# "I WAS MESSED UP FROM THE START": THE SHAPE OF CRITICAL LITERACY IN STUDENT WRITING HISTORIES

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> The history of my [sic] is unfortunately not very good. I was messed up from the start. I am not much of a reader and that has hurt my writing history.
>
> Doug[1] "Preliminary Learning Narrative" (2000)

> A word has meaning against the context of a sentence. A sentence has meaning against the context of a language. A language has meaning against the context of a form of life. A form of life has meaning against the context of a world. A world has meaning against the context of a word.
>
> Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (1972: 110)

## Opening Lines of Communication

Doug's opening and the student writing of his peers examined in this essay came in response to an invitation for students to "write the history of [themselves] as writers and thinkers." As their teacher, I made the invitation in the belief that taking a reflective and critical perspective on their literacies might help students find ways to gain access to the privileged literacies of their college setting. As a teacher-researcher, I was also interested in tracing students' own understanding of the contexts which alternately

enable or prevent full acquisition of the discourses of power promised by higher education. But the particular context surrounding the invitation to tell these histories is itself one caught up in the power of other discourses, for all of the students were on academic probation and seeking to resume academic good standing through successful completion of the course, and I was the individual creating the classroom context against which they would make their claim for academic competency.

The 'invitation' itself, then, also carries with it embedded assumptions about who gets to ask for responses and who provides accounts of themselves in any writing situation, but particularly in academic settings. The narratives students produced in response to the invitation reveal some ways in which these students think about and use the literacies they have in order to acquire and gain access to the privileged literacies of their college setting. They begin to map out the domain of my initial teacher-research inquiry. But in the writing itself, students produced a range of rhetorical positions of received or acceptable discursive forms for student academic writing. These enactments suggest the shape of other territories not initially imagined by my teacherly assumption that students would willingly embrace the invitations I made to them. Looking closely at the responses lying on the *borders* of my expectations, I want to allow those student voices to communicate more clearly the freighted context from which they emerge and to yield insight into what a critical or academic literacy is and might be in their lives.

The place of critical literacy in the lives of secondary and post-secondary students is difficult to locate, and the purposes to which students put the literacies they already have and bring to academic situations is equally elusive to trace, however. These complications emerge in part because of the slippery nature of terms such as *literacy* and *critical literacy*. Too often, as in the case of Doug's opening to his "Preliminary Learning Narrative" above, we are left to *let stand* the gaps in meaning that open between students' histories of reading, writing, and thinking and the increasingly more complex discourse contexts we push them up

against. Doug's inability or unwillingness to name the content of his history[2]—we do not know if it is a history of 'my writing,' 'my thinking,' 'my schooling,' 'my life,' or something else entirely—speaks to a more widespread frustration among students of not knowing what it is their literacy events in schools and in life are for. Especially in high school and in the transition from high school to college, many students are hard-pressed to realize where their writing is taking them or what difficulties may await them there. With Doug, they may be able to trace a loose connection between reading and writing and success in school, but the attempt to situate student literacy more solidly in terms of an academic and critical literacy may indeed be "messed up from the start" if we fail to investigate how school and teacher discourses themselves shape the assumptions and mark the limits of what "counts" in student literacy work.

The acquisition of academic discourse is, of course, a signal event in the development of undergraduate (and even graduate) student writers (Kirsch 1993; Zamel 1993, 1995; Blanton 1994; DeAngelis 1996/1997; Spack 1997; Bazerman 2000). The move toward this facility and fluency by academic writers is one that highlights the social and cultural nature of language and meaning-making, and research across disciplines has focused on the range of strategies available to individual writers as they move from being receivers of to participants in (and creators of) academic discourse (Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine 1991; Elbow 1991; Kellogg 1994; Flower, et al. 1994; Welch 1998; Bishop 1999; Bazerman 2000; Wells, et al. 2001). Much of this research acknowledges the importance of teacher response within the writing process as a means of fostering student writing development (Straub 1996, 1997; Welch 1998; Callahan 2000), though recent research has cautioned that the pattern of teacher response in a traditional-style classroom discourse can turn the acquisition of academic discourse into a teacher-centered activity rather than a socially positioned meaning-making activity of language use (Fife and O'Neill 2001).

In the practice of teachers and researchers, 'literacy' and 'critical literacy' may frustratingly be either synonymous or

opposing terms: in the parlance of many classroom teachers, 'critical' literacy often simply means a 'close' literacy, as in critical reading/close reading, and 'critical reading' signals the process of retaining what one has read (usually for the purposes of later and often high-stakes assessments) (see Chapman 1993). Held 'close' to the text by this sort of literacy, students perform to meet the needs of teachers, curricula, or schools, but not necessarily themselves. But a 'critical' literacy can also mean "literacy that matters" (Gee 1996; Comber 2000; Wells, et al. 2000; Harste 2001), a literacy which adopts the skills of 'critical' and 'close' reading and turns them toward inquiry and engagement with the world at the level of power. When students take on literacy in *this* way, they use language to question and to change the world around them–especially through an interrogation of the ways in which language use upholds that world through discursive and institutional structures.

Schools, colleges, and universities are of course all sites of institutional power, and the discourses that prevail there are infused with the language of access and power. For instance, among the most basic promises of schools in the United States is that they not only localize but facilitate students' entrance and uptake into discursive and literacy practices that will "count" in later life. The job of schools, according to this notion of critical literacy, is to provide students access to and training in deploying these discourses of power in their own language use. We see such promises in the visual rhetoric of college and university websites, in the mission statements from academic departments, and signposted throughout the "multiliteracies" (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) of campus life; all exert tremendous persuasive power on students seeking to enter the academic and critical discourse of higher education. But 'critical literacy' as I would like to use it here is also an inheritance of a 'critical pedagogy' in composition studies, which insists

> that students should be taught the skills needed to write and read within the standard conventions of cultural and

> academic discourses, but also . . . insist[s] that students should be taught to interrogate, critique, and in some cases *resist* the values promoted by those same discourses. (Hardin 2)

It is this focus on critical *resistance* to and not just reproduction of privileged discourses that most significantly separates 'critical literacy' from 'academic literacy.'

Yet even when we situate the term 'critical literacy' within particular contexts of reading, writing, knowing, and being in the world, we can find ourselves–much like Cavell's parsing of meaning and language cited above–back where we started. For if the 'words' of critical literacy are embedded within the 'sentences' or 'forms of life' of academic discourse, they remain potentially unavailable to students who have yet to take up academic discourse modes. Instead, students may be 'taken up,' subsumed, by discourse, and their efforts at meaning-making become lost in someone *else's* expectations for reading and writing, and thinking. Acknowledging these difficulties, I want to evoke in the descriptions and analysis below something of the recursive trajectory of meaning suggested by Cavell in order to foreground the always situated and mediated nature of literacy events in the lives of students, thereby making present the fact of someone *else's* (often more powerful and more privileged) utterance within discourse events, especially when those events involve a consideration of the role of writing itself in constituting and shaping literacy and learning. In this way I hope to trace more clearly the shape and form of the literacy events that are already there in students' lives but that stand unnamed and powerfully determinant. This naming is a necessary step in recognizing the existence of other voices in one's own discourse, and it marks the move that students need to make in beginning to adopt a critical literacy and that teachers need to discover as part of their practice. Nowhere is this discovery more obvious than in classroom encounters, and part of what I will trace here is also the rippling effect for both me and my students of opening new lines of

communication and reflection about literacy, learning, and academic success.

## The Context(s) for Communication

The seventeen student writers represented by the primary data set here come from two sections of a three-credit college course–"College Culture"–designed to help students on academic probation resume good-standing.[3] The course was one of several offered through the Academic Support Center (ASC) of a large Research Extensive University in the Midwest and was designed specifically to assist "at-risk" or probationary students.[4] As the instructor for these two sections of the course, I chose to maintain a particular focus on writing throughout the term, a focus that deviated slightly from the curriculum set by the ASC staff for this course.[5] Certain projects–career exploration inquiry conducted by students through interviews and research into their desired profession or field of study; learning skills inventories; issue-outcome analysis essays–were required by the program curriculum and did not necessarily focus explicitly on writing as a means of learning, thinking, and making meaning, though students of course conducted these projects in writing. Out of my own understanding of the research into critical literacy and student writing, however, and from my experience as both a writing center director and college teacher at other institutions, I decided to invite students to use writing to explore in a critically reflective way these set topics and to demonstrate their academic development over time. Other engagements or activities in the course included papers in which students critically reviewed and analyzed their own thinking about writing and learning (these reflections were drawn from information supplied in the narratives examined below), reports by students (individually and in groups) about certain study skills (note-taking, test-taking, and critical reading strategies), and presentations and activities led by a peer instructor, a student who had formerly been on academic probation at the university, who had taken the course in the past, and who had been deemed by the program coordinator to be

sufficiently capable of helping to lead other students out of their academic difficulties. I met with the peer-instructor for each section frequently before and after each class session to talk about the immediate future direction of the course and jointly to determine the shape of many classroom invitations. Each of the additional engagements drew from the reflection and analysis of the preliminary learning narratives.

One section of the course met for 50 minutes three days a week (MWF) in a 'smart-classroom,' with computer hook-ups and built-in projection units, in the School of Education; the other for 75 minutes twice a week (TR) in a narrow, windowless classroom with a single conference table. This room was across campus from the School of Education in a building which housed the Student Counseling Center and Psychology Department, reinforcing for some of the students a sense of their need for academic diagnosis and treatment. In addition to these regular class meetings, students and I met bi-weekly for individual 20-30 minute conferences about their performance in the class and about their academic progress in general. These meetings were flexibly arranged to accommodate students' class and work schedules and were held either in the atrium of the School of Education or in the dining commons of one of the large on-campus residence quads near the university library. These sites evoked the institutional discourses of the university and reinforced the rhetoric of achievement and success. In the dining commons for instance, a number of large murals depicting the 150 year history of the university and key moments of student achievement in science, the arts, and athletics, surrounded the walls of the dining area, and an excerpt from *Hamlet* offering advice for successful navigation in the world[6] was engraved high above the tables on the north wall of the commons.

Such extra-curricular images and texts contributed to the discourse of achievement and progress with which students in the course were struggling. This range of texts in part constitutes what James Gee (2005) identifies as the "other stuff" which accompanies language-in-use to create what he calls "Big D"

Discourses. "The key to Discourses," Gee notes, "is 'recognition' . . . as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity), here-and-now" (27) The dining commons itself was also the site for one of the later whole-class activities discussed below, in which students applied the reflective stances and self-scrutiny of their personal learning histories to the narratives of success written on the walls around them, interrogating the 'Discourses' operating at the university while also attempting to enact them. The balance for any student entering academic discourse is fraught by previous performances and the rhetoric of expectations, but it is especially tricky for students already marked as outside the dominant discourse. As Gee warns,

> Whatever you have done [in seeking to be seen as participating in a Discourse] must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses. If it is not recognizable, then you're not 'in' the Discourse. (27)

The walls of the dining commons projected a fixed image back to any students looking up for inspiration or reassurance that she belonged in this place.

The students enrolled in the two sections of this particular ASC course were in many ways recognizable as part of the university student discourse, or in the language of the course itself, of the Culture of College. They were traditional college-age students (18-22 years old), majority white (two were African-American, one was Mexican-American), roughly even in gender (9 men, 8 women), and largely "in-state" (one was from the South; one was from the Northeast; one was from the Southwest; the rest were from the home state of the university). The in-state students more commonly held one or more part-time jobs to supplement income or pay tuition, an economic and time constraint that

contributed, by the students' self-reporting in their written reflections, career exploration projects, and conferences with me, to many of their social and academic pressures. Out-of-state students at this university generally faced slightly tougher admissions standards than in-state students, a practice typical of large state universities nation-wide.[7] These out-of-state students also pay more in tuition, a factor in their feelings of stress, though in ways different from those faced by in-state students, as cited by both groups in their academic skills inventory and subsequent written reflections. Whereas the in-state students were acutely though privately aware of the personal financial cost of their education, the out-of-state students were more openly conscious of the cost of their education to themselves or to their parents. Since the 'other stuff' of their lives placed them squarely *in* the Discourse, it was largely their inability to enact the codes and language-in-use of college culture that had placed them outside the Discourse of academic success and achievement. But as I will discuss below, the academic invitations to engage this language were for many of my students themselves part of the barrier.

## The Invitation: Opening a Line of Self-Inquiry

During the first week of classes, students received the following email from me:

> Subject: Preliminary Learning Histories
> (Wednesday's Assignment)
>
> Class,
> Here is the prompt for Wednesday's assignment:
>
> "Write the history of yourself as a writer and as a thinker."
> Remember to format the paper according to MLA guidelines.
> The paper should be however long it needs to be in order to
> meet the demands of the prompt as fully and completely as
> possible–within reason.
>
> Also remember to bring a second typed copy to class with you
> on Wednesday. If you have questions feel free to contact me.

Good luck.

Dr. Staunton

Prior to receiving the assignment, students and I had had a class discussion about the learning histories assignment. In that conversation, I informed students that every student in an ASC course was required to submit a "Learning History" as part of the course grade, though how the history itself was used or graded across ASC courses ranged widely.[8] So, for instance, students in my two sections of "College Culture" would not have their learning history papers graded; submission alone would constitute full credit for the assignment.[9] Prior to working at the ASC, I had been a director of two different college writing centers, and I had taught college writing and literature courses with heavy writing focus at three different colleges or universities. So I had some experience in developing ways to support struggling writers, but I wanted now to discover ways in which gaining access to and acquiring more sophisticated forms of writing might assist the ASC students in returning to academic good-standing. The curriculum for "College Culture" established by the program coordinator focused largely on time management, study skills, and reading strategies, and seemed to see writing as an adjunct to reading and thinking. I was ambivalent about the curriculum and the secondary role writing seemed to be playing in the development of critical and academic literacy, but I was also troubled by the seemingly uncritical reception of the students' Learning History papers as a reliable source of knowledge about them and their own understanding of their literacy. I did not want it to be the final or only word that students would have to say about their thinking, writing, and learning. And I did not want it to be the only source of information for my assessment of their past history and future possibilities as learners. To highlight the process of writing as inquiry, I foregrounded the provisional status of the assignment as a "Preliminary" Learning History. These narratives were not to be finished statements of personal identity

or scholarly activity but exploratory works in progress. Similarly, I wanted to modify the curriculum and medium of the delivery to focus the class on developing writing and coordinating assignments in such a way as to 'teach' indirectly time management and the other skills. But those skills and strategies were always embedded within writing situations.

In my two sections, then, students would be using the information and events offered in the narratives as *preliminary data* for future papers, and as resources for self-reflection, collaborative diagnostics of writing and thinking, and especially as data for sustained inquiry into an academic and professional area of interest, which would culminate in their career exploration project. In short, I wanted to allow the writing students did about themselves to serve for them the same research and diagnostic analysis purposes as it did for me. I decided then that the narratives themselves would be viewed only by the student-writers and the teacher, but none of the "Preliminary Learning Histories" themselves would be graded. This was an important distinction for the students and these sections of the course, for in addition to being graded by the other "College Culture" instructors, the learning narratives were also part of an on-going research study by the ASC at large. Usually, the learning histories had been solicited as diagnostic tools for instructors to get to know the history of the students and their experiences with schooling, but not as diagnostics of writing ability. Thus, the invitation to produce a personal learning history narrative at the ASC was typically a variation of the following:

> Tell me your story. How did you get to where you are in your academic career? Focus on the highs and lows, the significant events and people who influenced your learning history and why. End with a discussion of your transition from high school to college. Be thoughtful in your discussion. What have you learned and what would you want someone else to learn from your story? (Pugh 8)

I came to discover from examining prior sample essays produced by *this* assignment, that the narratives students offered–especially in the way that students responded to the final question–typically culminated in an appeal to their teachers for the help they thought they most needed. But the question of form was largely predetermined for the students by the prompt–"Focus on the highs and lows . . . .End with a discussion of your transition from high school to college"–resulting in the following schema for the essay: Introduction; rising action; falling action; 'transition from high school' discussion; conclusion.

As useful as the particular information offered by each student in his or her history tended to be, however, the Learning History assignment generated by this prompt did have the unintended result of producing fairly typical forms of writing, inviting student reflection on and critique of their educational situation only of the past and only within specific present horizons about what successful academic work was. In a study of sample narratives taken from previous sections of the course, I noticed that apart from the differences in individual detail, the essays typically and almost uniformly followed a five-paragraph form and varied most significantly only in the opening and closing paragraphs. The invitation tended to create in this set of essays anticipated narrative dichotomies between good/bad teachers, high/low points of schooling, and likes/dislikes about learning environments. As such, these other narratives re-inscribed some notions of schooling and writing as restrictive and confining, and the limited variety of opening and closing gestures suggests that the personalizing and authorizing elements of the narratives–by which students might otherwise be able to enact a sense of their own voices and situation for readers to recognize–fell into rather predictable scripts of students falling from educational grace (in the past) and turning over new leaves (in their present courses) to discover paths to educational redemption (figured as successful completion of the semester and as eventual graduation from college).

In thus reproducing conventional genres of academic success and tales of "at-risk" students making good, the student-narrators from earlier years of the course took care to mention the highs and lows of their learning trajectory, and they frequently directed attention to episodes in which certain individuals–especially teachers–or events had a singular effect. The particular details, of course, were wide-ranging, especially in the 'body' of the essays, but the placement of details in set locations was plotted along a much smaller spectrum. What was particularly striking about the narratives as a group was the way in which individual writers attempted to negotiate the features of two of the more difficult formal elements of an essay–the opening and closing paragraphs. These 'genres' of student prose are quite difficult to master, and they often repel students from the task of the essay as a whole (Cooper 1999). Even more striking, however, was that each opening stance had a matching closing stance, so that although all the students saw themselves revealed or explained in some manner by their narratives, how students positioned themselves through their opening gestures came to indicate the direction their explanations would eventually take in assessing the responsibility for the present situation and came to rest in a corresponding closing posture. In short, for each of those narratives, the end was always already present in the beginning. They were "messed up," finished, done, "from the start." The reading of their lives created by the entire situation located the remedy for student failure in the current staff of the ASC, who could fix them, straighten them out, and put them back on track.

This dynamic was troublesome to me while planning my own section of the course for several reasons: it seems to lay the burden of fixing the "mess" of students' lives at the teachers' feet; it also invites teachers and students alike to believe that only one person needs to make a difference, and it leaves unquestioned the role that language (and Gee's "other stuff") plays and continues to play in shaping the paths into academic forms of life. Nothing emerges about the importance or possible value of collaboration among peers, nor do the institutional logics of schooling, which

create the context for these students to become 'at-risk' 'from the start,' remain under the critical gaze of students or teachers (writers or readers) for long. That does not mean that these logics are not available for scrutiny, however, and the categories below are an attempt to describe some of the patterns that emerge.

## Existing Patterns (Openings and Closings)

Within these existing patterns were four distinct versions of student histories, though each eventually figured the student's academic end somewhere in his or her beginning: 1) the Self Looking Back, 2) Looking at the Self in Definition, 3) Hypothetical Other Selves, and 4) Rhetorical Trajectories (see Figure 1).

| Self Looking Back | Looking at the Self in Definition | Hypothetical Other Selves | Rhetorical Trajectories |
|---|---|---|---|
| "As I look back . . ." (Cole)<br><br>"As I reflect . . ." (Tess)<br><br>"When I think back . . ." (Levi) | "A learning history is what a person has learned." (Kari) | "If I *had* to blame something . . . " (Franklin) | "Since I don't know exactly where to start, . . . I will start from the beginning." (Tommi) |

**Figure 1.**

Several students attempted to take on the perspectives of observers-after-the-fact by opening their essays with temporal subordinations: "As I look back . . ." (Cole); "As I reflect . . ." (Tess); "When I think back . . ." (Levi). Whereas these openings adopt a personal and informal voice for the reflection, other students such as Lamar maintained the "I" but created a sense of the evaluating and impartial observer: "Throughout my years of schooling I have encountered many different experiences many of which were both good and bad." Though both types of personal

reflection involve the **self looking back**, the second version situates the backward glance slightly outside oneself–"throughout my years"–making a block of experience existing across time and available to the scrutiny of another eye.

Continuing in this increasingly more "objective" positioning, another student, Kari, places her history within a broader category of analysis, **looking at the self in definition**. "A learning history is what a person has learned," Kari's opening begins, seeming to take on the "objectivity" of academic discourse but having difficulty emerging out of its tautological beginnings to offer more sophisticated analyses of either her own history or learning histories in general. This inability of students to use the prompt to move into more sophisticated forms of writing to probe their learning pasts marks the other two existing patterns: **hypothetical other selves** and **rhetorically positing a trajectory**. Beginning the essays with a suggestion of hypothetical other selves–both oneself and other people–students posit a situation requiring or assuming some judgment from the (hopefully sympathetic) reader. As Franklin's opening reveals, sometimes this hypothetical self seems to be created simply as an offering to find blame somewhere, anywhere to satisfy the prompt, to "focus on the highs and lows" and to demonstrate "what you have learned" about that history. "If I *had* to blame something," Franklin says, not necessarily admitting that he *wants* to blame something, "that contributed to me not caring about grades enough," it would be the presence of other people as distractions (emphasis added). Finally, in tones that imply either bemusement or perhaps some level of disdain for the assignment itself, Tommi articulates the final mode of response by **rhetorically positing a trajectory** from which to safely and comfortably trace her history. Again the opening is one which may have a questionable reality in the life of the writer: "Since I don't know exactly where to start, I guess I will start from the beginning." This light opening forecasts the direction and goal for the paper, but it does so by highlighting the very arbitrariness of *having* to begin somewhere.

In offering this taxonomy of openings, I do not want to suggest that the students from these prior sections of the course were not in fact in academic difficulty or that their histories are in any way complete falsehoods. But I do want to highlight the highly artificial nature of the opening gestures to underscore the need for *interpreting* how the writing is fabricated to work with, for, and against the students here. As with any first-person utterance, these openings call into question the reliability of their narrators. Indeed, among the key skills of critical reading–a central competency promised students by the "College Culture" curriculum–is the ability to judge the validity, reliability, and accuracy of a text and to challenge the assumptions or claims of the text when they seem unwarranted. Not to submit student writing to the same basic standard of analysis would be to suppose that student texts somehow operate differently than other writing and that they provide a faithful reproduction of student motive, intention, and belief. But this writing is hardly transparent–perhaps least of all to the authors themselves struggling with a mode and genre of academic discourse their very presence in the ASC course suggests they have yet to master. What is more, to imagine that one could assess the content of the essays without acknowledging the layers of packaging involved in the presentation risks missing something fundamental about all the essays. As students take on more formal modes of academic discourse, they increasingly adopt the expected script for the assignment, creating variations of the genre of academic fall and redemption. If the sign of successful academic writing is for students to create a faithful reproduction of this self-mortifying narrative of struggle, then it is little wonder that students view its claims to foster independent thinking and expression suspiciously and with resistance.

## Seeking New Openings

Seeing the limits of the existing ASC prompt to allow students to use their writing more freely, I modified the prompt for my two sections of "College Culture" in the hopes of eliciting

information about the students' relationship to and facility with writing and thinking. My explanations surrounding the prompt were similarly curtailed to disrupt some of the either/or responses generated by the earlier invitation (and to move students beyond some of the more artificial elements of essay writing identified by Cooper [1999]).

> Remember to format the paper according to MLA guidelines. The paper should be however long it needs to be in order to meet the demands of the prompt as fully and completely as possible–within reason.

Though certainly somewhat ambiguous–"the paper should be however long it needs to be"–the invitation nonetheless stresses the expectation that form and content should be mutually informing. But it also presents a potentially frustrating context for the student writers: the teacher refuses to disclose a finite expectation for his assignment. In follow-up discussions with students in class, I reassured them that my directives were not given out of a perverse desire to make them miserable, but a legitimate invitation for them to set their own horizons of expectation for what made a work sufficiently complete. However, in acknowledging that such an intersection should exist "within reason" (w*hose* reason is not specified), this caveat also points students to the existence of discourse expectations in a colloquial way. Whatever the form the writing eventually would take, in other words, it must exist within reach of the bounds of 'reason' if it is going to be available to someone besides the author. In-class clarifications of the prompt underscored the presence of such expectations in *every* writing situation.

## Results and Observations

Before reviewing the student writing offered in response to my invitation and trying to discern what these responses might mean, it is important to remind ourselves of Anne Dyson's observation that "literacy events are not static determiners of what and

how. . . [students] learn"(146). Though Dyson is working chiefly with young writers, her understanding of literacy is useful in examining the transitional population of the ASC. In fact, the stakes surrounding the literacy events there are quite high–the course after all is the means to resume good standing; failure in the course means dismissal from the university–but also the events are always in a state of transformation. As such, the rhetorical similarities and the tendency toward "prefigured" outcomes both here and in the prior sample of narratives should not in fact be seen as arguing for a predetermined or inevitable trajectory for literacy and learning. Rather what literacy practices such as life histories or histories of writing can show is how literacy is historically situated and mediated by other literacies. Barton and Hamilton (2000) note that "literacies are coherent configurations of literacy practices" (10-11), but those configurations are not themselves necessarily fixed renderings. What we see in the results below is that rhetorical beginnings are attempts at imagining viable presents (and presences) that will require contact with others as evaluators and mediators before arriving at future endings. In envisioning possible sites of encounter, these narratives suggest the level of critical engagement with the structures and discourses of power in their world that students were prepared to take on.

Gee (2000) calls such configurations "enactive work," part of our efforts "to get other people to recognize people and things as having certain meanings and values" (191). When others make active efforts "to accept or reject our attempts–to see or fail to see things 'our way,'" they are doing what Gee calls "recognition work" (191). As I have argued above, in general the narratives from the first prompt turn that enactive work toward recognition of the student not as herself but as an instance of a type of 'at-risk' student. But many of the student writings from both prompts do both kinds of work–they enact and recognize–for in configuring their histories as writers and thinkers, students are also refiguring the literacies enacted by their histories in particular ways. For instance, one of my students, Rosie, situates her history within the

discourse of genetics to account for her interest in success in writing, and in the process she invites speculation about her own control over her academic standing. "As scientists are finding out more and more about people just by the breakdown of their genetic map," she begins, "it is safe to say that it is 'in my genes' to have a writing and thinking tendency" (see Figure 2). Understanding her past writing and thinking as something already written into her life, Rosie figures the turn to academic success as a matter of 'cracking the code' to discover the map of her future life and success. Another of my students, Tara, adopts a tone of happy surprise that she at last is invited to speak her mind by being invited to reflect on the workings of her own intellect: "Speaking about the history of my mind is an interesting turn from the normal inquiries that I've been allowed to write about for someone else's interest." If only other courses made similar invitations, the remark implies, Tara might have more intellectual and personal investment in her academic work, and she might finally be able to enact the knowledge she has within her. Though these passages embrace the notion of accessing success through educational discourses and situations, they also present themselves as knowledgeable discoveries and observations *despite* the discourses of school. In other words, Rosie and Tara already know something they only now feel "allowed to write about for someone else's interest."

| **Historicizing Opening I–Continuity** | **Retrospective I–Re-viewing the past from present stability** | **Definitional–Situating the self within other discourses** |
|---|---|---|
| *-Over the many years in which I have attended school . . .* (Tina)<br><br>*-It all started one day . . .* (Chas)<br><br>*-I have always enjoyed writing research papers . . .* (Ira)<br><br>*-In the past I've dreaded writing any sort of paper . . .* (Alison)<br><br>*-Ever since I was a little boy I've always contemplated about things . . . .*(Mike)<br><br>*-I have always been a thinker but not much of a writer . . .* (Martin) | *-I have been alive for twenty-one years. Almost all of these years have been spent in some type of education . . . . As my education progressed, so did my writing.* (Sheryl)<br><br>*-To the best of my knowledge my writing and thinking skills are quite limited . . . .I think these skills may help me greatly in my future here at college.* (Max)<br><br>*-Being a sophomore in college, I have had to learn many things about myself . . . .I learned very quickly that once I was in college that I had to take little tasks, such as writing and thinking, more seriously.* (Cyndi)<br><br>*-In my short existence and shorter time at school I have had many opportunities to grow as a writer and a thinker . . . . [E]ach one taught me something about life and how I should go about living it.* (Mitch) | *- . . . Technically I am a transfer student into University Division and so I was put on probation because I didn't have enough transfer credits to put me where I needed to be in terms of University Standards.* (Diane)<br><br>*-As scientists are finding out more and more about people just by the breakdown of their genetic map, it is safe to say that it is 'in my genes' to have a writing and thinking tendency.* (Rosie)<br><br>*-A learning history is what a person has learned, and how a person has learned in the past . . . .In this paper I am going to tell about my learning history.* (Anne)<br><br>*-A learning history seems to me to be a summary of the education that I have received prior to this point in my life. I do not feel that a learning history only consists of education that has been attained in a school.* (Melissa) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Historicizing Opening II-Change**<br><br>*-As a high school student school had no significant value to me . . . .After working for a year and a half I realized I had no future I then became interested in a career in Physical Therapy . . .* .(Devon) | **Retrospective II-Reviewing the 'stability' of the past to Re-view the present**<br><br>*-The history of my* [sic] *is unfortunately not very good. I was messed up from the start. I am not much of a reader and that has hurt my writing history.* (Doug) | *-Speaking about the history of my mind is an interesting turn from the normal inquiries that I've been allowed to write about for someone else's interest.* (Tara) |

**Figure 2.**

In addition to opening up paths of resistance for these authors, these renderings in turn are an offer for potential readers of these narratives (the most immediate audience being the teacher who has assigned the task) to refigure in terms of their own lives and own literacies, so that teachers and students can find space for authentic conversation about the work of the student and the expectations of the teacher in terms of real world considerations.

For the student-writers of my class, the most immediate and obvious differences offered for readerly refiguration come in the structural and typographic aspects of their first submitted essays. Only three of the seventeen students (17.6%) used a five-paragraph structure, as compared to the near uniformity of the five paragraph mode in the narratives from the prior prompt. The difference is far from trivial given the constraints of their situation and their struggle with the academic discourses. In these essays a range of paragraphing allowed students to configure their writing and thinking histories (see Figure 3) to suit their rhetorical needs.

| **Single Paragraph Responses (11.8%; n=2)** | **Two, Three, and Four Paragraph Reponses (35.3%; n=6)** | **Five Paragraph Essays (17.6%; n=3)** | **More than Five Paragraph essays (35.3%; n=6)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| -1 page, includes brief examples of topic<br>-3 pages, includes many episodes or sustained examples of topic | -2 paragraphs–'thinker' paragraph and 'writer' paragraph (very short) (2)<br>-3 paragraphs–final paragraph is shorter than other two, summative (3)<br>-4 paragraphs–(1 page)–very short responses, with brief examples (1) | | |

**Figure 3.**

The second and more important type of rhetorical choice students deployed was in the nature of opening paragraphs and opening sentences. Again, when compared to the prior responses which elicited only four types of closed, generic response, these openings begin different trajectories (see Figure 2). Each type suggests a particular literacy *habitus* (see Bourdieu 1993), and each helps us to see the task itself from the perspective of the student's seat (Comber 2000) and to recognize the work that goes on there.

Part of the immediate 'recognition work' for me and my students took place after the Preliminary Learning History in the bi-weekly one-on-one conferences we had about their academic

work and career goals. Quite literally, these narratives opened up a semester long conversation between me and my students about their academic lives. Although I'd like to think that these discussions had some profound impact on students and that they approached the status of "authentic conversations," I am mindful that they were also *required* meetings and so carried with them an artificial or performative quality (similar to the rhetoric of the first set of learning narratives) in which students and I went through the gestures of a therapeutic conversation about life goals and trajectories. Some of this rhetoric was perhaps a residual effect of one of the texts required by the program coordinator (and about which I was ambivalent), Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* (2005[1997]). Despite the wide popularity of this book[10] and its earnest appeal to live purposefully, it seemed at times, and especially in light of the students' very real concerns about their own careers and academic progress, to offer something of an ironic echo to Polonius' "few precepts" to Laertes in *Hamlet* (1.3.62), which literally loomed high above our one-on-one conversations, inscribed on the wall in solemn script. Such rhetoric, offered as received wisdom and without context (i.e. attributed authoritatively to 'Shakespeare' rather than to the slightly out-of-touch character who utters them), underscores the emptiness of such pronouncements: *Give thy thoughts no tongue . . .; neither a borrower nor lender be; the apparel oft proclaims the man; to thine own self be true* (1.3. 63-82). How are twenty-first century students invited to recognize themselves or their situations in these conflicting clichés? A contemporary gloss of the lines might read: *Keep your mouth shut; hold tight to your money; dress for success; and look out for Number One.* And yet, in spite of my reservations about the "authenticity" of the conversations and my critical interrogation of the environment in which we performed them, I believe that students in their "recognition work" began to re-configure the options disclosed by and opened up to critical reflection within their learning narratives. Inverting Polonius, they were "giving tongue" to their thoughts and as Gee (2005)

describes, making "visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing" (29).

Gee comes by the language of recognition and configuration from Ricouer (1984) and his work on time and narrative. But what Gee terms "recognition" occludes somewhat the hermeneutic process of recognition and confrontation that Ricouer locates in the process of "refiguration." Like the reproduction of "at-risk" genres, refiguration is a form of mimesis, and the student writing in response to both prompts is offered in part as a mirror to the academic struggles and intellectual history of the students. But when these representations become sites and products of "authentic conversation" (see Gadamer), students and teacher encounter each other and texts on their own terms. Without a sense of real invitation, that is, a sense that the prompt will in fact allow the writer to share something unexpected, however, the writing simply imitates the conventional genres of student failure and success at the capricious hands of teachers. Students continued to pursue this process of making themselves seen and heard, however, through the peer review process they applied to each of their subsequent writings, in which multiple readers responded to writer-posed questions about the pieces. In these marginal and extra-textual conversations, students began to extend Tara's discovery about writing for "someone else's interest" and recognize themselves and their peers as the ones for whom they were writing.

For instance, for the first formal assignment following the learning histories, I asked students to write a brief essay on the relationship between writing and thinking. Again, I attempted to allow for open form responses. I distributed this prompt in class and by email:

> Review what you wrote as your history of yourself as a writer and as a thinker. Using your experiences and observations there as a starting point, consider the logic that underlies the relationship between writing and thinking. In

> 1-2 pages write an essay that examines what links or differentiates writing and thinking.

Students maintained the variety of structures, opting again for fewer paragraphs. But the content began to speak back to me and to their situation. Cyndi sought to explain the difficulty of confronting ideas and opinions different from one's own, rhetorically trying to balance a felt need as 'student' to give the teacher what he's asking for and a stronger desire as 'Cyndi' to decline the invitation to joining this particular academic discourse.

> When sitting in a class at a college or university, the students need to keep an open mind. By this I mean that, the student [h]as to try to understand what point the professor is trying to make. This is a very difficult way of thinking. Everyone has their own beliefs about certain issues and to try to see the other side of an issue is very hard. The students are asking themselves how the professor can believe something and some students will think about the issue more and try to see it from another standpoint. It is hard in college to let down the wall that we are comfortable with and try to see something from another standpoint.

Simultaneously self-reflective and resistant to the task of thinking about writing and thinking, Cyndi's response calls immediate attention to the professor's authoritative role in student-teacher interactions: professors seem to demand of students an acceptance of discomfort and difficulty. She finishes her essay with a final observation and appeal about thinking and writing; students would prefer not to be discommoded.

> There are people out there who are very open-minded and can write about just about anything. They find it easy to communicate their views with others and enjoy doing so. Then there are people who are stuck in the routine of

> thinking and writing and find it harder in college to adjust to the new way that the professor may present. *I am like the people stuck in their old habits. I have found what is comfortable for me as far as thinking and writing goes and I would rather stay in that area than try to figure out what the professor wants me to think about an issue. . . . Since there are so many views on each issue at hand, we should be able to feel satisfied with what we have written.* [emphasis added]

Cyndi's was by no means the only essay indicating an entrenchment or retreat after the first weeks of the course, but hers nicely embodies the dilemma of engaging multiple voices and perspectives in a high stakes situation. After several observations about what the general state of affairs is for students and professors, she positions herself in a somewhat unlikely role, the one who wants to stay put and operate as before. In fact, if the culture of open-mindedness and questioning opinions is to be taken seriously, Cyndi suggests, why shouldn't her perspective, even if it differs from the one in authority, have equal value.

Whereas I disagree with Cyndi's particular assessment of the situation (and sought in my response to challenge her to think further about her observations), she was quite clearly trying to write her way out of having to come up against the more complex discourses of *academic* culture. Despite herself (and in spite of the conclusions I might hope she would arrive at), she was in fact using writing to help think about and to critique Discourse. This realization on my part led me to open the class to more regular student input about how and what we decided the assignments about the culture of college should be. I administered midterm evaluations to both sections and used the responses to redesign the schedule and emphasis of the assignments. An email to the class later in the semester specifically signaled these changes in response to student requests and suggestions:

> In order to accommodate two of your requests from the midterm evaluations–your desire for more outside the

> classroom and group activity as well as to meet your wishes to return to the issue around which the course is structured (namely, the culture of college)–I am proposing that you work in research pairs to locate, analyze, and promote (or change) ideas or images of THE culture of college here at the university.

Several students, including Cyndi, opted to work collaboratively on the final paper, and she and her partner who was in the same major program researched a business model, product design, and proposed a marketing campaign for apparel targeted at the twenty-first century college student. Having found a partner with whom to share her writing voice, Cyndi finally managed to achieve recognition from me and her class peers (who were also involved in assessing the presentation of the project). In pursuing their career projects, other students interviewed local store managers, pharmacists, reporters from international wire services, studio-managers, and even clergy to make concrete the real world expectations of their desired careers.

This expanded notion of literacy work helps situate the earlier practice of writing a history of writing and thinking within an understanding of shared and social purposes. Rather than looking at transfer or take-up of discrete literacies to identify critical stances by students, we can see that students are involved in a much more difficult process of negotiation. They are articulating incipient discourses of self over against discourses of schooling, and they are doing so with the rhetorical tools of their social lives and the academic world. For instance, when the peer instructor for one of the sections invited the students to "involve themselves in their own detachment" (inspired by his reading of *Tuesdays with Morrie*), he led us out of the high-tech classroom in the School of Education and on a walk across campus to the dining commons near the library. Along the way we became observers of the world around us and recorded what we saw: the carefully landscaped paths and the "river" that trickled through campus, the rough-cut limestone façades of the buildings, and the donor

nameplates tacked to benches, buildings, even trees, all marking off their environment.

Ending up at a long dining table below the lines from Polonius, we looked around at the murals depicting the university's past and considered where we might fit in this pictorial history. The students offered some resistance to the script of success framed by the Albom book and the discourse of academic achievement, however. They began to ask about the piling up of clichés in Polonius' speech; one student asked why we only had the attribution to Shakespeare and not to the speaker; another wondered about tone–was this meant to be taken ironically? Or literally?; others wondered whose stories were left *out* by the murals. For instance, women and ethnic minorities are absent from the historical murals depicting academic and scholarly achievement but not from the more recent depictions of athletic or social scenes of college life. Those more recent scenes, in mural on the wall opposite Polonius' speech, however, significantly lacked images of academic or scholarly achievement. Students asked why they were left out of these portrayals and what that disappearance suggested to them about the institutional story of success that they had been grappling with personally.

In these interrogations, students moved from being passive receivers of pre-determined wisdom to becoming critical thinkers. They were beginning to effect a kind of "syncretized literacy" (Gregory and Williams 2000), which recognizes that "learners are not entrapped within any single early . . . literacy practice" (13), but can continually fashion new forms of literacy to meet real-life situations. In fact, as Barton and Hamilton (2000) observe, "people use literacy to make changes in their lives; literacy changes people and people find themselves in the contemporary world of changing literacy practices"(14). They do so by transforming the "resources" of literacy, including "the time and even the space available for literacy activities" (Barton and Hamilton 192). So, they find themselves *as themselves*, as people explained by, placed in, and empowered by their literacy practices.

## Charting New Trajectories

I want to resist here the script of the happy ending and the self-congratulatory pose of the teacher-hero narrative–of replacing one script with another–and instead point to some of the openings students pursued on their own. The first type of retrospective and the second type of historicizing opening of the learning histories both suggest student-control over the text, and rhetorically they indicate student-control over the student's own life history. Whether these scripts become enacted and embodied as the student's own *habitus* remains to be seen, for if students are to take up residence in academic discourse they need time and space–certainly more than a single semester course might offer–to practice the forms of utterance that will become their own. But what is already evident in these openings and in the subsequent comments from students when they were peer reviewers of later papers is a recognition by students that any start must come out of the student's own interest in her life and writing. On a later essay in which students described their best and worst job experiences (and which was to build toward the career exploration project) one student asked his peer reviewers to let him know if he had supported his thesis well, a common concern of student writers. The responses of the two peer reviewers is worth considering for the way in which they move beyond this question of form to push the writer to consider the form of life he wants to enter after college. Engaging the writer's question at both a personal and formal level, the first reviewer responds to the author, and the second reader comments on the first and makes suggestions to the author, not for the paper but for life.

> **Author:** Do I support my thesis well?
> **Reader 1:** Yes, I am very clear on what you like and dislike. I think you support it well with the anecdotes given. What would you look for or want in future career? Would you settle for dislikes in a career or look for something that isn't your first choice but less disadvantages?

**Reader 2:** I like her questions. I don't know you, personally, but I hope you wouldn't settle for anything. What do you want in a job exactly? (10/3/2000)

That interest itself is fostered by knowledge of writing, for 'writing' is something each of these students has had experience with. But their histories are continually being written, and how they directly inform later student practice after my class would have to be the focus of further study. Among the definitional openings are the excerpts from Tara and Melissa, which begin not only to demonstrate facility with academic discourses but also to display command over one's own life. Melissa's demurral–"I do not feel that a learning history only consists of education that has been attained in a school"–is also the start of resistance, specifically to the subject line of the assignment (Preliminary Learning History), but more generally and perhaps more productively to the notion that learning can or should be confined to the discourses and structures of schooling. Subtly, but purposefully, Melissa takes us outside the walls of the school to demonstrate how she has come to think, write, and know her own experience. Again, we would need further analysis of how such opening positions shape and frame student self-perspectives and academic performances in ways that support their critical engagement in the world. But what we can see is that using writing as inquiry is certainly a promising place to start.

In the analysis of student narratives from two separate prompts, it is clear that invitations for self-disclosure and self-analysis from students offer a mixed bag of student profiles and histories. The responses the students give do not necessarily reveal what teachers may think they want them to reveal. What is also suggested by these two instances is that in the case of classroom invitations to writing, in one sense 'you get what you ask for,' or at least, 'you get *how* you ask for.' That is, the shape of the question(s) we ask already shows traces of the possible range of responses students believe are available or expected. It is important to know, then, what exactly is being asked for and how

it is being asked. I have looked only at the openings for the second set of samples here. But I have tried to follow some of the traces those openings left for my students and me. Whether such openings can or should foreshadow anything about long-term student writing achievement and academic success more generally is a question for other researchers. Even in this abbreviated form here, however, they still might offer a unique time and place to sideshadow (Morson 1994) the literacy practices of students and teachers by casting light on the way in which writing and thinking are situated in academic contexts. By looking at student writing in these ways we can begin to see what students themselves are offering back to us in resistance, confrontation, and conversation, and see in what is created here by students, a set of texts that *they* can return to. Not to at least attempt to open our invitations for writing and thinking is to keep the power of literacy and academic discourse to ourselves and closed off from students' own needs and purposes. With the narratives of their lives as a point of opening–not as a closed script in which they tacitly or explicitly agree to take up the role we've already prescribed for their remediation–they can continue in a recursive way to find meaning in the meeting between their words and the world.

**Notes**

[1] All student names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

[2] In two separate versions of the learning history, this sentence did not change.

[3] A preliminary set of essays, discussed below, comes from a sample of 13 separate student writers.

[4] The term "at-risk" is itself problematic (see Gregory & Williams, 2000), and it was not a phrase I used with my students. I use it here in a qualified sense, however, to indicate the personal and academic context for this cohort, for "at-risk" was the designation most commonly used by the ASC staff to refer to probation students, a pre-existing utterance freighted with the assumptions of others about the students' lives and past academic experiences.

[5] Other courses offered by the ASC followed a less rigid curriculum, particularly when they were not tied to the academic standing of the student. At the time of the study, I had made a significant career change in order to pursue more closely my interest in pedagogy and the links between literary studies and literacy. I received my PhD in American Literature in 1999 and had been a visiting professor for two years.

[6] Polonius's amalgam of fatherly directives to Laertes in Act 1, Scene 3–with several curious but notable omissions, to be discussed below.

[7] See Aronowitz (2000) and Noll (1998) for two recent discussions of the tensions inherent in tuition-driven enrollment patterns and student achievement expectations in higher education at state universities.

[8] The ASC was conducting a long-term study of student attitudes, behaviors, and achievement using video-taped interviews and the student learning narratives. Instructors were requested to solicit and collect these narratives as part of their courses. The essay samples establishing the pre-existing context of the invitation, which I sought to alter, were from this long-term study.

[9] Except for the section taught by the program coordinator, the instructors of the other sections of the "College Culture" were graduate students from a range of academic departments, and they had not taught a college level writing course before, though some had taught at the college level in other content areas. These other instructors of "College Culture" did grade their student essays, though their primary focus in evaluation was putatively not on the quality of the writing itself but on the content of the student's ideas expressed through the writing.

[10] It continues almost ten years after its publication in hardback to rank in the top ten of the New York Times Bestseller List (Nonfiction, Paperback).

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