seek to make a place for intimacy. Unable to find such a place in standard English, we create the ruptured, broken, unruly speech of the
vernacular. When I need to say words that do more than simply mirror or
address the dominant reality, I speak black vernacular” (bell hooks, quoted in
Padilla, 26).

In a Department with no composition faculty charged with administering a
writing program, this kind of discussion simply has not arisen naturally in dealing with
the first-year writing course. Individual faculty members may not disagree with hooks’
position, but without the need to articulate policies for teaching students who bring this
“ruptured, broken, unruly speech” to the classroom every Monday—course objectives,
acknowledgement of mismatches between BVE and “Standard English”, etc.—the
discussion will never grow into action. As I noted before, good people in the University
have never been in short supply, but the access/standards dynamic is complex and
powerful. Weinberger’s memo ultimately resulted in the replacement of the STAR test
with a writing sample, scored holistically by the same people who taught the bulk of the
writing courses. Unfortunately though, the English Department soon lost the “turf battle.”
Without a writing program of its own, or a composition/rhetoric faculty to fight for it, the
money to pay the teacher/readers had to come from the STAR Center, until that line item
was sacrificed to a budget crunch. At any rate, the writing sample for placement could
not have lasted more than three or four years, since it had been gone for that long by the
time I arrived in 1998. When the money ran out, the placement effort simply stopped.
The Department’s attention was necessarily drawn to other areas: continued explosive
growth and the development of the MA in Literature, to name two. Today, access is
under the control of standards again; first-time-in-college students are placed in writing
classes solely on the basis of their SAT scores.
Second, an unusually “pure” form of literature in English was installed as the dominant discourse. From the days the doors first opened to freshmen at FIU, ESOL classes were offered by both the English and Modern Languages Departments for those students who needed that accommodation. (Indeed, accommodation was the byword, as one student in the late 1970s took a single ESOL course for 23 credits.) And in fact, the ESOL courses were very good, as might be expected with a large labor pool of bilingual and polycultural teachers, at least among the part-time staff. They were so good that the University was threatened with legal action by Inlingua and Berlitz. The two private language schools saw themselves as victims of unfair trade practices, charging that the tuition for FIU ESOL courses benefited from state subsidy and were artificially low. If FIU didn’t charge more money for its courses, they complained, they would be driven out of business. Apparently, there were considerable numbers of nonmatriculated special students taking the courses, and there was a significant price difference (approximately $300 for FIU’s course v. over $2000 for the others).

FIU’s response was to accelerate some nascent plans in the English and Modern Languages Departments to start up an “English Language Institute,” designed to focus on the study of the English language. Original ideas included the study of Creole languages, bilingualism, TESOL, among others. Instead of backing out of the high-end TESOL market, however, the University chose to enter it instead. The English Language Institute (ELI) was created as a special Type II Institute, responsible for the generation of its own operating revenues. The ELI has been quite successful in the intervening years, turning a handsome profit for the College of Arts and Sciences. In addition to a fleet of vans which
pick up students from the community and bring them to class, the ELI is erecting a new building for itself in 2002.

What seemed to slip by everyone, however, were the effects on FIU’s undergraduates of siphoning off all the ESOL courses from the regular curriculum, which is exactly what happened. As a result, while the undergraduate ranks of this majority-minority public university were swelling each successive year, students found themselves on the horns of the access/standards dilemma. While prospective undergraduate students were encouraged to register for courses at FIU, there was suddenly no course available to them in which their ESOL issues could be addressed by a trained staff. Instead, they were offered only the “regular” sections (i.e., non-ESOL) of ENC 1101 Freshman Composition or the new ENC 1930 Essay Writing course. Before the establishment of the English Language Institute, the placement options were:

1. Freshman Composition for native speakers
2. Freshman Composition for nonnative speakers.

After the ELI the options shifted to:

1. Freshman Composition for native speakers
2. ENC 1930, a basic writing course for native speakers

In both cases, the primary placement instrument was the SAT, which in any case, was not a good choice, for reasons detailed many times (as for example in Ed White, cited above).
FIU’s experience seems to support Fox’s argument. If threats to standards are posed by increased access, then more extreme threats call for more extreme responses. The threat to the standards of the State University System posed by FIU, by any measure, has certainly been extreme: from the largest opening day in the history of American higher education to the Number One Producer of Hispanic graduates in the country. And the response, first to establish a Standard English error quiz as a placement tool and second, to surgically excise all the undergraduate ESOL courses that might have helped students get through the gate, has been extreme as well.

As for the course itself, ENC 1930 Essay Writing seemed like a better-than-nothing choice because at least it had been designed to help students who were not ready to take “regular” Freshman Composition. The course originally appeared as part of the University’s summer “bridge” program, “Super Summer.” The Super Summer Program accommodates special admits, or “specials” in the jargon of the State University System. These are students whose SAT scores fall below the Board of Regents’ minimum of 1000 combined for regular Fall admission. It should be noted that the SAT score is the single most influential admissions requirement for incoming students. Students who score between 860 and 1000 may be admitted to the University provided they successfully complete a 7-credit summer program immediately before the Fall semester. The seven credits consist of: a 3-credit math course, a 3-credit English course (ENC 1930 Essay Writing), and a 1-credit Freshman Experience course. Miami’s cultural diversity occurs naturally, as I noted above, so the University’s “specials,” as a group, are neither more nor less diverse than the regular Fall admits. FIU’s extension of its admissions requirements, then, represents not an effort to recruit minorities—this will happen as a
matter of course—but instead, an effort to broaden access to those less well-prepared for college. Those students will be accepted provisionally, provided with an array of credit-bearing courses to address (I’m trying not to say “remedy”) those inadequate preparations, and then accepted into the ranks of “regular,” matriculated students.

Thus, each summer, some sixty or so sections (capped at 25) of ENC 1930 are filled with students who have low SAT scores. That’s really all we can say about them, because there is no way to separate the ones who got those low scores because they are underprepared native English speakers from the ones who got low scores because they are nonnative speakers whose English language ability doesn’t faithfully represent their ability to survive in college, or either of those groups from students whose math scores were low enough to drag down their verbal scores. The first and last groups, when they get to ENC 1930, generally have fewer problems than the middle group, because the class is conducted in English and the subject matter is the English language. It is the middle group of ESOL students who are inappropriately placed in the course—through no fault of their own—who are granted access, but who will be judged by an unfair standard.

It is difficult sometimes not to see plots everywhere, or not to believe that standards have a life of their own. It would be easy to argue, for example, that minority students at FIU—even though they are no minority at all, but fully three quarters of the student body—seem to be routinely subjected to somebody’s version of a higher education gauntlet. Finally, in 1972, the unequal access issue is resolved: a brand new state university throws open its doors to the majority-minority metropolitan area of Miami, with two million citizens. And good people work hard in good faith to build a university deserving of the effort. But how does it play out?
New students are placed (it's hard not to write “put in their places”) in one or another writing class based on test scores which measure their ability to identify the characteristics of the “Standard English” dialect. The innocent idea behind the placement process, of course, is to give students the best chance to succeed. But even the idea of creating a climate of success for students depends on an ideological assumption: that, as Fox puts it, lack of access is caused directly by lack of skills (Fox 10). Félix Padilla gives the view from a Latino student’s side. A Puerto Rican immigrant to Chicago, aged thirteen, Padilla quickly learned that there was something wrong with the language he spoke with his family and friends. The Spanish teachers at his high school promoted their own (nonnative) versions of “Castilian Spanish” as the goal for native speakers of Puerto Rican Spanish (24-26). Padilla wishes in retrospect that his teachers had taken a more critical approach to “our class-based vernacular speech” instead of developing a “hierarchical ranking of dialects” (25). At the top of the hierarchy is the equivalent of Standard English, Castilian Spanish, in the middle are all other Spanglishes, somehow inferior to the standard, and at the bottom is Spanglish. Just as some Americans are vulnerable to thinking that British people speak English better than they, some speakers of Spanish believe that the Spanish spoken on the Iberian peninsula is the “purest” or best Spanish. Such a view ignores the socioeconomic dimension, as though differences in social class and prosperity were unrelated to differences in language. The harshest censure for native speakers of Spanish in this country, however, is reserved for “Spanglish,” which has no exact parallel in English, though Black English Vernacular comes close. According to Padilla, “teachers are more heartless in their criticisms, charging that Spanglish represents illiteracy in two languages, that, Latinos/as resort to
speaking in Spanglish because they lack command of English and Spanish in their individual formal modes. For Latinos/as, as well as for speakers of other vernacular idioms, this view is an absurdity. It suggests the most ludicrous way of thinking about language use, especially when we consider that, as Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa puts it so well, “for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo, for a people who can identify with neither standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves” (26).

Padilla: “It was clear that our teacher’s aim was to make us internalize her hegemonic vision of Spanish. Conversely this meant forcing us to develop an image of ourselves as carriers of a substandard, defective, and contaminated form of Spanish; we were being compelled into accepting a significant component of our culture as second-rate, at best, and not worth fighting to sustain” (27).

The very courses that might be helpful to minority students in approaching the dominant discourse are unavailable to them within the curriculum. Bilingual educator Sonia Nieto writes about pressures on various ethnic groups of students to conform or assimilate to the dominant discourse:

There is no question that all children regardless of linguistic background need to learn English; likewise, the values and traditions of students from all cultures cannot simply be reproduced in schools. In fact, this stance implies a view of culture as static and inert, and the reality is that cultures always change when they come in contact with one another. That is, cultural change is inescapable in both the schools and society. Nonetheless, the coerced and one-way cultural change that is expected primarily of students from dominated cultures is invariably negative and unequal because it exerts pressure on some students, but not on all. Because assimilation can act as a disincentive to learning, alienation and marginalization may be the result. In
fact, recent research has demonstrated that academic achievement and learning may be fostered by encouraging the maintenance and affirmation of students’ cultures and languages, and that assimilation is not necessarily a prerequisite for success (Nieto 35, emphasis original).

Students for whom English is a second or other language benefit more from an ESOL writing course taught by an ESOL teacher than they do from a Basic Writing course taught by a literature-trained composition teacher. But at FIU, students are separated by institutional barriers from faculty who might best help them. They must pay extra ($3000 per course at the ELI) for the kind of help they need most. They may, on occasion, be lucky enough to sit in the basic writing class of a composition teacher who happens to have a background in ESOL (a 15% chance according to an in-house survey). This does happen, of course. Teachers come to me frequently to confess that they have passed an ESOL student in ENC 1930 on the basis of effort and relative personal progress, even though her writing is not of a passing grade. But this is the luck of the draw only. In any case, standards are safe from such saboteurs. Given that these teachers are almost always adjunct faculty, they themselves operate dangerously close to the margins, and can be counted on to behave themselves in cases of dispute. Students and teachers, then, are expected to carry the extra burden of working in a standards-supporting environment—a basic writing class of 25, with a literature-trained writing teacher at the front of the room.

*Failure to survive the gauntlet run is not only not tolerated, it is punished.* We can tell how just how high the stakes are by the institutional diligence and consistency with which we support the standards. In a bizarre manifestation of the University’s commitment to standards—though no one will officially characterize it this way—FIU has installed a surcharge for the “frivolous” re-taking of a course. That is, a student who
registers for the same course for the third time must pay a fine to do so (number of credits times out-of-state tuition rate). Repeated failures, then, will be tolerated only to a point. Failure to pass ENC 1930, it seems, rests entirely with the student, and further, the University has only so much patience. The official thinking, of course, is very different. What’s really behind the penalty is pressure from the State Legislature to improve time-to-graduation statistics. Students must be lazy, to take as long as they do, and the financial disincentive of the penalty will shock them out of their lassitude and motivate them to dig in, try harder, and pass the course on one of the first three tries.

FIU students are anything but lazy, though. Many take ENC 1930 two or three times before moving on to the two-course sequence of Freshman Composition and Literary Analysis. I have often found myself sitting with a student who has managed, like Ira Shor’s student, to achieve “illegal literacy” against all odds (Shor, “Illegal Literacy”). Shor’s student is an African American woman who has come to him for advising. She has been told that she must take the remedial writing course at CUNY in order to graduate, despite having passed the required composition courses that follow remedial writing. Shor wonders about the folly of such a policy of requiring a student to take a remedial course after she has demonstrated by a passing grade in a higher level course that she doesn’t need remediation. He also points out that advising students through such a dilemma (she must take the course, in the end) wastes a great deal of student and faculty time and university resources as well. In a variation on the theme at FIU, students may start school in the Super Summer term (seven weeks in July and August) because their test scores place them in ENC 1930. Because of time constraints, however, these students must register for the subsequent Fall semester before their Super Summer grades have been
submitted. Frequently, students end up with a grade of C- or below in ENC 1930. When
grades finally get posted, they will of course receive no credit for the course and must
take it again. But in the meantime, the University itself has insisted that they enroll—
"illegally"—in ENC 1101 Freshman English. They may put off retaking ENC 1930 until
as late as the second semester of their senior year in some cases. Indeed, in one of the
writing circles I videotaped for this study, out of the four students who were present for
the session, three were "illegally" enrolled in one or another course. One, a native of
Trinidad and a very competent writer, was a graduating senior taking ENC 1930 because
of exactly the circumstance outlined above. The other two were transfer students from
Venezuela, both enrolled simultaneously in ENC 1930 and ENC 1101. At FIU, if
transferring students bring more than 50 credits with them, they are exempt from the
usual general education requirements. Technically, then, it must be admitted that their
inappropriate enrollments were, strictly speaking, "legal." But one of the students ended
up failing not only ENC 1101—as one might expect—but ENC 1930 as well. Now she
must spend more time and money to take both courses over again.

Finally, there is the failsafe: the statistical profiles of students who enter the
University in the Super Summer Program are not recorded in the Fall statistics, i.e., the
ones reported in the University's publicity. If students dare to run the gauntlet, and if they
survive the wrong classes with the wrong teachers, and if they pay enough extra money,
whether to get access to the courses and faculty most suited to help them in the ELI, or to
retake the wrong courses with the wrong teachers "frivolously," they get wiped out of
existence anyway. This practice of 'special admits', noted above, is not unique to FIU.
Indeed, it has its origins in Division I sports, and is widespread throughout the country.
Summer programs were frequently designed to benefit scholarship athletes whose test scores fell below minimum requirements for admission. Someone at some point apparently suggested that there might be different kinds of admission: “regular” admission and “special” or “provisional” admission. So, the triple threat is admitted provisionally for the Fall. He enrolls in a special summer program designed to correct his deficiencies and, provided he maintains a certain grade point average, he matriculates in the Fall with everybody else. It might be inconvenient, however, for his low SAT score to be bandied about in the press, so his admission profile is kept separate from those of the Fall entering class, because, he is after, “special.” There is a financial incentive to this kind of arrangement for the University. Students who would be otherwise refused admission need not be turned away. If the bridge program doesn’t work and they fail, they have at least contributed to the University’s bottom line. This assumes, quite reasonably, that the courses these students take are profitable to teach, and at FIU, they are. If they succeed, the University gets to claim credit for the survivors when they graduate. The saddest fact at FIU is that our Super Summer students perform as well as “regular” admits in terms of GPA, according to statistics compiled by the Office of Undergraduate Studies. Thus they would not necessarily drag down the profile for the Fall. Finally, it must be noted that even though Super Summer Students represent fully half of our first-time-in-college students, we only count the survivors and suppress information about the rest.

*When is basic writing not basic writing? FIU’s nonremedial remedial writing course*

There is a special problem in any discussion of ENC 1930 at FIU. While it is clearly the University’s remedial English course, nobody will refer to it that way on the
record. As noted above, the Florida Legislature forbids the teaching of remedial courses to students matriculated in the State University System. The University of Florida’s equivalent course was abolished when the Board of Regents became aware of its existence in the 1980s. FIU’s disguise is pretty good though, and has protected the course from its inception to today. In the first place, it is called “Essay Writing.” *Essay Writing* has the ring of something even more advanced than Freshman Composition, a course probably taken after it or perhaps even in the same term, but decidedly not before.

Secondly, it has a number in the Unified Course Numbering System (another gift of the Florida Legislature) that is higher than the number for ENC 1101 Freshman Composition. If someone someday is called to account for the course, he will likely offer a reasonable explanation for this latter phenomenon. The Uniform Course Numbering System was designed to facilitate the smooth transfer of credit among all the State’s institutions of higher learning. On the assumption that Freshman Composition at St. Petersburg Community College is as good as Freshman Composition at Florida State or Miami Dade Community College, etc., the same courses in the system carry the same number. When the course that is now ENC 1930 was first proposed at FIU in the early 1980s, it was intended to be a new course offering, expressly not the same course as the remedial course taught in the junior and community colleges. Therefore, the title was not the same as that course (currently called ENC2 College Preparatory Writing at Miami Dade Community College). Moreover, since the students taking the course were told in their acceptance letter, not that they were denied regular admission, but that they qualified for a special program of study, a different, non-pejorative course title was deemed appropriate. And since *Essay Writing* was an experimental course—i.e., new curriculum
and new content—it was automatically assigned a 19- prefix, as all experimental courses are in the Uniform Course Numbering System. A scan of all the experimental courses introduced at FIU showed that the vast majority were upper division courses, and not courses for entering students. There would have been no reason to account for this phenomenon when *Essay Writing* was first proposed, and the College of Arts and Sciences’ Curriculum Committee would not have seen (indeed, did not see) any evidence of a plot to teach remedial courses at FIU. Instead, the idea was to offer something new to accommodate incoming students and to help retain them after the special program was over.

One further important distinction of *Essay Writing* has worked to conceal its true identity as FIU’s basic writing course. Unlike basic writing courses at many schools, *Essay Writing* both carries full credit and counts toward graduation. It’s not entirely “free,” however, since it counts as one of the student’s electives, thus severely restricting choice in the array of possible electives, of which most students only have two or three, after declaring a major.

Thus, when the Legislature finally ferrets out FIU’s unauthorized remedial course, the last line of defense, should anyone wish to preserve the course, would be to argue that it is not a remedial (or basic writing) course because 1) students nominally learn how to write essays in the course, 2) it has a higher course number than ENC 1101, and 3) it is a credit-bearing course that counts for graduation. None of these reasons is compelling, of course; when legislatures want to eliminate basic writing, they do so on the basis of cost controls (see for example, Grego and Thompson, Gleason and Soliday, Harrington and Adler-Kassner, Fox and Rodby, Fox). The non-legislative evidence for recognizing *Essay*...
Writing as a remedial course is much stronger: 1) students are placed into the course by dint of lower test scores than those of “regular admits”, 2) successful completion of the course is (at least nominally) required before a student can take Freshman Composition, and 3) it operates outside of the general education requirements for matriculated students.

The stakes for naming Essay Writing as a basic writing course at FIU could not be higher. First, one little lie covers up other big ones. Sure, we admit, it’s really a remedial course, but we mustn’t tell anyone or we might miss the revenues from 100 sections each year, some one and a half million dollars that would have to be replaced from other sources. We have come to depend, as David Bartholomae has pointed out, on maintaining a steady supply of basic writers (“Tidy House” 18).

Second, it calls attention to the course by revealing its true identity as an unauthorized remedial course (In an interesting irony, FIU has trumped Ira Shor’s student with an “illegal literacy course”). It could be argued that the reason ENC 1930 is a good candidate for pedagogical change is precisely that not enough attention has been paid to it, but the kind of attention it would draw to itself in an ‘exposé’ would almost certainly be the wrong kind of attention. In this case, revealing the truth might well result in the elimination of the course. And while many might welcome the abolition of a basic writing course, it might end up reinscribing anew the kind of institutionalized racism that makes basic writing courses necessary in the first place.

According to Ira Shor, “Basic writing as a field was born in crisis nearly thirty years ago” during the Johnny-Can’t-Read crisis of the 1970s (Shor 1997). No one, it seems is satisfied with the results, since there have been many attacks and calls for nothing less than its abolition for almost ten years now. Politics—personal, pedagogical,
institutional—have driven much of the crisis and abolitionist rhetoric from the beginning. On the personal level, we seem never to have been able to get out of the circular bind of defining basic writers as “the students whom we place in basic writing classes” (Rosendale 25). The problem is that naming students ‘basic writers’ marks them as different at best and deficient at worst (Helmers, Harris, for example), but not naming them seems to recreate the structures that effectively marginalized minority students for years. That is, unless basic writers sit in classes designed specifically for them, they are far more likely not to finish college (Greenberg 94).

The politics of pedagogy regarding basic writing are equally complex. If we accept some definition of a basic writer as a person who has not been successful in “regular” writing classes, that is, as a person in need of literacy skills and nonacademic support she has been unable to get so far, then we will favor arrangements that can serve such needs, even if those arrangements are necessarily different or nontraditional. At the heart of the alternatives offered to remedial English classes of 25 students is the concept of mainstreaming (more of which below). In 1993, Peter Elbow suggested eliminating basic writing classes, converting basic writing teachers to tutors, and reaching out to other units in a kind of Writing Across the Curriculum approach. Although Elbow’s particular vision is yet to be realized, the most different-looking of several experiments—including FIU’s—all suggest that mainstreaming is a viable strategy. Published reports on Grego and Thompson’s Writing Studio at the University of South Carolina, Gleason and Soliday’s FIPSE-funded Enrichment program at CUNY, and Rodby and Fox’s Adjunct Sessions at California State University, Chico all call strongly for not segregating students into basic writers and “regular” first-year writing students, as well...
For their part, institutional politics have contrived to keep basic writing courses on the margins. The strongest statement condemning such politics from within comes from Shor, who sees basic writing classes as “curricula for containment and control” to “manage the time, thought, aspirations, composing, and credentials of the millions of non-elite students marching through the gates of academe” (“Our Apartheid” 93). Outside the academy, popular criticisms of the basic writing enterprise focus on the ruination of American colleges and universities, as a result of admitting unqualified students.

The three varieties of politics—personal, pedagogical, and institutional—come together to make a strong case for abolition. Worse yet for advocates of leaving basic writing alone are the recent admissions of failure by some well-know basic writing scholars. Harvey S. Wiener, in “Attacks on Basic Writing—and After,” makes a charge, more fully elaborated by Lynn Troyka that “those with the responsibility for writing programs have not attended appropriately to public perceptions about the basic writing enterprise” (97). Popular, uninformed criticism of basic writing is too easy a target, according to Wiener, beneath our contempt perhaps. But the popular critics won’t simply go away if we ignore them, and their voices are being heard by voters and politicians with control of education budgets. More disheartening still is Lynn Quitmann Troyka’s “open letter” to the editors of The Journal of Basic Writing. “How We Have Failed the Basic Writing Enterprise” outlines four reasons for Troyka’s perception of failure. We (basic writing administrators, really) have failed in four ways. First, by “giving insufficient attention to public relations”. This is the same charge that Wiener makes, but Troyka extends our neglect to “our many publics:” fellow academics, administrators, “consumers of media” in which discussions of basic writing are carried out (114). “We
simply sighed,” she says, “shook our heads, thinking “What do they know?” (115). Our second failure has been “allowing ourselves to be co-opted by traditional academic politics” (116). Not only at Troyka’s home institution, but everywhere, faculty hired to teach basic writing courses quickly realized that finding new ways to teach on Monday morning was not going to get them tenure or promotion. The third failure, for Troyka was “not unraveling the confusion of legitimate differences of dialect with ‘bad grammar’”(113). Specifically, she is talking about the distance basic writing advocates maintained from the Ebonics, or Black English controversy in the late 1970s and early ‘80s. Troyka now sees this as a lost opportunity for “speaking out vigorously to educate the public in the scholarship of dialect” (118). Finally, according to Troyka, we failed to take “a more critical and enterprising approach to research” (113). She faults our either/or approach to the question of teaching “grammar” to writing students, and for accepting research results from 1960s-era studies uncritically. Troyka also wishes the field had generally been willing to conduct more teacher research, specifically citing the failure to pay more attention to learning styles in the early 1980s.

When personal and pedagogical politics are combined with institutional politics, it seems a foregone conclusion that other states and systems will follow CUNY’s lead. There are hopeful basic writing teachers nevertheless. The designers of two of the three projects I compare to FIU’s writing circles in the next section are, like us, at least ambivalent about abolishing basic writing, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Third, linking Essay Writing with its equivalents at other institutions throws much light on the situation at FIU, in terms of students, teachers, and the course. Although I have suggested above that FIU’s situation is extreme, the stories of basic writing at other
institutions show that the difference really is a matter of degree, and no one has a monopoly on the most effective way to protect “high standards” from basic writers.

FIU and UW. For example, Gail Stygall writes about basic writing at Research I schools in “Unravelling at Both Ends: Anti-undergraduate Education, Anti-affirmative Action, and Basic Writing at Research Schools.” Quoting the Boyer Commission’s report, she notes that while research universities “make up only 3 percent of the total number of institutions of higher learning... they confer 32 percent of the baccalaureate degrees” (5). Further, according to Stygall, “For basic writers, often first generation college students and/or students of color, access to baccalaureate degrees at research schools is often through or enhanced by enrollment and participation in basic writing and academic support programs. Indeed, diversity and retention of underrepresented students at public research schools may well be a partial function of the success of their basic writing programs” (5). Despite their important contribution to basic writing, at least in terms of numbers of basic writers served, Stygall thinks Research I Universities offer bad examples of how to treat both basic writers and basic writing.

Stygall details the situation at the University of Washington in Washington State, where the rhetoric coming out of Olympia is frighteningly similar to that coming out of Tallahassee. Washington State and Florida are both embarking on a journey toward a “seamless” plan for kindergarten-through-graduate-school education planning (9). In both cases, the move to a K-20 system has been prompted by projections of increasing enrollments in the near future, most of which will come from minority groups. The controlling idea of the new way of doing business is that better planning will eliminate...
the costly practice of the State's universities providing services (i.e. remedial courses) that students should have gotten from the high schools or community colleges. “To be maximally efficient, the university should admit only those students who can benefit from attending a research university,” writes Stygall, mimicking the tone of her University's master plan (10). To achieve this efficiency, however, the University's commitment to diversity must suffer, since the very students whose numbers are projected to swell its undergraduate classes are the ones who will not be able to enter if special programs are curtailed. We can easily predict the future for FIU from the results of our fellow Research I Extensive University's increase in efficiency:

The enrollments of new underrepresented freshmen (African Americans, American Indians and Latinos) declined by 31.6 percent, after the passage of Initiative 200, the law that prohibits the consideration of race or ethnicity in admissions... The effect on the Educational Opportunity Program writing course enrollment reflects these changes. From our typical 12 sections of the initial course in the two-course sequence with 18 students registered in each, we dropped to seven sections, with the cap lowered to 15 students. The real estate of admission “slots” previously awarded to underrepresented students now returns to its rightful owners (18).

FIU and UIC. Elsewhere, Carol Severino describes the sad irony of the relatively new University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), with respect to its urban mission and its Education Assistance Program (EAP), which last was originally designed to provide needed help to urban commuting students from the neighborhood. It turns out the urban mission was more about plunking a research university down in the middle of the city than about ensuring students from the area got the chance to attend. Quickly, UIC built both a figurative and a real wall around itself, and simply redefined the urban mission to suit its new purposes (Severino 40). Once UIC had established itself as a permanent fixture, standards were raised, the EAP staff and budget were gutted. FIU is in danger of
doing the same kind of violence to the “International” in Florida International University. Its earliest champions made the argument that a new kind of facility was needed (indeed, the choice of a name is believed to have been one of the chief reasons for the success of the proposal) to serve a population in Miami that was different from the rest of the State. And certainly, FIU has succeeded, recently replacing UCLA as the number one producer of Hispanics with B.A. degrees, as noted above. But now, near 90% of its goal of 40,000 enrolled students, the administration has begun to make some of the same pronouncements as UIC. At a meeting with faculty, for example, President Modesto Maidique announced a new focus on “quality, not quantity.” The Admissions Office has been charged with raising the profile of incoming students for a start. More students are being sought from out-of-area, including overseas, and new dormitories are being built to accommodate them. (The second 850-bed dorm will open in the Fall of 2001, with more online to reach the University’s goal of 20% of students in housing by 2010.) Second, reversing a three-year trend, all remedial courses offered by MDCC on the campus of FIU have been cancelled, and the number of students admitted into the Super Summer Program was capped for the very first time in 2000. With all the publicity surrounding the awarding of a Phi Beta Kappa Chapter to FIU, another round of standards-raising will follow as the night follows the day. Again, standards are raised at the expense of access, and again, the danger of identifying ENC 1930 as the remedial course it really is (or at least has been) is that we identify it as a target for cost-cutting at the same time.

FIU and USC. One morning in the late 1980s, Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson of the University of South Carolina woke up to find that the state’s Commission on Higher Education had simply eliminated college credit for their
university’s basic writing offerings (“Repositioning Remediation” 62-63). The often-rehearsed (and not altogether unreasonable) argument was simple: either students are ready for college or they’re not, and the State is no longer going to waste money on underprepared students. After all, that’s what community college is for. Of course, no one consulted the folks who had been teaching the course at USC for years, no one consulted the community colleges to see if they could actually absorb the change, and no one could really prove that the new arrangement did not discriminate unfairly against minority students. Nevertheless the credits were gone and overnight, all the basic writers disappeared, if only in the sense that they now had no basic writing classes to go to.

Instead of pulling the blankets up over their heads, Grego and Thompson, supported courageously by the Department Chair, rubbed their eyes and got to work (Grego, personal communication). Their response was to create a new institutional structure, which they have called the Writing Studio. There are no more writing placement tests and no more separate basic writing courses at the University of South Carolina. Instead, all freshmen enroll in ENG 101 Freshman Composition. During the first week of the universally required course, teachers “engage students in writing exercises and solicit writing samples (both in-class and take-home) which help students reflect upon and write about their ‘writing history’” (63). The accumulated pieces of writing are combined in a packet with an incoming portfolio (required of all students) and then examined by English Department staff to determine who would benefit from work in the Studio.

Students sign into small groups which meet once each week, led by experienced teachers... to work on writing that is part of their ongoing composition course. The Studio carries no grade or credit of its own: students either pass or fail based on attendance at Studio sessions, though they may
also ‘pass with distinction’ if they are strong participants. Their composition instructors use the Studio staff’s weekly communications and final reports when factoring students’ final course grades... (Grego and Thompson 63).

Of all the experimental approaches to redesigning the basic writing course, Grego and Thompson’s Studio approach comes closest to the physical arrangements of FIU’s writing circles approach. In both cases, students meet regularly in small groups to workshop each other’s papers. There are two significant differences. First, while Studio students at USC attend “regular” Freshman Composition concurrently with their Studio work, FIU’s writing circle students only meet in the groups once a week and have no regularly scheduled class meetings. Second, the sources of funding for the two programs are quite different. USC’s Studio is funded by the Dean and the Department Chair’s commitment to providing enough TA stipends to staff the Studio. This is an expense to the College of Arts and Sciences at USC, over and above the cost of teaching the Freshman Composition courses in which the students are also enrolled. From an institutional point of view, remediation has not been eliminated along with the course offering, but a substantial cost saving has been realized. Support for the Studio is strong at present, but its continuation relies on the Chair and the Dean’s good will (Grego, personal communication). At FIU, in contrast, the funding mechanism had been left intact: writing circle courses are funded the same way as non-conference writing courses (FTE + tuition). This “business as usual” aspect of a radically different-looking course has been an important constant of the College’s support to date.

FIU and CUNY. In many ways, particularly in the similarities between our respective student bodies, the FIPSE grant project that Mary Soliday and Barbara Gleason for CUNY designed would have been perfect for FIU too, given equivalent time
and faculty resources. Originally planned as an experiment in a mainstreaming alternative to remediation, the Enrichment project introduced some important changes to CUNY in 1993:

- testing for placement into remedial or credit-bearing writing courses was eliminated
- testing for exit from writing courses was eliminated
- full credit was instituted for the two-semester Enrichment sequence
- students stayed together in a writing course for two consecutive semesters
- the curriculum for the new writing course focused on language issues, included a significant research component, and featured sequenced assignments

The assessment of the project was built in from the beginning, and the authors provide some empirical evidence that should be hard to ignore, though interpretation of their results is not a simple matter (see DeGenaro and White, for example, for a discussion of the problems in evaluating recent basic writing research, especially pp 22-35). Soliday and Gleason found, among other things, that 1) students wrote longer essays than they had in the remedial courses; 2) organization and critical thinking skills improved; 3) finding topics to write about became easier; and 4) that lasting relationships were formed with teachers, peers, and tutors assigned to assist in the course (73-74).

At the end of their report, Soliday and Gleason issue a call for future research that sounds amazingly like what has evolved into FIU’s writing circles and this study, although our project was begun without the benefit of having read their work in the *Journal of Basic Writing*.
What should guide our revision of particular programs is, first, an assessment of remediation’s purpose within an institution [a hidden/unconscious agenda at FIU which has worked to restrict access] and its impact upon students and teachers [a source of frustration for teachers not trained to deal with ESOL issues and for students not prepared to survive without ESOL help]. Such an assessment could include the history of specific writing courses/a writing program and its symbolic role within an institution [the formation of the department without a commitment to composition of any kind and the siphoning off of ESOL courses by the English Language Institute]; forms and uses of institutional testing [the plagiarized STAR test and the SAT]; teachers’ practices and their authority within the writing courses [survey results show the “default setting” (see Cazden, 53) is current-traditional and classes are lecture based]; existing resources [the circumstances I outline immediately below when we decided to transform the course]; funding [the dynamics of the FTE]; course size [an effective reduction from 25 to 5]; tutorial services [an underfunded and not-professionally-staffed writing center operating in the Testing unit of Undergraduate Studies]; relationships among remedial writing courses, college writing courses, general education/core curriculum requirements, and the courses in departments that students major in [a credit-bearing elective masquerading with a higher course number than Freshman Composition]; other remedial programs on campus [none]; and the population of students that the course serves [very like CUNY’s] (75-6).

Conditions ripe for change: Redesigning the Basic Writing Course. From a faculty point of view, the worst problem with ENC 1930 was that the teachers and students didn’t match well. Most of the students—75%—brought another language to the classroom and most of the teachers—80%—had no background in the teaching of English as a second or other language (Composition Survey 1998). Over and over again, teachers would complain in my office that they had students in their classes who could barely speak enough English to be at the University, and they just didn’t know what to do with them. The University’s Writing Center was understaffed, slow to respond, not affiliated with English in any official way, and badly thought of by both teachers and students.
Students at FIU were powerless to do anything but sit in the class and either pass through to Freshman Composition or fail and take ENC1930 again. But it was necessary for faculty frustration and dissatisfaction to come to the boil before any change in the course could be made. By the summer of 1999, that frustration and dissatisfaction was added to a number of other forces and developments that came together serendipitously and allowed for a radical redesign of the course. Four factors presented themselves at the same time:

1. **There was a crisis in the material conditions of employment for part-time faculty.**

   87% of the Department’s writing courses were being taught by a core of adjuncts who were largely unsupervised. The majority of them, at $2000 per course, were teaching in at least one other institution as well in order to make a living wage. A survey I conducted revealed that teachers were spending between 18 and 20 hours per week teaching each section of a writing course, with the vast majority of time (12 hours per week) spent reading and grading papers outside of class. The Dean, the Department, and the adjunct faculty were all looking for a change.

2. **There was curricular chaos in the face of steadily increasing demand for the course.**

   The basic writing course, ENC 1930 *Essay Writing*, was originally developed for a small population (200 students in 1992) of special admits. In only eight years, the number of special admits increased from 200 to over 1400—fully one half of the University’s first-time-in-college students. With no composition/rhetoric faculty in the Department, adjunct professors were left to their own devices in terms of curriculum. For most, this had evolved into one or another textbook’s version of a “remedial English” course, in which “Standard English” became the unit of
measurement. Even at a school where most students arrive well rehearsed in the dominant discourse, such a course is problematic, but at FIU, where 75% of students bring another language to the first year composition classroom, it was devastating.

3. A unique piece of writing software arrived on campus. Two members of the Department, both of whom had served as an interim Director of Composition before I was hired, had reviewed Academic System’s Interactive English (IE). Unlike any other writing software available (even today), IE provides an entire basic writing course, from invention techniques to readings to peer review screens to detailed writing assignments (the software is discussed more fully below).

4. In a happy serendipity, FIU’s troubled Computer Services Division was having difficulty attracting faculty to some of its newly-acquired, state-of-the-art technology. The Division, in fact, was so interested in increasing faculty use of its facilities that it offered to underwrite the entire (considerable) expense of implementing Academic Systems software. The software would be installed on a new server in a new lab with 50 brand new IBM Pentium III desktop computers. Not only would the entire cost of this installation be borne by Computer Services, but they would also provide the user software—at $90 a copy—free to all students in the pilot.

As the incoming WPA, I felt compelled to act. Crisis, chaos, computers, and serendipity, along with my abiding faith in the conference combined to suggest a rather radical temporary solution. The Department Chair and a handful of interested teachers worked with me to design a pilot program (five sections) that put small-group conferencing squarely at the center of the basic writing course. We opted to use the
*Interactive English* software as the curriculum for all five sections. Students were to spend at least three hours per week working on the software in a computer lab dedicated to that purpose. The lab was open for about 50 hours per week, and students could go there at their own convenience. The classroom as we knew it was entirely eliminated; instead, students would meet in groups of five for one hour each week to discuss the writing they were working on. We hoped that the software package would engage students enough so that they would write outside of class, either in the lab or at home. Then they could bring their writing to the weekly one-hour conferences, which, since they would be “cold” conferences (the teachers never having seen the writing before the meeting), would virtually eliminate the crippling burden of reading and grading some 200 pages of student writing every week. Instead of 35 hours of classroom time for 25 students over the semester and about 165 hours of reading and grading time for the teacher, we tried to put student writers in the lab for 35 hours and across the table from writing teachers for 70 hours.

The software package we use is called *Interactive English*, from an educational software company called Academic Systems. *Interactive English* was designed as a “mediated learning” course, that is, a course in which a significant portion of the course content is “delivered” to students via interaction with a computerized curriculum. The goals of mediated learning, according to the company, are 1) to free up time for the teacher by relieving her from the responsibility of delivering *all* the course content and 2) to allow for more individualized attention to each student through self-paced, interactive work on the computer. In Academic System’s vision of how the course works, students meet during regularly scheduled class time in a networked environment with the teacher.
present. But instead of lecturing from the front of the room, the teacher is freed to move around the room, assisting individual students (or small groups) according to their needs, trusting in the interactive software to keep students interested and working productively. There are currently twelve separate lessons, varying in level of difficulty, and moving from personal narrative to persuasive essay.

The advisory board which was convened to develop the lessons contains some names familiar to specialists in composition. Among them are Andrea Lunsford, Karen Greenberg, the late Alan Purves, and Geneva Smitherman. The lessons themselves organize discrete activities of a writing process into six units:

1. **Explore.** Students are introduced to a topic with integrated audio and video presentations by a narrator and actors. For example, in the lesson about a language experience, a young man speaks to the camera about his difficulties with a stutter in grade school and how it affected his education. Students wear headphones while watching the video presentations, and may repeat material at any time and as many times as they like.

2. **Focus.** Students begin to move toward developing a thesis through prewriting activities such as notetaking and rough drafts. The program works with either the integrated word processor or the student’s own word processing program.

3. **Draft.** Here students begin exchanging their writing with peers and/or the teacher for written feedback. Peer review forms are provided by the program and may be customized by the teacher.

4. **Revise.** Students can revise for content and organization, again with feedback from peers.
5. **Edit.** In this stage, students can use an integrated handbook to assist them in editing their work, and the teacher can assign various exercises and lessons as needed.

6. **Conclude.** Students evaluate their own essay and submit it electronically.

Our implementation of *Interactive English* departs from the company’s intentions in one important sense. In FIU’s writing circles, the teacher never meets with students in the lab, in fact, never goes to the lab at all, unless he or she wants to. And instead of proceeding through each step of *Interactive English’s* lesson plans, we use the program’s features to do one big thing: to give us something to talk about in the weekly, one-hour conferences. We leave the navigation of the lesson almost entirely up to the students, who seem to manage it—barring technical difficulties—quite well.

The move to conferences. I’ll finish Chapter One with a discussion of the benefits we have seen. My goal, at the end of the chapter is to have drawn a clear picture of:

1. FIU as a university with a brief but fascinating history, with a rich diversity of student languages and cultures
2. the curricular and administrative pressures that forced ENC 1930 to become a gatekeeping course that was unfair to non-majority students
3. how a radical redesign of the course was accomplished, and what that course looks like today.

At this point (end of Spring semester 2001) we are in our sixth semester of teaching ENC 1930 in Conference. Many things have changed for us, some of them dramatically. For now, I will only list the changes we were able to observe, starting with the very first
pilot. It was the fundamental nature of these changes that suggested that the program was
worthy of further study. At the beginning of Chapter Two, I will reorganize the
observations below for an analysis that takes the course outside of the English
Department at FIU.

The work of the writing teacher has been physically relocated. Five students and
one teacher sit at the same table. There are no blackboards or computers in the rooms.
All the work is accomplished with paper and pencil. Interestingly, our use of
technology has had the effect of eliminating synchronous computer classrooms and
has instead placed the face-to-face teacher/student interaction at the center of the
course.

The work of the writing student has been physically relocated. In the first summer,
most of the students did all their writing in the lab. In successive semesters, more and
more students are taking advantage of the option (offered by the system software) of
working at home, provided their computers are capable. Otherwise, students are only
engaged at the University for that one conference hour in writing activities or talk
about writing.

The concepts of both 'classroom' and 'section' have been fundamentally
changed. The real work of the writing course takes place in the more intimate setting
of conference rooms (though some take place in regularly assigned classrooms).
Teachers like meeting students in small, manageable groups, and students very much
like the direct contact with teachers. The idea of the section has been replaced by the idea of the five-person writing circle. After the first week of class, students may never again meet as a large group, but they will become intimately familiar with the other members of their writing circle.

Teacher time spent reading and grading has been drastically reduced. All of the teachers report that they do spend less time reading and grading papers at home. This doesn’t mean that they have eliminated reading and grading by any means. But the weekly conferences provide a constant evaluation of work in progress: students always know how they are doing.

Time spent conferencing with students has increased. To the extent that teachers can work within someone else’s pre-designed curriculum, they can rely on the course to present a workable model of a writing process and focus their attention instead on individual progress.

We suddenly have at least a degree of curricular consistency and the means to measure student progress. For the first time, it is possible to speak with confidence of specific outcomes for all students who have taken the conference course, regardless of section or instructor. And the software generates a couple of very useful reports.
Adjunct faculty teaching in the program are paid $1000 more per section. I was able to argue successfully to the Dean that a conference-based course would justify a higher rate of pay (The going rate is $2000 per course, but ENC 1930 pays $3000). In the first place, it requires an increased on-campus presence. In addition to the five hours of conference time and office hours, a weekly staff meeting was built into the program. This is the first regular meeting for which teachers get paid to attend, and the hope is that an ongoing commitment to this kind of inservice will result in more teachers working toward common goals. Second, the small group attention to students and the sense of community in the writing circles is likely to result in higher rates of persistence among students enrolled in the course.
In Chapter One, I tried to describe the climate for change in the English Department at FIU which called for the redesign of the basic writing course. I wish I could say that the project was the result of a carefully planned research program. But it wasn’t. The primary motive for making changes was really pragmatic: to change the job description for writing teachers by making substantive changes to the way the course was conducted. As shown in Chapter One, the course served neither faculty nor students well. Added to that, a survey I had conducted in the Spring of 1998 showed that most teachers spent between 18 and 20 hours per week teaching the course, and that the bulk of that time—12 to 15 hours per week—was spent in reading and grading papers outside of class. Finally, there was the “ESOL problem”—too many nonnative speakers of English in writing classes with faculty untrained in that field. The immediate cause of the action taken, to be truthful, was not reflection or deliberation but a pedagogical sense of desperation. With a very few exceptions, nothing good was going on in those classes. And in the absence of a strong composition faculty and program, it was up to the classroom teachers we had in place to do something about it.

Over time (we have run approximately 130 writing circles courses over six semesters), we discovered that we were right about some things, wrong about others. Certainly, we could not have predicted the complex ways in which a “simple” turn to
conferences would affect teaching in the Department. But it turns out that the pedagogical instinct seems to have been a sound one. That is, whatever successes we have enjoyed in the writing circles are explainable in terms of both current composition theory and the classroom work and theory of other scholars, some of them outside the field. The same is true for our mistakes and failures; they too are illuminated by the work of others in composition and in the closely aligned fields of education theory and linguistics.

Chapter Two will deal first with the writing circles as “disturbing practice” of the kind called for by Libby Miles in the July 2000 issue of College English. FIU’s writing circles offer nothing really new to writing teachers—small groups, conferences, integrated technology. Yet, in spite of the familiar “toolkit,” the writing circles arrangement, as a pedagogical construct, can be profoundly disruptive to both teachers and administration. In the second part of Chapter Two, I will connect the writing circles to Douglas Barnes’ work on communication in the curriculum, using examples from the audio and video tapes of student/teacher conferences and teacher interviews.

Part One: Writing circles as disturbing practice

Libby Miles recently published a review essay in College English, titled, “Disturbing Practices: Toward Institutional Change in Composition Scholarship and Pedagogy” (CE 62 July 2000). In the essay, Miles examines three new scholarly books, each of which deals, in its own way, with institutional practice and scholarship in composition and the potential for change. In a dramatic opening, Miles provides a bulleted list of “true stories,” all of which have been taken from the three books she reviews (Hillocks, Fox, and Gale). The true stories, perhaps better called “horror stories,”
run the gamut from self-satisfied teachers to insensitive administrators to vision-less editors in publishing houses to sloppy scholars.

The horror stories are just that—horrible. But they also ring disturbingly true. It is probably the rare institution that could not contribute a viable candidate for worst horror story in an extended collection of such things. In my own institution, for example, one composition teacher routinely lectures her basic writing students on the quality of individual minds. By way of motivation, she explains that there are three rough groupings. “If I tell you how to do something and you go and do it, that’s excellent. If I tell you how to do something, and you can’t do it—if I have to show you how to do it—that’s not so good. But if I tell you, and show you over and over again how to do it, and you still can’t get it, then you have a worthless mind.”

Another teacher always schedules her classes in one particular computer classroom, which has a cap on class size of 20, as opposed to the standard cap of 25. The ostensible reason is that the class only holds 20 students. But the teacher uses none of the commercially available software for the teaching of composition (Daedalus, CommonSpace, etc.) or even any of the course shell software (WebCT, Blackboard, etc.), which products take advantage of the networked environment. Thus, the computer classroom is used as a kind of high-tech typing lab, which also conveniently reduces the possible size of the class by 20%.

It is easy to share Miles’ outrage at these and similar stories of teachers who seem to construct students at best as the opponent in some kind of game and at worst as the enemy. But as Miles also notes in Hillocks, such teacher behaviors are often defended with considerable passion and eloquence (Miles 759). I find the eloquence less surprising
than Miles does. From the point of view of faculty who completed their training more than 20 years ago, the dominant impression of the last two or three decades may well be one of progressive deterioration. First, as access improves, the perception is that the quality of student is declining. Second, these are folks who learned how to write (and write well) in a very different way themselves, under the rubric of what is usually called “current-traditional rhetoric.” If their training ended in a Master’s degree in the 70s, say, they probably went to high school and college in the 60s, in the heyday of what Sharon Crowley has recently christened “full frontal teaching.” They have seen developments in composition teaching come and go—sentence-combining, structural and transformational-generative linguistics, classrooms without walls. They are, not unreasonably, a little weary of “innovation” and perhaps even cynical. Further, they feel the same way about their teaching as we more enlightened comp folk feel about ours: we do what we believe works in class; we incorporate our experiences in the classroom; and we have the best interests of our students at heart. Even FIU’s ranker of student minds, it must be said, has a case to make. Holding the PhD in American Literature from a top twenty public university, and with a track record of scholarly publications, this teacher firmly believes it a disservice to the students to pass them on to the rest of their academic careers with sloppy thinking and writing skills. She has had a degree of success in her own field and is confident that the methods that served her so well will serve her students the same way.

With the benefit of recent work that has elevated the field of basic writing to a disciplinary subspecialty, we may well object at the turn of the century that it is no longer up to individual faculty to set their own standards for passing students in isolation.
from their colleagues and from the goals of the program in which they teach. When they try, they undo the successes of increased access: students who have been admitted to study at the university under one institutional policy which recognizes a degree of underpreparedness are summarily failed under another, teacher-specific policy which stresses uniform adherence to high standards which are themselves not clearly articulated. But writing teachers who approach their work in this way are nevertheless entitled to a certain amount of professional respect and consideration. Miles’ use of ‘troglodytic’ is, I think, unfair. Indeed, someday, there will surely be just as derogatory a term for, say, social construction or critical pedagogy. It has already happened with ‘process,’ a term which more and more often occurs with the modifier ‘naïve.’ Surely none of the teachers I have ever talked to—no matter their philosophical leanings—has purposely worked to thwart students’ progress.

While it may be easier to identify a distasteful teaching philosophy when it presents itself in the behavior of a particular person, the administrative structures and policies which work against student interests are more pernicious by half. They can be far more complex than the philosophies of individuals, having accreted, layer by layer, over time and across separate units of university. A particularly rich and insidious example at FIU is the above-mentioned treatment of students who participate in the “Super Summer Program,” all of whom, since the inception of the program, have taken the course that is the subject of this study. In either case at FIU, however—personal teaching philosophy or institutional practice—it has been basic writers in general, and ESOL basic writers in particular, who suffer the consequences.
All three of the new books Miles reviews suggest that “everyday practices are all-but-impossible to change without alteration in the institutional structures surrounding and supporting them” (Miles 757). The story of writing course placement at FIU, sketched above, is a clear example. The unit with the funding, Undergraduate Studies, initially determined which exam to use. Faculty in the English Department—the real stakeholders, in that they taught the classes organized by the exam—enjoyed a temporary success when they made a logical case to replace the multiple choice exam with a writing sample. But without the money to pay for more and more essays to be read, the task fell again to Undergraduate Studies, and the multiple choice exam (albeit a different one) came home to roost. Miles is fed up with the pace (or absence) of change in cases like this and just can’t take it anymore: “To my mind, they are all disturbing practices—and, as such, they cry out to be disturbed” (757, italics original). She then issues a call for “counterdisturbances, for ways of disrupting some all-too-common and all-too-accepted pedagogical and scholarly practices” (757).

The redesigned Basic Writing course at FIU, with its effective class size of five, no classroom time, and a prepackaged, computerized curriculum, certainly qualifies as the kind of disruption Miles is calling for. But before making that case, I want to try to separate two ideas: intellectual openness to change and material change. Ultimately, I will suggest that the kind of change Miles is talking about depends more on material circumstances than intellectual traditions.

**Constructing time and space.** In terms of intellectual tradition, FIU’s writing circles are descended from a long line of well-respected and established practices in writing instruction. Its two most visible features are the writing course on CD-ROM and
the group conferences. Computers and writing instruction have been linked in many
different ways for more than fifteen years now. Some uses of computers in writing
classes call for networked groups, live chat, and electronic submission of papers to peers
and instructor. Our use of the computer is low-tech by comparison: students go to the lab
to read and listen to prewriting stimuli on multimedia CDs. They may write their papers
in the lab, but more prefer to write on their own machines. The instructors of ENC 1930
need never set foot in the lab or even own a computer themselves, as is the case with one
instructor.

The other signature component of the course, conferencing, is far better
integrated into the pedagogy of writing instruction than computers. We all think
conferencing is a good idea. Or better, it would be hard to find someone today who didn’t
think conferencing was a good idea. There are different varieties of conference: group
and individual. There are different locations: in the classroom while other students are
working, à la Garrison; in the professor’s office with Don Murray; and more recently, in
a MOO (Haynes), or in chat rooms online, or in a temporary, mini-group in a networked
classroom (as in Faigley, *Fragments*).

My own faith in the power of the conference comes from another setting: the
writing center. I had spent a good deal of time in two different writing centers, and had
always found it rewarding. Moreover, the differences in the physical space and the way
time was spent were rewarding in a way that the classroom was not. On the best days in
the first year composition classroom, class discussion is active and pulls in more than the
usual over-achievers, and talking about writing provides the needed distance and space
for an important point to be fully explored. On other days though, I would sometimes
hear myself talking and suddenly get a panicked sense that I had already told the class everything I knew about writing weeks ago. Now I was just trying to convince them to like the same poems or short stories I liked.

Things were always different in the Writing Center. I wouldn’t know who was coming in or what we would be doing for the next half-hour or so until I sat down at my desk. Three or four hours and five or six conversations across a desk with students later, at the end of my shift, I would gather up my stuff and go home. After a half-dozen conferences in the Writing Center, my faith in students was always restored. The luxury of working one-on-one with a student on a paper she brought to me on her own was a refreshing change from the sullen, required presence of twenty-five first year students in my classroom. Writing Centers were good. Conferences were good. Students were good. I was good. When I thought about it at all, I suppose I just accepted what I perceived as the normal order of things: writing center work was a useful support to the primary work of first year composition.

It wasn’t until I was assigned to the fledgling Writing Center at the University of New Hampshire that I began to see things differently. As a supported Graduate Associate, my work in the Writing Center replaced my classroom teaching. For the first time in years, I was entirely out of the classroom; the only teaching I was doing was one-on-one (and occasionally, some group) conferences. No more syllabus or course design. I remember feeling badly that I didn’t feel more badly about that. No one was asking/allowing me to take charge of introducing a class full of new students to the world of college writing. I should have felt a sense of loss—loss of responsibility, loss of agency, or, being honest, loss of authority.
But instead I felt relieved and energized. For one thing, I was free from my own syllabus. I no longer had the burden of devising a prospective plan for the whole semester, in which I had to theorize first year composition. Instead, my “syllabus” was constructed anew every day in the appointment book. My day’s work was no longer the management of 25 first-year composition students responding to one person’s version of what he thought they ought to know. Now my day consisted of responding to actual needs of students from all over the University, who brought me face to face with what college writing is, as opposed to what I thought it should be. I had traded deduction for induction, and the world was a different place. I actually had more time! I was no longer trying to design or generate my own students’ writing through assignments, readings, and discussion, all of which framed my own theory of writing instruction. Now I was collecting real and fresh examples of college writing every day, and all I had to do was show up on time.

If there was a downside, it was a vague and nagging guilt about how much better a deal working in the Writing Center was than teaching another section of first-year composition was for my grad student colleagues. I had more time to myself. I didn’t lug home stacks of papers to read and grade; Writing Center conferences are cold conferences. I didn’t have to work in a vacuum designing the perfect syllabus or assignment anymore; all I had to do was observe hundreds of other people’s syllabi and assignments and correlate them to what their students’ work at the Center looked like. I began to rethink: from the inside looking out, writing centers weren’t just good, writing centers were better, better than classes. I made more of a difference in college writers’ experience. Conferences were better. I regularly had all the time I needed to read a paper.
for the first time, find out what the student wanted from the session, and go to work on it. Classes were never as satisfying for me. Students were better. Given the time, space, and full attention of a writing teacher, students are remarkably capable of being critical of their own work in useful and important ways. I felt that I was better. Instead of having the sense that I was trying to ‘transfer’ what I know about writing to the class, I was called upon to actually use that knowledge while being flexible, attentive, and open-minded at the same time. I became convinced, by repeated demonstrations, that early college writing instruction should include more and more conferences.

Of course, even if I had never worked in a writing center anywhere, no one would have needed to twist my arm to convince me of the pedagogical value of conferences. After all, I trained at the University of New Hampshire, the unofficial home of the conference. As a TA, I taught the first year composition course which required weekly 15-minute conferences with each of the 24 students in the class. For me, teaching with conferences is more an act of faith than philosophy. I have seen what conferences can do, I believe in them. Most teachers believe in conferences. Anne Ruggles Gere, in fact, points to a one-hundred year history of the published successes of conferences and writing groups (Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications). She is echoed by Bob Connors’ claims about nineteenth century rhetorical instruction in American colleges, which included frequent office meetings between student and teacher (Composition Rhetoric). While the expressivist philosophy that underlies the modern (last 35 or so years) conference has come under attack recently, the focus of criticism has been on personal politics or intellectual traditions. The pedagogical practice itself—meeting with students to discuss their writing—is remarkably free from complaint, with
the exception of the issues raised by Laurel Johnson Black and discussed below.

Somehow, though, we—I mean here teachers of writing, and more particularly, teachers of writing at the college level—have neglected to take our own advice about conferencing. Despite a long history of classroom success and a laundry list of benefits to both student and teacher, the writing conference has never been more than an accessory to the composition classroom. And it seems that one reason is not so much a lack of intellectual commitment to (or faith in) conferencing as simply finding the time and space to do more of it.

Finding a place. Though popular, useful, and productive by all accounts, conferences remain an ancillary to the composition classroom. According to Black (and others she cites), conferences are composition’s single most successful practice and the favorite component of first-year writing programs among writing program administrators. The real—the material—trouble with conferencing—the thing that makes it scarcer than we all agree it should be—is its economics. Conferences are never more than an accessory to the first-year course because almost no one can afford them. There isn’t enough time in the teacher’s schedule to meet with every student, and teach class, and read and grade papers. Funding a writing center to meet with students in support of the first year writing course is often not possible either; while full classes generate revenues, writing centers generate deficits.

It was this concern—finding the resources to conference more—that finally led to the redesign of ENC 1930 with conferences at the center of the course. The intellectual preparation for teaching in conference was the easy part. As writing teachers, all of us are
quite prepared to entertain alternative practices and theories. It is, after all, what we do. We read the journals, go to CCCCs, surf the internet, and see something we might be interested in. We read, think about it, and talk to colleagues about it. Then we draw up a plan to bring it into our own classroom to try it out. This process, admittedly simplified and by no means intended as a description of anyone’s actual behavior, is nevertheless a reasonably descriptive “flow chart,” if you will, of how we work. Even newcomers to the field, in graduate pedagogy seminars, follow the diagram: read the research, discuss it with faculty and other grad students, draw up a plan. Indeed, a common feature of many pedagogy courses is an assignment to design a working syllabus for the grad students’ looming first course (see, for example, Smagorinsky and Whiting).

The stability and pervasiveness of this process of moving from theory into pedagogy is certainly one of the factors retarding the pace of change and inhibiting the development of Miles’ “counterdisturbances.” We writing teachers tend to spend more time reflecting on intellectual matters than material circumstances. In my case, although I saw the value of conferencing clearly enough from a theoretical point of view, it wasn’t until I physically moved into the Writing Center that I began to reflect on the relative economies of classroom teaching versus conference teaching. Without that physical exchange of place and the new “grammar” of time that accompanied it, I believe I would never have been willing to abandon so much to get to what is now the writing circle. Watching the videotapes of writing circles at FIU, I realize now that it was my embodied recollections of sitting with students and their papers in writing centers that really convinced me. In teaching ENC 1930 in the writing circles, we have 1) walked out of the classroom, 2) turned over assignment design and choice of readings to a third party, and
3) stopped reading and grading at home. All three of these, though they certainly involve an intellectual commitment to change, are more importantly, changes in the way we spend our time and changes in the places in which we work. In Miles’ terms, nothing could be more disturbing.

The writing circle version of ENC 1930 requires the 25 students in a section to meet with their teacher in groups of five for one hour each week. Each section is allotted class time by Space and Scheduling in the usual way: twice weekly meetings for 75 minutes in a fixed-seating or armdesk-equipped classroom. This was our first disruption: what we have is access to 25 seats for a total of 2.5 hours per week; what we need is access to a table and six chairs for a total of 5 hours per week. Conferences are scheduled to run for one hour each, but the division into 75-minute class periods leaves two 15-minute periods hanging. Thus, even if we use the assigned classroom for two of the writing circles, we still need to find a place to meet for the other three. (Our “space problem” has never been fully resolved, and it continues to dog our efforts to expand the number of sections.)

Typical classrooms, whether or not the seats can be moved, are not ideal spaces for a six-person conference. The acoustics are not the best, and there is too much unfilled space, which can distract attention. To support a six-person, one-hour writing circle, all that is needed is a table and chairs. But finding space on a college campus that is not classroom space is harder than it looks. The first room on the videotape is a group study room in the Green Library. It is a nearly perfect space for writing circles: natural light from two windows, comfortable chairs, and no distractions. What would make it perfect is a round table instead of the rectangular one that comes with the room. My suggestion
about changing it, however, didn’t even register with the Library staff. This turned out to be **Rule #1 for Disrupting Space on campus: Don’t ask for too much at once.**

Group study rooms are limited in number in the Library. Student groups (or student/faculty groups for that matter) may sign up for available rooms, on a first-come, first-serve basis. They tend to be reserved most often in the late afternoon and early evening, whereas we needed them mostly during the morning and early afternoon hours. I asked the sympathetic and helpful staff of the Library if the English Department could reserve as many rooms as possible for the off-peak hours to hold conferences for ENC 1930. From the Library’s point of view, however, I was asking for something very different. They perceived that I wanted to take over their groups study rooms and turn them into classrooms, which was quite accurate in a sense. While they were interested in the concept of the writing circles—library staff are often ahead of the curve on pedagogical issues—they were wary of setting a dangerous precedent. Why shouldn’t anybody try to switch an undesirable assigned classroom in the Trailer Complex, for example, for a beautiful new room in the Library?

**Rule #2 for Disrupting Space: It is always easier to accomplish space negotiations unofficially than through proper channels.** Even assuming that we had an entire office building of conference rooms suddenly made available to us for conferencing, it would still be impossible for us to give back the assigned classrooms to Space and Scheduling. Their computer ties the assignment of times and rooms to the schedule of classes offered; if no room has been assigned, there is no class. Thus, even though there is a serious shortage of classroom space on campus, it was institutionally impossible for us to help to alleviate that shortage by exchanging unused 25-seat
classrooms for unused group study rooms. In the end, over Cuban coffee, I was able to convince the Library staff to allow us to “sign up” for two rooms on an ongoing basis for the same otherwise unused hours every day. The winning argument was that the Library’s own statistics for room utilization would be bolstered by filling in the empty slots ("Writing circles, after all, are a kind of group study, right?"), which would help them protect their highly desirable spaces from being co-opted by administration.

When the program expanded to FIU’s smaller, Biscayne Bay Campus, the Space Problem had to be tackled all over again. There were no group study rooms available in the Biscayne Bay Campus Library. Instead, after another round of Cuban coffee, the Dean of the School of Hospitality Management took me on a tour of their new building. We walked and talked, and laid out our relative programmatic needs. He discussed the possibility of creating separate ESOL sections for the large number of transfer students from Europe and the Far East who were most often inappropriately enrolled in upper division technical writing courses. I asked for tables and chairs. In the end, he got two sections of Technical Writing for the Hospitality Industry, and I got two rooms. One was an unfurnished meeting room, the other was the not-yet-completed cooking studio classroom (they were waiting for the $3000 overhead mirror that allows students in the uppermost tiered row to see what the chef is doing down in front). For a whole academic year, students sat around the grill and discussed their writing.

The third and final rule of disrupting space on campus is: Rule #3: No temporary arrangement can be made permanent. It has been necessary to either renew these arrangements or to make new ones each and every semester, one semester at a time. When the Library filled a staff position, one of the group study rooms had to be replaced
by sharing a conference room in the Athletic Academic Fitness Center. When the overhead cooking mirror was finally delivered to the Biscayne Bay Campus, writing circles began to be conducted in the relatively quiet student cafeteria. This semester, on Tuesdays and Thursdays before 3 pm, there are writing circles in my office. Next semester, it’s Mondays and Wednesdays. It should be noted that 1) I have an office and 2) my office is big enough to accommodate a table and six chairs. On the other hand, 100% of the adjunct faculty, who teach 90% of these writing circle sections have no access to office space.

In all cases, we were unable to “return” the empty classrooms we had been assigned to Space and Scheduling, in the interests of easing the space crunch. The explanation was as material as concrete: those rooms had been assigned to our classes and therefore taken out of the mix. Even if we could tell Space and Scheduling where and when all our writing circles would meet for the entire semester, they would still need to assign us a room, whether we intended to use it or not. There simply was no other mechanism for posting the course to the schedule of classes from which students would register. They were sympathetic, but institutionally hobbled. For the Summer B Term of 2001, we actually have worked out a structurally different arrangement with Space and Scheduling. Some 40 sections of ENC 1930 in Conference will be assigned to the same room, though each section must carry a unique number on the schedule of classes. All students will report to the dedicated computer lab for an “Open House” during the first week of classes, where they will sign up for writing circles and make a commitment to meeting times.
The Rules for Disrupting Space on Campus may be collapsed for convenience under a higher-order axiom: *All students must be taught in classes, and all classes must take place in classrooms.* I speak facetiously of ‘rules’ and ‘axioms’ but there is the smell of truth to such constructions. Our intricate troubles finding (and holding on to) the physical spaces in which students and teachers might sit down to conference highlight the opposition I posited above, between intellectual willingness to change and real, material change. George Hillocks is right: teachers’ ways of thinking drive their ways of teaching. “Optimistic” and “constructivist” teachers believe that conferences, for example, represent best practice in composition. They are supported by their own experience, and by the historical validation of two hundred years of teaching writing in America. But the intellectual commitment of some scholars and not others is insufficient to effect widespread change in everyday practice, because Libby Miles is right too: changing everyday practices depends entirely on changing the institutional structures that contain them. To the extent that institutions continue to enshrine the everyday practices of the “pessimists” and “objectivists,” such as conducting only classes only in classrooms, George Hillocks will have little new to report in his next published meta-analysis.

Finding time. It makes me uncomfortable to separate the space issues of the conference course from the time issues. If teaching the basic writing course in conference has something to offer, it is the way time is spent—by students and teachers learning about writing—while situated in places that are not typical classrooms. Without access to the new spaces, however, new ways of spending time are not possible. That’s the only justification I have for treating space before time, even though time issues are more
deeply "disturbing." Thus, issues of space and place will bleed over into the discussion of time that follows here.

The original intent of forming writing circles was to change the way teachers spent their time. In the Spring of 1999, I conducted a survey of all the writing teachers at FIU. I asked teachers what they did in class as well as out of class, why they did it, what they wanted to change, what they wanted to leave alone. FIU's writing teachers reported what writing teachers often report across the country, as in Richard Larson's report to the Ford Foundation and both of Hillocks meta-analyses:

- the default setting for teaching composition is what is most often called "current-traditional rhetoric ("presentational" classrooms, heavy use of handbooks, largely literary texts in readers)
- for adjuncts, job security was a serious and ongoing concern
- it takes between 18 and 22 hours per week to teach one section of composition

It was this last item that stood out. In the table below are the details from the survey, expressed in hours per week spent on a given activity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time in hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom time</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office hours</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and grading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two things were disturbing about these numbers. First, more than half the time spent on teaching a course (the range was between 60 and 70%) was not spent teaching at all, by anyone’s definition. Instead most of the time was spent on what may be the single most problematic task of writing instruction, reading and grading papers.

Reading and grading papers in the absence of the student is one of those combined space/time issues. In training sessions, I have taken to calling this pattern an example of “bad distance learning.” Here’s how it works: the cycle starts when I give a writing assignment in class. The student then goes home (i.e. to another place) to write her paper. She is working in a place where I can’t say—before it’s too late—“Oh please don’t open the paper with ‘When one examines the question under discussion, one immediately sees that it has been a serious question, quite worthy of discussion, for as long as man has considered it.’ I am simply not available at the time or in the place where she is writing to tell her why I might object to such a windup. Two days later, she and I (and 24 others) return to a common space at a common time, where I spend most of the hour talking at the front of the room about how writing works. After class, we go our separate ways again. I take her paper home, along with 120 other pages of student writing done somewhere else, in my absence, to read and grade over the weekend. As I read, the student is not available to tell me what she really meant by that sentence, or why she left out of a paper on animal rights the fact that she works in an animal hospital.

The second problem with spending so much time on reading and grading is that it leaves so little time for conferences. And if conferences represent our best chance of
working with individual students, then the time-structure in the Table above “cries out to be disturbed,” in Miles’ terms. My survey was telling me that same things that Hillocks confirmed in his follow-up study, namely that most teachers operate in a presentational style, as dispensers of information, as Crowley’s “full-frontal teachers.” The FIU survey response answers a particular kind of question, “Where does the time go?” but there is another way to look at time too. We might call it teaching time, that is, the time in which students and teacher are physically available to one another in a setting that allows for something other than lecture or presentation.

Here again, it is impossible to cleanly separate space and time. On the other hand it is relatively easy (and instructive) to organize the search for teaching time. At FIU, the writing classes are capped at 25 students and typically meet twice a week in 75-minute periods. Full semesters are usually 15 weeks long.

\[
\begin{align*}
2 \text{ classes} \times 75 \text{ minutes} &= 150 \text{ minutes of class time per week} \\
150 \text{ minutes} \times 15 \text{ weeks} &= 2250 \text{ minutes of class time per semester} \\
2250 \text{ minutes} \div 60 \text{ min/hr} &= 37.5 \text{ hours of class time per semester}
\end{align*}
\]

This is a great deal of time in which to teach students how to write. As any veteran Space Disrupter will point out, however, one doesn’t teach students, one teaches classes. Adding students to the equation only complicates things:

\[
\begin{align*}
75 \text{ minutes} \div 25 \text{ students} &= 3 \text{ minutes per student per class} \\
3 \text{ minutes} \times 15 \text{ weeks} &= 45 \text{ minutes per student per semester}
\end{align*}
\]

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Can it really be that this is all the time one student gets? No, on two counts. First of all, standing in a classroom, one really does teach *classes* not *students*. Material is presented to the entire class in lectures and even discussions. Exactly who joins in or abstains from discussion is not under the teacher’s control, or is at best, minimally so. That is, the teacher might call on individual students to spread the class’ participation around. Inasmuch as all students present can witness the participation of others, the 3 minutes-per-student figure is misleading; if they pay attention, they can benefit, in a general way, from the entire 75-minute class. Second, it is unfair not to count all the time spent reading and grading outside of class. Taking the high end from the FIU survey:

\[
\begin{align*}
12 \text{ hours} & \times 5 \text{ essays} = 60 \text{ hours of grading time per semester} \\
60 \text{ hours} & \div 25 \text{ students} = 2.4 \text{ hours per student per semester of grading time}
\end{align*}
\]

Adding the 45 minutes per student of class time to the 2.4 hours per student of grading time, each student gets 3.1 hours of attention from the teacher over a semester.

But there is something wrong with this arithmetic. On one hand, three full hours per student doesn’t seem like such a bad number. After all, when 10,000 students are required to take writing courses at FIU, this is making the best of a bad situation. On the other hand, each student’s 3 hours with the teacher take place in either 1) a classroom with 24 other students with varying levels of writing ability and ESOL issues or 2) at the teacher’s dining room table, in the physical absence of the student. Arithmetic, it seems, is not the problem. If anything the arithmetic overstates the teaching time in a presentational class. The problem might be more usefully viewed as a problem of space...
and time: if the only space in which a writing course can meet is a classroom, then how a
teacher spends her time with students is largely predetermined.

When the writing class physically moves out of the classroom into writing circles,
by contrast, the teacher is released into a whole new algorithm or grammar of time. First,
we will do the same calculations for the writing circles. The writing circles meet for one
hour each week for the full semester. In addition, students are expected to spend three
hours per week in the lab, working with the course software (3 hours x 15 weeks = 45
hours). But time spent in the lab does not involve the teacher in any way. Students sign
in, but work on the writing program by themselves. (The math below pertains to one
writing circle and the students in it, rather than the teacher. The teacher has five writing
circles per semester; those figures are given elsewhere.)

1 hour x 15 weeks = 15 hours per semester of conference time

This figure seems very low in comparison to the 37.5 hours per semester of
classroom time. But the difference narrows when the students are added, because those
fifteen hours are divided among five students only.

15 hours ÷ 5 students = 3 hrs conference time per student per semester

If the arithmetic overstates the case for presentational teaching in a classroom, it
understates the case for a writing circle in a group study room. Referring to the video, this
is the space in which the teacher meets with only five students fifteen times for a full
hour every week of the semester. In the circles, each student gets 12 minutes with the
teacher each week. Reversing the question above, can it be that the student really gets all this time? Actually, she really gets much more.

First, in the circles, it's very difficult to hide. There are only six people in the whole room and everyone is looking at everyone else all the time. If there was a reading assignment, and you didn’t do it, it will quickly be clear to everyone. If you have nothing to say about anyone else’s paper, either the favor will be returned, or your peers will tell you that you’re being unfair. Attention runs very high in the writing circles.

Second, both students and teacher are working on writing in the same place, for the whole time they are together, as a cohesive group, not a class. In the second part of this Chapter, I will address the qualities of group work and relate them to a theory of pedagogy with examples from the tapes. Here, we can observe this in an interesting way by looking at the uses of silence in the writing circles.

The two teachers whose writing circles are on videotape (the students in the circles will be introduced below) use conference time very differently in the service of getting students to work together as a cohesive group and not as a class. Glenda Phipps is the more experienced of the two. She came to Miami from New York, where she had been an Instructor at CUNY. Glenda has published in composition with colleagues and has run successful Teacher Training Workshops. Alejandro (Alex) Salinas is a recent graduate of FIU, with a Master’s degree in Journalism. Alex is an excellent writer, with a couple of feature publications in the Miami New Times. His background in composition consists of the graduate Composition Pedagogy course he took with me two years ago. Alex is Nicaraguan by birth, perfectly bilingual, though he questions his own ability to write in Spanish, and returns to Managua for extended visits with his family every year.
While reviewing the tapes, I noticed something different about the silences in Glenda’s group from those in Alex’s group. I am defining a silence as a period of time longer than 1 second, in which no one in the room speaks, and which follows a question by the teacher. At first I wasn’t sure what it was that caught my attention, so I timed some of them. I looked at 12 minutes from Alex’s writing circle and 12 minutes from each of Glenda’s two circles, selected at random.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Silences</th>
<th>Alex</th>
<th>Glenda I</th>
<th>Glenda II</th>
<th>Glenda totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of silences</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cumulative duration (secs.)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avg duration (secs. ÷ no.)</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was not surprised that Glenda seemed more comfortable with silence than Alex, as measured by her slightly higher tolerance for longer silences. Alex and I have talked a few times about how hard it is to wait without answering. Glenda, on the other hand, had one average-busting 20-second silence. Nobody outwaits Glenda. In fact, during one middling silence, a student makes a pressure-relieving sniggering sound. It’s an acknowledgement of the discomfort of the moment. Glenda echoes the sound with an amused and agreeable “Hmmhm!” acknowledging that the awkwardness has been made public. Then she lapses into patient silence again.
What surprised me was that the numbers were so close. My general impression was distinctly that Glenda seemed “easier” about tolerating student silence, whereas Alex was clearly making an effort. I watched and listened again, and this time, I paid attention to how the silence ended. I wanted to see who “owned” the silences. That is, did the teacher answer his or her own question (and thus take ownership of it), or did a student? Here was the difference. Only one of the 22 silences on Glenda’s two tapes ended with her answering her own question. Alex, on the other hand, had answered 5 times—50% of his own questions. In Glenda’s circle, the students owned all the silences. It was clearly up to one or another of them to end the waiting. In Alex’s circle, on the other hand, students knew that there was a 50/50 chance that the teacher would cave in before they did, and Alex would end up owning his own silence. (I hasten to make the important point here in fairness to Alex, that his writing circle is composed entirely of students with obvious ESOL issues, whereas in Glenda’s group, there are no such problems.)

I do not present the issue of ownership of silence to compare teaching skills, though certainly, it is a good indicator of effective group management skills. The point is that the pressure in these writing circles is intense. This is a small room. Everyone is seated at the same table, within two or three feet of everyone else, and facing each other. The teacher is sitting on the same level as the students. No student can play the classroom odds, just looking down until somebody else answers. If the teacher does call on someone for an answer, there is a 20% chance that it’s you, as opposed to a 4% chance in a classroom.

It seems reasonable to claim that there is a higher quality of silence in writing circles than in classrooms, or better, that silence in a writing circle is more productive.
than classroom silence. And it is a combination of two disruptions that makes those silences more productive. First, the physical space works to keep everyone in the room involved and focused. Second, this intimate meeting will be reenacted 15 more times over the course of the term. That kind of time with students is a luxury to a writing teacher.

Part Two: Teaching in Groups

If conferences are probably good, then groups are probably better. At the beginning of the chapter, I referred to Gere’s history of writing groups to back up a claim that the idea of teachers meeting with students to conference about writing was not a new idea. There are differences between groups and conferences, however: all groups involve some conferring, but all conferences are not groups. And writing circles are most definitely groups. By way of highlighting the differences, compare the conferences that Black writes about in Beyond Talk, the sort of conferences that are the backbone of UNH’s first-year course. The conferences are one-to-one meetings between student and teacher. They take place in the teacher’s office, by appointment. Writing circles are one-to-five meetings and they take place in a space where the teacher and student sit at the same table. Students in Black’s course may only meet two or three times in a semester and do so at her direction in conferences that last between fifteen and forty minutes (40, 41). Students in UNH’s class meet on a more regular schedule, with six or seven conferences in a semester, each of which lasts around fifteen or twenty minutes. Writing circles meet every week at the same time and last for an hour. Individual conferences are “hidden and private” (Black 8), in that no one but the teacher and one student know what
really goes on, while writing circles, as groups of five students and one teacher are public. (More on the importance of the public aspect of writing circles below, in the discussion of Barnes.) A handful of teacher-requested, one-on-one conferences, as in Black, represents an ancillary use of conferencing. The UNH conference model moves considerably along the continuum away from an ancillary role; the conferences are treated as the core of the course and happen with predictability and regularity. Even farther along are the writing circles, which are the only contact the students have with their teacher for the whole semester, and which occur weekly, for an hour at a time. This expectation of regular meetings with the same small number of peers, the product of disrupting received ideas about campus space and everyday practices of classroom time management, is what moves the small group conference from the margins to the center of the course.

The efficacy of small groups in composition, like the efficacy of conferences, is hardly in doubt. In Teaching and Assessing Writing, Ed White has made the case for, in his term, “student response groups.” (Shortly, I will provide examples that support White’s claims, when I tie the writing circles to the curriculum work of Douglas Barnes.) According to White (114-ff):

- The basic reason for using groups is to provide a tangible audience for student writers that is not the teacher. With a real audience of peers, students are less likely to write for the teacher, and more likely to “internalize writing standards”
Students usually feel comfortable working in small groups, and learn while they get to know each other.

Students who tune out repeated complaints about mechanics coming from the teacher pay more attention when the complaints come from other students.

As students engage in give-and-take over drafts, they must use the vocabulary of writing assessment in an active way.

Furthermore, small groups may be what lies at the end of the road on which composition has taken its “social turn.” I think that our social turn is actually more closely related to language theory than to pedagogy or philosophy, and I will treat it so in Chapter Three. But here, I would note that small groups are themselves a constructivist community and in that, they differ significantly from one-on-one conferences. Black, for example, is insightfully critical of the potential for teacher domination inherent in the one-on-one conference:

...[H]ow much of a role do students get in constructing knowledge? In actually shaping a conference? A word count in the fourteen conferences I examined ... indicates that, overwhelmingly, it is teachers who talk. ... It’s important to remember that both students and teachers found these conferences typical and successful. Yet, in sheer volume, talk is distributed in a radically uneven manner, one which falls clearly along the lines of status, generally producing in the conference the kind of teacher control that characterizes most classrooms (41-42).

When student meets teacher, one-on-one, in the teacher’s office, at the teacher’s request, we might say that what is happening is that the student is merely reenacting the writing of a paper for an audience of one. And that “one” is invested with all the authority...
of the institution. In the conferences Black analyzes, teachers utter fully 75% of the words spoken. In the writing circles I examined, on the other hand, where the teacher is outnumbered five to one, students dominated the talking, on average, holding the floor for 60% of the conference hour. Black is right that just favoring a constructivist philosophical view of knowledge is not enough. Teachers can too easily default to telling the student what to do. Our experience with the writing circles suggests that at least a partial solution to preserving a true knowledge-making community is to invite more students into the room. As Black points out, it’s easy to do nothing in a conference to help a student learn to write. I have an audiotape of a spectacularly unsuccessful writing circle myself. On it, the teacher has students simply exchange papers with one another and set off on an error-hunt. There are two complete silences of more than 10 minutes each while students try to figure out—with no guidance or experience—what’s wrong with their peers’ papers. Further, 90% of the talk on that tape comes from the teacher. But this is an inexperienced teacher, and this is not a writing circle to be emulated. Glenda is the model, not someone who has been teaching for two semesters after having taken one pedagogy course. Likewise, even though the graduate students Black transcribes may not demonstrate effective one-on-one conferences, even though such conferences happen all the time.

**Writing circles and communication in the curriculum.**

Ed White’s observations about student response groups in writing classes are confirmed in our experience with writing circles at FIU. We may have moved things around in time and space, but we haven’t invented anything—either new techniques or philosophies. But from the beginning, feelings about the redesigned conference course have run high.
few students have complained, after taking ENC 1930 in conference, that the rest of their writing courses are not taught in the small groups. They want to know why not. Could I change that for them? Experienced teachers, committed to the presentational classroom for years, have had what one described as "a conversion experience" to teaching in writing circles. Several have been moved to add small group conferencing to other courses they teach, both at FIU and elsewhere. On the other hand, the writing circles have driven three teachers to date out of the basic writing classroom. They refuse to teach the course anymore. Almost everyone who has taught in the circles has found that they are not only spending far less time reading and grading at home, but that they actually enjoy spending all their time teaching. Best of all, there has been a noticeable improvement in the quality of writing in the basic writing class, to the extent that grades are up and failure rates are down (though more institutional research must be done to confirm the figures).

These are observations of disruptions too, but they are different from disruptions of physical space and time. How to explain them? Making changes to classroom time management, to where students and teachers meet, to how teachers spend their time are all material changes. The most noticeable change is the increased role of talk for both students and teachers. With five writing circles per week, teachers are engaged in talk for 5 full hours every week. This is give-and-take talk, not lecturing. At one end of the scale, a dedicated, pessimistic, conference-shunning presentational teacher may spend no time at all engaged in meaningful talk with students. When she teaches her first writing circle class, she is suddenly spending five hours every week in a new and possibly uncomfortable activity. Worse yet for her, the one task that reaffirmed her relationship with students, and that took up the bulk of the hours spent on the course every week—
reading and grading papers—is almost entirely eliminated. And for those five hours of a new and discomfiting task, she must concede even the symbolic advantage of her physical position apart from the students. At the other end, a dedicated, optimistic, conference-loving constructivist teacher switches to writing circles and is liberated by the same changes in circumstances that unnerve his colleague. Writing circles offer a starkly clear pedagogical choice. The material changes that move meaningful talk to the center of the course have profound consequences for both teachers and students.

Douglas Barnes, in From Communication to Curriculum, places talk at the center, not just of writing classes, but of everything that happens in schools. For Barnes, schools are “places where people talk to one another” and talk is always at the center of the curriculum (11). Like Libby Miles, Barnes believes that change is difficult. He offers as a starting point the way that students and teachers communicate: “From a practical point of view ..., no amount of central curriculum planning, new materials from Schools Council projects, or exhortations to teachers will make significant changes in what is learnt, if school communication systems remain unchanged” (188).

For Barnes, echoing Ed White, this means setting up small groups wherever possible. He insists that teachers will “achieve better learning if they plan for uses of language that would contribute to learning” (191) Barnes is aware, however, that changes in ways of communicating with students are profound changes. By way of encouraging teachers to experiment, he provides a useful description of five characteristics of successful small groups. I will be guided by these characteristics as I attempt to account for the depth of feeling which teaching in conference at FIU has aroused.
1. The first characteristic Barnes examines is the extent to which the teacher encourages students to develop feelings of competence. Students (or anyone else, for that matter) who feel unsure of the reception their comments in a group will receive, can become overly cautious. Instead of entering the conversation with exploratory comments, they will more likely either abstain or try to guess what the teacher is looking for. Barnes suggests that a teacher should try to “educate his pupils’ sense of relevance” in all communication. In practical terms, that does not mean accepting everything students offer, but instead it means allowing them to try out their comments on the group and to see for themselves how they are received. Barnes adds that the form of the language used in groups is an important part of the process. That is, students should not be held to speaking like English majors in a writing circle while they are making their contributions to the group’s talk. There is plenty of time for that in the final draft of the paper.

In a way, then, Barnes is asking us to respect student’s contributions to the talk of the group. Writing circles, because they are weekly, regular, one hour long, and involve only five students at a time, make it relatively easy to allow students to grow into competence over the 15 weeks of a semester. They also make it possible for the teacher to get to know students well enough to attend to differences among them in their willingness to make a contribution. Here is an excerpt from one of the videotapes.

On the first tape of Glenda’s writing circle, everyone is discussing some reading they have done before they get down to a first draft. The students were allowed to choose for themselves which pieces to read from three that Glenda had distributed in the previous meeting. Present are Francesca, Melissa, Carolina (rhymes with ‘Tina’), Ronnie, Glenda, and me. Missing is Cindy Ann, who, it turns out, is stuck in one of Miami’s
world-class traffic jams, and won't arrive until the meeting is almost over. One of the first things to note is that the three women students present are all bilingual Spanish/English, with native fluency in both languages. Glenda has explained to me at the outset of the taping that this session will consist of discussion only, in preparation for writing. The gist of the assignment from the software package is to “write an essay about a social issue with which you agree or disagree strongly.”

Melissa and Ronnie have both read a piece about inhumane practices in slaughterhouses, ripe with graphic detail. They tell us about the Humane Slaughter Act and how it prescribes certain practices and forbids others. Apparently, in order to keep the production line moving, slaughterhouse workers not infrequently start some of their tasks early, before the animal is dead (castration, making a gutting incision, removing the tail, etc.). Such practices are outlawed by the Humane Slaughter Act. There is ongoing spirited and disgusted talk about the horrors of the slaughterhouse, with everyone contributing. At one point, Carolina turns in her seat to Melissa and asks, “Well, how are they supposed to kill them?” On camera, Glenda, who has been engaged in the discussion, immediately falls silent and sits back in her chair. In the exchange that follows, one student asks a question of another student and gets an answer that satisfies her. What is interesting is that Carolina asks the question, not of the teacher, nor of the room in general, but specifically of one of the two students who has read the piece for the class. Two things are clear: 1) students expect one another to do the work of the course and to be able to represent it to each other and 2) the teacher trusts the students to contribute to each other, as in asking a question and giving an answer, without putting her own seal on the transaction.
There is plenty of evidence that students' contributions to the talk of the circle will be respected. This is two weeks from the end of the semester, and they have had eleven one-hour meetings like it already. They are very comfortable with one another. Moreover, levels of language use mix freely and appropriately here. Witness Ronnie’s experience as an illustration of respect for a student’s contribution and tolerance of non-disciplinary language.

Glenda has asked one of her routine questions when students have done reading for discussion. “Take a minute and find a place where something that you read really jumped out off the page at you... where you found yourself strongly agreeing or disagreeing with something.” There’s a longish but comfortable (1min. 20 sec.) silence while students locate a passage.

_ Ronnie_: “I like the third page and the fourth paragraph where he says that if animals have rights [he reads now] “then we need not make not make any distinction between an unnecessarily cruel use of animals and ...”

[continues to read]

The point being made by the author is that one cruel use is as bad as another. Ronnie interprets for the group, and then looks up when he has finished reading the passage:

_Ronnie_: “If you gonna give em rights then you might as well don’t eat ‘em!”
This is met with laughter by the whole circle. Glenda follows up with an affirming, “Uh huh.”

*Ronnie:* “And if we don’t eat em we gonna die! Because we need vitamin B-12.”

Glenda jumps on this, not for diction, but for logic:

*Glenda:* “And there’s no other way to get Vitamin B-12...” [with eyebrows raised in invitation].

Ronnie doesn’t take the invitation, however, and Glenda immediately gives up and moves on. She returns to the point of the exercise (which seems to be what Ed White meant by forcing students to use the language of assessment in an active way) and simply asks Ronnie the same thing she has asked everyone else who volunteered a passage, “So do you agree or disagree?”

Clearly, Glenda has established a grammar of discussion in the writing circles. When she asks students to point out a passage and they do, the only follow-up she allows herself is to ask if the student agreed with the writer. Evaluations of the student’s reasons for agreeing would be “ungrammatical” for Glenda. The best evidence of this is the way students freely offered passages for discussion. In Barnes’ terms, the students in this writing circle are educating each others’ sense of relevance: everyone offers a passage from the reading and disagrees or agrees with it, free of evaluation by the teacher. They must construct by practice a sense of which comments were the most useful.
2. The second measure of successful small groups for Barnes is the extent to which curricular materials are made publicly available to students and are under their control. It is difficult to assess whether the writing circles can be considered successful in this regard. When Barnes makes the point in From Communication to Curriculum, he refers to specific individual classroom projects. In one, groups of students are given a poem to talk about “in any way they like” and are left alone to do just that, while a tape recorder listens in. In another, students are given the apparatus for simple science experiments and are left alone to develop and test their own hypotheses. What Barnes wants to see is students trying things out on their own and dealing with the results of their efforts.

In ENC 1930 in Conference, the curricular materials are certainly under the control of the students and are publicly available to them. As noted above, students may visit the lab at any time during the 50 hours per week it is open. They may go together, and some students do work in the lab with a friend. But no one reports an entire writing circle working together. For one thing, it is all but impossible, since the program requires students to wear headphones to access the audio portion of the lessons. So, while the materials are “publicly available” they are not available to the writing circle as a group.

There is another difference from the projects in Barnes’ study. The CD-ROM course, Interactive English, was not designed by any of the people who teach the course. In fact, the hardest part of the whole project was convincing faculty to try the software, to give up any and all control over the content of the course. Ideally, the lessons would be designed by our own faculty (and we have begun to do this) to reflect local issues and the teaching strengths of our staff. There is only one reason we use the software: it has
absolutely no competition. Not a single one of the computer software packages available for teaching writing provides anything like the richness of content available to users of Interactive English. That doesn’t mean we like it. Students complain that the lessons are irrelevant to their lives and generally “lame-o,” and at $100 a copy, with no chance of resale at the end of the term, too expensive to boot.

In defense of Interactive English, it must be said that the lessons certainly represent sound thinking in composition. The writing assignments would rate highly for the three criteria laid out in Scenarios for Teaching Writing: 1) the prewriting stimuli are rich and varied, 2) a rhetorical context for the student’s writing is specified, and 3) instructions on how to proceed are explicit and clear (Anson et al. 8). And in defense of the writing circles, it may be said that the opportunity to work together on the curricular materials occurs in the conferences themselves. But what is missing from the writing circles, compared to Barnes’ experiments, is time on task as a group without the presence of the teacher. This is an important difference because, without it, the group’s work habits can never develop away from the teacher’s gaze. As we will see immediately below, the teacher can virtually neutralize all the advantages of meeting in small groups in well-appointed spaces all by himself.

3. Barnes’ third way of measuring the effectiveness of small groups is to ask, To what extent does the teacher help the group to focus without dictating direction? For Barnes, ‘focus’ has two senses. There is the focus that must be provided by the teacher. “Education is not a matter of throwing pupils into life at the deep end” (193). The science experiments noted above were designed by Barnes in collaboration with the students’
science teachers. They were based on what the students were studying at the time, what the teacher’s goals and expectations for the course were, and Barnes’ own goal of “achieving the most learning possible.” The problem with teacher focus, according to Barnes, is that it is “all too easy to try to do the learning” for students and to “dictate the adult version, ready-made” (194). The second kind of focus comes from successful group work. Students can provide a focus themselves, asking valid questions that never occurred to the teacher. Too little teacher focus, and students flounder. Too much teacher focus, and students can only imitate.

This is the question that brings the writing circles back to earth. In spite of all the claims made above about how material changes can create a space and time in which intellectual change can occur, sometimes it just doesn’t work. So far, out of forty-six teachers, two have walked away from the program, dismissing it as wrongheaded. Both were openly uncomfortable about the role of the computer in the course. One thought the whole concept of “squandering class time” in favor of “cozy little meetings” amounted to a form of “educational malpractice.” It could be argued in these two cases, though, that the physical changes in the delivery of the course—giving up the classroom, sitting at the same table with students, working on drafts instead of grading finished papers—were so incompatible with their pedagogical philosophies that the writing circles would never have worked for them.

The following case, though, is different, and proves a point made by Black, namely, that it’s easy for unexamined teaching practices, no matter how innovative or promising, to slide into a deadening orthodoxy. The teacher in this case, a recent Literature MA from FIU, is a new teacher. He sat in the same graduate composition
pedagogy class as Alex Salinas, and his only background in composition is that course.

Here are the opening moments of a recently recorded (audiotape) writing circle:

(‘T’ is the teacher, ‘S’ a student)

T: Ok, does everybody have your revisions for everybody? I made the evaluation sheets similar to what we did before. You’ll find all the editing tips from the software are in here. I’ve also included stuff we’ve done in class, that you should be able to identify. Try to go through ... try to do a good job on two essays. You know, don’t rush to do everybody’s. Take your time, try to do a good job on at least two. And um, you know, make any comments...address what, you know, you feel is wrong with it, but what you basically think are strong things, things that you think are good, and just make sure that the writer knows that. Ok? Just take from the middle, the papers as you need them. Your papers are there too. If you have any questions about that, we could talk about it after class...

[There’s a brief exchange here that is inaudible, but apparently, a student asks for clarification about what exactly has to be handed in.]

That [a comment sheet] goes back to the people...you know, these are revisions. So those forms go back to the people who wrote the essay.

[inaudible from a student]

T: Right, you have to turn in everything, I mean, whatever comments your peers give you—eeeverything—all your email correspondence that you
have about your work, because that’s all part of your process. Ok, cause
that’s the one thing I really want you guys to understand. If you walk
away with anything this semester, it’s that writing is a process. If you’re
discarding all your friends’ comments, you’re discarding a big part of the
process. Does that answer your question?

S: Yes

T: So where’s my copy? Thank you.

silence, 5 sec.

T: And feel free to interrupt each other or whatever and ... if you have any
specific questions or issues that you feel need to be addressed with the
writer.

At this point, 14 full minutes of silence ensue, while the teacher and the students
read and fill out comment sheets on various papers. The only sounds are the scratchings
of pens on paper from time to time, and the odd cough.

Before addressing the problems I see in the way this writing circle was conducted,
I owe it to the teacher to share the blame. At this date, supervision of adjunct faculty
teaching English courses at FIU is nonexistent. As the Director of Undergraduate Writing
Programs, it is my responsibility to set priorities, and I have not pursued a program of
teacher oversight in order to focus on other aspects of program-building. This is not a bad
teacher, this is an unsupervised teacher who has been cast adrift in a classroom with
insufficient training and mentoring. In a sense, then, even though this writing circle
meeting must be ranked as a near-total failure, there is hope. All this teacher needs is support.

To begin, it is painfully obvious even from this brief excerpt that meaningful talk between teacher and student and between student and student is not going on. The teacher utters almost 100% of the speech in the passage, which is followed by a long silence. The talk is all procedural and concerns only class management details. There is no talk about writing whatsoever here, and almost none on the rest of the tape. The meeting certainly does not qualify as a group, since there is no exploratory talk whatever, but it really doesn’t even qualify as a recognizable conference. It’s more a case of people working on loosely related tasks in the same room. If what happens here is a conference at all, it is, in Lad Tobin’s term, a “first-generation” conference, described here by Black:

[First generation conferences are] brief conferences held regularly with students as they work on papers individually. These conferences are highly directive, with teachers setting the agenda and dispensing information to students who receive it passively, rewrite their work, and return for another brief conference (Black 14).

The teacher learned one thing in that graduate course: writing is a process. But what kind of process is it for the students in this writing circle? Surely it is a mystery. The students are turned loose on each others’ papers with only the general admonition to “do a good job,” “make any comments,” and “make sure the writer knows [what you think is good]”. One suspects that most of what they will find can be characterized as errors. On the rest of the tape, when a student approaches the teacher to turn in a comment sheet or ask a question, the subjects include: use of the semicolon, commas, use of the dictionary, citation of online sources. The only discussion of something at the level
of the whole sentence or higher concerns “adding more detail,” with no more specific advice.

The idea of “process” seems to be something that takes care of itself, provided the student visits certain locations in a particular order. If you prewrite, draft, peer review, draft again, and edit, then your process is sound. Somehow, your writing will improve too. The teacher in fact, knows how this will happen, but he is unwilling to guide the students to a place where they can discover some of it themselves, and instead, ends up simply dictating the ready-made adult version. The focus here is entirely the teacher’s and there is entirely too much of it. Predictably, there is no chance for students to develop a focus of their own.

In defense of the teacher, the tone of the writing circle taped here is not unpleasant or strained in any way. It is clear that students are doing the work for this teacher and that, they have a cordial, even friendly relationship. Even if his use of focus has constricted exploratory talk at every turn, he is doing no worse than many teachers of the old version of the course, and better than some. But he has defeated all the material changes of the writing circles and turned them into mini-classroom sessions. The teacher’s authority has been restored, control and order are back, even the handbook is back. Unfortunately, so are the basic writers. The students in this writing circle are not in a position to offer any focus of their own. Instead they can only grind through the pace that has been set for them by the teacher. The point here is that, even though it seemed so at first, the magic is not in the method of the writing circles. In fact there is no magic at all. There’s still good teaching and bad teaching. Further examples are provided immediately below.
4. How does the teacher advance or retard the “pace” of the group by exercising critical comments? Barnes defines ‘pace’ as “an aspect of the teacher’s demands on the class” which is “linked with the way critical standards are being applied” (194). Pace, then, is not just a matter of how much work one group does as opposed to another, but also a matter of how the teacher works to keep the group working. Composition teachers recognize the concept as encouraging students to “turn off the editor” during the early drafts of a piece of writing, so as not to inhibit exploration. In a small group where talking is the primary means of communicating, the exercise of critical comments on students’ verbal offerings can have the same stifling effect as the editor. Students must be allowed to “draft” their comments before being required to submit a “final” version.

When the teacher makes critical comments too early, students stop thinking about figuring out the issue and start thinking instead about how to please the teacher. On the other hand, if the teacher never offers critical comments or never tries to keep the group on task, students will enjoy the talk, but won’t get anything done. The difficult questions about critical commentary are when and how much.

The writing circles themselves, because they offer regular, large blocks of time for talking, can contribute to the management of pace, as can the personalities of the students in a group and the teacher’s pedagogical background. In this sense, pace is not unrelated to focus. The examples below show, on one hand, how a lack of focus can either guarantee a certain pace or else hobble it altogether. On the other hand, they also show how the absence of a sense of pace, in the form of premature critical comments, can undermine focus or how a strong sense of pace can support it.
Returning to the audiotape of the unsuccessful writing circle above, a student approaches the teacher and hands in a paper. Almost immediately—there isn’t time for anything except a quick scan of the first few lines—the teacher finds trouble:

T: Oh, oh. ... Oh oh. What’s this? Bad! Bad! [the tone is exaggerated here, clearly self-mocking, and not at all serious]

S: What? Why? [a mix of amused and nervous laughter here]

T: Bad! ... It’s awful!

S: What?

T: Does it say ‘so’? [shows the student the problem on the paper]

S: Oh, oooh! ‘Do’ [the student has found the typo, ‘so’ instead of the intended ‘do’] That’s horrible. Sorry, it should be ‘do.’

T: Aaaah! Yes.

S: That’s not what I wrote.

T: Yeah, I know. I hate it when I write ‘so’ and it always turns into ‘do’ somehow. I don’t know how that happens. [Here, the correction is made and the interaction is over.]

This very brief exchange (31 seconds), looks worse on the page than it sounds on the tape. This teacher is not being cruel, and he enjoys generally cordial relationships with his students. The tone is playful and self-mocking. Both parties are clear that this is a send-up: Alert the Media! The Chief Inspector of Papers has discovered a First-Degree Typographical Error! Film at eleven! But even the distancing via humor from the quick
discovery of a crime against good editing does not undo the teacher's focus on the student's error. What kind of pace is possible for this student's work with the teacher?

In the first place, this exchange really occurs outside the group, in that it is a one-on-one interaction between the teacher and the student. The space and time for group talk created by the physical arrangements of the writing circle are not functional here. The effect is to reinscribe the identities of teacher (as knower) and student (as supplicant or empty vessel) that are otherwise deconstructed by the writing circle arrangement. In the end, regardless of the student's and teacher's playful engagement, the error is corrected. Furthermore, the correction of one typographical error is the sum total of the exchange. The student's expectations about what the teacher wants have been confirmed. The teacher, for his part, has been able to help a student by catching a mistake before the final evaluation process. The teacher's focus is clear.

Second, there seems to be a missed opportunity to maintain (or establish) a pace for accomplishing the work of the course. The writing circles provide a relatively vast capacity of time to work with students in group conferences. Compared with the UNH model, for example, which represents one of the fullest integrated uses of conferences in writing courses, the fifteen full hours in a semester of writing circles would provide 60 of the typical 15-minute conferences. Given the amount of time available, it is certainly premature for the teacher to exercise his critical power over the student at this point. Before the final draft is to be handed in, it would be entirely appropriate to remind everyone to watch for mechanical errors. At that point, hamming it up as the Great Error Detective would probably be much more effective. In the interests of establishing a pace, he might instead have greeted the submission of the paper with a more general comment:
So, are you happy with this draft? or Did anything you didn’t expect come up in this draft? or even just Thanks.

All teachers struggle with establishing and maintaining a pace too, of course. And in the writing circles at FIU, with no supervision whatsoever, teachers have evolved different ways to deal with pace. One recurring strategy is to use the hour to do two or three students’ whole papers in a workshop format. A student who is “up” today provides copies for everyone and then, more often than not, reads the paper herself while the others in the group listen and make notes for commentary. For one of the teachers who was audiotaped (call her Gail), all aspects of each paper are dealt with as they come up, whether the paper is a draft or a final submission. So for example, in a draft of an argument paper, titled “Go Home,” for which the student has chosen municipal curfews as a topic, the following issues are raised in order:

1. misspelling (“You forgot the ‘r’ there.”)
2. a definition (“Define ‘truancy.’”)
3. sentence fragment (“I detect a fragment. Who can find the sentence fragment in this paragraph?”)
4. evidence (“I like your statistic very much. I like how it supports your point.”)
5. placement of quotation marks
6. word choice
7. diction
8. run-on sentence
9. punctuation
10. missing word
11. run-on sentence
12. parallel structure
13. word choice
14. comma splice
15. awk
The treatment of this student's paper lasts just under 40 minutes. Of the 33 comments on the paper (all of which were initiated by the teacher, not other students), 85% deal with issues at the level of the sentence and below (run-ons, word choice, punctuation, etc.), and 15% deal with issues at the level of the paragraph or higher (i.e. the paper itself, argument papers in general, academic discourse). The student's reading of her own paper was interrupted after comments #5, #10, #23, and the last 10 comments were made after the reading was finished.

To Gail's credit, she did not fail to attend to some of the larger issues. Though she held it till the end, she did express her enthusiasm for the student's choice of a title for the paper. Unfortunately, there was no discussion of how the title was chosen, or whether other students in the class liked it and why. The discussion of a
‘concession’ and a ‘refutation’ warmed the cockles of my Jesuit-trained heart.

Clearly, Gail had treated her students to one or another version of classical oratory’s structure of an argument. Though it probably received a fuller treatment at some earlier point in the term, discussion of it here was limited to Gail’s recognition of its inclusion, which she praised. Gail also had generally good things to say about this student’s use of statistics to back up her claims.

The benefits of Gail’s positive comments about larger issues of structure, however, were swamped by the overwhelming tide of comments about mechanical errors. In an effort to be thorough, to not hold back any of the help she is able to give students, Gail loses any sense of pace she might bring into the writing circle. The discussions of the title, the use of statistical evidence, and ways of structuring arguments might have been considerably enriched by the participation of the other students in the circle. They might well have provided some unforeseeable focus of their own. Why didn’t the students join in? Barnes would argue that Gail’s exercise of critical commentary raised the stakes of participation in the circle so high that no student felt capable of making a useful contribution.

The two teachers whose writing circles are excerpted here seem to need some help, in the form of supervision and practice, with setting and maintaining a pace. They know the difference between larger issues and smaller ones, and that the larger ones ought to be addressed first. But they seem unable to do two things. First, they can’t keep themselves from helping. If they see a problem, they fix it. And because their teachers are far better trained to fix (and even to recognize problems in the first place) the students can’t compete. So they don’t. They meekly make the suggested
corrections. Second, the teachers can’t relax enough to wallow in the luxury of conference time that the writing circles permit. Unlike Glenda, they have a hard time with their own focus. When Glenda is asking students to report on what they read and say whether they agree or not, that is exactly what gets done, and it is all that gets done. Students may make outrageous comments with no support, but if that’s not the purpose of the exercise, the time to address them is not now. The difference between pace in Gail’s circle and pace in Glenda’s circle is the difference between being driven by situational ethics and having a philosophy of life.

5. Finally, Barnes gauges the effectiveness of small groups by asking *how the teacher helps the group make its work public*. His interest in making our meaning public is that it forces us to match our own views against those of others. But Barnes maintains a further, critical distinction between audiences of different sizes. The audience of a large class (say, 25–30 students) is critically different from a small group of four or five: “[T]he very size of a group of thirty or so makes a close relationship impossible. Without a close relationship one cannot be sure of shared assumptions, or whether what one says is earning acceptance and agreement” (195).

But the teacherly audience of one is no better. “[T]he fact that he knows the answer tends to discourage explicitness” (196). We saw examples of both above. Students in Gail’s circle offer no comments whatsoever during a forty-minute “workshop.” They know that Gail is better at the task than they are, so they let her do it. In contrast, one of the students in Glenda’s writing circle pursued a fuller, more explicit explanation of some vegetarians’ connection with the Jain religion, without her help. It
didn’t occur to Carolina that her fellow students wouldn’t be able to answer her question, or that they might look down on her for asking.

Small groups like the writing circles offer a middle alternative. The stakes are lower in small groups than they are for either the teacher-as-audience or the full class.

According to Barnes:

The small group encourages exploration. Incompleteness and changes of direction, a fairly low level of explicitness, hesitation and lack of an overall plan do not seem out of place amongst intimates who are trying to sort out a complex topic. The same behaviour would be intolerable in a larger group, which would demand explicitness, a more complete organization of thought, and some confidence in phrasing (196).

In writing circles (at least, when they are successful, as most are), it could be argued that practically all of the students’ work is public, unlike one-on-one conferences, where, according to Black, “practically all of what goes on is private and hidden” (8, italics original).
In Chapter Two, we examined the impact of radical changes in spaces and time on both teachers and students when the basic writing course at FIU was redesigned. In spite of those changes, we saw that ENC 1930 in Conference is really more of a new arrangement (in the sense in which that term is used in classical rhetoric) than a departure from composition's best practices. Finally we saw how Douglas Barnes' work on communication and curriculum can illuminate both the successes and the shortcomings of the writing circles. In this chapter, I will first turn to the literature of classroom discourse analysis, primarily using the work of Courtney Cazden and Martin Nystrand to look at the quality of communication in the writing circles. Then I will adduce concepts from socially oriented theories of language—specifically in the work of James Paul Gee on discourse analysis, and then more generally in relation to some recent research in TESOL theory—to add more depth to the examination and explanation of how the writing circles work.

Support from classroom discourse analysis

What goes on in FIU's writing circles seems also to be supported by recent contributions to a body of literature in the field of education concerned with analyzing the specifics of the discourses of individual classrooms. One of the earliest studies, an essay published in 1972 by Susan Philips, took an anthropological view of the interactions of
Native American children of the Warm Springs Band in the Pacific Northwest with their schools. As her work grew into a dissertation and later a book, it drew other researchers into classrooms to listen to teachers and students talking. Philips found that the home culture of the Native American children was not reflected in their white schools, and that they suffered as a result. In addition to Philips' work with the Warm Springs community, Kathryn Au studied the participation of native Hawaiian students in reading classes (1980) and then collaborated with anthropologist Stephen Boggs to study how Hawaiian children worked with narrative in school. The children Boggs and Au studied routinely and irrepressibly "violated" the school conventions of storytelling because they simply did not fit with the way they told stories at home. In 1983, Shirley Brice Heath published the most influential study for writing teachers of the relationships among children, their home cultures, and the schools, *Ways With Words*. Heath's work has become a required stopping place for any investigation of literacy practices or writing instruction involving diverse populations.

The charter for the study of classroom discourse should probably be credited to Hugh Mehan and Courtney Cazden, who have worked together and independently for over thirty years. According to Cazden, there are compelling reasons to attend to classroom discourse:

1. Spoken language is the medium by which much teaching takes place, and in which students demonstrate to teachers much of what they have learned.

2. Classrooms are among the most crowded human environments such as restaurants and buses or subways. But in such places simultaneous autonomous conversations
are normal, whereas in classrooms one person, the teacher, is responsible for controlling all the talk ...

3. [S]poken language is an important part of the identities of all the participants. Differences in how something is said, and even when, can be matters of only temporary adjustment, or they can seriously impair effective teaching and accurate evaluation (2-3).

Hugh Mehan’s *Learning Lessons: Social Organization in the Classroom* (1979) was the first to describe the Initiation/Response/Evaluation (IRE) sequence. Mehan developed the terms to describe the forms of the exchanges between students and teachers in class. Cazden describes IRE in her *Classroom Discourse* in the context of a storytelling exercise in school thus:

1. The teacher initiates the sequence by calling on a child to share [Initiation].
2. The nominated child responds by telling a narrative [Response].
3. The teacher comments on the narrative before calling on the next child.

[Evaluation] (Cazden, Discourse 29).

Impediments to discussion. In a writing class in college, such an exchange is instantly recognizable and unremarkable, and might go something like this:

Initiation: *Who would like to tell me what the author has to say about capital punishment?* Ralph?

Response: *He’s opposed to it.*

Evaluation: *Right, he’s opposed to all forms of the death penalty.*
Individual IRE sequences can be combined recursively into an intermediary hierarchical level, which Mehan named the Topically Related Set (TRS). Finally, the sum of all the TRSs is the highest level of classroom interaction, the Lesson (Mehan 66-70). Thus, the writing class exchange above might continue:

Initiation: *And does he give us any reasons? Alicia?*

Response: *He says that it makes us as bad as the criminals we execute.*

Evaluation: *OK, good, any other reasons he's opposed to all forms of the death penalty? Anyone.*

This IRE combines with the first in the same TRS, because they share a topic, or a discussion thread, and many more could be concatenated to these until the teacher decided to terminate the Lesson, and move on to another one.

While the form of the IRE sequence may be familiar and comfortable, its nearly absolute dominance of student/teacher interactions may not. According to Cazden, “The three-part IRE sequence is the most common sequence in teacher-led speech events. In linguistic terms, it is the ‘unmarked pattern.’ A more informative label comes from computer terminology: IRE is the ‘default’ pattern—what happens unless deliberate action is taken to achieve some alternative” (53). The trouble with an IRE-dominated discourse pattern in the classroom is that, to the extent that students and teachers come to rely only on such exchanges, they become a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Only* teachers can ask questions, and students can *only* answer them and then wait to see if they were right or wrong. Cazden sees this issue as a matter of “speaking rights:”

In typical classrooms, the most important asymmetry in the rights and obligations of teacher and students is over the control of the right to speak.
To describe the difference in the bluntest terms, teachers have the right to speak at any time and to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speaker; they can speak to a student anywhere in the room and in any volume or tone of voice. And no one has any right to object (55).

Clearly, all the “speaking rights” belong to the teacher in a classroom, unless she consciously and vigilantly works to give some of them away to the students. “Easy to imagine,” says Cazden, “but not easy to do” (54). The kind of free and open discussion among peers that most writing teachers want to encourage is stifled by default. Even the pace of classroom talk works against discussion. Most classroom questions call for answers already known to the teacher, as a kind of running check on comprehension, and stimulate recall rather than thinking. Ironically, if students are well-prepared for this sort of classroom dynamic, the pace of instruction can become quite fast, even to the point of being counter-productive, to the extent that teacher/student “dialogue” is reduced to short mutual assurances that attention is being paid.

In her discussion of pace, Cazden notes that the study of silences in classroom discourse is undervalued and warrants more research. First, she observes with Dillon that changes in behaviors are harder for teachers and students than changes in attitude, and she singles out the management of silence as the single most difficult change to make in the way teachers employ questions (60). Cazden reports on the research of Mary Budd Rowe, a science teacher who has studied classroom silences at all educational levels for twenty years (60-61). With a stopwatch, Rowe has found that “when teachers ask questions of students, they typically wait 1 second or less for the students to start a reply; after the student stops speaking they begin their reaction or proffer the next question in less than 1 second” (quoted in Cazden 60). With inservice support and supervision,
teachers who learn to increase the waiting time to three seconds before responding to students or asking another question see “pronounced changes:”

1. Teachers’ responses exhibit greater flexibility, indicated by the occurrence of fewer discourse errors and greater continuity in the development of ideas.

2. Teachers ask fewer questions, and more of them are cognitively complex.

3. Teachers become more adept at using student responses—possibly because they, too, are benefiting from the opportunity afforded by the increased time to listen to what students say.

4. Expectations for the performances of certain students seem to improve, and some previously invisible people become visible.

5. Students are no longer restricted to responding to teacher questions and get to practice all four of the moves [Rowe adds “structuring” to “initiation,” “response,” and “evaluation”] (60-61).

As Cazden marvels, “So many significant changes from a seemingly small change in pace!” (61). I would suggest that the changes are so significant—dramatic, really—because the dominance of the IRE pattern is so absolute; any variation at all draws attention to itself immediately. In the writing circles, as we saw above, an expert “waiter” like Glenda energizes the group’s discussion by the skillful management of silence.

In addition to the patterns of discourse, the physical arrangements of most classrooms can work against free discussion or dialogue as well. Susan Philips, noting
differences in the way Warm Springs Indian children made eye contact from the way white people do, described the problems she saw in the school:

While the teacher is speaking, the students look at the teacher much more often than elsewhere. And when a student is speaking, the student designates the teacher as the addressed recipient of the speech by looking at her. Peers, in turn, do not gaze at the speaker’s face nearly as often as the teacher does. They look more often at the teacher listening than they look at the student who is speaking. As often as not, while one student is speaking, the other students do not look at anyone, but gaze off in the distance or downward. This pattern of gaze direction supports an impression conveyed by the system for regulating talk that students are not supposed to play a role in regulating the talk of their peers. A child’s claim to the floor is validated by the teacher, both verbally and visually, or not at all, in the official structure of talk (Philips 76).

On the videotapes of writing circles, the benefits of sitting around the same table are obvious. When all members of Glenda's group are at the same table, the scenario Philips describes does not occur: students tend to look at one another, to address one another directly, and even to ask questions of one another without the help of the teacher. In Alex’s writing circle, on the other hand, meeting in a portable classroom and seated in a semi-circle, students behave more like those Philips describes. Actually, there is a new “problem” in the writing circles—how to get students to keep from talking to one another. Although some teachers manage it in a negative sense (nobody talks to anybody else, as in the independent “correcting workshop” above), at least a half dozen other teachers have reported it in a positive way. Things like “Sometimes I have to wait until I can get back into the conversation!” or “I feel guilty sitting there while they do all the work.” There is an example of this on a videotape of Glenda’s group. At one point, Cindy Ann is talking to me, seated directly across from her, and Francesca, seated to her right, has some advice for Cindy Ann, but can’t get her to turn away from talking to me.
Finally, in good-natured exasperation, Francesca tells Glenda because Cindy Ann is busy. Then it’s Glenda’s turn to be “frustrated” as Cindy Ann and I continue to talk to one another. When we finally end, Glenda does ensure that the student-to-student communication finally takes place. Francesca tells Cindy Ann that she has some research that might prove useful to Cindy Ann’s final draft, and ultimately hands it over.

This kind of free dialogue between peers is rare, and occupied only an average of “50 seconds per class in eighth grade, and less than 15 seconds in grade nine” in one large, recent study of 450 class sessions (Nystrand). By contrast, in the writing circles that run the way we would like them to, there is as much as a full 45 minutes of discussion (on two separate tapes, one audio, one video) in one meeting of the writing circles.

**Resisting IRE: uptake, backchanneling, high-level evaluation**

Even though teacher-dominated IRE sequences are the “depressingly enduring findings” of many studies of classroom discourse (see Nystrand, p 42 for a summary list of 15 projects from as early as 1860 to the present), teachers do manage to teach effectively both within its constraints and in discursive practices that subvert it. Mehlan reminds us the focus of study should be the “communicative competence” of the students, not just the IRE sequences that characterizes classroom discourse; these are just the forms of utterances operating in a communicative sequence. Students must be able to do more to learn. They must be able to recognize the IRE pattern in order to get the floor, hold it, and influence the subsequent discussion.
For Mehan, this is more a matter of the student’s competence to internalize the implicit rules of his specific classroom discourse and then produce them himself. That is, “[Good students are] successful in introducing their own topics and changing the course of the lesson, apparently because of their ability to introduce interesting topics at the right junctures of the lesson” (159). Mehan’s formulation here resembles an expanded notion of the narrower “linguistic competence” of Chomsky. Unlike Chomsky’s mentalistic construct, however, which operates only in terms of a single person (not even a whole person, really, but a “mind”) Mehan’s version of competence depends absolutely on other people. Chomsky’s grammaticality judgments are based on the native speaker’s intuitions alone. Classroom competence, by contrast, depends on the classroom equivalent of grammaticality judgments of other competent classroom communicators.

Cazden also cautions against becoming too enamored of only counting discourse structures and not attending to what else goes on in class. Though cross-discussions (dialogue between peers) are typically brief as well as rare in American classrooms, they often represent the “intellectual high point” of the lesson (Cazden 62). “These observations [that student discussion changed someone from an advocate to an opponent of capital punishment, for example],” says Cazden, “point to the importance of infrequent events, ways of talking that have special value at specific moments, ways that would be lost from notice in analyses that combine frequencies for the lesson as a whole” (62).

One measure of teacher/student communication within the IRE model recognized in classroom discourse studies is what is variously called ‘uptake’ (Collins), ‘backchanneling’ (Duncan, cited in Mehan), and ‘high-level evaluation’ (Nystrand). The
The essence of the phenomenon is the incorporation by the teacher of the student’s reply in her evaluation. The first example of an IRE above contains uptake:

Response: He’s opposed to it.
Evaluation: Right, he’s opposed to all forms of the death penalty.

Uptake is an indicator, not a technique. That is, we speak of the presence or absence of uptake in an IRE sequence. It is not a technique for teachers to practice in order to better communicate with their students.\textsuperscript{xii} Uptake, or backchanneling, is perhaps best understood as an indicator of conversational continuity: when the teacher incorporates part of the student’s reply in her evaluation, she is reinforcing the student’s engagement in the IRE sequence and the lesson. The alternative, to short-circuit the IRE in order to correct a student’s inappropriate reply, disrupts the continuity not only of the IRE, but possibly of the TRS and the whole lesson as well. In James Collins’ original study, he noticed far more evidence of uptake in higher level reading classes than in lower level reading classes in Chicago (in Cazden 85-89). The frightening conclusion of his work is that better students (those already more competent at getting and holding the floor) get better (more encouraging and reinforcing) treatment from teachers. Students who are not so able are more frequently interrupted to correct either deviations from the IRE sequence or wrong answers to teacher questions.

\textbf{Nystrand’s study}

Martin Nystrand adds a new dimension to uptake/backchanneling. He has recently published the results of a massive study of classroom discourse—the largest undertaken.
to date—in a 1997 book, *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom*. The study, funded by a grant from the Department of Education, applies large-scale data analysis to investigate classroom discourse and its effects on learning. Here are some highlights of a description of the project, to which Courtney Cazden and Elizabeth Cohen served as advisors:

- The data for Nystrand’s study were collected over two years
- The money came from the DOE’s National Center on Effective Secondary Schools
- 112 English and language arts classes in the 8th and 9th grades were studied
- 1100 students and teachers participated in each of the two years
- 450 class sessions were recorded (audio and video, then transcribed)
- “Our project sought specifically to relate student learning about literature to the nature of classroom discourse” (xiv).

Nystrand sets out to examine “what each participant learns from the particular interactions that constitute the conversational steps or moves in a classroom discussion. He then considers alternative patterns of interaction and asks which pattern seems to contribute most effectively to students’ learning” (ix, from the Foreword by Robert Gundlach), concluding that “generally students learn more in classrooms organized more dialogically than monologically” (31).

Nystrand’s emphasis on the dialogic nature of classroom talk is certainly not unique, but he offers something new too. In the Foreword, Gundlach quotes Jerome
Bruner: “I find it ironic that in all the lists of human instincts that used to be offered by psychologists to explain human nature, nobody ever mentioned the need to share the objects of our attention with others” (x). This reminds me of the psychotherapist Michael Franz Basch’s contention that a newborn constantly seeks contact with others, not just to define itself against everything else or even to seek pleasure, but in a search for engagement (see Basch, Understanding Psychotherapy). Gundlach then describes an interesting critical distinction between “theories of social construction of meaning” and “theories of social interaction” (x). It turns out that this is the core of Nystrand’s contribution. According to Gundlach, “theories of social construction of meaning concentrate on the relatively stable, widely shared understandings that groups of people develop for themselves” (x). These ‘shared understandings’ sounds to me like many definitions of ‘culture’ (as in Philips) and a lot like what, in Gee, reminded me of the classical rhetorical concept of the enthymeme. “Theories of social interaction, in contrast, highlight the more dynamic, less predictable meanings created when two or more people engage in conversation” (x). Further, for Gundlach, “…given the freedom and uncertainties of genuine conversation, learning is often built on surprises” (x).

Whatever the term—backchanneling, uptake, or Nystrand’s contribution, ‘high-level evaluation’ (taken up below)—this enfolding of the students’ comments (even questions) and incorporating them into the discussion is the essential difference between recitation and interactive, dialogic discussion. The reason is that it makes a great deal of the conversation unpredictable. Such discussion is “less predictable and repeatable because it is ‘negotiated’ and jointly determined—in character, scope, and direction—by both teachers and students as teachers pick up on, elaborate, and question what students
say” (6-7). For Nystrand, this issue is often clouded by miscasting the argument as one of teacher control v. student control. Instead of this sterile and unproductive argument, Nystrand suggests that we focus on something else “...more basic than either teacher or student is the relationship between them” (6, italics original). He suggests (and provides some compelling evidence later) that this teacher/student engagement should be the key object of study.

For Nystrand, as for Mehan and Cazden, just classifying classroom talk—identifying and counting structures—while necessary, is not enough. “We must be careful, too, not to define pedagogical engagement in terms of either how much students actually talk or how much time they spend on task...The usefulness of such talk or time can be assessed only when the nature of the talk or task is considered” (7).

This doesn’t mean, even in the face of the copious data his study provides, that Nystrand is prepared to simply dump lectures and recitation and replace them with small groups and open-ended questions absolutely. “On the one hand, lectures can be useful when they respond to, anticipate, and/or engender curiosity and important student questions. On the other hand, many lively discussions are not really so free-formed but, like recitation, can be orchestrated by ‘right’ answers, hidden agendas, and preordained conclusions. All of these complications make it clear that, in the final analysis, the key features of effective classroom discourse cannot be defined only by identifying particular linguistic forms such as question types, or even the genre of classroom discourse (lecture, discussion, etc.)” (7).

In analyzing instructional discourse, Nystrand looked at
1. authenticity of questions (both student and teacher) [i.e., was the teacher genuinely soliciting creative thought from the student or asking a question whose answer was already known to the teacher]

2. uptake

3. level of evaluation (They looked for the “extent to which the teacher allowed a student response to modify the topic of discourse” (32))

Nystrand adds a dimension to Mehan’s original “evaluation” and distinguishes “high-level evaluation” (90). For Mehan, evaluation by the teacher marks the end of an individual IRE sequence. When the teacher says, “Right, he’s opposed to the death penalty,” she has marked the exchange as satisfactory. Nystrand adds the descriptive ‘high-level’ to define an evaluation as one which goes beyond simply marking the end of the preceding IRE and both validates the student’s reply and uses it to invite further questions, ideally from other students.

In their findings, discussion and authentic questions had a positive effect on achievement on a literature test (designed by Nystrand) in the 8th grade classes, to the surprise of no one. However, in the 9th grade classes, discussion and authentic questions actually showed a negative effect on achievement (58). In Table 3.1, we see, for example, that students of the teacher who asks many authentic, discussion-friendly questions don’t do nearly so well on the test as students of the teacher who asks very few authentic questions.

From Table 3.1 Student Literature Achievement and Class Behavior in Ms. Jansen’s and Mr. Kramer’s Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Variables</th>
<th>Ms. Jansen’s class</th>
<th>Mr. Kramer’s class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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The important contribution of Nystrand’s research team was supposed to be empirical verification of the effectiveness of dialogic classroom discourse. Though not entirely disappointed, they were perplexed by these results. Their further inquiry provides the basis for claims that merely counting the number of questions or turn-taking is inadequate. The team went back to look closely at the data. What they found was that they had failed to account for the larger issues of 1) the context of the class’s location in the structure of the institution and 2) teacher/student engagement. As it turns out, the 9th grade classes as a whole included more low-track classes than the 8th grade classes as a whole. With ability-grouping in mind, they then went over the data again, and found that in the lower track courses, authentic questions were authentic in name only on many occasions. That is:

In the high-track classes, fully 68% of authentic questions concerned literature, whereas only 25% of authentic questions in low-track classes did. In low-track classes, teachers’ authentic questions often concerned such issues as, ‘How do most of you feel about tests?’; ‘What would your parents say if you got an A on next week’s test?’; ‘What things would you associate with lying in the sun?’; ‘Do you ever have to take notes?’ Discussion broke down in a similar way so that discussion in the high-track classes tended to be about literature far more than did that in the low-track courses (58).

Mr. Kramer’s class in Table 3.1 was a high-track class, Ms. Jansen’s a low-track class.
Here, Nystrand’s data replicate Collins’ findings that children in the lower level reading classes in Chicago were treated differently from the higher level class. Tracking leads to inequalities in treatment of students’ contributions to the talk of the class, and inequalities in this treatment lead in turn to inequalities in achievement. I see this secondary analysis as the strength of the Nystrand team’s study. One of their initial goals was to see if quality of discourse was responsible for unequal levels of achievement in high v. low track classes. The team correctly perceived how difficult it would be since there was very little in the way of empirical data with which they could compare their own results. They also knew that low-track students started at lower levels of achievement than high-track students. This would be a problem for simply comparing end levels of achievement on the test by the two groups: low track students might show significant improvement in achievement relative to where they started, but that improvement would only show up as lower achievement in relation to the higher track students. So Nystrand controlled for entering differences in the numbers to get a truer picture of what happened (64). Even with the weighted effects of ability levels now clear to see, however, the unexpected negative effects of discussion on achievement were still unexplained. How could discussion possibly be responsible for lowering achievement? In a fresh search for an explanation, the team refocused and looked at: what went on in the classroom immediately before and after groups and discussion; the kinds of tasks assigned to the groups; the teacher’s instructions to the groups; and the role of the teacher in the groups.
The relationship’s the thing

The most puzzling finding of Nystrand’s study related to the two teachers above, Mr. Kramer, and Ms. Jansen, both ninth grade literature teachers. Mr. Kramer, from the transcripts, could fairly be called an ‘authoritarian monologist.’ He seemed to be philosophically opposed to free discussion in his classroom. He opened one recorded session as follows:

What we’re going to do is analyze a group of poems from the textbook. The way I analyze the poem is the way... I expect you to analyze the poems in the booklet. I’m not going to go through that many poetic devices, but I am going to analyze the poem in terms of themes, all right. The way I analyze the theme of the poem and the mood is the way I expect your analysis to be in the booklet. So what we can call these are simply dry runs, [to] sharpen your senses in terms of how you’re going to do the booklet poems (Nystrand 79).

The reference to “dry runs” hearkens back, in an eerie and uncomfortable way, to Britton’s dismissal of “dummy runs” in The Development of Writing Abilities. Not surprisingly, Mr. Kramer had asked far fewer authentic questions in his observed classes than had Ms. Jansen, whose classroom discourse, on the other hand, had been coded with many more instances of authentic questions and dialogic discussion:

What is the difference between the words used by the children and the father?

How does that make you feel about the words the children used?

I told you yesterday that there are a lot of right answers. As I said, there are a lot of different answers. And even my answers, I guessed on a lot of these too. It’s not specifically stated, so I’m assuming that you guessed, too. And we should come up with a bunch of different things (76).

How then to explain the unexpected results? Part of the reason lies in the medium.

In the form of print only, Mr. Kramer appears uninterested in what his students might...
have to say, and conversely, Ms. Jansen appears to spend considerable effort in empathetic attempts to identify with her students and to listen to their input. But when Nystrand bypassed the transcripts and listened to the recorded-live audiotapes of these sessions, the inadequacies of a print-only coding of classroom interactions became clear. While Ms. Jansen did ask students questions, many of them were authentic in name only. That is, like Gail whose writing circle was discussed above, although Ms. Jansen was genuinely interested in her students, she was unable to break out of the IRE pattern for any length of time, or in such a way that fostered independent thought from her students. Her questions may have been authentic in form, but she was still in search of “right answers.” In her defense, Nystrand suggests that the tracking system makes it difficult for teachers to do anything else. Students openly told her for example, that they knew they were enrolled in “the dummy class” (78).

The audiotape of Mr. Kramer interacting with his students, by contrast, revealed him to be very different from the authoritarian figure transcribed above. “Upon first listening to sessions of Mr. Kramer’s ninth-grade literature classroom, it was hard to decide which impressed us more: the air of mutual respect pervading it, or the fact that he cultivated such an atmosphere without asking many authentic questions (or questions of any kind, for that matter)” (79). In person, Mr. Kramer is a confident teacher, who knows he is teaching high-track students. He is demanding and directive, but his IRE sequences—even when they were limited to modeling methods of analysis for students to mimic—left plenty of room for students to think for themselves. And over time, the rigid scaffolding erected by this teacher at the beginning of the term was dismantled piecemeal by the students, under his watchful eye, as his students progressed.
The best explanation Nystrand can offer of the higher levels of achievement and participation in Mr. Kramer’s class are not reducible to the forms of discourse alone. Neither can it be separated completely from the high/low tracking of classes; to an important extent, the attitudes of students toward teachers in general have been “set” in advance by administrative mechanisms. When low achievers as defined by the school system are grouped together, the default settings of these low track students make them less likely to rise to Mehan’s “communicative competence.” In the high track classroom, successful learners who already demonstrate such competence get more opportunities to practice them with a teacher who works under less pressure to teach to the test. The best explanation of Mr. Kramer’s and Glenda Phipps’ classroom success is the quality of the relationship with their students, and this is something that they have earned in the classroom.

The way that Nystrand uncovered the qualities of this interpersonal relationship was to measure in small group work 1) the degree of student autonomy on offer in a classroom, 2) student production of knowledge, and 3) the effectiveness of group work in the classroom.

**Student autonomy and production of knowledge.** When teachers ask questions, will students’ answers be allowed to stand on their own? Will the teacher be the ultimate source of resolution in all matters? I once did a presentation on public speaking for a sixth-grade class at the request of the teacher. At the end, as I was preparing to leave, the teacher shocked me by telling the class that going around speaking in schools was a good job for a man, but probably not for a woman. When she checked with some students, they all agreed. Suddenly filled to bursting with empathetic feminism, and on the verge of...
speaking up, I was silenced with a wink from the teacher as the bell rang. In the teachers' lounge, she explained that she does something like this every year. Her goal is actually to break down gender-role stereotypes, but she has learned how to wait for students to see for themselves what nonsense we all are subjected to in the media. At some point, one of the students will object, discussion will follow, and the teacher will allow herself to be convinced. I jokingly suggested that it might be a disaster if no one spoke up before the end of the school year, and the teacher assured me that such a thing had happened several times. In each case, her students had returned to her one or two years down the road to explain the error of her ways to her.

This teacher took the long view of student autonomy. There is a short view too. On one of the writing circle tapes, a student is talking about animal rights, trying to explain why humans need to take their stewardship of animals seriously. She reminds us that “they’re so needful to us.” Glenda affirms the idea with no correction of the ungrammatical construction, giving no indication that anything is amiss with the way the thought was couched at all. In a way, the stakes are even higher for this student than for the sixth-graders whose teacher tells them that girls do girl things and boys do boy things until they complain. The sixth graders are faced with a life lesson, one they will confront for many more years to come, adjusting their positions back and forth. In the writing circle, on the other hand, if Glenda felt compelled to correct the student’s error—this is an English class after all—she would have had to interrupt the student, reminding her that what she had to say was less important than the way she said it, and that the teacher is always listening for form as well as content. It would have taken time to correct and more time to recover the idea in discussion. The message would have been very clear: you may
think for yourself, as long as you do it in a form the teacher approves of. Instead, Glenda’s no-comment is really a loud affirmation of her trust in the student to do useful work.

To honor student production of knowledge, a teacher must be willing to be happy with the insight and understanding produced by students, even when it occurs at the expense of “coverage” and even, as in the sixth grade class above, when it is wrongheaded. The teacher’s philosophy of knowledge-making will determine, to a great extent, what counts as knowledge in the classroom. Teachers who hold an essentially objectivist view of knowledge and who believe their task is to distribute knowledge to students are predisposed to discount student attempts at making knowledge. When these teachers are criticized, it is for ignoring students’ contributions to learning. Teachers with a more constructionist view are predisposed to honor student production of knowledge, but are open to charges from the other side of failure to “cover” the curriculum sufficiently. As Gundlach suggested in the Foreword to *Opening Dialogue*, Nystrand thinks this is most often a sterile and unproductive debate, focusing as it does on theories of the social construction of meaning. He would prefer instead to focus on a theory of social interaction, such as the kind of interaction that goes on in groups.

*Effective group work in the classroom.* The best opportunities for social interaction in the classroom, both student/teacher and student/student, come in group work. As we have seen in the writing circles, however, just physically moving people into small groups is not enough. When the teacher sees herself as a dispenser of information, she can effectively shut down discussion even in a group of five students ostensibly providing peer “response” to each other’s papers. This kind of activity is called
“collaborative seatwork” by Nystrand (64-65). Students are doing no more than working in each other’s presence on preassigned and fully predetermined exercises; it’s not group work at all. Effective group work is earned, not assigned.

Nystrand offers advice for teachers who want to manage groups effectively from Irvin Yalom, a clinical psychologist who has studied, supervised, and published about psychotherapy groups. According to Yalom, effective groups depend on culture building, group maintenance, and the judicious exercise of evaluation. Culture building establishes “a code of behavioral rules, or norms, ... that will guide the interaction of the group” and further that any group (such as a writing circle, for example) “has norms that radically depart from the rules, or etiquette, of typical social intercourse” (quoted in Nystrand 85). Group maintenance requires the group leader to ensure that outside forces don’t threaten the operation of the group. For Yalom, these outside forces include “continued tardiness, absences, subgrouping, disruptive extra-group socialization, and scapegoating” (quoted in Nystrand 86). In the actual groups themselves, the most important task of the teacher/group leader is to avoid “jumping into ‘content commentary’ too soon” (Nystrand 87). In other words, teachers must work to postpone evaluation of student responses to questions and dialogic exchanges with other students in order to allow ideas to develop. According to Nystrand, “A leader who does this hinders her group’s dialogic potential by sending the message that knowledge flows in only one direction—a message that students are prone to internalize quickly, given the very real institutional authority with which teachers are invested” (87). What makes Mr. Kramer and Glenda effective group managers (and teachers) is that they have earned the right to “make evaluative
commentary without setting [themselves] up as the authority who ‘owns’ the knowledge produced in the classroom” (Nystrand 87).

How dare them!

As Glenda’s writing circle settles down to the day’s work on the first day of taping, Glenda notes the absence of one of the students, saying “It’s too bad Cindy Ann isn’t going to be here. She’s our most colorful and vocal member.” There’s a murmur of assent mixed with amusement among the other group members. Over the next half hour, there are a couple of other references to how Cindy Ann might have responded to this or that comment or passage from the readings. Always, references to the absent student were accompanied by a combination of bemused smiles and the kind of eye-rolling that parents do when they say, “Oh, our Billy, he’s something, isn’t he!” I couldn’t wait to meet her.

Near the end of the session, (this circle is doing animal rights) Cindy Ann materializes. Glenda notes that she has “made a grand entrance” and invites her to join us, introducing me briefly while Cindy Ann sits down. The group is busy enlightening Glenda about “Murder King,” a nickname recently applied in the media to Burger King, whose world headquarters happen to be in Miami. Cindy Ann, orienting herself, notes the sheet of newsprint hanging on the wall when the discussion winds down. “I have a question. I’m looking behind there [pointing to the wall]. Are those the proposed topics?”

Glenda replies, “Some people, other groups, yeah.”
Cindy Ann is concerned that she has somehow missed something important, and is glad to hear that the topics on display are just a record of topics chosen by other students in other writing circles.

“Oh, good. Because I already did mine.”

Here, Glenda seems to lose her mind temporarily, as she rebuffs Cindy Ann, saying “You’re not approved.”

Cindy Ann is incredulous, “Huh?” The rest of the students (me too) are frozen for the briefest moment.

“You’re not allowed to work ahead,” says Glenda, and suddenly everyone laughs in release. She’s only kidding! Everybody immediately settles down. Cindy Ann lets us in on the plan she has worked on ahead of the rest of the group. “I’m doing um… animal rights, um…” Then Cindy Ann wags a large index card in front of us, and her face lights up mischievously. “I could just give you my first line,” and she reads from the card. “I say that it is ridiculous to give animals rights, for everything has a place in nature. Animals by instinct know this, animal rights activists need to learn it. By saying that,” she continues, “I’m just, you know, giving you a basic idea of what it’s going to be on.”

True to form, Glenda accepts this less-than-neutral pronouncement with a sedate, “Uh huh” in mi-fa, and then asks the group the same question she asks for everybody’s plan, namely, what’s Cindy Ann going to need to bring in to the paper. Some helpful discussion follows. Then Glenda points out that time is almost up and moves the group along to give everyone else a chance to tell about their plan for the first draft due next week. Shortly afterwards, the circle ends. Maybe it was Glenda’s deadpan use of humor
with Cindy Ann, but I am left with the impression that the writing circle had been a little livelier ever since Cindy Ann swept in.

After the students leave, while I am taking down the videocamera, I thank Glenda again and tell her what a lively group I think it is. I also note that she was right about Cindy Ann being colorful and vocal, and ask if she always comes to the writing circle with work in hand as she did today. Glenda replies that Cindy Ann is very conscientious, mostly because she’s failed the course twice already. I’m stunned and say so. This is Cindy Ann’s first experience with the writing circles (and she enthuses about it to Glenda regularly), but indeed, she has failed the course twice before with two different teachers. Glenda has no doubt she will pass the course this time (indeed, I learned after the semester that she got a B).

It is difficult to see how the student on the videotape could have failed the basic writing course twice already: she is alert and talkative in the group, she has done “unauthorized” work ahead of schedule, she speaks quite well and confidently. Her writing, when I later see the first draft of the animal rights paper at the next writing circle, looks like ‘B’ work I have seen many times before. That is, it needs plenty of work at various levels but there is a clear thesis, some strong patches of writing, and the student is clearly interested in getting it right. It could even get an ‘A’ on the final draft (though this one did not, as it turns out).

At the second meeting of the circle, Ronnie and Carolina are absent, leaving only Cindy Ann, Melissa and Francesca. In Glenda’s writing circles, protocol requires students to volunteer to read their own paper. After that, they must be quiet, while the other group members discuss the paper. When they refer to the writer, it is in the third person. The
writer, meanwhile, is supposed to take notes on her copy. When the group is substantially
done with the paper, the writer gets a chance to speak again. Francesca goes first this
time; her draft is clear and well-organized, yet draws discussion for some 30 minutes.
Next up is Cindy Ann, who gives a short “writer’s apology” before reading. She says,
“Before I go, can I say something? I was confused. I was on the internet, getting all this
information ... it was coming from so many places, so I just got the form as I wrote.” My
sense, from being in the room, is that Cindy Ann felt that Francesca’s draft was perhaps
more organized than her own.

Cindy Ann’s draft is almost four typewritten pages, has a title, “Animal rights or
Animal Rights Activists’ wrongs?” and an epigraph in a 10 pt, bold italic, sans serif font:
“Animals should not be given devotion above what nature equipped them with: this will
only lead to a massive upstirment in nature’s logical and well-laid design...”

The quote, she informs us, is from herself. I can’t speak for the rest of the circle,
but I’m already in love with the paper. Cindy Ann is a poet, I think. In the title, the play
on the opposition of ‘rights as entitlements’ and ‘rights, the opposite of wrongs’ may not
quite work (two rights but only one wrong?), but this is an attempt to make a title do
what a title is supposed to do. But even that’s not enough for Cindy Ann. Perhaps an
epigraph will strengthen her opening salvo. So she quotes herself and sets the quote off
visually. If the reader hasn’t buckled up by now, it’s too late, because we’re off on a
high-speed pursuit. Here’s the first paragraph, with fonts matching as closely as I can
manage:

According to one B. Schulman, author of \textit{the illogic of animal
\textit{rights,}} “by the survival of the fittest, which is the law of raw nature, no animal
has **RIGHTS**! Only the tools with which to survive as best it can.” Once again I reiterate in mine own words. **Animals have NO RIGHTS!** Only the tools nature gave them as organisms with which to fend for themselves and ultimately secure the survival of its species. This rule most definitely also applies to the human animal.

We will return to the first paragraph shortly, but the paper goes on without a breath, and Cindy Ann is having fun reading it. Now I understand the eye-rolling, and the ratcheting up of the adrenalin level that accompanies her presence. From paragraph two:

... I add to this, the day I see naked cheetahs picketing with “give us back our hides” signs is the day I stop wearing animal print. Or the day the League of fish against Human Consumption of seafood Coalition tries a kamikaze on me while I dine is the day I stop eating shark meat.

I like the delicacy with which Cindy Ann manages her typographical arsenal. It seems that ordinary exposition appears as unmarked text, but statements she considers important or is willing to stand behind get single quotes. Then there is the font that ought to be called **Outrage Bold!**, which Cindy Ann uses to make sure the reader is paying close attention. This is how Walt Whitman would have written if only he had WordPerfect 9.0.

So how could Cindy Ann have failed this course twice before? One possible explanation is that Teacher #1 believed in a “deficiency explanation” of some students’ inability to do what is required of them in school. If one believes that some children are
not exposed to a rich enough language environment as a young child (which does not model the forms of Standard English for her) then one could point to plenty of places in which Cindy Ann varies from the model: *in mine own words, I farther say, use them as beast of burden, how dare them.* But right away, the “deficit explanation” must be ruled out. That is, Cindy Ann could not possibly be viewed as being incapable of writing well because she doesn’t know the structures of Standard English. If she was, she would not be able to produce some of the relatively advanced vocabulary and syntactic structures elsewhere in the paper. All of Cindy Ann’s relative clauses work in terms of subject/verb agreement, for example, her fragments are effective for the most part, and she exploits the full range of punctuation (most of it quite skillfully), which is unusual for basic writing students. At least some of what might be marked ‘errors’ are merely Jamaican imports of Creole structures, such as the case variations of the pronouns in *in mine own words* and *how dare them.* According to Douglas Barnes, “the underlying assumption of deficiency explanations is that we can treat as absolute the teacher’s view of what constitutes valid knowledge and appropriate learning behaviour” (170). If Teacher #1 was satisfied that he knew Standard English and that Cindy Ann didn’t play by the rules, then he certainly could have constructed a logical argument—however distasteful and unfair—to fail her in the course.

Teacher #2 may have seen her duty as the upholding of the standards of the University. If we are going to accept these students, the argument goes, then we must ensure that they are ready to succeed in the Freshman Composition course that follows ENC 1930. If students like Cindy Ann haven’t “mastered” the “basics,” and if Freshman Composition is not designed to “remedy” such “deficiencies,” then the teacher is duty-
bound not to pass students through who will only fail the next course in the sequence.

Cindy Ann’s access to FIU poses a threat. And the threat is met with standards yet again.

Is Cindy Ann a basic writer? No and yes. No, of course not—she uses language in rich and interesting and passionate ways. She may not know how to write college papers that get good grades yet, but there is very little, in my view, that is basic about her writing.

Yes, though, Cindy Ann is a basic writer by definition: as long as students sit in basic writing classes, they will in fact be basic writers, whatever that may mean in their institution. In the Conclusion, I will argue that the writing circles offer an opportunity to maintain access without imposing the unfair standard of ENC 1930, in conference or not, or any other basic writing course, whatever its name might be.

Simply rejecting deficiency explanations of this woman’s two failures, however, is less than satisfying. That is, we know why it’s not a good explanation, but what is? The writing circles at FIU offer a potential new source of support—language theory.

**Authentic beginners**

Discourse analyst James Paul Gee theorizes that all literacies are social literacies. Gee rejects all theories of meaning or meaning-making which depend on “anything like the traditional ways in which philosophers, linguists, and psychologists have talked about meaning.” Meaning does not reside in words or grammatical structures, nor is it “recalled” from a mental “inventory.” Rather, meaning is negotiated situation by situation, on the fly, as it were. He offers two example sentences:

*The coffee spilled, get a mop.*

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The coffee spilled, get a broom.

For Gee, meaning is not stable, but situated instead. A situated meaning is “an image or pattern of elements from our embodied experience of the world … that we assemble ‘on the spot’, in context, as we communicate.” And each process of assembly is built on linking our past experience to “our construal of that context” (Learning 6). In other words, there are two different situated meanings for ‘coffee’ in the two sentences. When we hear mop in the first sentence, our experience of mops situates the coffee, as it were, with our experience of cleaning up liquids of various kinds. In the second sentence, our experience of broom situates the coffee with dry, grainy substances of various kinds, one of which is coffee beans or perhaps coffee grounds. We have “assembled” two different meanings for the same word entirely from the immediate contexts in which they occurred.

The point for our purposes is that words don’t have any reality themselves. What they “really mean” is absolutely and inextricably bound up with who spoke or wrote those words, who heard them, where they were spoken or written, the circumstances that brought the people together, etc. This stands in sharp contrast to such time-honored advice as “choose the right word” in the handbooks. The right word is not something “out there” that students can plug in to fix a weak sentence. For Gee, these contexts, constructs much larger than just the words that surround coffee, for example, are Discourses with a capital D.

Discourses, then, are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as
instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African-Americans of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on through a very long list. Discourses are ways of being ‘people like us.’ They are ‘ways of being in the world’; they are ‘forms of life’. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories (Social Linguistics viii).

Writing circles, for example, are Discourses. They involve mature, intelligent, helpful people of a certain sort (teachers, or people like us), young, inexperienced, needy people of a certain sort (students, or people like them), and a whole set of tightly circumscribed expectations about how we ought to behave and communicate with one another. Classes in classrooms are a similar, but still very different Discourse.

To operate effectively within Discourses, people must learn specific social literacies. According to Gee, people don’t learn language at the level of “English” at all. Instead they learn many different varieties of English that he calls “social languages.” Following Goffman, Gee asserts that:

Each social language offers speakers or writers distinctive grammatical resources with which they can “design” their oral or written “utterances” to accomplish two inter-related things: a) to get recognized by others (and themselves) as enacting a specific socially-situated identity (that is, to “come off” as a particular “kind of person”) and b) to get recognized by others (and themselves) as engaged in a specific socially-situated activity. Each distinctive social language, thus, allows a speaker or writer to get recognized as a socially-situated “who doing what” (Learning 1).

Perhaps this is a better explanation of Cindy Ann’s two failures in her first writing course at the university. She failed to pull off a performance of a certain who doing a certain what. She is, for Gee, an ‘authentic beginner’ (Learning 1). As opposed to ‘false
beginners,’ authentic beginners “come to learning sites of any sort without the sorts of early preparation, prealignment in terms of cultural values, and sociocultural resources that more advantaged learners at those sites have” (Learning 1). The argument in the education literature is well rehearsed for middle class children. Children from middle class homes appear to learn more quickly than children from homes farther down the socioeconomic scale because the middle class children (false beginners) are much more familiar with the habits and behaviors valued by most school systems than the other children (authentic beginners). Their advantage in the classroom comes from growing up in families that are already in line with the cultural values in the schools.

At FIU, authentic beginners are everywhere. The majority of the students are authentic beginners at an American public university. Most of them have not had models of parents (who) as college graduates (doing what). And in the schools they attended before coming to FIU, they have been very different whos doing very different whats. Many of them, for example, from Caribbean islands where the colonial British system of education still dominates, find it difficult to write research papers without plagiarizing. They have always been cast as a certain type of person (a student seeking more knowledge that experts have) doing a certain type of thing (assembling the expert opinion of those who know more and presenting the “package” to the teacher). It often takes several conversations to convince them that what we want is for them to go to the experts as they always have, but then to mediate that research experience for us and thereby make an original contribution. Many students simply don’t believe or trust this line of thought.

Cindy Ann is an authentic beginner, even though she’s a veteran of the course, because she didn’t learn the details of the who doing what that she needed to learn to get
recognized as a basic writer remedying deficiencies, or mastering skills. Her submission of this draft might well have earned a C- or worse in one of those earlier courses. In Gee’s terms, Cindy Ann has turned in an “ungrammatical” language performance. That is, she has not learned that she can’t quote herself, can’t splash around in the fonts folder, can’t play with words and sounds (“the law of raw nature”), can’t be funny without being serious first and more often. If she does, she runs the risk of not being recognized. We have failed to recognize her twice already.

There’s hope in the writing circles, though. In the Discourse of the writing circle arrangement for ENC 1930, one aspect of the who changes from “student sitting in a class of 25” to “member of a small peer group.” The what changes from “learning English” to “contributing a piece of writing to the group every week.” The whos doing the whats participate directly in the interactive making of meaning. Thus, the kind of social interaction fostered in the writing circles is exactly what learners of social literacies—in this case, something like academic discourse—need most.

I like the idea, first of all, of locating the problems of students who are labeled ‘basic writers’ in language instead of in the students themselves, and second, the notion of the authentic beginner. The other solutions we have tried in composition (and it’s worth noting that we in composition are trying as hard as anyone) have fallen short. The whole idea of constructing students as basic writers and then teaching them style to “improve their skills,” as Richard Ohmann pointed out in 1987 in “Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language,” results only in the perpetuation of students who need such a curricular focus: “a skill like this ... inadvertently suggests to students that they be less inquiring and less intelligent that they are capable of being” (242, quoted in Fox).
“academic discourse” approach introduced by David Bartholomae in “Inventing the University” is a step in the right direction. At least Bartholomae acknowledges that we are fooling ourselves and our students if we don’t recognize what Gee would call the differences in Discourses between the student’s own typical social literacy as a student and the social literacies of the academy’s disciplines. But Bartholomae lumps the whole academy together in one monolithic Discourse and all basic writers together in another. In the classroom that results, all the students get thrown into the deep end together and are urged to swim, swim really hard. I think this is what happened to Cindy Ann, and she went under.

Constructing Cindy Ann as an authentic beginner, on the other hand, we can recognize her unique (and I use the word advisedly) performances for what they are: assemblies of situated meanings from one social literacy that clash with expected patterns of assembly of situated meanings in another. Is this really different, though, from academic discourse? I think so. While Bartholomae is honest with students about laying out the differences between the language and ways of knowing of the students and the language and ways of knowing of the academy, he always comes down on the side of the academy. Yes, students are in the academy after all. But a look at the readings in *Facts, Counterfacts and Artifacts* suggests that the academy will survive the students’ journey through it no matter what. In other words, it’s one thing to recognize how the academy values knowledge, it’s another to work to change the parts that need changing. If we only focus on elevating the basic writers to our own level, though, we slide from academic discourse into cultural literacy.
Second, if we acknowledge that there are authentic beginners and false ones, and that the false beginners have all the advantages, it behooves us to pay close attention to identifying those advantages as specifically as we can and to point them out to the authentic beginners as a matter of fairness. Again, is this different enough from what we do already? I think so, if we really attend closely to those differences and change our recommendations as our students change. It may be that some of the advantages enjoyed by false beginners are not worth preserving, such as for example, our predilection in the academy for Latin phrases and abbreviations when there are perfectly good English substitutes available. Indeed, sometimes there are literal, nearly exact translations, as in ‘that is’ for *i.e.*, or its fuller form *id est*. It took me longer to type the Latin abbreviation than the English equivalent just now because of the two periods and the turning on and then off of the italics. Another example is the legal term *mens rea* which is always defined in the newspaper as ‘guilty mind’ (*mens* = ‘mind’ and *rea* = guilty). The Latin phrase is not better than the English phrase. Or my favorite, French *je ne sais quoi* for its literal translation in English of ‘I don’t know what.’ False beginners in the university have grown up in a culture which fears foreigners on one hand, but valorizes foreign phrases on the other. It is important for everyone—not just the authentic beginners who have no finely developed sense of when to use a foreign phrase—to examine where this curious habit of more formal and conservative social literacies came from.

Whether from a legal tradition imposed by a conquering nation or a basic American cultural insecurity, analyzing the presence of these bits of other languages in English is instructive. As we level the playing field, we learn something about ourselves. The alternative is to preserve what has always been preserved; we say that such phrases
belong to the vocabulary of Standard, Formal English and that their use is reserved for expert users of the language. Instead, we should be calling them what they are: conscious choices. My own use of *sine qua non* above, for example, lets my readers know that I know how to use Latin phrases, or even better, makes them think I might know Latin. I could raise the stakes even higher, by perhaps including a phrase from Cicero and *not* translating it, as though any reader of mine would not need it. We might construct my use of Latin phrases as a matter of style, as it has been done for centuries, or we could describe it as a considered attempt to impress people by overseeing the “assembling” of the “situated meaning” of those phrases. In the reader’s experience, that is, where was she when she saw such a phrase before this one, and what was she reading?

For his part, Gee offers suggestions that he characterizes as prerequisites for learners acquiring one or another social language. The first thing he calls for is more practice with situated meanings.

Learners must learn, in production and reception, how to situate/customize meaning in the midst of practice, that is, how to assemble, here and now, the detailed, nuanced meanings that both construct and reflect specific identities, activities, and cultural models. They must gain feedback, inside and outside actual practice, as to whether they are producing and recognizing the right situated meanings (Learning 14).

It would be hard to provide this sort of practice in a 25-student presentational classroom supplemented only by out-of-class grading. The only way for authentic beginners or anyone else to “assemble here and now” is to be in the presence of others while engaging in exploratory talk or writing. In Alex’s writing circle, the student whose ESOL problems are the most obvious and intrusive writes about the frequent appearance
of the word “freedom” in American culture. It can be found everywhere, she says, even on “monetary articles.” Alex marks the phrase and brings it up later. He asks the group if that sounds okay and they admit it doesn’t. One of the students, whose native language is also Spanish, like the writer’s, offers “currency” as a replacement for “monetary articles.” This is exactly the right nuanced, situated meaning, and Alex confirms it. As a native speaker of Spanish himself, he offers his observation that the Spanish word articulos is the source of the problem, that it doesn’t work just transliterated from one language to the other.

If this student had turned in a paper which was then read a few days later, not in her presence, a teacher might have only written ‘word choice’ in the margin. The odds of the student following up and the teacher making sure she understood the situated meaning are low at best. This is what conferences, whether in writing circles, writing centers, or one-on-one in the teacher’s office do better; they provide a space and time for this kind of necessary negotiation.

If students are to learn a social language well, they must also pay attention to cultural models: “Learners must gain meta-awareness about what cultural models are relevant to specific identities and activities within specific Discourses. They must come to see how these cultural models are triggered in actual contexts of practice by specific situated meanings” (14).

This is an ongoing task for everyone. Recall Glenda’s joke about Cindy Ann not being “approved” to have a draft ready before it was actually due. Everyone in the room was reminded for a pointed moment that the cultural role of teacher does not ordinarily tolerate joking with people in the cultural role of student. The roles of teacher and student
are deeply ingrained, and one joke hardly clarifies the issue once and for all. In the
second writing circle, after Cindy Ann has finished reading her diatribe, Glenda
acknowledges what everyone must be feeling, when she says, with gobs of irony, “But
what do you really mean? What do you really Feel? I too was moved to speak and
seconded Glenda’s comment with, “Yeah, you’ve got to learn to come out of your shell a
little!” A good laugh was had by all. Almost all, that is. While the rest of us were settling
down and preparing to workshop the paper, Cindy-Ann, who was sitting across from me,
made a note. Any good WPA can read writing upside-down (how else would you know
what the report on the Dean’s desk says?), and I saw, to my horror, that Cindy Ann had
written, “Put more of yourself in paper.” I felt awful—Cindy Ann was the only person in
the room who hadn’t gotten the joke. I made a note of my own, to apologize later and
admit that we had made fun at her expense.

I really shouldn’t have been quite so surprised that Cindy Ann would take our
comments literally. After all, she has failed this class twice. If she fails it again, she will
have to pay the surcharge for “frivolous retaking.” I also should have noticed who was
cracking jokes and who wasn’t. The two teachers did, the two other students didn’t. In
another irony, / was spared the humiliation of apologizing (or at least, of raising the
issue) when Cindy Ann herself, asked for clarification. “You said I need to put more of
myself in the paper. What did you mean?” The two teachers (and I admit I was first)
fairly climbed over one another to tell her we were just joking. Actually, we were just
forgetting that not everyone would recognize both the idiom and Glenda’s falling tone at
the end of her sentences, which undid her question.
Finally, Gee suggests that Discourses ought to be critical of themselves, and honestly so, aiding changes in practices when that criticism indicates that changes ought to be made. The term he uses is “critical framing” and it means “juxtaposing the ways and values of different Discourses to each other and framing one Discourse within the ways and values of the other” (Learning 15). This can be a simple matter. Recall a comment on the animal rights issue made by Ronnie, an African-American Miami native:

*If you gonna give 'em rights, then you might as well don't eat 'em!*

I might say to Ronnie, “Wait a minute, I love that! Quick write it down for us. It just makes the whole case so compactly.” Then I might ask how we could include it in Ronnie’s draft. It would be instructive for everyone to examine how, exactly, and why Ronnie’s spontaneous formulation is effective. What would have to be done about it to include it in a paper? Could he even include it? Why not? How does he deal with this issue in other circumstances?

The purpose of such activities, for Gee, is to transform Discourse practices when necessary and to avoid the potential colonizing of students by allowing them to control only enough of a Discourse to become consumers of it. The writing circles at FIU offer an intriguing possibility to engage in organized transformation of practice. As indicated above, we are not overwhelmingly happy about the product Academic Systems offers. While certainly sound in design, the lessons suffer—at least for us, at a large, urban, public, majority-minority university—from a lack of relevance. We have been experimenting with creating some lessons of our own. They might not be as high in
quality, but they would not be as expensive to produce either, making it more feasible to keep them current, replacing lessons on an ongoing basis. Students could be involved at every step of the way. In fact, we are piloting another class, a section of Advanced Composition, in the Fall of 2001, whose goal will be to produce at least one of these new lessons. Eventually, it is possible that much of the curricular materials for a whole range of writing classes will be produced at FIU, by FIU faculty and students, playing to their strengths.

**Support from TESOL theory**

Parallels from ESOL/TESOL research. Barnes’ theory of communication within the curriculum fits well with Gee’s theory of language and social literacies. For Barnes, the social functions of language go on simultaneously with the making of meaning, and Gee sees people interacting as a *sine qua non* for learning of any kind. But neither Barnes nor Gee, nor both together can explain perhaps the most interesting by-product of teaching in conference at FIU: the decrease in complaints from teachers about ESOL students inappropriately enrolled in Essay Writing. Since converting up to 90% of the sections of 1930 in any given semester to the conference format, such complaints have virtually disappeared. Indeed, by the middle of the second semester of the writing circles arrangement, I was struck by the complete lack of legitimate complaints from 1930 teachers about ESOL students. Given our student population, it was statistically impossible for some 23 sections of the course to *not* have any ESOL students in them. In a bizarre but welcome reversal, I had to seek out the teachers and ask them if they had any problem ESOL students. While they did have ESOL students, they didn’t seem to
have the kind of problems they usually had. One after another reported that even the
students whose writing was the most problematic were nevertheless coming to the
conferences and contributing to the discussions. Two of the bilingual (Spanish/English in
both cases) teachers reported that there was occasional translation into the native tongue
in the writing circles, for the benefit of these ESOL students. They even admitted that
they had participated on occasion themselves. (They were both quick to downplay the
significance of these lapses into bilingualism and to reassure me that they weren’t
teaching in Spanish.)

Was the arrangement of students into groups of five in the writing circles
somehow responsible for reduced incidences of ESOL problems in the course? How? Or
was it the software? As I talked to teachers, I began to hear an eerie but welcome refrain.
“Well, I do have a student (or two or three) whose English is pretty shaky, but she seems
to be hanging in there.” What do you mean by ‘hanging in’? I ask. “She goes to the lab,
comes to conferences, and contributes to the discussions, and she always brings a piece of
writing.” But, I press further, isn’t her writing considerably behind what others are
bringing to the group? “Well, yes, but they’re helping her with it. It was tough on her at
first, but she seems to be much better at listening and understanding what’s going on
now.”

The teachers were clear about it: the weekly, one-hour, five-student conferences
were good for ESOL students. It was easier for them to hear what was being said,
because the faces of all the possible speakers, unlike those in a 25-seat, forward-facing
classroom, were always visible, and, after all, there were only four other student voices to
get accustomed to. They also had no place to “hide.” In an hour, each student gets
between 10 and 12 minutes to herself, every week. This is the kind of required conversational opportunity that TESOL theorists recommend (see Ellis, especially Part Four and Part Five). Finally, there is a big difference between doing grammar drills and getting your text ready for the very specific audience that is your writing circle. When I talked to ESOL students, they were clear about it as well. They mentioned the obligation of speaking as a positive, if difficult task. But what mattered most to them was that the intimacy of the circles provided them with a chance to really get to know some other students outside their circle of friends from the same culture. Without the circles arrangement, the best that could have been done for these students would have been to send them to the Learning Center for tutoring, where they would have the same chance (about 15%) of sitting with someone trained in ESOL issues as they have of getting a writing teacher with that same background. Could it be that fellow students did a better job teaching English to nonnative speakers than anyone else on campus? Is there something about the software that is particularly effective in dealing with ESOL issues? Or is it the circles themselves that somehow focus on the ESOL student’s real needs? How?

As it turns out, the issues raised above link directly and neatly to a great deal of current TESOL research. It seems that the writing circles—even though they were not consciously designed to be—are consistent with many elements of best practices in the teaching of second or foreign languages. In a general way, it makes sense to look to TESOL research if one considers academic discourse, or Standard English (or, for Gee, social literacies) as dialects of “English” writ large: student writers are language learners.
too. But such a general orientation is supported in the finer details as well. I will briefly review some of the relevant research.

1. **Pragmatics.** The study of pragmatics in second language (L2) learning assumes that it is not possible to separate what learners acquire from how they use it. “...[A] full understanding of how formal properties are learnt will not be achieved without examining the way in which these properties are used in actual communication” (Ellis 159). Gee gives an extended example of the importance of pragmatics in a discussion of a Korean graduate student at an American University. This student has been dropped by her thesis director, and approaches Gee to ask if he will take over the task. She says, “It is your job to help me, I need to learn.” Gee’s analysis of this sentence is that it is “ungrammatical” and “wrong” because it “…used a wrong social language, one that communicated a wrong identity, a wrong activity, wrong situated social meanings, and operated within a wrong cultural model” (Gee, Language Learning 8). For Gee, this student never learned some essential “grammar” of the advisor-seeking-grad-student-in-American-university social language she was trying to speak. What she needed was, not more practice in producing syntactically clear sentences, but more practice in sounding like a graduate student in search of a new thesis director. The best source of this information is other graduate students, conversation about negotiating with advisors, meetings with faculty to clarify the expectations of the thesis-director/graduate-student relationship, etc. FIU’s writing circles create the time and space in which such “grammatical training” can occur for a parallel situation: the first-year student learning how to work in groups with other students, how to speak to faculty members, etc.
2. English at FIU as “official” or “national” language. Many Spanish speakers in Miami, especially those who have grown up here, refer to their own native language ability as “kitchen Spanish.” That is, they speak Spanish exclusively at home and outside the home with friends and family, but since English is the language of the schools, they may get to college never having written in Spanish in their lives. What role does the students’ bilingualism play in learning how to write an academic social language in English? The concept of second language learning in majority language contexts has much to offer, especially in the creation of the “meta-awareness” of cultural models and identities Gee writes about.

3. Submersion v. immersion in language classrooms. In L2 research, “submersion programs” are defined as programs in which:

...linguistic minority children with a low-status mother tongue are forced to accept instruction through the medium of a foreign majority language with high status, in classes where some children are native speakers of the language of the instruction, where the teacher does not understand the mother tongue of the minority children, and where the majority language constitutes a threat to their mother tongue... (Skuttnab-Kangas)

Submersion programs typically make no concessions to the language of the student, and have repeatedly been shown to have negative effects (Ellis 225).

Bilingual immersion programs, on the other hand, in which instruction for the majority students in the minority language occurs alongside instruction for minority students in the majority language, tend not to threaten social identity so much. Not surprisingly, immersion programs usually result in higher levels of L2 proficiency for both groups (Genesee, Swain and Lapkin).

Input and interaction models. In studies of the kinds of curricular material used in L2 teaching, those materials which called for real social interaction—as opposed to the
artificial classroom exchange of teacher-question and student-response—resulted in higher levels of proficiency. This squares well with Barnes and Gee above. In the L2 studies, the best materials are situated in discourses and demonstrate what native speakers actually say and write, as opposed to the claims of reference works and textbooks (Li, Tanaka). ESOL students in ENC 1930 in Conference get 15 full hours per semester of meaningful interaction with native speakers as they construct their papers.

**Special Issues for Latino/a students in writing circles at FIU**

Lisa Delpit, in *Teaching Other People's Children*, reports an exchange that opened a class for her first-grade reading students in Philadelphia. Delpit, a new teacher, had practiced her delivery in front of a mirror:

“Good morning, boys and girls. Today we’re going to read a story about where we live, in the city.”

A small brown hand rises.

“Yes, Marti.”

Marti and this teacher are special friends, for she was a kindergartner in the classroom where her new teacher student-taught.

“Teacher, how come you talkin’ like a white person? You talkin’ just like my momma talk when she get on the phone!” (48).

Marti has demonstrated that the fundamental principle of classroom discourse is transparent even to young children: the language of the school is not the same as the language of the home. And while no one would call it an advantage to be Black in White America, Marti has a kind of “advantage” over the majority of FIU students for whom Spanish is the language of home. At least her home language is another variety of school language—obviously different, to be sure, but a variation on the same theme, as it were. That is, she recognizes that Teacher, a native speaker of BVE, has picked up a School...
English accent, but nevertheless, most of the grammar, vocabulary, and even discourse moves of both home and school language are still English of one variety or another. For Latino/a students, there is no connection; the separation of the home language from the language of school is complete and absolute.

According to some recently compiled statistics, 97% of all the Cuban immigrants in the United States live in Miami. There are other Spanish-speaking groups as well, and presently, the combined numbers of Colombians, Nicaraguans and Ecuadorians outstrip Cubans in Miami (Benjamin 53). And while they all share a language, the various cultures differ widely, as do accents. Michael Benjamin, in *Cultural Diversity, Educational Equity and the Transformation of Higher Education: Group Profiles as a Guide to Policy and Programming*, discusses some of the shared aspects of Latino/a cultures, including the very common physical contact: “Contact is frequent, and interaction typically involves hugging (*abraza*), public kissing and frequent touching... In conversation, participants stand much closer together than would be comfortable for Whites, often with noses almost touching, and, among status equals, with eye contact frequent and prolonged...” (57). As a native New Englander, I think Benjamin understates the case. Students at FIU shake hands in the hallways, kiss to greet one another in the classrooms no matter how many times they have already met in the day, walk arm-in-arm in the library. Although I have not seen teachers and students extend the greeting kiss to one another, handshaking as students file in to class is everywhere.

More noticeable than even the physical closeness of Latino/a students is their concept of time. For Latin American students in this country, according to Benjamin, “Time is seen as flexible or elastic. Appointment times are treated casually, flowing out
of mutual relationships rather than the tasks at hand. Similarly, tasks have no inherent significance apart from the relationships out of which they emerge. In short, the importance of relating to others stands as a cornerstone of the Hispanic meaning system” (57). The suggestion is that these effects/habits arise from a larger, more inclusive notion of extended family, and make Latino/a students less likely to find Anglo schools a friendly or even familiar place. These (and other) characteristics of Hispanics as outlined by Benjamin have made their relationships with schools “problematic at all levels… In elementary school, Hispanic children are often classified as underachievers… At the high school level, they have traditionally displayed low achievement, a high (60%) dropout rate… and limited motivation to pursue higher education” (61).

Some non-Spanish speaking teachers have found ways to begin to redress the disjuncture between the languages of home and school for Latino/a students. For Miles Gullingsrud (“I am the Immigrant in My Classroom”), using Spanish in the classroom is taken for granted. He teaches in the Coachella Valley Unified School District in California, where 96% of the students are Mexican-American (52). Gullingsrud uses “rudimentary expressions such as greetings, common questions, numbers, and days of the week”; works on his Spanish accent, and learns “to pronounce names correctly before calling roll on opening day”; has learned how to say “Como se dice ______ en español”; keeps bilingual dictionaries handy in class; keeps a “language learning journal to write down notes and Spanish words or phrases for practicing”; reads Spanish aloud when he encounters it in class (52-3). He also “cultivates a corps of language brokers,” students to ask for help with translating Spanish text and conversation, looks for ways to incorporate
Spanish text in class, and tries to learn more about the culture of his students (through translating proverbs and sayings, comparing holiday traditions, etc.) in class.

In another captivating project on bilingual education in an Arizona kindergarten class, Espinosa, Moore, and Serna report on the children’s field and class work on the Sonoran Desert. Using problem based learning as a model for inquiry, students compiled information about the flora and fauna of the Sonora, and “published” their work in oral presentations and mixed media. On their own initiative, the students decided to provide accompanying text for posters and exhibits in both Spanish and English. The class is a bilingual education class, so it differs from ENC 1930, but the authors do note specifically that “the coherence of the English text [of one group of native Spanish speakers] was dependent upon the children’s ability to express their ideas initially in Spanish... Furthermore, the children in this group were willing to try writing in English because the were able to write in Spanish” (135).

Thus there are models for beginning to include the home language of the majority of students at FIU. Even more encouraging though is a recent (1995) article, “The Peer Review Group: Writing, Negotiation, and Metadiscourse in the English Classroom” by Linda Williamson Nelson. Nelson, who holds an interesting appointment as Associate Professor of Anthropological Linguistics and Writing at Stockton College in Pomona, New Jersey, has been observing cultural exchanges in the peer groups in her classrooms for twenty years (230). It is her claim from her extensive observations that the multicultural classroom is actually better suited for learning to write—for all students of whatever background—than the monocultural classroom, and for a very simple reason.
First Nelson stresses that bringing students together in the classroom from disparate cultures is not something to worry about, at least if we are worried about silencing minorities. On the contrary, says Nelson, “in spite of the apparent tenacity of linguistic hegemony, the discourses of people of color refuse to be silenced. The classrooms, particularly in universities and colleges, remain the primary arenas of the ongoing contact and conflict of competing discourses” (227). For years now Nelson has been managing the makeup of groups students in her basic writing classes so that incoming sets of friends were separated and students from different countries were distributed as widely as possible:

While it was indeed significant that these students had the opportunity to interact with people from different backgrounds, I was soon to learn that the advantages and the challenges of this deliberate multicultural arrangement derived from the ways in which all students were prompted to construct and reconstruct ideas so that their ideas were only minimally reliant on cultural presuppositions communicated in the form of idioms, nonstandard English dialectal morphologies, and even culturally derived rhetorical strategies (231).

Nelson is describing here what might be called a linguistic battle of attrition. In a paper written by a native speaker from New Jersey, a Korean writer may not “get” a reference to Jay Leno, a Brazilian may not understand an ironic passage, and a transplanted Californian may be confused by a meal of “scrapple and hoagies.” One by one, the writer has to renegotiate all the hidden or “understood” context of his paper for his peers. They grind away at lack of clarity and confusion until the communication is
clear for everyone. Along the way, the writer may lose some bits that are “too local” for the others, but in turn, they may learn enough to recommend that he keep others which were questioned initially. I suspect that Nelson is something of an expert in group maintenance, per Yalom, as her students apparently feel free and confident enough to challenge unclear references and vague, half-understandings wherever they see them in each other’s writing. I also suspect that the small groups (five students, like the writing circles) and the relationships formed in them make the whole process manageable.

Nelson frames what happens in her groups in a new way:

[T]o the extent that the students in a group were unable to receive the intended message of the speaker/writer, that speaker/writer had to restate the point until he or she had reached a level of general comprehensibility. The students engaged in group process, it seems, were prompted to move their writing, unawares, toward what I have called a *lingua franca*, a common language that was divested of very specific, closed network cultural meanings that would foreclose on the comprehension of group participants who did not share the writer/speaker’s cultural background. While one could not accurately identify this so-called *lingua franca* as neatly identifiable standard English, the closest descriptive label available for the common language is a semiformal standard that, for the most part, has been divested of nonstandard American English regional, social, or ethnic markers as well as unconventional morphological or idiomatic constructions that are often seen as second language interference features in the writing of students who have learned English as a second language (231).

This is common sense of an uncommon sort. It shows a writing group learning not “English” (whatever that is) but *how to be a college writer*. It is a dialogic environment with high levels of student autonomy, per Nystrand, and per James Gee, it provides copious opportunities for authentic beginners to practice situated meanings with real-time feedback.
CHAPTER IV

SOME NEEDED RESEARCH

In a sense, what follows is a research plan and not a final chapter at all. In the ordinary order of things, I might perhaps have done some research on basic writing and conferences and then developed a plan to include more conferences in the basic writing course at FIU. Certainly I would have identified objectives for the project and designed a means of assessing how and how well those objectives were met. Then I might have tried out the idea in one of my own ENC 1930 classes. In fact, as we have seen, nothing of the kind happened. Instead, a few of us teachers leapt blindly into an ad hoc solution to a complex problem we didn’t fully understand at the time. To be honest, if we had understood it, and if we had been able to foresee all the consequences of the changes we blithely improvised and implemented, we almost surely would have been intimidated into doing nothing. But we moved ahead anyway, and now it seems the course is a permanent (or at least as permanent as any course) offering in the Department of English. Now I have to address what might be called the Dissertation Question, namely, why and how is one redesigned writing course at one university a worthy object of study for a dissertation?

I think the answer has to do with the passion that has attended our every step and misstep. Almost everywhere we put our feet down, we profoundly disturbed someone or something. The result is a kind of map of the fault lines in the teaching of writing. In retrospect, we should have anticipated the trouble. Consider the key elements of the
course redesign: introducing a new use of computers and technology, redefining classroom space, redefining teaching time, wresting control of the content of the writing course away from teachers and handing it over to a piece of software, elevating the role of student talk in the writing course at the expense of teacher talk. Any one of these attacks on the status quo amounts to a serious disruption. Taken together, the items on this list add up to the one disciplinary move most likely to draw criticism in the first decade of the new century: privileging pedagogy over theory and ideology. That is, the changes wrought in ENC 1930 at FIU were changes in how the teacher got from Monday morning to Monday morning. In another recent review essay, Pat Belanoff examines three books that make a similar “move” and suggests that the re-turn to pedagogy in all three books may be a sign that the discipline is “in the process of decentering” (Belanoff 395). Belanoff welcomes this decentering if it means more attention will be paid to the classroom, “for our connection to the classroom is our strength and ultimately our rationale for being a discipline at all” (401).

In spite of its pedagogical origins, however, ENC 1930 in Conference is no more disconnected from theory than any other change in policy, curriculum, working conditions, or economic conditions. For example, the State University System’s policy of charging for “frivolous retaking” of a course is ostensibly an economic remedy for an administrative problem, namely, slow progress toward graduation. But its effects are visited disproportionately on a particular constituency—the ESOL student and the students called ‘basic writers.’ Every change in any aspect of student/administration relations is implicated in ideology and theory, no matter how explicit or tacit those ideologies and theories may be.
What follows, then, is an outline of specific questions and issues raised by teaching the basic writing course in conference, in no particular order. No attempt will be made to “cover” these questions and issues fully, but only to show how they are brought into high relief by the writing circles course. In other words, I will present an agenda for various research projects. Some will be action research or teacher research projects and will reflect the pedagogical bias of the original project that engendered them. Others, still based in classroom practice, call for the opening (or re-opening) of theoretical discussions in composition.

Revisiting time and space

Time. John Lofty argues, in *Time to Write* that, ironically, in a culture that can sometimes be obsessed with time, we frequently think of time in “very limited mechanistic ways” (221). In schools, for example, the day is divided into manageable units (class periods), which allow for control of large numbers of students by a relatively small number of staff. Lofty works from Michel Foucault’s reading to trace this arbitrary segmenting of the school day to Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the prison panopticon (209-210). The panopticon towers above all the other prison buildings, allowing staff to see the inmates at all times and to ensure that they make profitable use of time.

As a principle of control, panopticism intends for the individual to internalize the temporal values of the controlling authority. In school this means that, without prompting, the student will respond to the bell, move swiftly to the next class, and again produce the requisite amount of work. To internalize such values would lead students to conform to the authority of the school to the extent that at home they would block out hours in which to do homework. The values of school time are thus insinuated into every aspect of students’ lives (210).
Distasteful as the concept may be, it would be impossible to argue that panoptic time is a complete failure. Students—especially the successful ones—certainly do internalize the values of school time. They use their Day Runners, Filofaxes, and PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) to keep track of due dates, to block off homework or study time, and to negotiate the many other demands that compete with school time, such as work and dating. Teachers internalize school time too. We issue a syllabus with the finely-grained details of our own idiosyncratic version of school time. And we use due dates to protect our own time away from the school (“The amount of reading and grading I must do for this class make it impossible for me to accept late papers”). Likewise, it would be unreasonable to argue that teachers consciously seek to control students’ time with class schedules and a syllabus. But it seems clear that panoptic time in school operates as a sort of “default setting”—like the word processor’s style or format settings for documents—that shapes what Lofty calls the student’s “timescape,” a kind of map the student uses to square the demands of the school with her own time. According to Lofty, when the school’s “timescape” always takes precedence over the student’s, we send an unfortunate mixed message:

Teachers frequently ask students to accommodate their rhythms of language use not only to the constraints of the schedule, but also to the time needs that we project for each activity. “You have five minutes to free write, twenty minutes to read, and fifteen minutes for peer editing,” a teacher might say. While there are occasions when these constraints will be appropriate and effective, if students’ efforts to make meaning through language are routinely cut off because “time is up,” one message ... is that teachers are more concerned about observing the time etiquettes of school and classroom than about respecting the time needs of the work itself (222).

In Lofty’s view, writing teachers have a responsibility to try to create alternative “timescapes for literacy.” “Whole language,” according to Lofty, “needs whole time”
(222), and whole time must be negotiated, that is, socially constructed by the stakeholders, namely, students, teachers, administration. Lofty admits to an uphill battle: 1) students must be trusted to manage their own time, and 2) "institutionally determined structures of time" (223) (i.e. time and room schedules, credit hours, etc.) are reconstituted only with great travail.

In Lofty’s own study, he found that the high school students in his classes were indeed capable of managing their own time, as long as they were consulted about it and their input respected. “They asked to write without interruption, to work at their own pace as well as time to be silent” (224). In the writing circles we found evidence to back up Lofty’s observations as well as a need to examine our own structures more closely. The five pilot classes were conducted in a short, seven-week summer term. Classes in such terms are typically double sessions; they meet twice as often as full, fifteen-week semester courses. In our case, it means that Summer B students in ENC 1930 in Conference meet in writing circles twice a week for an hour instead of once a week, as in the long term. Typically, circles met on Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday, or Monday/Thursday, Tuesday/Friday. We didn’t notice any problems with students’ management of their own time at first. It was only when the first full semester teaching of the course began in the subsequent Fall that we experienced some trouble. In a regular term, students must spend three hours per week in the lab and one hour per week in conference. But the one-hour writing circle is the only supervised time in the student’s week. A month into the full Fall semester, several of the teachers reported that students didn’t seem to be taking the course seriously enough, almost as though they felt they had fallen into an unbelievably easy course which only took an hour of their time a week.
After negotiations between students and teachers (probably more like readings of the Riot Act, to be honest), everyone seemed to settle in. But clearly, the writing circles were a new and very strange rearrangement of time for both teachers and students. It would be interesting to study whether there are significant differences between running the course in seven weeks v. fourteen weeks. Are students/teachers happier with one format over another? Are there measurable differences in the writing of the two groups of students?

Lofty’s suggestion for the second point (negotiating time with the institution) is to hope for the best, given the difficulty of the task. At FIU, however, we are about to embark on a full-scale, though covert, assault on the institutionally determined structures of time in the summer of 2001. Owing to an even more severe shortage of classroom space (some 15 portable and dilapidated classroom trailers are being removed permanently, with no replacement of their 600+ hours of class time every week), we have been asked to run 35 sections (175 circles x 2 meetings per week = 350 writing circles) entirely without classrooms. In the past, when we could “give back” classrooms to Space and Scheduling, we were granted in return the use of a large-capacity (150 seats) classroom for the simultaneous orientation of six sections of ENC 1930 at a time. The students from, say, sections 1 through 6 would all come to the large classroom at 10:00 A.M. to find and “huddle” with their teachers in various parts of the room, and sign up for writing circles with them. This year, we have given back the rooms for all 35 sections at the University Park campus, but we don’t have the benefits of access to a large classroom for our group orientations. Instead, we intend to hold an “Open House” in the computer lab dedicated to the course. Before students come in, we will ask teachers assigned to the course to tell us when they would like to run writing circles. Based on
their preferred schedules, we will draw up a table showing available slots. We will ask for the most “coverage” around the times originally scheduled for the classes students signed up for. But based on usage of the computer lab in the last six semesters, we will also ask if some teachers would like to work in the evening, on Saturday morning, or Sunday afternoon. Students enrolled in any section of ENC 1930 in Conference will report to the Open House in the lab at any time during the first two days of the term, when it will be open for ten hours each day. They will sign up for a writing circle time slot that fits their schedule, **regardless of the times originally scheduled for their section of the course**. Thus, a teacher may end up with five students enrolled in five different sections in the same writing circle. And her other four circles may represent a similar mix of students from different sections. Such an arrangement is not the nightmare it seems to Registrars everywhere. At the end of the term, teachers simply submit grades for the students in their circles to the Director of Undergraduate Writing Programs, who then reshuffles them onto the Grade Rolls and submits them. The “sections” we are fiddling with were designed not by teachers or students, but for the institution’s convenience. 

Lofty calls for just such a timescape as the one we are trying to construct, whose “larger contours … will be boldly marked by the constraints of the schedule, yet [whose] details [will be] finely grained enough to represent time of a quality conducive to reflective thought, unhurried discussion, and engaged writing” (222). We think that one day of grade-juggling is worth the effort, in the interest of designing a timescape for writing instruction that both reflects and models our philosophy of teaching writing and our field’s best practices.
Space. We in education also think of space in “very limited mechanistic ways.” While educational research has been studying the spaces in which we teach and learn for fifty years now, classroom design lags far behind pedagogical theory (Fulton 13). At FIU, for example, it will be more difficult after the summer of 2001 even to find regular classrooms for conferencing whose chairs are not bolted in place. In the event of an emergency, according to the Fire Marshal, it would be difficult to evacuate a building quickly if people had to scramble over loose seating. Fire safety concerns trump educational philosophy and practice, because the money the University might have to pay out in personal injury litigation is tangible; the benefits to students of sitting in circles are not. As a result, we may encourage students to work in groups, but we arrange the physical space in which they must work together so as to render such group work impossible.

In the mid-1960s, after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church was faced with its own version of a space problem: the new orientation in the Church toward making worship easier to understand and more participatory was entirely incompatible with existing church buildings. The changes called for by the council were dramatic and transformative. Besides the change in the language of the liturgy from Latin to the vernacular, the Church also chose to make changes in the use of space. The altar was turned to face the congregation, communion rails were removed, the priest came down from the altar to distribute communion among the people. Many were shocked, less by radical rethinking of Church doctrine than by slight alterations in the use of holy spaces. But the effort continued and gradually the new uses of space and the new liturgy have begun to coalesce. Today, new churches are designed differently, some with the seating...
raised instead of the altar, and in a semi-circular shape instead of parallel rows (see Vosko).

Our experience with the writing circles suggests that changing the space in which the activities of the writing class take place does indeed affect both how students learn and how teachers teach. Unfortunately, space, like time, is money too. And even though there is some precedent in the classrooms-without-walls of the late 1960s and early ’70s, universities are unlikely to embark on a small-group-classroom building spree. Changes to campus space that favor small groups will probably come in increments, supported by some recent work in the field of adult education, where the learning environment is taken more seriously. For example, Rodney Fulton and Roger Hiemstra have devised a model for designing and rating the physical spaces of the learning environment under the acronym SPATIAL (Satisfaction, Participation, Achievement, Transcendent/Immanent attributes, Authority, Layout). They propose this model to challenge “the assumption that physical arrangement is only important for how it enhances or detracts from social interaction” (“Physical Attributes of Learning Environments 15”). Assessment of writing instruction typically measures at least the first three elements, but rarely in relation to where the writing goes on. Most of the writing in more traditionally organized (and located) courses goes on in places we can’t see. Writing circles make large portions of the writing process considerably more visible. Fulton also provides an interesting link between the material attributes of the physical environment and learners’ perceptions of those attributes:

*Density* can be measured as square footage per occupant in a room, but *crowding* is a measure of how a person defines available personal space. *Temperature* is readily measured in degrees, but thermal *comfort* is a subjective evaluation by an individual. Thus a place can have high density but be rated as crowded by one
group and not crowded by another, or a certain room temperature can be considered cool by some and warm by others (15).

The writing circles offer a chance to study student perceptions of an alternative learning environment in fine detail over time. It’s one thing, for example, to sit the teacher at the same table as the student, but what do students think of it? Some may appreciate the relative equalizing of power relations in the group, others may see it as an abrogation of teacherly authority. Do these perceptions change over the course of fifteen one-hour meetings in a semester?

FIU’s writing circles raise some other interesting space questions for further research. How does sitting in a small peer group affect the way people receive writing instruction? Do students make the connection between what might be called the “process” of the conference (talking/drafting/talking again/revising/talking again/editing and publishing) and their own version of a writing process? This is the “timescape question.” That is, we might examine whether it makes a difference if we improve the fit between what we profess about writing and what we do in our classrooms. Does it matter if students sit in these groups in a comfortable group study room in the Library as opposed to a large, mostly empty classroom? This is the “physical environment” question. The short answer from FIU’s writing circles is that it probably does matter, and it would not be difficult to survey students and teachers about how and how much it matters. But if we have learned anything about where to have group conferences, it is this: if you can do small groups, do them, regardless of where they must gather. Does writing belong in an English classroom? in a classroom at all? This is not the “abolition of first-year-composition question.” Rather, we are encouraged by the general “feel” of
conducting writing circles in the Library’s group study rooms, housed in the Reference wing. We would like to see writing circles conducted in other public spaces on campus, in the view of other students and faculty. What would it mean for students to meet their writing circles in a dorm, fraternity/sorority, the student center, non-quiet study floors of the library, etc.?

Computers/technology in writing instruction. One of the two big surprises of the writing circles has been the irony of technology’s role in the course (the other is the effects of the course on ESOL issues, discussed below). Teachers about to run writing circles for the first time are reasonably very anxious about dealing with the technology. Some of the less aggressively digital faculty are titillated by the prospect of entering the world of “computers.” For the last few years, they have always wanted to have a syllabus online, or a gradebook that automatically tallies the percentages in spreadsheet form, or to get student papers via email. Others, the kind who already have DSL connections at home and can access their email on the wireless internet via cell phone, fantasize about eliminating paper entirely. A few are reasonably current in composition as a discipline, and plan, perhaps, to use the anonymity of online chat to democratize the process of making comments between students. All are slightly disappointed in their own ways. But the teachers who shake their heads in fear that we are about to turn over our responsibility to teach writing to some cockamamie computer program are disappointed too.

The Luddites quickly find that the real center of the course involves only paper and pencils and talk. Students may log on to a server at FIU that connects to a server in California that allows the student at home to work inside the program, but what they bring to the writing circles is five paper copies of their writing to talk about. Of course,
an online syllabus really is easier to construct, change, and distribute, and spreadsheet gradebooks really do take much of the tedious arithmetic out of grading. Furthermore, if they like, they can generate a report on how much time the students spend in the lab, even how much time they spend on one section (Explore, Focus, Draft, Edit, Conclude) as opposed to another. This can quickly degenerate into a policing function, a frightening electronic panopticon, that tracks students’ time without their knowledge. But such reports can be useful too. For example, a student is unhappy with the grade on her first finished piece of writing, and the activity report shows that she spent 8 minutes in ‘Explore,’ no time at all on ‘Focus’ or ‘Draft,’ but 4 hours 32 minutes on ‘Edit.’ The report provides a starting place for a negotiation with the student about how she spends her time writing. With figures in front of both student and teacher, it’s easier to point out, not that the student “didn’t do a good enough job,” but that she overinvested in the back end of the process, while shorting the front end. In the training, however, we take pains to point out that the best index of how much time a student has spent in the lab is how much writing they bring to the writing circle and how ready they are to talk about it.

The fully-digitized among the staff find themselves awash in paper, yet again. But their disappointments are the most easily assuaged. While face-to-face talk, accompanied by papers is what drives the course, they may insist that students submit the drafts to one another before the writing circle, via email, and can respond to students in the same way above and beyond their comments in the conference. In the best conferences, teacher comments are less voluminous than student comments, so the extra email contact provides a supplemental space for the teacher’s contributions. They also take comfort in
being able to check on their students’ progress anytime from their cell-phone-connected-laptops on South Beach.

The teachers who have been attracted by Lester Faigley’s arguments in *Fragments of Rationality* or who are drawn to Haynes’ *MOOniversity* find that anonymous contributions in chat-style format have no place in the writing circles. The very opposite holds, in fact. Students make their arguments, ask for additional information, get convinced of someone else’s point all in the almost intimate physical presence of five other people, seated no more than a few feet away. On the videotape of one circle, for example, the sole Anglo-only student in a writing circle composed otherwise of English/Spanish bilinguals (including the teacher) can be seen to sit through almost the entire hour in silence. The other students, although they address each other, seem almost to ignore this one student. Very near the end, he interrupts the teacher once to make a comment on the discussion on gun control, and a second time when it is clear that the teacher has not understood. He speaks, and after a slight pause, the other students respond to him, inviting him back in to the circle with both body language and speech. When I watched the tape with the teacher, I asked him about the episode. He told me that on the previous assignment, this student had written in favor of English as the national language. While not all bilinguals are opposed to the concept, it happened that these students were, and the teacher reported that there was considerable tension in the circles for two weeks, while the papers on the topic were being discussed. The Anglo student was unmoved by the group, and the group held fast as well. Fortunately, the teacher opted not to settle things himself, and allowed the episode to play out among the two parties. The activity surrounding the Anglo student’s last-minute comment above, according to
the teacher, was the group’s way of forgiving him, of inviting him back in, without either side having capitulated.

The teacher and I agreed that the impetus for the resolution came from the fact that this is a small group with a lot of work to do in the semester, and everyone recognized that fact. But more importantly, they all knew that they had to sit in a circle, each one facing the other to get that work done. Ironically, it was the technology that forced the issue. The content of the course—the readings, the writing prompts, the writing assignment—are “taken care of” by the software. And this portion of the course was “anonymous” in the same sense that chat comments or MOO submissions are anonymous: they occur while the student is protected from the potential tyranny of other students with stronger voices, or more privileged positions in the discourse. But one might fairly substitute ‘isolated’ for ‘protected.’ That is, dropping a comment into an electronic discussion can also be construed as an antisocial act. In a solely electronic discussion, a student with a pseudonym can make a delicate comment anonymously, one that he might keep to himself in the presence of others, and then leave the discussion temporarily to see how the other discussants treat his offering. But he might just as easily make an offensive comment, like a piece of graffiti, and not have to be responsible for it. In the writing circles, social responsibility, at least on a small scale, is a constant. It behooves us to study the writing circles closely on this account. We know that the structure of the circles is dramatically different from classrooms, but does that structure silence the same groups that are typically silenced in a classroom? Do all the groups tolerate dissensus? How do the teachers manage this issue?
The role of technology in the teaching of writing, it seems, is highlighted in the writing circles in a unique way. Just like John Lofty’s concept of the ‘timescape,’ we might think in terms of a “tech-scape:” instead of assuming that roles for technology are predetermined by the nature of the equipment itself, or the configuration of the lab, we all—students, teachers, administrators—should be prepared to negotiate the uses of technology in our courses. As with time, we must be guided in our designs for the use of technology by best practice and our own philosophy of teaching.

Diversity issues. The second question related to ESOL that I want to suggest as a fruitful area of future research relates to a point raised by John Trimbur in “The Problem of Freshman English (Only): Towards Programs of Study in Writing.” Noting the absence of writing courses or programs of study which “promote writing and advanced literacy in other languages, along with English” (23), Trimbur takes an unusual view of composition’s history to make what might seem like an obvious point: in American colleges and universities, the first-year composition course is taught in English:

What I am leading to here is that the formation of the first-year course ... not only participated centrally in the decline of rhetoric as a program of study but also helped to sever writing in English from its association with classical languages, replacing the emphasis on translation in the earlier curriculum with the monolingualism of vernacular literacy. To put it another way, the consolidation of the Freshman English requirement culminates the movement toward English-Only in writing instruction, taking place along with the break-up of the older classical curriculum and the concurrent territorialization of modern languages in their separate departments (18).

Ultimately, Trimbur is arguing for the inclusion of perspectives other than English in the study of writing, even though he admits he has no specific plans for doing so. Instead he ends by suggesting that a start can be made in the “borderlands” of Florida, California and the Southwest, as well as in the “polyglot metropolises of the global
market (Miami, New York, Los Angeles).” Trimbur ends with an injunction to “avoid the national Chauvinism of a First Worldist language policy and to reconfigure literacy education not only as English studies but also as writing programs with a multilingual, internationalist perspective” (28).

I think there is much merit to Trimbur’s argument, and can foresee all kinds of interesting alliances with Modern Languages Departments to provide writing instruction to, say, advanced Spanish Language majors. But I don’t see as much hope in the borderlands and polyglot metropolises. In fact, those areas seem to be precisely where resistance to attacks on the dominance of English Only are likely to be strongest. In the three cities he mentions (New York, Los Angeles, and Miami), we see strong evidence of resistance to any incursion on the territory of English. New York’s City University has just decided to close its open admissions policy and California has passed Proposition 187, which denies the benefit of public education to illegal aliens. In Miami, while the whole world watched, the city split cleanly along language lines in the Elian Gonzales affair. And at FIU, the public university in Miami, all undergraduate ESOL courses have gradually moved out of the curriculum and relocated in a fee-based, university-affiliated English Language Institute.

Based on our experience with the writing circles so far, we have been emboldened to undertake a small step in the direction Trimbur suggests. Taking our cue from our students, who have been critical of the Academic Systems software as being unrelated to their own lives or experience, we have begun to produce our own interactive writing software. For the Spring of 2000, a team of adjunct faculty and graduate students will have assembled a lesson on the role of the police in the community. The team is using the
actions of police and community leaders during the Elian saga as background reading and
discussion prompts. They have decided to include a particular editorial from Granma, the
Cuban Communist Party’s newspaper, selections from which are available in Spanish on
the internet. The piece will appear on a web page with other articles from the Miami
Herald, in English. The teachers plan to take their lead from the circles. We are counting
on the groups to work out for themselves how any non-Spanish speakers in the writing
circles will be able to access the editorial. Who will translate it? Our bets are on the
students. But will they translate on the spot? Will they translate the editorial and post the
translation next to the original? Will they be allowed to submit the translation for credit
in the writing course? If there is disagreement, how will they resolve it? If there is a
Haitian Creole speaker, will she translate into her native language? If, against all odds,
there is a writing circle with no Spanish speakers in it, will the group go to the Modern
Languages Department, to a friend, or will they do anything at all about the text?

We see a number of opportunities here to trade on a kind of natural resource: the
literally tens of thousands of bilinguals—students, faculty, and staff—on campus. We
have no fears on behalf of the English language. Many Spanish speakers, especially if
they have grown up in Miami, refer to their own native language ability as “kitchen
Spanish.” That is, they speak Spanish exclusively at home and outside the home with
friends and family, but since English is the language of the schools, they may get to
college never having written Spanish in their lives. What will happen to their English
composition skills if they do write an occasional assignment in Spanish? When they
translate it for their non-Spanish speaking peers, they will encounter language contact
issues as they move from Spanish to English, making decisions about case, number,
verbal tense and aspect, sentence structure, and meaning (vocabulary). They will do so, not from a deficit model, in which their faulty English is corrected, but from a position of advantage. Spanish speakers will enjoy a momentary advantage over people (perhaps including their teacher) who do not speak Spanish, and everyone will have to deal with that. In the end, they will produce an edited text in “standard” English after all.

What is the value of this kind of “momentary advantage?” There are hints that it may be very valuable to students. Janis Massa, of the formerly open-admissions CUNY, in a piece on assessing the writing of second language students, writes about what she calls in a subheading “A Significant Classroom Event” (in Tchudi 80ff). In an ESL class, Massa assigns a poem by Julia de Burgos, which she distributes in both Spanish and English. She asks for a student volunteer to read the poem to the class in Spanish, encouraging “the non-Spanish speakers to listen to the ‘music’ of the poem read in the original” (80). Massa then asks for a volunteer to read the poem in English:

Reading and hearing the poem in the original Spanish, followed by the English translation, turns the ESL classroom into a place in which the native language is merged in the target language setting. This is a unique experience for the majority of the students, who live, work, and socialize in communities in which Spanish, their native language, is spoken exclusively (80).

At the conclusion of the Spanish reading, the class applauds, and then again, more applause after the English reading. What exactly are the students applauding? Certainly it could be the powerful poem of de Burgos. But it could also be the volunteers’ performances, or even just the chance to honor Spanish in an English class, however briefly. In one of our writing circles, Howard Gengarelly, a teacher not trained in ESOL, witnessed a similar spontaneous outburst of applause.
H: And What I would like to say is, Tanis, I think you’re doing a lovely job on your English language skills. This stuff... this is much, much, much, much, much better.

T: Thank you.

H: Each time you’re improving, and I think that’s wonderful.

Other students: Yay! [softly at first, then gathers into applause]

What Howard and the other students are celebrating here, at one level anyway, is really Tanis’ survival of her inappropriate placement into ENC 1930. She should have been taking an ESOL course, which unfortunately does not exist. And Tanis is indeed a survivor. In fact, she even has enough distance from her situation (and the University’s) to make a joke. When quiet is restored after applause for her improvement in speaking and writing English, Tanis replies to the group, “OK, Gracias!” In her self-aware, mocking relapse into Spanish to acknowledge the group’s acknowledgement of her progress, Tanis articulates the feelings of other bilingual students in the group, and they all absolutely burst into raucous laughter. Opportunities for spontaneous applause in class should never be squandered, but writing circles seem to offer a comfortable place in which to experiment with, and study the effects of honoring the other languages of the students. Perhaps by designing such inter-language contacts into courses in Trimbur’s “borderlands” we can negotiate the allocation of language space in our classrooms instead of defending English Only against the “attacks” of increased access.
Assessment and equity issues. Even after six semesters of passionate commitment of faculty and students, the whole idea of teaching in writing circles is really no more than an experiment, or worse, some kind of unauthorized trial of an unproven cure for the ills of first-year composition. In short, our exposure results from a lack of appropriate assessment—of the writing done in the course; of the course itself; of the course’s place in the overall program of instruction in the English Department, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the University. There are good reasons and bad reasons that no focused attention has been paid to assessment of the writing circles at FIU. The worst reason is that we have been too busy putting out fires here, lighting new ones there. In a very real sense, for example, if there is no place to have a writing circle, there cannot be a writing circle. So if there is a choice between convening some teachers to nail down outcomes for the course or plying the Library staff with Cuban coffee, assessment issues must be put off. Other bad reasons include understaffing of composition faculty (there are two of us, one on each campus, both charged with program direction) and lack of funding (no money to pay teachers to do the work of assessment).

The good reasons are the consistent (if anecdotal) reports of faculty and student satisfaction and enthusiasm, as well as the obvious new esprit de corps among writing circle teachers. The single best reason, however, is the quality of student writing. Average grades for sections of ENC 1930 are up 25%, and better writing is apparently the reason. Forgetting for a moment, the writing circles as “disturbing practice,” the writing of writing circle students really should improve. They are getting large amounts of small group work for an entire semester. At other colleges, students who seek out the writing center and make consistent visits will also improve their writing. This is the ‘best
practice’ argument; more conferences are good for students, therefore, an arrangement that produces 15 conference hours per student per semester (the equivalent of 30 half-hour visits to the writing center in many places) is bound to produce improvements in writing.

Regardless of the reasons for not spending time on assessment, however, something must be done about it, and soon. It is all too easy to imagine a scenario in which a representative of the Administration decides that the extra $1000 paid to the writing circle teachers is a poor use of limited monies. I could argue (as I did, successfully, when we were launching the program) that the 33% increase in pay for a 50% increase in face-to-face faculty time with students (5 hrs wk in conference as opposed to 2.5 hrs wk in class) represented a bargain. They might reasonably ask for proof that the course’s redesign has been effective. Where are the numbers? What do you mean by ‘better’? Your students are satisfied—so what? Why wouldn’t they be if they all get better grades? In that case, we would find ourselves in the unenviable position Ed White describes:

[O]f course, we and our colleagues have known the value of our work from the beginning ... We know it because we have seen our students improve ... and they come back to thank us for the help we have given them. But although we know our students write better and we have all kind of unofficial nonempirical evidence to show that our program is valuable, we seem unable to come up with data to prove it to outsiders (Teaching 265).

Of course, we might scramble to find whatever empirical statistics there are, checking grade rolls and trying to sort out retention rates from various databases. Or we might take the advice of an old magician about trying to solve problems quickly: Don’t
just do something, stand there. The danger in scrambling to satisfy a demand for information is immediately and forever being committed to particular kinds of information. The Administration understands measures like the CLEP (College Level Examination Program), the CLAST (College Level Academic Skills Test), and the SAT. They do not understand the accepted wisdom in assessing college writing of “multiple measures over time” or, at least in FIU’s case, even portfolios or holistic scoring. They do, however, understand statistical significance, Likert scales, and chi-squares.

Furthermore they are acutely aware that external funding agencies understand the same things. Even if we had assessment information in a format comfortable for the administration, though, it behooves us not to provide it just for the sake of being accountable. If we truly believe that most measures of students’ writing abilities and programs’ effectiveness underrepresent our successes as we know them, then we must take steps to design and provide other measures. We cannot escape accountability—nor should we try—but how is administration to know why we value our work if we don’t tell them?

One example of a newly defined measure in the case of the writing circles (or any class that uses groups for that matter) is the copious practice of oral communication skills provided by the course’s design. First, we need to articulate for ourselves what we value about the talk in the circles or groups. We could compile and view videotapes of writing circles. Then we might list our desired outcomes for the oral communication component of the course. By the end of the course, students should be able to:
• get the floor in a discussion, hold it, and successfully negotiate conversational turn-taking
• establish an *ethos* (i.e., how to get others to take their positions seriously) and modify positions based on feedback
• engage others from diverse backgrounds fairly, attentively, and with respect
• combine informal speech and draft writing into formal, edited writing
• manage one-on-one student/faculty interaction productively

Once we agree on the value of talk in groups, we can begin to generate the kind of statistical information the administration favors. We can then say for example, that each student spends, on average, almost two hours in group conversation in a writing circle. (Student talk represents 60% of the talking time on the samples I have seen.)

\[
\begin{align*}
60\% \text{ of one hour} & = 36 \text{ minutes} \\
36 \text{ min.} \div 5 \text{ students} & = 7.2 \text{ minutes per circle meeting} \\
7.2 \text{ min.} \times 15 \text{ circles} & = 108 \text{ min.} \\
108 \text{ min.} \div 60 \text{ min.} & = 1.8 \text{ hours}
\end{align*}
\]

In those sampled sections of videotape, we could also count the number of times students ask questions of one another. Then we could put this information in a format that others are likely to find convincing. In another setting, Mina Shaughnessy described how the “debate about Open Admissions has been and is being carried on in the language of those who oppose it: in the alphabet of numbers, the syntax of print-outs, the
transformations of graphs and tables" (“Open Admissions” 403). If this is the language of power in the academy, then this is a language we need to practice. As a hypothetical example, we might then say something like the following: Student-to-student learning is fostered in writing circles, as evidenced by the average of 47.2 times that students ask and answer each others questions over the course of a semester.

One of the most pernicious problems of living within the limits of the kind of empirical information that administration finds most comforting is that observations such as those immediately above will inevitably be lost. According to Ed White, “We need to recognize that empirical program evaluation takes place at several removes from reality (264).

Level One: the student—thinking, learning, daydreaming

Level Two: the written expression of that student’s mental activity—a first-draft writing product, a survey or multiple-choice test of some sort, a demonstration of the writing process

Level Three: the evaluation of that second level—a number, a letter grade, a statement of some sort, a profile of scores

Level Four: group measures, normed over time by pre- and post-testing, for example

Level Five: statistical tests of reliability, validity, and significance to whatever group comparative data may still be afloat (from White 264-265)

Ronnie, Melissa, Carolina, and Cindy Ann are long gone by Level Five; they really disappeared at Level Two. Of course, it’s not their responsibility to help us
transformations of graphs and tables” (“Open Admissions” 403). If this is the language of power in the academy, then this is a language we need to practice. As a hypothetical example, we might then say something like the following: *Student-to-student learning is fostered in writing circles, as evidenced by the average of 47.2 times that students ask and answer each others questions over the course of a semester.*

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Ronnie, Melissa, Carolina, and Cindy Ann are long gone by Level Five; they really disappeared at Level Two. Of course, it’s not their responsibility to help us
evaluate the writing circles course or the larger program; the assessment of their work is
the grade they got, which is a separate issue. But in the interests of a true evaluation of
what writing circles can do, their presence and visibility are invaluable. How do we
demonstrate the students and their learning for others?

Providing empirical evidence of *activities we define* is a start. We could, indeed
should, scour the campus for allies as well. It is widely noted in the literature of Student
Affairs, that the single most significant cause of student leaving in the first year is
identified not as academic difficulty or financial hardship, but loneliness. Undergraduate
Writing Programs could document, via a short survey, that students tend to maintain the
friendships they form in the writing circles after the course is over. We should be talking
to Student Affairs and mixing our numbers with theirs wherever it helps to make our
work either more empirically obvious or less abstract, or both. We could also enlist the
help of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. They keep statistics that the Registrar
doesn’t, and may be able to help us show (if it’s true, of course) that, as we expect,
students of color fail the writing circles course—like Cindy Ann—less often than they
failed the previous version. Further, the political reality is that the Office of Multicultural
Student Affairs has the kind of clout that one new and expensive ($1000 more per
section) writing course does not.
CONCLUSION

Is this reasonable, though—advocating that we engage in the manipulation of statistics we don’t respect and that we “play the race card” by implicating a student services organization in our plans? Is this some kind of academic Cold War? It certainly looks like a war, an undeclared war, conducted without the approval of the Congress, to be more specific. The new access to higher education for minorities poses a threat. The fact that at FIU minority students are not a minority at all, but a majority, simply makes the threat more immediate. The enemy has been identified: waves of immigrants, most of them illegal aliens without papers, that is, without the kind of preparation they should have. The area has been secured: any courses which might case their entry have been removed and relocated out of reach in the English Language Institute. Weapons have been chosen: admissions tests to keep the worst of them out; placement tests to further test their endurance and tolerance for failure; penalties for repeated attempts to enter by the stubborn few; a part-time, underpaid, poorly trained and supported Border Patrol (adjunct faculty).

So if it is a war, the students didn’t start it. And people like Cindy Ann think it’s worth fighting the battle. But we writing teachers should resist allowing ourselves to be cast in the odious role of covert CIA operatives providing “training” to the locals. Instead we should keep trying to get elected and argue constitutionally for a cessation of hostilities. Along the way, we may have to hire some lobbyists and spin doctors, and make the circuit of the pundit shows, and even occasionally say some things that leave a
bad taste in our mouths. But above all, we have to run in those local elections. As Tom Fox says, staying around is half the battle.

Perhaps, though, there is another metaphor instead of a war. In a war, after all, the two sides are clearly distinguished from one another by several things: 1) a sense of belonging to a cohesive group and a loyalty to that group; 2) identification of a clear threat to the group; and 3) a plan or strategy to join battle. Ira Shor, of course, would say that all of these elements are present today. But Arthur Applebee, in *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning*, offers an alternative. For Applebee, the problem is change and people’s resistance to it. Over the past few decades, prefigured by John Dewey, we have begun to seriously rethink our concepts of learning and teaching. According to Applebee, “Older, positivistic notions of knowledge as reflections of fundamental truths about the world have been gradually replaced with newer frameworks that acknowledge the situated nature of what we know” (1). This simple statement reflects the some of the vast differences we have seen in the writing circles. On the one hand, there is silent “collaborative seatwork,” where the teacher waits for students to somehow absorb her knowledge about how to “correct” papers. On the other, there is the “frustration” of the teacher trying to reenter the lively student-to-student discussion to get credit for her own contribution to the making of knowledge about animal rights. These differences are profound, notes Applebee, and “are still being worked out in the educational system as a whole” (1), and they have touched the public in a way not seen before, at least not in recent memory. In a writing circle, the teacher takes a much-reduced teaching role in favor of a new role as facilitator of learning. This is
threatening—or better, perhaps, confusing to “what everyone knows” about schools and teachers from their own experience.

Schools as we know them have been structured to effectively transmit an objectifiable body of knowledge to new generations. Teachers and textbooks present what is known; students memorize and recite; and when students have learned the basics, the more academically inclined are invited to continue to the “higher” studies in which they may eventually make their own contributions to knowledge. Curriculum, in such a system, becomes the specification of what is to be learned, a codification of existing knowledge parsed for effective teaching into elaborate scope and sequence charts. These in turn serve as guidelines for textbook construction and lesson planning (Applebee 1).

The response from the public, starting with the 1976 “literacy crisis,” has demonstrated what Applebee calls “an unprecedented awakening of public interest in issues of curriculum.” Citing attacks on curriculum for “lack of depth and rigor, for abandoning the Western heritage, for failing to develop basic skills, and for ignoring the diversity of America’s cultural heritage” (1), he chooses to focus on the give-and-take of this “conversation,” no matter how bitter and acrimonious it may be, instead of construing it as a battle of opponents. Graduates of public and private education correctly perceive that momentous change is occurring at alma mater, and they want an explanation. Sometimes what they offer is shouted, blaming, and personal, as they try to communicate with us in the academy. Sometimes it’s more reasonable. But we have to hold up our end of the conversation as well. That is, if parents of students see references to Dewey as backsliding into some “progressive” philosophy which has been demonstrated to their satisfaction to be a failure, some of the blame is ours, just as it is for “failing the basic writing enterprise.”
The important point for Applebee is that, whatever the short-term outcome, such participation of the public and the academy represents a “socially and culturally significant conversation” (Applebee 2, emphasis mine). When they go well, the writing circles at FIU operate as socially and culturally significant conversations. It is the students and teacher in the small groups who determine the subject and the range, methods, and interpretation of inquiry by talking among themselves. The resulting meeting of cultures in small, manageable groups of people committed to one another—however artificially, for one semester, in a randomly assembled writing group—is just the kind of conversation that needs to be nurtured in our schools.
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NOTES

1 There were a couple of exceptions, notably, one advanced PhD student in Composition at another University, and three adjuncts with experience teaching basic writing both at FIU and elsewhere.

2 I use the designation ‘Black’ because the more popular alternative, ‘African-American’ does not apply to many of FIU’s students who are Black, but who come from the Caribbean and elsewhere and do not consider themselves American in any sense.

4 For Administrative and Professional (A&P) employees, the mix is an interesting middle ground between the faculty and the students: 33.9% Hispanic, 11.3% Black, 3.6% Asian, 44.5% White.

5 Even in 1998, when I became the first comp/rhet specialist hired by the Department, I was hired ABD and put on the payroll as an Instructor until I finished the PhD. Thus, though charged with building a writing program, finishing the dissertation, and managing some 500 ENC courses per year, I have remained vulnerable to the exercise of power by just about anyone in the Department, since everyone on a tenure-track outranks me or in the Administration, since I have no institutional authority as a junior faculty member not even on the tenure-track yet.

6 Actually, she need not retake the same two courses; any English course would do, since she does not fall under the general education requirements. But in the absence of any ESOL courses in the Department, they remain her best option.

7i A full class of 25 students taking the course for three credits generates 75 student credit hours (SCH). These 75 SCH are divided by 40 hours to produce Full-Time Equivalents (FTE). For each FTE, the State of Florida provides $5000, generating $9375 per section (1.875 FTE x $5000). With tuition added ($120 per SCH x 75 = $

7ii Actual practice varies considerably among teachers. Most disperse into the circles by the end of the second week of class and never meet the whole class again in a 15 week semester. Others meet once at the end of the term. Still others plan 4 or meetings over the course of the term.