

STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING CLASSROOM

by

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# STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING CLASSROOM

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The low success rate of students in community college developmental education classes has caused not only institutions and their instructors but also those outside of the classroom to search for alternative programs and delivery methods to improve student outcomes. As college completion rates become increasingly tied to state funding, many community colleges are re-thinking their programs, considering acceleration of coursework, learning communities, and supplemental instruction as replacements for the traditional developmental sequence. While these programs have shown success in some community colleges, much of the research is quantitative in nature and based on completion rates. The purpose of this study is to lend an instructor's and students' voices to the conversation on developmental education. The study focuses on one community college developmental writing classroom for one term. Through student stories, the study reveals community college students' challenges and strengths, adding to the understanding of what causes some students to succeed while others fail. The study is a narrative inquiry, with data drawn from field notes, interviews, student writing, and instructor journal writing. Chapters include stories of racial and social tension in the classroom, challenges of overcoming previous negative schooling experiences, resistance to classroom procedures and requirements, difficulties in shifting from refugee camp

schooling to college expectations, and student determination despite overwhelming challenges. The student stories reveal a changing population in one suburban Midwestern community college and help provide a context for conversations about curriculum and program revisions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

High school, I just did what I had to do, took shop classes. When I went to school, I was not thinking about getting no office job. We took shotguns to school and went hunting for lunch. There were no computers in high school. After school, we hung out at Max's Bowling, played pool. When my dad asked what I was going to do after graduation, I said, "Kick back and do what I'm doing now." He said, "Go to school or get the hell out of here." He'd already had my bags packed with my brothers on their way to drive me to Texas to work for their refrigeration company. Got to see the country, setting up refrigerators in grocery stores. Came back, been doing plumbing, odd jobs. Heard I could get \$42 an hour with the pipeline coming through, but I need a certificate. (Interview with Randy, March, 2012)

At 45 years old, Randy began Hall Community College<sup>1</sup> on a Pell Grant, hoping to get a welding degree to improve his income. His test scores required him to take the first developmental levels of writing and math, Language Skills and Math Fundamentals. Since he had little computer experience, his advisor enrolled him in Computer Literacy as well. He was on the waiting list for the welding program, but he had to pass his developmental classes, classes meant to prepare him for college-level courses, before he

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<sup>1</sup> All names, including the name of the institution, city, and participants, have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.

could begin his program. Although he was highly motivated to do well, he struggled in each class and finished the term with 3 F's.

I begin with Randy's story since, unfortunately, his story is not an uncommon one in many community colleges. Students return to college with high hopes, are placed into pre-college general courses, and find themselves ill-prepared, not just in terms of skills but mentally and socially as well. Randy had no computer at home. The only person he knew who had a computer was his brother, and his brother used it only for its meat sensor program. Essentially, the computer was used as "a big thermometer," as Randy put it. It had no printer or internet connection. While Randy enjoyed his teachers, he told me it was difficult going to class: "Usually I'm the one calling the shots." He did not understand his fellow students, whom he felt were full of disrespect for school and the teachers. Still, he felt overwhelmed by the mental shifts of going from math to English to computers and then to his construction work.

Not long ago, Randy might have simply been labeled "not college material." He himself had not considered going to college, but due to economic shifts, more and more people who had never considered college are now enrolling. How can we make the transition to college smoother for them? Randy's story is important to consider as institutions and educators work to understand the poor success rate of students in developmental classes. As colleges like Hall Community College begins revising their developmental programs, it seems that the first inclination for administrators is to look to other colleges with statistically successful programs. Stories such as Randy's, however, can reveal local issues and challenges and strengths specific to an institution. Such stories

can be used as resources for those working on curriculum revisions and on adding support services.

I have taught college writing classes for 22 years, the past 11 focusing on developmental writing. However, for many years, I realize now that I was distant from my students. I was passionate about literature and writing, but I did not know my students. During my 1-week graduate school “boot camp” that taught me how to teach writing, a graduate student demonstrated to us how to teach critical analysis to our students. The graduate student had told us that the department had traditionally spent too much time on narrative writing and that to better prepare our students for future scholarly work, we should shift our focus to analysis. I dutifully imitated this assignment in my classes. My first students, like all of the other students of graduate students who went to “boot camp” that year, wrote several papers that focused on analyzing the purpose, evidence, tone, structure, author, and audience of formal essays. As I moved past graduate school, I adjusted to the syllabi requirements of the places where I taught, but early on, I still considered these analytical papers an important part of any writing course. No matter where I went, I assumed my goal as a writing teacher was to prepare students for advanced college writing.

Before I came to Hall Community College, I usually had traditional-aged students who came from similar backgrounds. If they had not, I am afraid I might not have noticed. Most students, though, were working toward 4-year degrees that would require a wide range of academic courses that would likely center around writing. One class early in my experience at Hall, though, stuck with me. I was teaching a class that was primarily

welding students. As I had for several terms, I began with an essay called “No More Pep Rallies” by Kralovec. In it, Kralovec argued for privatization of extra-curricular activities so that schools could focus more on academics. Usually, students would write passionate responses to the essay, arguing how important football, band, or debate had been to their high school lives. However, in this class, everyone was quiet.

“Ma’am, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I been incarcerated since 8<sup>th</sup> grade,” one man told me.

The class laughed.

I tried to ask other students what sorts of activities had been important to them in high school, but they just shook their heads.

Since they would not speak, I had them write. One of them wrote, “I’m not in high school now. I don’t intend on ever going to high school again. Why is this the 4<sup>th</sup> time I’ve had to read this essay?”

As I read the response, it struck me as rude, and I talked to him the next class about his tone. He apologized. Then I started to talk to the students individually, and I learned that many of them did not want to think about high school. It had not been a pleasant time in their lives, full of football games and school dances. Some of them had dropped out early, either due to having to work to support their families, substance abuse, or failing classes. Those who stayed spent much of their days in shop classes. To them, regular classes were torture. All they wanted to do was build something, use their hands for “real work.”

I realized, too, that the writing class as I had planned it would be just as painful as the classes they had tried to avoid in high school. I adjusted, building on what they already knew and what interested them. In the end, it turned out to be a productive class, and the students continued to keep me updated about how they were doing whenever I would see them in the hallway after the term had ended. Still, that class haunted me, and I worked to re-think how I approached my classes.

I returned to graduate school in part to search for ways to improve my classes and in part simply because I had always loved school. My love for school is just one way in which my story is different from my students' stories. At school, I feel at home. For students like Randy, though, it is not much different than prison: "The difference between prison and school—well, at least in school, you can walk right on out that door" (Interview with Randy, March, 2012).

Students are resources that can be used to inform curriculum decisions as well as larger program-level discussions. For this study, I have completed a narrative inquiry, "a method of inquiry as well as a means of personal, professional development" (Conle, 2001, p. 22). I was inspired to learn more about my students after realizing we had less in common than I had once thought. While I began my study of my students because I cared particularly about my students and how I could improve their chances for college success, I know that I am not alone in my struggles to create a classroom that reaches all students who want to learn. For beginning teachers, my stories give them a glimpse of the types of students they may encounter in their classrooms. For those searching for ways to improve

developmental education, the stories provide an understanding of student struggles and strengths that goes beyond success rate charts.

### **The Attack on Developmental Education**

Developmental education (also called “remedial,” “foundational,” “transitional,” or “college preparatory”) has been called the “bridge to nowhere,” (Complete College America, 2011) and “a dysfunctional system,” (Vedder, 2012) due to its low success rate. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2012) has donated millions of dollars to the problem of developmental education through their funding of the Developmental Education Initiative, which has partnered with community colleges to push for innovations in teaching. Developmental courses are classes designed to help students prepare for college-level coursework; such courses bear credit for financial aid and GPA purposes, but do not count for degree or transfer credit. Although developmental education is not new, the growing number of students testing into developmental coursework, along with the low success rate, has made the problem a national rather than institutional problem. According to Complete College America (2011), nearly 4 in 10 developmental students do not complete their developmental coursework. Across the nation, community colleges are experimenting with new program structures and new support systems to help solve the problem. While many of the ideas, such as accelerating coursework, learning communities, and supplemental instruction (Bailey & Cho, 2010), show promise, more research that looks closely at the students’ backgrounds and experiences in the transition to college work is needed to help inform the re-thinking of developmental programs and courses. Connelly & Clandinin (1988) have argued: “We

believe that curriculum development and curriculum planning are fundamentally questions of teacher thinking and teacher doing” (p. 4). More research that values teacher knowledge needs to be conducted, especially given that the teacher thinking and teacher doing that have contributed to the current developmental education curriculum seem to be at odds with student needs and expectations of the curriculum.

### **Terminology**

When describing developmental writing, several different terms have been used. “Remedial” is the term government officials still use, but the term’s negative connotations cause most colleges to use other terms. In universities, developmental writing courses have been called “Basic Writing,” but in a university, developmental writing may consist of just one course called Basic Writing. The issues are far different from ones community colleges face, where up to four levels below college composition may be offered. As the term “developmental” became synonymous with “remedial,” many colleges have renamed their programs “college prep” or “foundational.” Since journals, organizations, and graduate institutions still use the term “developmental,” however, this is the term I will use to discuss college courses that bear credit for financial aid and GPA purposes, but do not carry institutional or transfer credit.

### **The Students**

Who are the students who place into developmental writing courses? Those who place into the higher level developmental courses may simply be returning adults who tested poorly after a long absence from school or students who did not take school seriously in high school but are now motivated to finish college and begin a career. At the

beginning levels, however, students are most likely ones who had some major interruption to their schooling. Some students come from poor or working class backgrounds and may have moved so much that they were always behind. When they were in high school, they might have worked rather than taken the college-preparatory path. At the time they were in school, they might not have considered going to college, but now that they are older, they want to be an example for their children and give their children a better life than they had. Others may not speak English as their first language, and in many colleges like Hall Community College, they are placed alongside everyone else who scores poorly on the entrance exams. Among non-native speakers in a developmental classroom will be students who were doctors or other professionals in their own countries along with students who grew up in refugee camps and had very little formal schooling. Some may come from backgrounds where non-standard English was the norm. Many students with learning disabilities place into developmental coursework, often based on the one-size-fits-all testing that is offered. In one of my classes a few years ago, I realized that nearly every student I had had come from a traumatic background, whether it be from parental or domestic abuse, foster care, war, alcohol or drug abuse, or prison. Unlike the traditional college student many college instructors expect, none of these students had spent twelve years of their schooling preparing for college. Many were lucky that someone pulled them out of their predicament, and they were able to get GEDs. Students who sit in a developmental classroom may be highly motivated to change their life circumstances, but the transition from a life outside the classroom to one inside the classroom is often overwhelming. Students may bring a wealth of experience and knowledge, but they often do not have the “cultural capital”--

social experiences that shape a person's resources (Bourdieu, 1986)--that is often expected of college students.

The students focused on in the study that follows represent the diversity described above. As a Karen refugee in Thailand, Eh Doh received a combination of Thai and Karen camp schooling in the Mae La Refugee camp. Before coming to the United States, he had never seen a computer. James never thought of himself as a "school person," but at 40, is now back in school due to a severe injury that prevents him from manual labor. Jasmine, labeled "SPED" and told by her peers that she would never work more than a minimum-wage job, is now in school to prove wrong those who doubted her abilities. With little money and no support from his family, Ethan, too, is trying to prove to others that he can make something of himself. Aniyah, an African American woman overwhelmed with the responsibilities of raising 3 children, 2 of whom have major medical issues, was working toward a new career to better support her children. Only a couple students in the class had a college-preparatory schooling experience, and even they had their own private struggles.

While middle-class children have spent much of their lives being groomed for college through advanced coursework and an array of outside athletic and cultural activities, poor and working-class children have not had the same opportunities (Lareau, 2003). Lareau (2003) calls the middle-class efforts to prepare their children for college and future success "concerted cultivation." From a young age, middle-class children are placed in organized sports, music, and enrichment activities so that many have little time to play freely. In poor and working-class families, economic issues make such activities

quite difficult, if not impossible. To Lareau (2003), there were definite advantages to the more relaxed “accomplishment of natural growth” practiced by most poor and working-class families. Families were not as harried as the middle-class families she studied. Still, students who have never been exposed to some of the cultural activities middle-class families have as part of their daily lives often have a difficult time in the transition to college, whose courses are usually taught by members of the white middle-class.

### **Challenges in Developmental Writing**

Despite the fact that developmental education courses were intended to support students deemed lacking the academic and language skills needed to succeed in college, the success rate in developmental coursework is very low. It is not unusual for a few students to stop coming after a week of classes and for a class to end with only half of a class. Nationally, less than 25 percent of students who enroll in developmental education courses will graduate within eight years (Bailey & Cho, 2010). Researchers trying to solve the problem look at institutional issues, such as how departments should be divided (“best practice,” for example, says that developmental education should be its own department and not housed in English or Math). Program-level changes are also studied, such as the effect of the number of developmental courses a student should have before beginning college-level work. Many articles in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and *The Journal of Developmental Education* are practitioner-based, giving classroom advice for teaching particular topics. University scholars often argue that the classes must go beyond basic skills and introduce students to critical thinking.

While many articles acknowledge the diversity and challenges of a developmental writing classroom, few take a close look at what is actually happening in the classroom (Grubb, Boner, Parker, Gabriner, & Wilson, 2011). Developmental programs are on the periphery of college campuses, ignored as not the real mission of any college. The students are ignored as well. Many quietly drop out, with little acknowledgement that they were ever there. Recent research focusing on the success rates of accelerated developmental programs often focuses on students who are very close to college-ready. Those at the bottom remain at the bottom. No one seems particularly interested in the outliers.

In the classroom itself, though, there is often a disconnect between the students and the instructor, one that the instructor may not be fully aware exists. Hull & Rose (1990) illustrated this “mismatch” in an analysis of a student’s reading of the poem that varies from a more “traditional” reading. While the article shed light on one aspect of the student-teacher mismatch, the student studied in the analysis was very interested in doing well. In many situations, though, a major challenge is working with students who want to do anything but read and write. In my own experience, I loved every minute of college, and as a teacher, I would love to draw students into this world I love. As Liston (2004) has written, education can be “an invitation to receive part of the human inheritance, to participate in some strand of the human conversation, to become educated” (p. 472). However, to ever get to this point, instructors need to first understand and value their students’ experiences and backgrounds. Before reading studies of working-class views (and paying attention to them myself in my own classrooms), it had not occurred to me

that many people did not value the type of education most English teachers would like to offer.

Aside from my one week “boot camp” for graduate teaching assistants, I have never had formal teacher training in order to become a teacher. I taught the way I had been taught. My training had been “the apprenticeship of observation,” many years of observing teachers as a student, but not fully understanding why teachers taught as they did or that there could be other methods (Lortie, 1975). I did not consider that my experience of education had been in the “best” K-12 public schools my father could find based on realtor recommendations and that later my experience of college would be at private liberal arts schools with primarily white, middle-class and upper-middle-class students. My college professors fostered my love of literature through class discussions and the requirement of written responses. Once I began teaching, I imagined that my students would need to write analytical papers for their English, history, sociology, and philosophy classes. In my composition classes, I hoped to prepare my students for the scholarly world I hoped they would enter.

Gorman’s (1998) study of social class and parental attitudes toward education gave me a clearer picture of the contrast in values. The voices of the working-class participants are particularly telling:

Still today, I hold resentment for [people like this]. I call them ‘suits.’ I think they look down on me because I work with my hands and not sit behind a desk. I think this country would be in bad shape if everybody wanted to sit behind a desk.” (Gorman, 1998, p. 20)

Likewise, hooks (2000) described the conflict she faced with her working-class family when she returned home from college:

Like many working-class parents, my folks were often wary of the new ideas I brought into their lives from ideas learned at school or books. They were afraid these fancy ideas like the fancy schools I wanted to attend would ruin me for living in the real world. (p. 143)

Many of the students at Hall Community College come to become trained to become welders, automotive technicians, and chefs. In my area, we may also have students who come for agriculture degrees. For those who want nothing more than to work with their hands, the shift to the academic world is difficult on many levels. Students in developmental classrooms often have come from the world of work—laboring in the factories, under cars, and in the fields—this is the type of work that they value. If asked directly, many would not consider business or academic work “real work.” Instructors often think of themselves as training students for the world of work, but many students are actually coming from ten or more years in the working world. The transition they are making is not necessarily from school to work but from work to school. They are comfortable with hard work, but not the type of work instructors ask of them. Without a clear understanding of the conflicting meanings of “work” between instructors and students, instructors may think of their students as lazy or incapable of the work required of them.

Developmental writing students face challenges in simply finding the motivation to stay in school. However, those who do remain and try to learn what we have to offer

also find linguistic challenges, challenges that go beyond the ability to memorize Standard American English forms. I do not know how many times I have heard a student say, “That don’t sound right!” in disbelief when presented with a Standard English form. As Schleppegrell (2004) wrote:

Learning to use language in ways that meet the school’s expectations for advanced literacy tasks is a challenge for all students, but it is especially difficult for those who have little opportunity for exposure to and use of such language outside of school. (p. 6)

Students who grew up with non-standard dialects are required to learn Standard American English for their future success in academic courses, but those who are successful with this linguistic shift can often alienate themselves from their own families and friends. Many of my students have talked about their families making fun of them for their suddenly “proper” English. Gorman (1998) wrote that working-class respondents “voiced their resentment at attempts by middle-class college graduates to showcase their language skills” (p. 25). For example, one participant said, “My neighbors, they both went to college, talking to them, no matter how old I get, I feel like an awkward little teenager stumbling about [not] knowing what I’m talking about” (p. 25).

Language is closely tied to our identity, but writing teachers usually begin with the assumption that students must learn how to write for an academic audience. While the NCTE wrote a statement confirming “students’ right to their own language” in 1972, in practice, most instructors expect students to write in Standard American English. Developmental texts, such as the one I use for Beginning Writing, open with an

explanation of the importance of learning to write: "...academic writing needs to be grammatically correct. You can't assume that your readers will be willing to tolerate (or ignore) errors you might make in grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, or mechanics" (Kirsznner & Mandell, 2012, p. 2). While some developmental texts do appeal to some of what students already know, most of the texts are devoted to teaching "correct" writing. Similarly, Anker's (2010) developmental text tells students:

In college, at work, and in everyday life, when you are speaking or writing to someone in authority for a serious purpose, use formal English.

Otherwise, you will not achieve your purpose, whether that is to pass a course, to get and keep a good job, or to solve a personal problem (like being billed on your credit card for a purchase you did not make or reporting a landlord who does not turn on your heat). (p. 38)

After a quick introduction, the typical developmental writing textbook is a workbook of writing process work and grammar exercises. Readings may or may not be included in such books, but when they are included, they are included as examples of rhetorical forms. Very few texts are thematically arranged, and even fewer are geared toward the non-traditional student that is in our classes.

Instructors of developmental writing often are part of the migratory academic culture that Brooke (2003) described. In describing his arrival to Nebraska, Brooke (2003) wrote: "I brought, for instance, course plans for first-year composition that would require students to focus on the construction of reasoned arguments that would hold up in any humanities department in any university in our country" (p. 3). No matter where I

lived, I, too, taught the same curriculum, no matter whether I taught in a university in the South or a community college in the Midwest. Books that are designed for developmental writing and composition courses are necessarily generic to appeal to a wide market, but these textbooks often end up appealing to no one. While it might be educational for a student in Nebraska or South Dakota to read about the experiences of a New Yorker, when all of the readings are about people and experiences from an alien world, it often solidifies the student's resolve that he or she is an outsider in the academic world. By beginning with the local, students can see the real benefits of an education that goes beyond training. Brooke (2003) has argued:

If education in general, and writing education in particular, is to become a real force for improving the societies in which we live, then it must become more closely linked to the local, to the spheres of action and influence which most of us experience.” (pp. 4-5)

In their study of 13 California community colleges, Grubb, Boner, Parker, Gabriner, and Wilson (2011) found that in the developmental education classes they observed, a “remedial pedagogy,” with a focus on skills and drills divorced from meaning, was the predominant pedagogy. Much of this likely follows the migratory nature of those in the community college teaching profession. Very few instructors teach developmental courses exclusively, and for many instructors, the way to make ends meet is to teach part-time in several institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2007). Part-time instructors make up over half of the faculty on community college campuses (McLaughlin, 2005), and 72% of faculty teaching in developmental education do so on a part-time basis (Eney

& Davidson, 2006). As such, few instructors of developmental education are people who see teaching developmental education as a career and are completely devoted to it. In many colleges, part-time instructors do not have offices, make 1/3 of what full-time instructors make, rarely participate in faculty meetings (because they are not invited to do so), and like their full-time counterparts, have little training in classroom instruction and curriculum development (Eney & Davidson, 2006). They might teach in a variety of disciplines as well, making their focus on the one developmental writing class at one institution a low priority. Of even lower priority becomes time to complete research, which makes research such as Wilson's (2007) study of writing conferences and Tinberg and Nadeau's (2010) study of community college student and instructor writing expectations rare in the literature.

Even when instructors would like to improve the educational experience of their students, work conditions often make changes difficult. In *Horace's Compromises*, Sizer (1984) discussed how the structure of the high school system leads to overworked teachers and students going through the motions of schooling, but learning little. Even though the community college classes themselves might not be as rushed as the seven or eight class high school day, the sense in a community college is similar: students going from math to English to social studies, then to work, and often home to busy families. For students I have talked to, the shifts from writing about an essay to solving equations to learning about the brain can be jarring and are often the cause for dropping out of school. Each class has little in common with the other and even less in common with their daily work and family lives. On the quarter system, there is little time for absorption of the material in just 10 ½ weeks. For instructors who teach 4-5 classes each quarter, there is

often not enough time for reflection about the quarter before the next one begins. In schools such as mine where common syllabi and common textbooks are instituted, there is a general sense of instructors and students hoping only to make it to the end of each quarter. Such a system makes the push for learning communities and combined courses understandable, but in the end, many of the changes are surface-level. A real overhaul such as the one Sizer (1984) recommended for high schools is rare, though The New Community College in New York has developed a new vision for the community college, one in which any “remediation” necessary is woven into the curriculum, and classes are interconnected. Since the college has just begun, it remains to be seen whether other community colleges will follow in its footsteps.

### **Multicultural Education**

While the college where I teach affirms diversity and requires diversity education of all of its employees, the diversity requirement can be fulfilled by eating at an ethnic restaurant or by a quick scan of an Internet article. Some colleges make a point of infusing the local culture into the campus culture. For example, Palo Alto College in San Antonio works to promote a multicultural environment, and it is known for its high success rate in its transfer program (Trujillo & Diaz, 1999). Readers in multicultural education are full of K-12 studies, but very little is written about what happens to students from diverse backgrounds once they graduate. Those who conduct research in developmental education come from a variety of backgrounds. Early articles were written by university professors who happened to be given a basic writing course to teach. Their backgrounds were either in literature or rhetoric and composition. While some scholars

have written about student issues in the developmental writing classroom (Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991; Hull & Rose, 1990; Wilson, 2007), much of the current research is focused on administrative issues. Graduate study in developmental education can often only be found within higher education administration programs. Such an approach often focuses on program design and analyses of results.

Much of the research in multicultural education can apply well to the developmental writing classroom. A single developmental classroom is likely to have students from different age, gender, social class, ethnicity, and language backgrounds. Classroom textbooks in developmental writing and college composition have adapted to the changing population by including works written by people from diverse backgrounds. For example, the book I use for my first-level developmental writing class includes essays by African Americans and Mexican Americans, and it includes essays by people who have experienced living on welfare. However, these readings are in the back of the book and with little context around them. Much of the rest of the book consists of grammar and writing process review.

McGee Banks and Banks (1995) noted that one misconception of multicultural education is that “the integration of content about diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial groups into the mainstream curriculum is both its essence and its totality” (p. 1). An equity pedagogy, however, goes beyond such curriculum changes, offering “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate, a just, humane, and democratic society” (McGee

Banks & Banks, 1995, p. 1). Understanding the diversity of students is essential for developmental education instructors, but it is also important to go beyond mere understanding. Basic writing scholars such as Mutnick (1996) and Horner and Lu (1999) argue that the basic writing classroom should be a site of resistance to current social conditions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Like colleges across the country, Hall Community College has a low success rate among developmental students. As a developmental writing instructor, I regularly see classes lose 4 or more students in a class of 16. One quarter, I had only 3 students complete a class. A colleague once finished a class with 0 students remaining. Acceleration of coursework (combining several developmental courses into one course) has been tried for the past couple years, but with mixed results so far. While the students who move on to college-level coursework seem very prepared for the next level, these courses have not been immune to losing a large percentage of students. Like other colleges, Hall has also experimented with Learning Communities, but there were never enough interested students to make this concept work. Put simply, no matter the pedagogical approach, too many students do not complete or pass developmental coursework.

While much of the research in developmental education today is quantitative in approach (Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Smith Jagers, & Edgecombe, 2010), a qualitative approach can help shed light on an important issue in the developmental writing classroom: the mismatch between instructor background and expectations and student

background and expectations. Many developmental writing instructors come from white, middle-class backgrounds, with schooling experiences that led them to pursue graduate degrees in literature or creative writing (Kozeracki, 2005). They are often not prepared for the diversity of the developmental writing classroom, which may include students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, linguistic backgrounds, ages, and schooling experiences. Much of the transition to college writing is often about far more than an understanding of where to place commas and apostrophes.

As an instructor, I have often wondered what made one student succeed while another who seemed to have similar skills failed. How can I build a curriculum and classroom environment that will reach more students? What suggestions can I make to administrators to help improve student retention and success? The student and classroom stories that follow have helped me understand my own classrooms better. Although the stories raise difficult questions, the stories can help inform those outside the classroom or new to teaching developmental writing students of common issues developmental writing students face.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING RESEARCH

#### **The Story of Developmental Education**

Developmental education is not a new phenomenon. Colleges have accepted students who have not been academically ready for college for the past 200 years (Casazza, 1999, p. 3). In the Colonial period, colleges were “little more than secondary schools” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958, p. 238), bearing little resemblance to university work in Europe. Still, many students were ill-prepared for college work and were offered tutoring to help them succeed (Arendale, 2002, p. 16).

As colleges became more advanced, more preparatory work was necessary; many students were unprepared, and pre-collegiate academies were started in the mid-1800s (Arendale, 2002, p. 16). These preparatory academies or departments were particularly important in the West, where very few high schools had been started, and those that had been started did not adequately prepare students for college work. Often, there were more students in these preparatory classes than in “regular” college classes (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958, p. 152). At the University of Wisconsin, for example, in 1865, only 41 out of 331 students were in “regular” college classes (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958, p. 152).

However, the problems weren’t limited to the West. In 1871, Charles Eliot of Harvard criticized freshmen for “bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, [and] ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation” (qtd. in Casazza, 1999, p. 3). Because of this problem, Eliot developed a composition exam as

part of the entrance exam. In 1879, 50% failed this exam. Still, they were admitted “on condition” that they take college preparatory classes (Casazza, 1999, p. 3). By the end of the 19th century, Harvard wasn’t alone; most colleges were offering their own pre-college courses (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 255).

What were these courses? Reading was most common, but in 1909, over 350 colleges were also offering “how to study” courses (Casazza, 1999, p. 3). Again, these pre-college courses were not limited to any specific kind of college. All levels of colleges were offering courses. Even as late as 1915, 350 institutions had preparatory departments (Brubacher & Rudy, 1958, p. 238).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of people attending college was still relatively small. However, as the years progressed, more and more people began attending college. During the Great Depression, many who might not have otherwise gone to college attended college because of lack of work. After World War II, the GI Bill helped even more to attend college. More than 1 million veterans enrolled in the fall of 1946 (Casazza, 1999, p.3). During this time period, however, there were more students needing pre-college courses than there were courses. Students would often repeat courses two or three times until they passed (Monroe, 1972, p. 103).

In 1948, the Truman Report stated that “free and universal access, to education, in terms of the interest, abilities, and need of the student, must be a major goal in American education” (McCabe & Day, 1998, p. 3). However, it wasn’t until the 1960s that colleges truly felt the pressure to allow any high school graduate into their programs (Cohen &

Brawer, 1996, p. 269). Along with a greater student population came more students with academic difficulties. Shaughnessy (1977) described the shift:

For such colleges, this venture into mass education usually began abruptly, amidst the misgivings of administrators, who had to guess in the dark about the sorts of programs they ought to plan for these students they had never met, and the reluctancies of teachers, some of whom had already decided that the new students were ineducable. (p. 1)

However, community colleges and 4-year colleges alike had to begin programs to help these students. The earliest 1-year developmental programs were at Morgan State College in Maryland in 1957 and City Colleges of Chicago, Wilson Campus in 1959 (Monroe, 1972, p. 111). The Wilson program was a 1-year, non-credit program for those who were in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile or below on their aptitude tests (Monroe, 1972, p. 114). Students studied composition, reading, natural science, consumer economics, basic math; completed a vocational orientation; and took two electives (Monroe, 1972, p. 114). After finishing the program, students could go on to a regular transfer or vocational program (Monroe, 1972, p. 115). However, the program was cancelled in 1969 due to protests that it was a second-class education, particularly to its African-American students (Monroe, 1972, p. 116).

Still, developmental courses continued to be offered in most institutions. The most traditional developmental writing program was what Lalicker (2001) calls the “prerequisite model,” a model in which students would be allowed in college if they took a basic writing course before enrolling in college-level writing. The course typically

relied on grammar drills and paragraph-level writing (Lalicker, 2001). A look at developmental textbooks currently available shows that this approach is still common today.

Ideally, though, developmental education is more than just a remediation of skills. The National Association of Developmental Education (NADE) (2002) defines developmental education as:

a comprehensive process that focuses on the intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development of all students. Developmental education includes, but is not limited to, tutoring, personal/career counseling, academic advisement, and coursework. (p. 1)

Beyond the prerequisite model, colleges have tried different approaches to aid in student success. In one model, a student enrolls in the college-level writing class but is also required to enroll in additional class to supplement the work done in the college-level class (Lalicker, 2001). A similar approach is used in Baltimore community colleges and has shown promising results (Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Jagers, & Edgecombe, 2010). A model that is currently gaining popularity is acceleration of coursework, in which students who have placed in the traditionally lowest levels of writing and reading may take one course in place of 2-4 courses in the traditional sequence. Again, research has shown improved success rates for students in such courses (Hern & deWit, 2010). Still other places are ending developmental courses altogether (Goudas & Boylan, 2010). Although developmental education has had a long history, developmental programs are

currently under attack, causing institutions to re-think their programs and course offerings in order to improve success rates.

### **Basic Writing: From the University to the Community College**

Much of the literature based on developmental writing grew out of Shaughnessy's (1977) work, *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy (1977) was one of the first professors of basic writing at the City University of New York (CUNY) after the college switched to an open admissions system. "Basic Writing" was what Shaughnessy called the courses offered to university students that were courses designed to prepare students for college-level writing courses. Like "Developmental Writing" (the term preferred in most community colleges), Basic Writing courses usually bore no degree or transfer-level credit, but they would count toward GPA and financial aid purposes. Like many instructors and professors even today, Shaughnessy (1977) found that she was not prepared to teach the new population of students that came to college with the advent of the open admissions system. In order to help other teachers new to Basic Writing, Shaughnessy's work analyzed common writing errors in Basic Writing students' work. Shaughnessy (1977) wrote that her book:

assumes that programs are not the answers to the learning problems of students but that teachers are and that, indeed, good teachers create good programs, that the best programs are developed *in situ*, in response to the needs of individual student populations and as reflections of the particular histories and resources of individual colleges. (p. 6)

In this sense, Shaughnessy could be considered an early practitioner-researcher.

Shaughnessy's book focused heavily on student errors, a focus that became common in many basic writing courses. Horner and Lu (1999) critiqued this focus, viewing basic writing as a place where students and teachers might challenge the political landscape that placed students into basic writing in the first place. Likewise, Mutnick (1996) argued: "Rather than view the margin as a site of deprivation, it could become a site of resistance to oppressive conditions like high-interest loans, part-time employment, racism, class prejudice, linguistic chauvinism, and other forms of discrimination" (p. 196). Horner and Lu (1999) and Mutnick (1996) envisioned courses that invited students into the discussion about social issues, not courses that continued "drill and kill" approaches common in such courses.

In practice, though, traditional basic writing courses continued to focus on student error. Around the same time as Horner and Lu (1999) and Mutnick (1996), many university professors began arguing that basic writers should be mainstreamed, arguing that treating the developmental population differently does little to introduce new writers to academic language (McNenny, 2001). Those who taught basic writing courses at the university level focused on bringing students into the conversation—not on basic sentence-level skills (Bartholomae, 2005). However, as calls for more standards and integrity in the university system became heeded, many universities have eliminated developmental programs altogether. For example, the City University of New York (CUNY), the college that had experimented with open admissions in the 1970s and led to Shaughnessy's (1977) ground-breaking work in basic writing, ended its open admissions policy in 2000. Many state universities are also moving away from offering developmental education, referring students with low ACT or SAT scores to community

colleges (Goudas & Boylan, 2012). Because of this shift, discussion about developmental education has moved to the community college.

Much of the early work on basic writing was written by university professors, working with students who were likely close to college-ready, but needed some assistance with the transition to academic writing. For many of these students, mainstreaming was a definite possibility. In addition, courses that brought students “into the conversation” were important in that the students enrolled in colleges and universities were there to get 4-year degrees. It was very important that students understood academic writing in order to be successful in future coursework.

At the community college level, however, there are two key differences. One, the backgrounds of the students can be far more diverse. The students in basic writing classes in universities certainly had their own struggles, often based upon socioeconomic struggles and/or cultural differences from mainstream college students. In the community college, though, students in developmental writing courses may have had little schooling at all and returned for a GED, may be English language learners, and/or may have experienced extreme poverty. Many developmental writing students in community college classrooms had never imagined that they would go to college and did not take any college preparatory classes in high school. Students returning twenty or more years after high school are also more common in the community college than in the traditional university.

A second key difference is level of educational attainment desired. A student in a 4-year-school likely hopes to achieve a bachelor’s degree or beyond. Community college

students may vary tremendously in the degree they seek. Some community college students do want to transfer some day. However, others are at the community college for a vocational degree in programs such as automotive, motorcycle repair, welding, or machine tool. Those seeking Associate of Applied Science degrees may only need to take one level of college writing and perhaps only one other general education course that requires writing. Other students may be at the community college for truck driver certification or another certificate of training. Such students will take even fewer academic courses. While basic writing and developmental writing courses have the same general goals of preparing students for college-level writing, there is quite a bit of difference between the audiences for both courses.

Research in developmental writing has been generally more practical than research conducted in basic writing, which often focused on theoretical and political issues (Soliday, 2002). The goal of many qualitative studies of developmental writing has been to shed light on community college issues; the focus was not necessarily on the students and the classroom (Herideen, 1998; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; and Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). Studies of developmental writing student persistence have also been conducted (Barbatis, 2010). Herideen (1998), Rhoads & Valadez (1996), Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads (1999), and Barbatis (2010) all base their work on critical theory, examining how race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, education, religion, and sexual orientation impact college students.

Some researchers have conducted qualitative studies of the developmental writing classes. For example, Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Castellano (1991) conducted a study of

classroom discourse in a basic writing classroom. Wilson (2007) conducted an action-research study of her own classes and students. Most recently, Grubb, Boner, Parker, Gabriner, and Wilson (2011) conducted a study of classrooms of 13 different community college developmental classrooms in an attempt to move current conversations about developmental writing back to the classroom. Tinberg and Nadeau (2010) have also conducted a qualitative study of community college writing students, but their focus was on first-year composition students rather than developmental writing students and classrooms. While qualitative studies of the classroom exist, more studies are needed. Much of the work so far has focused on urban environments, for example; a study about a community college in a Midwestern suburban environment can give a different picture of students in the developmental writing classroom.

More common in the literature, however, are quantitative or practical articles. A look at recent articles in the *Journal of Developmental Education*, for example, shows an emphasis in the research on “Ideas in Practice,” “Strategies for Improving Student Learning,” and “Techtalk” issues. Research in the *Journal of Basic Writing* combines classroom advice with policy discussions. Articles in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* focus primarily on issues in teaching writing and regularly offers a “What Works for Me” section. Such articles are helpful in giving instructors ideas for activities, but since they are often decontextualized, they are not necessarily ideas that would work in every institution.

Big decisions about developmental education are often based on quantitative data. For example, quantitative data show that the more exit points a developmental student

must go through (the more classes a student needs to take), the more likely he or she will discontinue the sequence and drop out of college (Hern & deWit, 2010; Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Smith Jaggars, & Edgecombe, 2010). Accelerated programs vary, where some programs combine two or more developmental levels into one, while other programs place students directly into college-level writing while offering additional lab support. Results are positive for many students, but no matter the program, there are a certain number of students who are not successful, no matter the model used. (Hern & deWit, 2010; Jenkins, Speroni, Belfield, Smith Jaggars, & Edgecombe, 2010). Still, because the numbers look better for accelerated programs than for traditional programs, many schools, including Hall Community College, are experimenting with accelerated coursework.

Other institutions are using quantitative data as evidence to support removing developmental coursework altogether. For example, some studies have shown that there is no difference in success rate between borderline students taking a developmental course compared to enrolling directly in a transfer-level course (Goudas & Boylan, 2012). Goudas & Boylan (2012), however, argued that much of the current research misunderstands the purpose of developmental education, assuming that those who take developmental courses should do better than those who enter the transfer-level course without developmental training. At issue is that states are changing their policies based on this research. Connecticut, for example, “passed a bill in the Spring of 2012 that requires all state colleges to eliminate prerequisite developmental courses and replace them with ‘supplemental support’ by fall of 2014 (An Act Concerning College Readiness and Completion, 2012)” (Goudas & Boylan, 2012, p. 12). Since much of the research was

based on students close to the cut-off score for transfer-level courses, those who may have needed a prerequisite model may be left behind with the models becoming popular today.

In the study I have conducted, the student stories reveal needs of the students that may not come out in studies of programs as a whole. Many of the students focused on in my study, for example, likely would have had even more difficulty had they been required to take an accelerated class or had they been mainstreamed into college-level courses. For many students, especially students with little college-preparatory coursework and/or for students just learning to speak English, 10 ½ weeks is not enough time to adjust to the demands of college reading and writing.

### **Practitioner Research**

As mentioned in the introduction, part-time instructors make up over half of the faculty on community college campuses (McLaughlin, 2005), and 72% of faculty teaching in developmental education do so on a part-time basis (Eney & Davidson, 2006). Many part-time faculty members teach classes at several institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2007). They might teach in a variety of disciplines as well, making their focus on the one developmental writing class at one institution a low priority. Very few teachers focus their careers on teaching developmental writing, and those who do are often too busy teaching to consider researching and publishing as well. While some community colleges encourage teacher research, schools like Hall Community College do little to support such research. For example, earning additional graduate credits does not move an instructor up the salary scale, and no incentives are given for conference participation.

Those who want to go to conferences may or may not have them paid for, depending on how much money is left in the budget. I know many instructors who have never attended a conference or received additional professional development training aside from the required all-college inservice each year. As encouragement of professional development, the college does reimburse tuition for additional graduate study, but it limits the number of credits taken each semester.

Calls for teacher research are frequent in both K-12 and developmental education (Rust, 2009; Higbee, Arendale, & Lundell, 2005). Considering that most teachers of developmental writing are part-time teachers running from one campus to another in order to pay their bills, it should be no surprise that they are not quick to commit to research. Only five universities offer graduate degrees in developmental education: Appalachian State University in North Carolina, Grambling State University in Louisiana, Murray State University in Kentucky, National Louis University in Illinois, and Southwest Texas State University (Dorlac, 2005). Such programs are important for those interested in developmental education, but the courses are primarily research-focused, suggesting that many graduates of these programs are more likely to go into research or administrative rather than teaching roles.

As a full-time developmental writing instructor committed to teaching and to my current community college, I am in a unique position to complete practitioner research. I am interested in both my own professional development and in adding research that treats students as more than numbers. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) described their turn to narrative research:

Children's experiences were reduced to scores on two tests, scores that were correlated, and based on this correlation, something about how these children would experience school was known. For Jean, something happened as she read and reread the statistical correlations. She knew these children, knew something about their stories as the children told them to her, and knew something about the stories that their teachers and parents told about them. They were much more than their test scores. Their lives were filled with complexities, with hopes, with dreams, with wishes and with intentions. Though the research community, with its reverence for numbers, focused on the correlations, Jean thought about the children's lives. There was one child whose scores did not work out in the predicted way. He was an "aberration" in the test scores. For the research, he was an exception, outside the standard range. Jean wrote a line about him in the research text that stated this. In life, in school, Jean spent many more hours trying to understand the complexities of his experience. (xxiv-xxv)

As more schools are becoming "data-driven," including Hall Community College, and as students have become reduced to numbers on success rate charts, I am in a position to describe the complexities of their experiences. Nieto (1999) wrote: "Students are the people most affected by school policies and practices, but they tend to be the least consulted about them" (p. 179). More recently, researchers such as Cameron (2012) and Cox (2009) have begun to give voice to students similar to the ones I work with, in Cameron's (2012) case to students who have dropped out of high school, and in Cox's

(2009) case, community college students struggling to adjust to college life. Although both studies illustrate student challenges well, both are based primarily on interviews. While both researchers are educators, neither study focuses on their own classrooms or their own context. Traditionally, such research may be considered more objective, more to be trusted. However, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have argued,

From the perspective of practitioner inquiry, the insider status of the researcher is regarded as an asset to be capitalized on and mined, given the emic perspective, the unique insight, and the longitudinal viewpoint the researcher brings to the topic of study. (p. 101)

As an instructor researching her own classroom, I was able to capture student experiences other researchers may not have been able to access. Stories of the classroom based on sustained experience in a context have a power that go beyond an outsider's observations.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

In describing traditional education, Dewey (1938) wrote:

There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources. A system of education based upon the necessary connection of education with experience must, on the contrary, if faithful to its principle, take those things constantly into account. (p. 36)

Highly influenced by Dewey (1938), narrative inquiry as a method of research focuses on a study of experience as a way to make sense of and improve education. The focus of narrative inquiry then is on experience and how that experience shapes knowledge. While my experiences shaped my knowledge, so, too, did the students' experiences shape their knowledge. Narrative inquiry is a method for researchers "to understand diverse individual's experiences as they are lived out in dynamic relation to people, places, and things in and outside of the schools" (Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Orr, Pearce, & Steeves, 2006, p. 2). The stories reveal the complexity of experiences in the community college developmental writing classroom.

### **Questions**

Although narrative inquiry often begins with the stories themselves and with questions following, before I began the class studied, I had long been thinking about these questions:

1. How do developmental writing students negotiate the developmental writing classroom?
2. How do developmental writing students experience the transition to life in a community college classroom?
3. What background experiences make the transition to college writing difficult?
4. What strengths do developmental writing students bring to the classroom?

### **The Design—Methods and Procedures**

Stories often have a power that statistics do not have. Narratives of teacher's lives, such as Ashton-Warner's (1963) *Teacher*, Paley's (1979) *White Teacher*, Hoffman's (1996) *Chasing Hellhounds*, and Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary* shed light on classrooms and the people within them that traditional research studies cannot. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) defined narrative inquiry as "both phenomenon and method...people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p. 2). Though stories are central to narrative inquiry, the inquiry is not simply a matter of telling stories. Stories are told as a way to look closely at theoretical and practical problems, as well as a way to illuminate cultural issues with schooling and learning (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011).

### **The Phenomenon**

Critics of developmental education are right that many students who begin in developmental coursework never graduate or earn a degree (Vedder, 2012). However, common assumptions, such as that they are simply not “college material” (Vedder, 2012) show a lack of understanding of the people in developmental classes. Students in these classes come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but they often have one thing in common: little experience in the academic environment. Whether students have dropped out of high school and later received their GEDs, come from war-torn countries in which school was unavailable or a low priority, or focused their education on vocational coursework, many community college students have a difficult time switching to the academic world. How do students with little schooling experience negotiate the classroom experience? What background experiences do they have that make schooling difficult for them? An understanding of students’ narratives can help guide classroom and curriculum decisions.

In describing narrative inquiry, Shaafsma and Vinz (2011) wrote, “Stories are often the beginning of the inquiry. What can be learned from narrating or reading them? Research grows out of the telling, questioning, and rendering of narratives” (p. 3). Narrative inquiry can be helpful in “examining the day-to-day work of teaching and learning and in gaining multiple perspectives on the way we and others experience education” (Shaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 12). Key to understanding developmental education is understanding the students who are in developmental classes. New approaches to developmental education are now being debated, but such approaches are often based on the results studied in one context. Although studies such as Cox’s (2009) study of the misunderstanding that occurs between professors and their students adds to

the understanding of students' difficulties in adjusting to college, the study is based on student and professor *perception* rather than experiences themselves. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) have argued, "In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history." Stories offer a broader context to issues developmental writing students face. Through "attending to and acting on experience by co-inquiring with people who interact in and with classrooms, schools, or in other contexts into living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience" (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013, p. 213), a narrative inquiry reveals the power of stories to change the lives of all involved.

### **Participants**

The participants were primarily members of one developmental writing class taught in the Summer Quarter, 2013 (July-September, 2013). The class began with 16 students from a wide range of socio-economic, linguistic, ethnic, and schooling backgrounds. The class selected was a Beginning Writing class, currently the first level of developmental writing. 1 participant was from a class taught in the Fall Quarter, 2013 (October-December, 2013). He was included in the study to add depth to the study but also to aid in hiding the identities of the participants. All student names (as well as the name of the college and town) were changed to protect the privacy of the student participants. Although 10 students agreed to participate in the study, 3 of those students stopped attending the class at some point in the quarter, 2 students stopped attending Hall shortly into the next quarter, and 2 students began attending another Hall Community

College campus. Students who had both agreed to the study and remained at Hall became the focus of the study.

The participants in the study are examples of some of the students we have in the developmental classrooms at Hall: students who are refugees, learning disabled, high school drop-outs, and sufferers of mental illness. At the same time, they are more than examples. In narrative inquiry, people are more than “exemplars of a form—of an idea, a theory, a social category” as they are seen in formalist inquiry; instead, “people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Each student is more than an example, more than an illustration of a theme. Eh Doh is a Karen refugee, but this does not sum up who he is or tell his full story. Each story is unique and complex, and although I have drawn themes from their experiences, their stories reveal more than simple lessons on how to teach high school drop-outs, ELL students, or students with dyslexia.

### **Researcher-Participant Relationship**

As the instructor of my students involved in the study, the researcher-participant relationship was more complicated than that of the traditional research-participant relationship in which researchers may have little connection to their subjects. Although I have had a long relationship with my college and many of the students there, I did not know the students of the class studied until I began the class and began my research simultaneously. I waited until the class had met a few times before asking for student participants, and the request was made not by me but by a colleague so that students would not feel coerced into completing the study. The consent forms of those who agreed

to the study were placed in a sealed envelope and locked in a filing cabinet I had no access to until after the class was over. Because the relationship was one in which I had power over student grades, I did not want any sense that the project was something they had to participate in.

Although building relationships with my students was difficult at first, partly due to meeting only twice a week and partly due to the particular mix of personalities in the class, through writing about my students, I was able to feel an empathy for my students that I think came through in my work with them. In analyzing their experiences in my classroom, I was able to change my practice along the way, improving their experiences and making room for more connections.

After the term was over, and I was able to speak directly to those who agreed to the study, I was able to establish further connections to my students. I was able to make it clear that I was available to them still, although the term was over. During the interviews, students seemed happy to see me after the class was over and one had asked about how he could take a future class with me.

Narrative inquiry is unique in its emphasis on long-term relationships between researchers and participants. The researcher is not a distant observer but usually a participant-observer with strong connections to the people and place researched. For example, in Phillion's (2002) narrative inquiry into the Bay Street School, she described her work as "in friendship with the community, the school, the people in the school, the parents, and Pam and students in her class" (p. xxiii). The researcher is often a part of the study itself. According to Pinnegar & Daynes (2007), this change in relationships

between the researcher and the researched is the first turn toward narrative inquiry. The relationship is not between one who is studying and one who is studied, but it is a relationship in which everyone will learn and change from the experience (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). For me, I began the study in order to understand and better serve my own students. In this sense, the inquiry has drawn me closer to my students and has added depth to my teaching. Conversations with my students have helped them understand their own stories better and how they affect their current experiences.

Along with this change in the researcher-participant relationship is a concern with temporality. In more traditional research methods, the participants and interactions are often thought of atemporal or static (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In narrative inquiry, however, researchers consider that “events and people always have a past, present, and a future” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). In Phillion’s (2002) narrative inquiry, for example, she wrote about the history of the Bay Street School as a way to connect herself to the school’s past and to become a part of the school’s future. Traditionally, classes have focused on students as a “blank slate.” Teachers are tasked with imparting their knowledge on their students equally. In narrative inquiry, when thinking about students or a school, “there is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

For my own study, I have included students in my own classrooms. As their instructor, I am already tied to them beyond a researcher-participant relationship. I have worked for the college for the past 11 years and have no plans to leave, so in this sense, I am a part of the college and a part of the students’ lives. Though I may have a student for

only a quarter, I often see students beyond this quarter in future classes and through advising relationships. As such, the ethical issues involved in conducting the study are more complex than if I had been an outside researcher leaving when the project was over. I had to consider that I may have one of the participants in a class in the future. Since many students may stop taking classes for a period of time and then come back to college again later, it is possible that I could see and work with students many years past the study.

The existence of a long-term relationship may change what participants might say or do, but this difference can be just as illuminating as the distant researcher-observer relationship. For example, in comparing Cox's (2009) interview results compared to my own, I noticed that many of the students' descriptions of classroom experiences were angrier than my own students' feelings toward the classroom. About her writing class, one student interviewed said, "I'm not very concerned—since—this class doesn't make me very happy. So I kind of just go through it, and I don't take a lot of time—my time—for this class. I just write what he told me to write, just to get over it" (Cox, 2009, p. 83). Such words are given to a stranger and may be a chance to let go some of the student's frustration with a particular class. When I was interviewing students who had been in my class, however, they were usually quite kind about me and the class. In this sense, the relationship that the students wanted to keep positive might have colored what they had told me about the class, especially considering I knew that students had negative experiences in the classroom. However, as someone students trusted, I was likely also able to learn more about their stories than a stranger might.

Practitioner research does not begin with the assumption that research purposes are neutral, nor does it assume that the good researcher is studiously agnostic about the questions or outcomes of research. Rather, it is a hallmark of much of practitioner research that the ultimate goal is challenging inequities, raising questions about the status quo, and enhancing the learning and life chances of students. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 102)

A researcher-participant relationship that is based on mutual care and trust fulfills such a goal.

### **Data: Field Texts**

According to Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) data in narrative inquiry are called field texts. Common field texts include field notes, journal records, interviews, story-telling, letter writing, autobiographical and biographical writing, as well as other data sources such as class plans and newsletters (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Many of these types of data are common in ethnographic studies as well, but the researcher is more of a participant in narrative inquiry. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the writing of field texts “expresses the relationship of researcher to participant” (p. 94). In narrative inquiry, the field texts are necessarily subjective, based on context of the interviews, writing, and field notes.

One type of field text is field notes, an “active recording,” where the researcher is “expressing her personal practical knowing” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Field notes are usually taken daily about experiences observed in the classroom. This is not merely

an exact recording of events as if tape-recorded; the researcher's interpretation cannot be divided from the description of the events. Rather than a distant observer, field notes of a narrative inquirer often include the inquirer as part of the events; "it makes a difference as we create field notes if we see ourselves as recorders of events 'over there' or if we see ourselves as characters in the events" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

For my own research, I took field notes at the end of each class period studied. Since I had several hours between the class I studied and the next class I had to teach, I went directly to my office and wrote down what happened in the class as quickly as I could so that I would not forget what happened. I did not record my classes, but I tried to capture events as faithfully as possible after each class. After taking notes, I also wrote reflections of the experience right after I took the notes. At first, I tried to handwrite notes with field notes on one side and reflections on the other side of the page, but I found that I was much faster at typing my notes, so the majority of my notes were typed. In addition to field notes, I journaled to further interpret the events that took place in my classroom. Through journaling, I worked toward "making sense" of what had happened (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The use of field notes went beyond recording of the events. There is a difference between the types of notes taken as a distant observer compared to someone involved in the events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because I was the instructor of the class and had a strong connection to the events described, I must acknowledge researcher interpretation in taking field notes and writing about the events. Like Tinberg and Nadeau (2010), who wrote "We make no claim to absolute objectivity," as they described their study of community college students, I do not claim objectivity in the shaping of the data.

In addition, I used 3 semi-structured interviews to add student voices to the story of the developmental writing classroom. These were the beginning interview questions:

1. Tell me a little about your schooling experiences prior to attending HCC.
2. What made you decide to attend HCC?
3. What strengths do you feel you brought with you when you began your Beginning Writing course?
4. What challenges did you face when you began Beginning Writing?
5. What positive experiences do you remember from Beginning Writing?
6. What negative experiences do you remember from Beginning Writing?
7. What suggestions do you have for improving your experience of Beginning Writing?

Although I had questions to begin the conversation, much of the interview was unstructured, allowing a more natural conversation to take place. Each interview had a different quality, depending on the person interviewed. With Jasmine, she clearly wanted to help me with my research and tried to focus on answering my interview questions. James, however, took the opportunity to tell his story, so his interview was more of an oral history (an autobiographical story) than Jasmine's interview. Eh Doh was the most hesitant of the interview participants, primarily worried about his ability to tell his story with his limited English skills. His interview was a combination of answering the interview questions and telling his own story. The interviews go beyond students' daily experiences to show where they have come from and where they hope to go in ways field

notes alone could not capture. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview all participants since some who had agreed to the study either dropped out of school during the course or during the next term. In particular, I had wanted to interview Aniya, who had consented to be part of the study and to an interview, but disappeared shortly into the next quarter.

Along with student interviews, I also used student writing to help paint the story of their lives but also the story of the writing that takes place in the classroom. Through their own writing, students can tell much of their own stories. I drew on early writing in the term about course goals to show both students' hopes for their future as well to illustrate their writing strengths and challenges. I included Eh Doh's essay about his village in Thailand to bring a student voice to the forefront. I also used excerpts from Jasmine's writing to show both her story and her linguistic challenges.

In using field notes, journals, semi-structured interviews, and student writing, my work has taken what Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) call the second turn toward narrative, the move from numbers to words. Authors like Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) likewise have discussed the limits of capturing experiences with numbers. Throughout the process of collecting and composing field texts, I worked toward an ongoing reflective stance that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call "wakefulness." I constantly fought the tendency to simplify my observations. Narrative inquiry is about more than simply telling the stories. As Loughran (2006) wrote:

it is not *just* the experience that matters, it is the learning through  
experience that needs to be reflected upon and shared, as the nature of the

deliberations within the teacher education learning community is critical to the development of a pedagogy of teacher education. (p. 23)

The research conducted goes beyond a description of the experiences, reflecting a teacher working toward an understanding of her classroom and students.

### **The Field**

Because I am currently an employee of the institution where I conducted my study, I did not have to spend time negotiating entry as other researchers must do. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote about the nervousness and difficulty narrative inquirers might face in beginning their research work in a place that already has a history and where the people there already have a common story. In such situations, researchers must find their place in the institution and fight others' misconceptions of their purposes there. By the time I had begun my study, I had already taught at Hall Community College for 11 years. I knew the setting well, and no one questioned my presence on campus. At the same time, I had to fight previous conceptions and assumptions. I assumed I had known something of my students, but I did not know this particular class and these particular students. For example, I had assumed students would want to get to know each other and make friends if given the opportunity. I knew generally of the challenges my students faced, but I did not necessarily question the organization of my class.

When I first began my inquiry, I thought it would be easier to observe and study a colleague's class rather than my own. In this way, I felt I could be focused completely on observation and not on trying to run my class. However, such a study is not unusual in the field. Studying a class in which I experienced the class with my students for an entire

term meant more for me and my students than a distant study of someone else's class. Through such study, I would be able to improve my own instruction and reveal instructional issues to others in the process.

### **Analysis**

Analysis was ongoing as I reflected regularly on field notes throughout the term, through the coding process, through turning the notes into stories, and through composing, writing, and rewriting the dissertation. At the end of the term, I reviewed all of the notes and reflections, looking for common themes and stories that emerged from the classroom experience. I coded my field notes for the following themes: attendance issues, classroom environment, college structure/scheduling, social connections, cultural clashes, technology issues, resistance, and adaptation. In my writing, I combined social and cultural issues into one chapter and connected the other themes to individual student stories. After writing the stories, I further analyzed the experiences, reflecting on educational significance and the stories' connections to other works I have studied.

Similar to the recursive writing process that I describe to my students, I found myself constantly reconsidering my purpose and direction. The more I analyzed, the more I realized that the stories did not reveal simplistic themes but had many layers of complexity. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, "Research texts are at a distance from field texts and grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance" (p. 132).

### **Research Text (Writing)**

In composing a research text, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) encouraged researchers to “reflect the temporal unfolding of people, places and things within the inquiry, the personal and social aspects of the inquirer’s and participants’ lives, and the places in the inquiry (p. 485). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described, the writing of the research text was one of the most difficult parts of the research process. I had to consider voice, signature, narrative form, and audience. “In its broadest sense, voice may be thought of as belonging to participants, researcher, and other participants and other researchers for whom the text speaks” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 146). How do I balance my voice with my students’ voices? Which stories do I tell? Whose voice will predominate?

“When a veil of silence is lifted and a writer knows he or she has something to say and feels the power of voice, that writer still must find a way of saying what he or she wishes to speak” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 147). As I began composing, I had to consider how much of myself to include in the story. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, too much of a signature would mean my voice could overpower the narrative, while too little would lessen my own point of view in the research.

“A writer’s struggle to respect working relationships and to make a place for participant voice and signature tends to be in tension with the notion of audience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 149). Although my primary goal was to write in order to improve my own classes and help other instructors along the way, I could never forget the consequences of my writing could be negative in that those reading could misunderstand my purpose. I constantly negotiated within myself how much detail to

provide, how much to reveal. I worried about what the students would think about how the stories portrayed them, how administrators might view the research, and whether or not the research revealed enough for outsiders interested in developmental education.

As I negotiated this process, I tried to overcome these feelings by writing first and deciding later what to use and what to discard. During the revision process, I worked to sensitively portray the participants in the study while still revealing important information about what it is like to be a community college developmental writing student. In order to make peace with sharing some sensitive information, I considered Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) argument:

But as researchers, we also owe our care and responsibility to a larger audience, to the conversation of a scholarly discourse, and our research texts need also to speak of how we lived and told our stories within the particular field of inquiry. (p. 174)

### **Ethical Considerations**

According to Elbaz-Luwisch, "Teacher knowledge is deeply personal, so research that studies teaching from a narrative perspective has no choice but to go in close" (p. 376). Unlike many participant-researchers, as the instructor of a class, I have power over students' grades; the relationship is more than a tutoring relationship. Before conducting the research, I worried about whether or not students would feel comfortable saying "no" to being a part of the research, considering I am their instructor (even if assured I would not know of their consent until after the class is over)? How comfortable would students be about having their teacher write about their experiences? How much would they want

the outside world to know about them? How do I balance my roles between teacher and researcher? If I am to create a trusting relationship between the students and myself, what boundaries must be in place? Can I be a teacher, researcher, and friend at the same time? In the end, however, those who wanted to participate participated; those who did not want to participate did not sign the consent form. Their decisions did not impact our relationship.

Another issue I considered is that once the research has been completed, how much should be shared with the people researched? Narrative researchers such as Horsdal (2012) give a copy of the story to the interviewee, who “has the full right to revise, accept, or reject the story altogether” (p. 80). Other researchers, like Josselson (2007), may give the interviewees a summary of the work but do not encourage their participants to read the work. Josselson (2007) works to write about the people in her studies with great sensitivity, but realizes that participants might still have a hard time with how they are portrayed in the research. According to Josselson (2007), “An ethical attitude requires that we write about other people with great respect and appropriate tentativeness and that we recognize that what we write may be read by the person we are writing about” (p. 553). In the end, I have not directly shared what I have written; however, I believe I have written about the students with enough sensitivity that I do not believe they would be offended should they see what I have written.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

### **Limitations**

Despite the many ways in which knowledge gained through this study contributes to the understanding about developmental education, the study was limited in that it focused on a small number of students in one college, one time, and one place. It is possible that what was revealed was not representative of other developmental writing classes. However, this is one major turn in narrative inquiry—the shift from the general to the particular (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). A focus on the particular can shed light on problems often ignored by numbers. This shift can offer a depth that studies that focus on larger numbers cannot offer. Studies that look at large numbers of students can show how a particular program or concept works for a majority of the students, but such studies often ignore the outliers and may not offer a complete picture. In focusing on a particular class, for example, a research practitioner is able to analyze the issues specific to the class. For educators, reading a focused study can illustrate how conducting a similar study might help them in their own classrooms.

### **Delimitations**

I focused on one class rather than multiple classes. My goal was to paint a picture of one class, a small experience, rather than attempt to cover all of developmental education at my college. I have chosen narrative inquiry as my methodology precisely because of its focus on the particular, which is a focus not usually used in quantitative methods. Rather than an ethnographic approach, I chose narrative inquiry because of the emphasis on the relationship between researcher and participant. Rather than a researcher observing someone else's class, I am a full participant in the life of the class I am studying. The participant-researcher relationship may be different than the traditional

research relationship, but it offers a perspective that would be difficult with other research stances. A narrative inquiry approach can add to the literature on developmental writing.

### **My Story**

Although the focus of the chapters that follow is primarily on the students, I am not an invisible observer in the classroom but an active participant. I tell a piece of my story to position myself “in the midst” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I am part of the story, and as their teacher, bring my own experiences to bear on the classroom story. My previous schooling impacts how I have acted as a teacher, and each teaching experience guides me toward how to guide my students in future classes. In describing an example of a narrative inquirer’s autobiographical writing, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote, “In Davies’ storied poem, her autobiographical writing gives one rendition of her early life and sets the context for her telling of her later school life” (p. 101). Similarly, my writing here sets the context for my future teaching life.

I grew up with parents who did not like school. My mother is from a small village in Khon Kaen, Thailand, from a time and place when schooling was not mandatory. When she was a young child, she pretended to go to school but hated it so much that she would climb a tree once she was out of her mother’s view and then stay in that tree until school was over and walk home with the other children. One day, her mother discovered her in the tree. Her mother was angry with her, but she decided that since she had hated school that much that she should instead be put to use by going to work. She had her work as a babysitter for another family, and thus, she ended her schooling at 8 years old.

Her native language was Isan, a form of Lao, but she learned enough Thai from the little schooling she had to speak Thai as well. She never learned to read or write, however.

My father grew up in Oklahoma and Texas, originally with an aunt and uncle, due to his mother's tuberculosis and his father's abandonment of both of them. When he was 5 years old, though, his mother became better and reclaimed him. He grew up in near poverty and though he always loved learning, he also hated school. When we watched *The Outsiders* together when I was a young teenager, he told me how familiar the movie was to his own experience. He was a "greaser," not thought of as someone who would go very far. After a short try at a Bible college, he fulfilled his dream to become a soldier and joined the Army. After the Army, he tried college again at a local community college, but when he saw an advertisement reading, "Come to beautiful Vietnam," he answered the ad and wound up in Vietnam and then Thailand, where he met my mother.

Although my parents' stories might seem a diversion from my own, I have often thought of them as people who could be students in my classroom. My mother easily learned spoken English, but she has never learned to read and write beyond what was necessary to write checks and read street signs. A few years ago, she would still not have been turned away from my community college; she would have been enrolled in the first developmental writing class available. My father actually attended a community college for a short time, but he always felt the walls were closing in on him. He is a brilliant computer programmer, but his knowledge of computers began from military training, not a college classroom. At times, he has regretted not finishing his degree, but he never had the patience for traditional schooling.

When I was young, my father still had an adventurous spirit, and we moved from Bangkok to America to Puerto Rico to Taiwan and then back to America for good. I spent the first five years of my life hiding behind my mother, rarely knowing the language of the people around me. My first school was a Chinese school, where I was the only white child and the only child who did not speak Chinese. My parents assumed that if I was immersed in the Chinese language that I would learn Chinese. This may have been true eventually, but they did not wait long enough to find out. I remember only sitting in the classroom, not knowing a word of what was being said. At one point, I got lost when students were going to an assembly, and that is my last memory of the school. I was then moved to a missionary school, where I began learning to read and write in English. I was much happier there.

Although I was small at the time, I have had the experience of not knowing the language of the majority of the classroom. At the same time, oddly enough, I still remember loving to go to school. I was anxious to get on that blue school bus the first time with the neighborhood Chinese children. I wanted to be like everyone else there. I loved listening to the teacher, even if I did not know what she was saying. I liked sitting in rows with other students in uniforms.

This is where I diverge from my parents and from most of my students. I have always loved school, and until relatively recently in my career, I had a difficult time understanding why other students did not like school. My family continued to move across the United States, my father often in search of a better place each time, but I was always excited about moving to new places. I initially had some difficulty in school since

I did not know some common words that my American counterparts knew, but I soon caught up and excelled through most of my schooling.

I had never not thought I would go to college. As a lover of reading and writing, I majored in English. Not wanting school to ever end, I went on to graduate school in English as well.

While my early experiences might be somewhat unique, my love of learning is likely something I have in common with my fellow instructors. Why else would anyone devote his or her life to teaching others a subject in college? Since we love our subjects so much, it is often difficult for us to see why others might feel differently. We often think that maybe they just have not had the right teacher. Since we have dedicated our lives to a subject, it is sometimes painful to have students who openly dismiss what we have to teach them. Once I learned more about my students, though, it became easier to understand why they might have trouble in the academic world.

As a mother of four boys, I have watched how my boys' schooling stories have had more in common with my students' than with my own experiences. I have seen how difficult it has been for my boys to sit quietly and complete worksheets compared to what they have really wanted to do, whether it be read mythological novels, build something, or write a computer program. I think of my second son, someone who loves work of any kind but academic, and I can see in him the students Cameron (2012) described in her study of high school drop-outs. I think of my third son, who spent his lunch time staring at a piece of paper that he was supposed to write an essay on about a time he had sped through something and had a negative consequence. When he got home, and I asked him

why his lunch box was full, he said, “I couldn’t do that assignment. I don’t think I’ve ever sped through anything.” He had not been allowed back into the classroom until he had something written, and so my 3<sup>rd</sup> grader spent the afternoon in the principal’s office, poking holes in the paper. My kindergartener must spend hours writing his letters on lined paper, each part of the letter out of place marked in red by the teacher. It should be no surprise that by college, many students have lost any joy they might have had in learning.

### **Student Stories**

In describing her study of students who had dropped out of high school, Cameron (2012) wrote, “the dominant theme to emerge from every conversation was each young person’s sense that their school experiences and relationships neglected the complexity of their lives and minimized them as individuals” (p. 7). Students had felt that they were not “*known*” (Cameron, 2012, p. 7). By college, many students do not expect the same relationship with their professors as they had or wished for with their high school teachers. Still, Cox’s (2009) study shows that teachers who took the time to get to know their students often had better success rates than those who did not.

Cox’s (2009) work illustrates the mismatch between student and teacher expectations through interviews with students and observations of classroom dynamics. Students she interviewed in her study overwhelmingly spoke of college as something to “get through.” They also rarely understood the reasoning behind professor classroom and curriculum decisions, such as organizing classrooms in circles and requiring students to complete peer review of each other’s essays. While I agree that mismatch in academic

expectations is an important part of understanding student challenges, student stories—both inside and outside of the classroom—show that the issue is more complex than a misunderstanding.

While some students see the community college as a continuation of the “prison” of high school, others see it as a sanctuary, a place that they can feel safe and valued. While many do experience the fear of failure that Cox (2009) describes, many others find that for the first time in their lives that they have something to say and that someone might want to hear it. Many students feel all of these contradictory emotions at once. I have watched students move up and down the continuum from fear to boredom to joy and back again. The stories that follow reveal the complexity of student lives and their experiences of the community college.

## CHAPTER 4

### HALL COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING CLASSROOM

#### **The College**

Hall Community College lies on the outskirts of a Midwestern city of about 258,000. Because of the city's low unemployment, safety, and human services resources available, many immigrants have resettled in the community. The city's public schools' website boasts that students from 57 language backgrounds are served by the schools. While some of the schools in the city are quite diverse, many others remain primarily white. Students who come to the community college may be from the city or from surrounding rural areas, which have remained primarily white. While the college itself is 84.82% white with half of the students the traditional ages of 18-21, developmental classrooms are often more diverse. In a class of 16, it is not unusual to have 4-5 different language backgrounds represented.

The college's enrollment has hovered around 10,000 students for the past 10 years, but this number includes 2 smaller campuses, 1 which serves primarily vocational students and 1 which is primarily transfer oriented. The one where I teach is a combination of vocational and transfer students, but the transfer mission is fairly recent, begun only 15 years ago. Even though there are more transfer students than vocational, the college still has a strong vocational atmosphere. Students walking down the hallways

may be wearing HCC-issued automotive shirts, chef's whites, nursing scrubs, or firefighter polos.

The campus consists of one long building, similar to a high school. The original building hallways are red brick or painted cinderblock. The hallways in the newer additions are white-painted cinderblock. In the main part of the building, signs are painted on the wall to guide students to each section, such as "Continuing Education" or "Student Services." However, in the newer sections, simple print-outs with "Business" or "Academic Transfer" are taped to the doors of the offices. All walls are fairly empty except for a couple glass-covered announcement boards. No stray signs, such as "Roommate Wanted" or similar signs you might see at a university campus, are allowed. Recently, posters displaying students in individual fields have been hung, along with a few posters about success in the workplace. Even though the college is just one building and ordered from A to V sections, students and outsiders are frequently lost due to lack of signs and maps.

The college's annual report boasts a high success rate for its graduates. For career/technical graduates, 94% became employed in careers or continued their education; for academic transfer graduates, 92% continued their education or became employed in careers. The college ranks high in various national studies, such as TheBestSchools.org and College Measures. The college is ranked in the top 5 for a two-year school in the U.S. for Agriculture, Agriculture Operations & Related Sciences and for Precision Production graduates in Community College week's magazine. The college is generally well-regarded in the community. Even though many students still aspire to

attend the state research university nearby, more practical-minded students are just as happy to attend the community college.

Still, nothing can change that the college is a school, and for many developmental writing students, school itself is the issue, not necessarily the environment. Sitting in a classroom brings back memories of negative high school experiences. Those who seem to do the best are often those who are able to start their vocational programs right away. Such students can “survive” a writing class if they are able to work in the welding lab the rest of the day. Many programs, though, do not accept students until they have completed their developmental coursework. Students who have had little success with school in the past find themselves enrolled in Beginning Writing, Reading Strategies, and Math Fundamentals, unable to even get on a waitlist until they have shown some success in these courses. However, these courses usually do not show students’ best skills. Many students end up repeating one or more of the courses until they lose hope of ever enrolling in the courses they came to college to take. As much as the college has tried to improve and offer new options for developmental coursework, the frustration of not being able to take other courses for a year or more can drive students away.

When I first started at Hall, there were 3 developmental writing courses: Language Skills Tune-Up, Writing Skills, and Basic Writing. The Tune-Up class was a 1.5 credit class (on the quarter system) that truly was a grammar “tune-up.” Students worked individually with an instructor on computerized grammar drills. At first, only one section of Tune-Up was offered—until we had more and more students testing into this class. As more students tested into the class and with instructor changes, the class became

a conference-based class and then later a class held in a traditional classroom. No one was ever comfortable with the success rate of this class. No matter whether it was conference-based, computer-based, or classroom-based, a large number of students stopped coming or failed the class. I remember several years ago watching the same student cycle in and out of each instructor's version of the class. At that time, there were no actual limits on how many times a student could take a class or on entry test scores. A student with a 0 on the COMPASS or ACT could enroll in the class. Thus, we had students who spoke only a few words of English and/or who had never written more than a few words taking the class along with students who were simply returning adult students.

Eventually, the college decided that there had to be a base score in order to take college courses. For English, students needed at least a 16 on the COMPASS or a 10 on the ACT to enroll. Those who had lower scores were routed to a Transitions Lab, which had close ties to ABE and ESL resources. For \$20, students could take a basic course that would prepare them to re-take the COMPASS. Those who took the Transitions course typically did better and eventually enrolled in college courses. Others simply did not enroll in college at all.

At the same time, financial aid restrictions became tougher so that students who were failing most of their classes were not continually awarded aid. The combination of the entry score and the elimination of students taking the first level of developmental writing over and over again made the first developmental classes decrease enrollment so much that classes that used to be filled now had only 4-5 students enrolled. The

department restructured again, reducing the traditional developmental writing sequence to 2 classes: Beginning Writing and Intermediate Writing. Along with this change, a federal grant gave the department the opportunity to experiment with accelerated courses. A course called College English Studies was started, where students who needed both reading and writing courses could take one course and use it to replace up to 4 developmental courses. Along with the class, students were offered intensive advisors to assist with the coursework and the transition to college. So far, the success rate has been enough to sustain its continuation, but it has not proved to be a higher success rate than the traditional route. The college is currently embracing different routes for different students. Acceleration can be an excellent opportunity for some students, but for students unprepared for the intense workload, it can be a frustrating experience. Ideally, advisors would ask questions of students to find which path would work better for the individual student. However, many students enroll in courses in a mass registration in the gym (which does not allow for much personal attention) or enroll on their own (and may not truly understand the differences between the courses).

The course used for this study was Beginning Writing (what used to be called Writing Skills), now the first course in the developmental writing sequence. The college syllabus states:

This course is designed to help students develop their writing skills.

Within the context of their own essays, students learn how to improve the structure of their sentences and the expression of their ideas. The integration of thinking, reading, and writing is also emphasized.

A couple years ago, the college instituted a common textbook policy, and even more recently, a common exam policy. The common textbook for the course is Kirszner and Mandell's *Writing First with Readings*. The common final consists of 30 multiple-choice grammar questions and a short essay exam. Required "Methods of Evaluation" on the syllabus include 8-10 pages of revised writings, 10 pages of informal writing, "miscellaneous" to include "process/revision work, grammar assignments, quizzes, in-class work, preparation, and participation," and the final exam.

Within these guidelines, individual instructors' classes vary quite a bit, and even my own class changes from quarter to quarter. Still, it is hard not to feel limited by the requirement to use a reasonable amount of the book and to prepare students for a common final worth 20% of their final grade. Most instructors spend at least some class time on grammar review and some on writing process instruction, and my class is no different. Where I diverge from some of my colleagues is the heavy emphasis on process and on the heavy weight of the final portfolio.

I spend most of the first half of the quarter on rough writing in students' Writer's Notebook, beginning with an authority list based on Donald Murray's (1985) work, a list of 20 or more items that they know well. Even though I still cover the modes covered in the textbook as required, I try to lead them toward their authority list as the basis for their writing topics. After the first half of the term, they begin expanding on and revising the rough work they completed in their Writer's Notebook into more polished essays. During this phase, they share their writing with classmates in draft workshops. Normally, by this point in the quarter, students are more confident with their writing and comfortable with

their classmates, so they are not as worried about the workshops as students from former classes have been when I have had workshops early in the quarter. The last part of the course is spent revising the drafts for inclusion in the portfolio. Although the basic structure of the course seems fairly linear, I work to individualize the course as much as possible.

I often feel divided about the purpose of the class and how it should be run. I greatly appreciated my liberal arts education and the focus on collaborative learning leading toward scholarly conversations. Should students follow such a path, I would like my class to be the first step toward such work. Do we assume all students are writers, and they just have not yet had the appropriate educational experiences to pass the entrance exams? How much do we acknowledge that in a community/technical college environment, many students will not write academic prose beyond Composition I? Are we hoping to introduce students to the discipline or are we providing a service to the college by teaching students basic skills?

### **The Class**

Ethan: “This room must not have been meant as a classroom” (Fieldnote, July, 2013).

Students surround a conference-style table in the center of the room with no more than a few inches between each chair. A white board covers one wall of the room, and a teacher station with a computer, projector, and DVD player sits in front of one side of the white board. Chairs encircle the whole table so that seven students have their backs to the board. Sixteen students are enrolled in the class, and sixteen chairs surround the table;

however, one student has an interpreter, which squeezes students further together as they allow more room between the interpreter and the hearing impaired student she interprets for. Those who face the white board have less than a foot between themselves and the wall behind them. To their right, students have even less space.

I have held classes in this classroom several times before, and these classes have sometimes been classes full of friendship and joy. I remember one class where students from Syria, Russia, Vietnam, and the rural Midwest would talk each morning about their fun evenings out with each other. They had not known each other before sitting in class together. After the term had ended, I sometimes saw these students together in the cafeteria or student center. Other classes were not as close, but the students had been generally friendly.

From previous readings on retention (Noddings, 1995; Thayer-Bacon, 2004; Tinto, 1997) and prior teaching experiences, I have found that students who form bonds with each other are more likely to finish the class successfully. Group work is often central to writing classes, and group sessions often do not go well when students are hesitant to work with each other. However, many students are not ready to form these bonds early on. Many are new to college and are not sure what to expect. They do not know me or their classmates. Still, this class is quieter than typical classes. For the first two class periods, students are completely silent before class, not turning to even look at their classmates except when directed to do so for a class assignment.

Still, I press forward with group activities so that they can get to know each other and become more comfortable with each other by the time they have to share their

writing. During these activities, I could see that many of the groups were silent until I came to sit with them. As I talked to a group, students would talk to me, but not necessarily each other. While sitting with a particular group, I could see that other students in the class were sitting quietly, writing, or sneaking out their cell phones. The class started with 16 students, but by the third class period, 2 have already dropped, 1 being my student with a hearing impairment.

How can I build a community in my classroom before I lose more students? The first two students dropped without consulting me, so I am left to guess as to why they left. Other students are already attending randomly. On the fourth day, Quentin, a young white man, asks, "Is the class getting smaller?" (He asks this nearly every day throughout the quarter until he stops attending himself.)

Students who graduate from an all-white graduating class of 32 students are likely to find themselves in classes with students from a variety of different ethnic and language backgrounds. The class may also include students from bigger cities; these students often come to be near relatives who have moved to the city due to better job opportunities. Those from bigger cities often feel they have little in common with the rural students and vice versa.

Some of the students in the class include Juliet, a Sudanese woman in her 20s; Aniyah, an African-American woman in her late 30s from a large Midwestern city; Kayla, a white woman in her 30s from the South; Chris, a white man in his 20s from a rural area in the Northwest; Ethan, Logan, and Quentin--all white men in their 20s from the city in which the college is located; Jasmine, a white woman in her late teens from a

small nearby town; James, an African-American man in his late 30s; and Eh Doh, a Karen man in his early 20s.

6 students in the class as a whole are taking the class for the second time, 1 of whom had taken the class with me previously. Only a few of the students are completely new to the college, but many of the continuing students have had limited success with their college careers so far. Even though most students have had previous experiences within the college, no one in the class knows each other. The college is a commuter campus, so most students come only to classes and immediately leave campus for work or family obligations.

Hall Community College is on the quarter system, where classes are each 10 ½ weeks long. As such, there is little time to build friendships in a single classroom. Students often choose schedules to maximize work time, so students typically try to take classes only on Tuesdays and Thursdays or Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. This particular class meets only on Mondays and Wednesdays for 1 hour and 55 minutes each class. The time between Wednesday and Monday often seems sufficient for students to forget they have class. Missing one class often means academic confusion, but it also means loss of connection to the students in the classroom.

With the haphazard attendance, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the fact that students have come to college for a reason:

I currently do want to have a field in computer information, right now I'm leaning towards programming. Then if I could work for Beathold Studios The same company that made "The Elder Scrolls" Series. That is currently

my goal long Term career wise. But my short term goal is To have a Job closer To where I live and preferably a better paying one. (Logan's

Diagnostic Essay: July 2013)

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I will be an ultrasound tech, have a good home, and open a refuge for pets. (Jasmine's Diagnostic Essay: July 2013)

\*\*\*\*\*

My first goal is to finish school. They tell me I could finish in four years but may decide to go on after that. School does seem overwhelming at first but once you get the hang of things it becomes easier. Maybe cause confusion and the "can't do this" attitude comes in but you need to be your best supporter. I know school is gonna be great for my future. (Kayla's

Diagnostic Essay: July 2013)

\*\*\*\*\*

Well in 5 years I hope to be way better off than I am now. Growing up everybody said I would fail at anything I tried to do, but I showed them.

Just 3 years ago I was homeless and backpacking America, going everywhere and seeing everything to me and my family it seemed as though they were right. I wasn't doing anything good for myself, besides gaining travel experience.

Then after 2 years of that lifestyle I found out I had a son...

I want to have finished school and get a job on the railroad. I see myself in a house with my kids. My mindset will be the main thing to keep me going, also knowing my babies are taken care of. I know in 5 years Ill be exactly were I want to be. (Chris's Diagnostic Essay: July 2013)

What prevents students from reaching these goals? In a class that began with 16, only 10 will eventually finish the course. What drove those 10 to succeed despite equally difficult obstacles?

The chapters that follow include: Conflict in the Classroom, which analyzes a racial incident that occurred near the beginning of the term; Beyond the Label, which focuses on Jasmine, a student working to overcome the SPED label from her early schooling experiences; Keeping Ethan, which focuses primarily on Ethan, a student who has been overwhelmed by outside forces and depression; From Mai La to the Community College, which focuses on Eh Doh, a student who grew up as a Karen refugee in Thailand; and From Worker to Student, which focuses on James, a student who is rebuilding his life after a major workplace injury. While the students should not be taken as representatives of their particular groups, their stories illustrate common issues developmental writing community college students face. At the same time, the stories illustrate students overcoming major obstacles to successfully complete their first college courses.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM

On the far end of the conference table, sits Aniyah, an African-American woman in her late 30s. She is by herself on the corner of the table, but she is working with Jasmine, a white woman in her late teens, and Logan, a white man in his early 20s. I hear that they are talking about Obama, but do not hear the exact conversation. I lead them back toward their descriptive topics, and Jasmine asks me if she can write about her cat, Squeak. I listen to her tell me about the cat leaving dead birds on the porch, and then mention that it's sometimes more difficult than students think to write a developed essay on a pet. Logan does not offer a topic, but Aniyah asks if she can write about her 3 children. I say that it might be easier to focus on one of them, but to talk with her group members about possibilities. She instead opens up her notebook.

I rotate around the room, talking to each class member until I reach Destiny, who has already written a few sentences and asks, "Is this enough?" as she points to her descriptive paragraph. Since it is less than half a page, I tell her that she could expand it a little more and to consider that eventually, they will be expanding these ideas into longer pieces. She answers, "It's long enough for a paragraph," and closes her notebook.

On the other end of the room, I overhear Aniyah starting to get louder as she is talking to Jasmine and Logan. When I get to her, I tell her they can go ahead and move to writing about their topics. She just looks at

her paper and says, "I'm not comfortable. I'm leaving." When I ask her what happened, she says that Jasmine is whispering about her. Aniyah begins getting louder and tells the class directly that Jasmine and Logan were talking bad about Obama and that she was offended. They were not being respectful and that she wasn't going to put up with it. No one in the class says a word.

As Aniyah begins packing up her books and notebooks, I tell her not to leave, but to come talk to me. I tell the class to continue talking about their topics.

We talk out in the hallway. She tells me again what happened, but she is so angry that she has a hard time saying exactly what they had said. She didn't like their tone when they were talking about Obama, which is what they were talking about when I initially sat in with their group. She didn't appreciate that they were calling him a "bad president." What made her want to leave, though, was when she heard Jasmine whisper, "She's nice" to Logan. Aniyah said over and over that it wasn't right that she was talking about her. She could understand that people disagreed about Obama, but they had no business talking about her. They didn't know her. "What does she mean, 'She's nice'?"

"I don't feel comfortable," Aniyah tells me. I mostly listen, but I could not gather everything she was saying. In the end, I convince her to come back so that she does not miss what we were learning today. After

she is able to tell her story, she seems calmer and agrees to come back to the classroom.

When we walk back in, the class is talking, clearly about the incident, but they stop as I shush them so that we can move on.

Much of the rest of the class goes on as if nothing happened, but I can see that Jasmine is red in the face and holding back tears. Still, Jasmine and Aniyah both participate as required. (Fieldnote, July, 2013)

The conflict between Jasmine and Aniyah concerned me on many levels. I worried first that I had made a huge mistake in how I handled the conflict. Was it not wrong of me to take Aniyah out of the classroom but not Jasmine and Logan? Should I have been braver and taken this as an opportunity to start a conversation about race in the classroom? Had I planned an essentially meaningless activity, considering none of the students wanted to complete it? Do such collaborative activities actually help students become more comfortable in a class or do they make the class even less comfortable? Am I expecting too much in trying to create a community of learners in such a short time span? How important is it for struggling writers to complete peer review? Considering the tough backgrounds many of my students have had, how much can I expect my students to share with each other, both through their writing and through their class and group discussions? After this class, I felt I had failed my students, and I had many more questions than answers. As I analyzed the story, though, I was able to see the difficulties students may face in adjusting to a new class, new instructor, and a new place.

### **Conflicting Goals**

Beginning Writing is the first course in the developmental writing sequence at Hall Community College. Students who take the course have likely come from negative previous schooling and writing experiences, so my first hope is to make students more comfortable with writing. I have had too many students in the past whose biggest challenge was to move beyond staring at the page. In my teacher's journal a couple years ago, I wrote:

I want to be the teacher who creates a caring, safe environment for my students so that they can be free to explore ideas, make mistakes, ask questions, and write without fear. (Teacher's Journal, June, 2011)

Beyond providing a secure environment, I admit that I am torn about what sort of course I should teach. Can a course be entirely about getting over the fear of writing? If so, how do I incorporate the required grammar instruction while still assuring students that they do not need to worry about grammar in the early stages of a writing project? If my goal is to draw on students' own interests and experiences, how can I justify asking a student not to write about her cat? If I create a course based on social justice, how can I do so without devoting a large portion of the course to outside readings and work that may not be central to writing issues? Though I have always been drawn to theme-based courses, whenever I have created such a course, I have faced resistance from those uninterested in the themes I had chosen.

In the end, I had students freewrite one minute and complete a grammar quiz another minute. I had students read about multi-cultural issues, but I allowed them to write about making pizza or buying a new pet. I told students they could write about

personal topics, but they needed to be prepared to share these writings with their classmates. I told students not to stress, yet they still had to take a high-stakes final exam worth a large percentage of their grade. On the first day of class, I told students that this classroom often fostered friendships, but early in the term, it had only stirred conflict.

### **The Activity**

In an interview with a composition student, Cox (2009) revealed a common thought students had about writing classes: “It’s okay to miss class, since we don’t really do anything” (p. 108). Although this is a comment I have heard about many classes, whether it is English, sociology, or history, I started thinking about students’ perceptions of the activity they were required to complete. To students, the brainstorming activity was meaningless, a “busy-work” activity.

My goal, of course, was not simply to fill time. In many other classes, students have little opportunity to get to know each other. Since the class had met only a few times, students still had not become comfortable with each other. I had thought that a simple activity would not only give them a chance to talk but to think through some possibilities for their writing. However, simply commanding students to “get to know each other” did not work as well as it had in the past with more out-going groups of students who enjoyed the chance to talk to one another.

As I thought more about what they were required to do—to brainstorm possible topics for a descriptive essay—I realized that there were several issues I had not considered. Although writing a descriptive essay is a common activity in writing courses, I realized that to students, the purpose was rather distant. I started to think of the specific

assignments my 3<sup>rd</sup> grader had to write, such as “Describe a picnic you and your family took” (when I am not sure we have ever been on a picnic), and I realized that the assignments in the book were not that much different: “A place you felt trapped in, a comfortable spot on campus, your dream house, a pet, a cooking disaster, . . .” (Kirsznner & Mandell, 2012, p. 94). I felt like I should have known better—that such topics rarely produced meaningful essays—but I had decided to follow the book more closely this quarter, partly because of a previous class’s experience and partly because I wanted to study what a “typical” developmental writing class might look like.

The previous term, I had planned a class that was focused primarily on student experiences. It happened, though, that the students in that class were all recovering from traumatic backgrounds. It was a small class of just 4 students. One had bi-polar disorder, another was a recovering alcoholic, while another had just left his children after a bitter divorce. I knew their stories from conversations with them, but when they had to write an essay, the last thing they wanted to do was write anything about themselves personally. Although they talked to me, they did not talk to each other. I did not push them to write about personal topics, but during conferences, they would often say that they could write about the time they \_\_\_\_\_, but they would rather just write about what it means to be a good student (or any topic that any student could write).

After that class, I started thinking, “What’s so wrong with the rhetorical modes?” Besides, learning how to write different types of essays was part of the college syllabus and clearly outlined in our textbook. Who was I to dredge up horrible memories? I hoped

for a more pleasant class this term, but I had not thought through how to keep the work challenging and meaningful at the same time.

Cox's (2009) study revealed how students' perceptions of the purpose of an assignment made a huge impact in the success of a course. When students did not know why they were completing an assignment, they did the minimum amount of work. This attitude was clear throughout the class described above. No student wanted to actually brainstorm descriptive topics with a group. As far as I could tell, the only time students actually talked to each other about descriptive topics was when I was sitting with them. As soon as I rotated to another group, students began writing their own assignments or began talking about other topics entirely.

Destiny's refusal to complete more than a few sentences shows that she saw the assignment as something to get over with as soon as possible. Cox's (2009) study likewise showed community college students overwhelmingly saw college as a means to get a job. The courses themselves were something to get through. "In the end, if a student concluded that the coursework offered no 'useful' knowledge, then 'getting it over with'—doing only the minimal work required for a passing grade—proved paramount: (p. 75).

While some students took the opportunity to get their homework done as quickly as possible during class, others sought to discuss issues they felt more important. When Jasmine, Logan, and Aniyah's group had started talking about health care and Obama's job as president, they were talking about something more meaningful than their favorite pet or place to relax, but I wanted them to focus on their assignment at hand. Clearly, my

attempt to return them to their planned discussion did not work. At the same time, how could I fault them for talking about what interested them when one of the main goals of the day was to get to know each other?

### **Community and Race**

Much of the research on student persistence in college has focused on the importance of student involvement and connections made to other students (Tinto, 1997; Barbatis, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). According to Tinto (1997), “Generally speaking, the greater students’ involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills” (p. 600). Based on this philosophy, many colleges have begun learning communities in order to support student learning and to help students feel like a part of something greater than themselves (Tinto, 1997; Barbatis, 2010). Types of learning communities vary, but they usually involve students taking a core group of classes together with other students; along with taking classes together, students meet outside of classes and may have an advisor specifically assigned to their group (Malnarich, 2005; Barbatis, 2010). Learning communities can be especially important in community colleges that are primarily commuter campuses. Such communities help students establish friendships and a support network that they may not otherwise have if they only came to classes and left as soon as they were over.

Since the persistence rate is even less in developmental education classes than in the general community college population, the establishment of learning communities has been advanced as one possible solution to the low success rate in developmental classes.

When developmental classes are team taught or linked with a content-area course, the courses can seem more meaningful to students, leading to greater student persistence (Malnarich, 2005).

Although Hall Community College had experimented with learning communities for developmental students, the pilot program lasted only two terms. The main issue was scheduling, both for students and instructors. Only a few instructors were interested in the concept, so classes offered were based on those instructors' availability, which was limited based on the number interested. In addition, students were offered only one option for class times, making accommodating work and family schedules nearly impossible.

Still, knowing the importance of the establishment of community, I hoped to do this on a small scale in my own classrooms. In previous classes, I had watched students establish friendships that would last beyond our class; they had often told me that our English class had been the only class where talking to each other was encouraged. They had no friends from other classes. I wanted the class to become a community of learners. At minimum, I wanted them to be able to work together for peer review with as little pain as possible.

Much of the research on community and persistence, however, has not taken race into account (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Winkle-Wagner (2009) has argued, "the academic and social integration model suggests an underlying assumption that a *student* must integrate into the institution rather than challenging *institutions* to adapt to the needs of new populations of students" (pp. 9-10). Although Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study

focused on African American women in a predominantly White university, much of her argument applies to community colleges as well.

Despite its growing diversity, Hall Community College is still predominantly white. At the same time, developmental classes are often more diverse. Students, though, often have come from more homogenous high schools. In this class, for example, Jasmine had come from a nearby town that was predominantly white. Aniyah had come from a primarily African American community from a major metropolitan city. Eh Doh grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand, but in Hall, he has found a Karen community with which he spends most of his time. Juliet grew up in a small village in Sudan and had not met people of other races until a life-changing trip to Egypt. Other students grew up in rural communities and may have met only 1 or 2 people of other races before attending Hall. Should we expect students with such diverse backgrounds to feel comfortable with each other after only a few classes?

Winkle-Wagner (2009) pointed out that “Less than half of the African American students who begin college actually complete their degrees in six years” (p. 8). The issues go far beyond any individual classroom, but this one class studied revealed an important factor in Aniyah’s comment: “She doesn’t *know* me.”

**“I’m not comfortable. I’m leaving.”**

The last thing that I wanted was for Aniyah to leave. At that point, I wanted nothing more than for the tension to not become worse, so talking to her outside the classroom seemed to be the wisest option. Had she not been already on her way out the door, I can see now how taking only her out and not the two others to discuss the conflict

would have been inappropriate. In fact, a colleague who had brought an African American student out into the hallway to discuss her behavior in class found herself having to defend herself to the Diversity Administrator. The student had complained that being brought out into the hallway had been demeaning and insensitive. For Aniyah, though, the ability to let go with me and explain why she was so angry helped her calm down enough to return to class. She truly wanted to learn, she had told me. She just was not comfortable with the other students in class.

Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study of African American women at a primarily white institution illustrated feelings of both culture-shock and isolation among African American women. The women in the study felt both "spotlighted" and "invisible" at the same time. At times, they were asked in class to represent their race, while at other times, they felt completely unnoticed (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Throughout the course, I tried to remain sensitive to the challenges I knew many of my students faced in feeling like an outsider on campus. Still, I worried that the class that I had set up did little to meaningfully bring students together.

### **"Real Teaching"**

In Cox's (2009) interviews with community college students, students overwhelmingly appreciated classes that were "taught" by their professors; they rarely understood the purpose of group work, including peer review.

I don't want some stupid kid grading my paper. For all I know, the kid next to me could be some kid that makes all Fs in school. I mean, you just pass your paper to the kid next to you, and he reads it, and he goes, 'Oh,

that's good,' and he passes it back to you. It's not productive at all, it's a waste of time, if anything. (Cox, 2009, p.110)

Cox clarified that the professor actually had articulated clear expectations for the workshop and that students were not “grading” each other; however, students generally wanted to know only what the professor had to say, not their fellow classmates. When describing classes where they had learned the most, many students described math or criminal justice, courses that had a clear content to convey. Students appreciated English when they were taught something they had to use in other classes, such as MLA format or a particular essay structure (Cox, 2009, p. 110).

Many composition classes, however, are built on the idea that students are already writers, and what teachers need to do is get out of the way:

Our greatest challenge in developing the craft and the art of teaching is to learn how to allow learning, how to get out of the way of our students, so that we can run after them, supporting them when they need support, encouraging them when they've earned it, and kicking tail when they need to get going. (Murray, 1985, p. 5)

In order to give students a sense of the writer's life, we have them work with each other as professional writers might, relying on colleagues to give initial reactions and feedback. Students, however, regularly fight back, assuring us that they have nothing to offer each other.

Is there a way to resolve the conflicting ideas of how a class should be run?

In the end, I compromised, taking some time over the next few days to get students used to the class by having whole-class discussions. Students seemed willing to talk to me—just not to each other. I worked to find out what students knew and used that knowledge as examples for directions for their writing. Eventually, students began talking to each other, and by the time I had them share their essays for peer review, they were happy to do so.

In her final reflection essay, Aniyah wrote about the change she experienced in class:

I feel this class has made be a better writer which will prepare me for the next writing class I take. Most of all I have learned how to be a team player with my fellow classmates. (Aniyah's Reflection Essay, September 2013)

Comments on course evaluations were generally positive about me and the class: “positive,” “kind,” “understands those who have children,” “down to earth,” “honest,” “listens,” “respectful.” When I later talked to students from the class, most seemed to appreciate the class; aside from Jasmine, most did not even mention the incident at the beginning of the class. Still, there are many things I would have changed about the course. An analysis of this event early the term reveals the complexity of the developmental writing classroom and the tough decisions an instructor must make when planning any class.

Those working to re-design developmental education may be well-aware that diversity exists within the classes and that students need to feel a part of the college to do

well, but they may not understand the specific struggles students may have within a classroom. When Aniyah said, “I’m not comfortable. I’m leaving,” she may have meant it in response to her classmates’ comments, but such a situation illustrates a turning point for many students. Is this a place they want to be? As a teacher, I want to create that place students want to be, but this creation is a constant process, changing with each group of students. Although Aniyah finished the class successfully and enrolled in the next quarter, she received all Fs for the next term, most likely due to simply leaving the college. Her abilities were very high, and she had a lot to offer the school. More work to make college a place all students feel comfortable, respected, and valued is necessary to keep our students from leaving college before their degrees are completed.

## CHAPTER 6

## BEYOND THE LABEL

In my school people would call me stupid and told me because I was sped I couldn't go to collage. I was'nt smart and I could'nt do any thing. They said I would work for minum wage my whole life. They put me in all easiy classes until my junor/seiror year, that is when they hit me hard with all the classes. (Jasmine's Journal, July, 2013)

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I'm sped—us speds are happy with D's. (Anonymous: October, 2013)

According to Hall's K-12 school district brochure, "The Special Education Program is designed to provide a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities which interfere with educational functioning ranging in ages from 3 through 21." Some disabling conditions include orthopedic impairment, hearing impairment, visual impairment, visual impairment, deaf-blind, mentally handicapped, behavior disordered, specific learning disability, developmental delay, traumatic brain injury, autism or autism spectrum disorder, speech impairment, or chronic health problems. Students I have had have usually called such services "SPED."

4 students in my class self-disclosed that they had been labeled as "SPED" in their previous schooling experiences, but only 1 student received official accommodations for a learning disability. As more and more students who had previously been convinced that they could not attend college are attending college, instructors must be prepared for this

changing population. According to Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann (2008), the number of college students with disabilities has tripled over the past twenty years. At the same time, colleges have done little to adjust to these changes (Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2008). Students are often unaware of the changes between K-12 education and college, where they are responsible for paying for their own testing and for advocating for their own accommodations. When accommodations are successfully negotiated with the accommodations office, instructors, used to many years of students without such requests, frequently question the details of the accommodation. For example, I have heard many instructors complain about accommodations that allow calculators in math classes or flexibility with grammar in writing classes. Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann (2008) write, “Too often, though, when students with disabilities come to college, they face an environment that ignores them or is even hostile” (p. 3).

How do students who have spent much of their schooling identified as “special education” experience the transition to college? I have often been told by students that they had been “mislabeled” as “special education.” For such students, college is a chance for them to show that they were indeed mislabeled and that they can make something of themselves. The difficulty for many of these students, though, is that they had been placed in classes that offered them little preparation for college. In their experience, very little writing was required. The most writing they did was to fill in worksheets. For students who do not fight the label, they may end up fighting their instructors over what qualifies as a “reasonable” accommodation. One of my previous students angrily proclaimed to me that his math instructor’s refusal to allow a calculator was the same as

“cutting off my arm.” He could not afford the testing to prove his disability, so the instructor was under no obligation to give him an accommodation. Students who have spent their entire K-12 schooling with easy access to calculators, grammar-checks, and tutors sometimes do not understand why college instructors may be hesitant to allow these supports in their classes. In the class studied, I had a few students experiencing this transition, but Jasmine was the one most willing to write about and share her experiences with me. Her story is important to consider as colleges welcome students who had previously thought college was not an option.

### **Jasmine’s Experience of the Classroom**

At the end of the first day of class, one student remained behind after all of the other students had left. Jasmine, a 19-year-old white woman, with glasses a little too big for her face and brown hair pulled back into a pony tail, continued to write 5 minutes past the end of the class period. I watched her write, shake her hand, and write some more. When she was finished, she looked up and asked if she could tape record the class since she was having trouble keeping up due to a previous hand injury. I mentioned to her that I did not mind having a tape recorder but that most instructors would require an accommodation letter for both the tape recording request and for the extra time needed for writing. At that time, she mentioned that she had had special accommodations in high school, but that she had not had the paperwork sent to the college yet. (I never did receive accommodations for her, and she never did record the classes.)

The next class, she was again the last student to remain behind, writing until past the end of the class. When she was finished, she asked if I could print out the

PowerPoints for her. She had noticed that I had given one to the hearing impaired student (who did have an accommodation requiring printed PowerPoints). I told her that I was posting all of the PowerPoints in Moodle, our online delivery system, but she said she was having difficulties opening the files. One of her classmates, Logan, had told her that she might not have PowerPoint on her computer, but she insisted that she did. In the end, I decided to bring her print-outs since she seemed so determined to have them.

Early on, I worried about her success in the class. Her writing was full of spelling and punctuation errors, enough to interfere with understanding her work. The topics she chose were also ones I knew she would have difficulty using in future composition classes. For example, one of her first topics was about her cat, Squeak. This is one of her earliest journal entries:

My cats name is Squeky. She is 17 almost 18 years old. She came from Californya. She was born in the allie where we use to live. She layed on my mom chest/sholder the whole way from Californya to Nebraska. She is Calico but she looks like she's black espealie a night. She like to kill birds and leaving them on the poach. She also like to do that with rats as well. She likes to lay on the poarch in the day time when it's nice and hot. At night she likes to goin to eat and then she goes back out and plays a night. When you scach her ears she needs on you skin and she will put her paw up and need the air as well. (Jasmine's Journal: July 2013)

**“I have no filter”**

For a few classes, Jasmine remained quiet during class time, dutifully taking notes and writing at the far corner of the conference table. She was clearly nervous about doing well, each class staying to talk to me about an accommodation or to ask questions. Her nervousness shifted to another concern, though, after the incident with Aniyah described in Chapter 5.

During our interview after the quarter was over, I asked Jasmine about the challenges she faced when she began the course. Jasmine's eyes lit up as she remembered the experience with Aniyah. Jasmine told me that she was talking to Logan about how the president was doing and the conversation went on to health care. She did not tell me specifically what they said about health care, but Aniyah's response was, "How can you be so racist?" Jasmine was trying to tell Logan that not all African Americans were "gang bangers"—that Aniyah, for example, was "nice and smart." Jasmine said she was trying to show that she was not being stereotypical, but that her intentions were misunderstood. She truly could not understand why Aniyah was so upset. I remembered talking to Jasmine after class that day:

When I explained to her that Aniyah thought she had been saying that she was "nice" sarcastically, Jasmine was visibly shaken and crying. "I don't even know what sarcasm is," she said to me. "I was taught to be nice to everyone." She really did not understand what had made Aniyah angry with her, and she was definitely not used to having anyone upset with her.

(Fieldnotes, July, 2013)

In class, Jasmine had mentioned several times that she was from Dale. This city has less than 7,000 people, 500 students in her high school, and is 96.8% white. However, during our interview, Jasmine told me that she was actually born in Los Angeles, and that in her early memories, white people were the minority on her block. “I don’t want this to sound racist,” she said, initially not wanting to mention the races of the children in her neighborhood. She remembered playing with African American and Mexican American children, but she said her brother was chased home by a gang of kids every day. In 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade, she remembered moving in the middle of the night. In the Midwest, her family felt they could have a better life away from gangs, away from the poverty they were facing.

She remembered distinctly the changes. She could suddenly walk around town without her parents worrying about her safety. In Los Angeles, she could not play outside. In her new town, no one locked doors, and people were friendly.

After her incident with Aniyah, Jasmine was afraid to say anything to her. She was nervous to even come to class, but she continued to come; she just stayed as quiet as possible. She told me, “If you don’t know a person, your shields are up—some—are just trying to pass the class.” Still, after a few days, she began talking again, talking regularly with Logan, a student who had identified himself as someone who had also experienced special education classes. She said she also talked to a couple other students in the class, but she did not feel like she made friends with anyone in the class. When I pressed her about whether she had become friends with Logan, she admitted she talked to him in class, but she had not really talked to him since.

Although she worked hard in the class, she had a hard time understanding that there might be other sides to an issue, and she had a difficult time sensing how others might react to a point of view.

Because of the tension in the class, I allowed students to choose their own workshop groups. Normally, I might have orchestrated groups of people with varying strengths. However, since it had taken so long for the students in this class to become comfortable in the class, I wanted students to work with those they felt the most comfortable with. In the end, I think this might have been a mistake since Jasmine and Logan chose to work with each other each time, and for each workshop, they primarily validated each other's papers. In some ways, working together may have been a necessary confidence builder, especially for Jasmine, but it also gave her a much smaller audience for her writing. Logan's response to her paper on gun control, for example, was that she was right—that places that tried to limit guns wound up having more troubles with guns. He rarely critiqued her writing, and she rarely critiqued his. They might spend a few minutes reading each other's papers, but then they would often just talk. Whenever I would notice this, I would try to bring them back to helping each other improve their essays, but since I could spend only so much time with each group, my advice was often ignored as soon as I went to visit with another group.

Part of me worried that the groups were not as helpful as they could be, but part of me was just happy that everyone seemed to be getting along. The groups were still spending some time on the writing, some more than others, but they did what they were required to, and everyone seemed much more relaxed.

At the end of the term, students were required to read their favorite paper to the class, and Jasmine had decided to read her paper on gun control. When I later asked her about her decision to read her paper on gun control for the class presentations, she said that she thought, “What’s the harm? I didn’t think I’d stir up controversy.” When she had shared her paper with Logan, he simply gave her further examples to support her points, so she had not considered others might disagree with her points.

As she read her paper about how every American should have the right to carry a gun, the class listened politely. She writes, “So today I’m going to tell you about why we should be able to own and carry a gun, why guns could be fun, and some experience I have with guns” (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013). Much of the essay, however, was her personal experience with guns rather than an argument. For examples, she wrote about her first gun:

When I was about seven to eight years old, my dad gave me a gun, and when I saw my dad use it, it didn’t look that hard to do. So my dad told me to “come here”; and he showed me how to use it, and when I pulled that trigger it threw me on my butt, and he looked at me and asked me if I wanted to use it again and I backed away shaking my head violently!!!

When I was older, my dad, my brother and I went to a shooting range, and we shot some bows and then some guns. When I took my first shot that day, they looked at me and was surprised that I did very well. (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013)

As she finished her essay, though, one student who had been quiet much of the quarter, said, “I disagree. A gun killed my cousin. I don’t think we need so many guns.”

Logan argued that places where there have been increased gun laws have seen an increase in crime.

The student who originally disagreed became more agitated. “No, too many people are getting killed. It’s not worth it.”

Aniyah added, ““What about Sandy Hook? Trayvon Martin? Enough is enough.”

Jasmine remained silent, saying only, “Ok?”

Since the primary purpose of the presentations was a celebration of the students’ best work, I eventually turned the focus back on the good qualities of the essay and tried to move forward. Luckily, it was about time for a break, so I dismissed students for a break, at which time, students continued their discussion. Jasmine, looking down, said, “Maybe I shouldn’t have read that essay.”

When we talked about what happened during our interview after the quarter was over, Jasmine was still surprised by the students’ reaction. Since she had grown up around guns and had even been given a gun when she was eight years old, she was not fully aware of opposing arguments. When I had asked her to consider the other side as she revised her essay, she added that guns could be dangerous. She wrote, “There have been times when the father takes his son hunting and the kid accidentally hit his dad on his face next to his eye” (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013). However, she did not address the national debate on guns.

## **Different Worlds**

As I reflected upon the incident, I wondered, was there a way to reconcile the extremes in experiences and values among those in the class? Some students had come from very rural backgrounds where guns were a part of life; fun included hunting, target shooting, and attending gun shows. Other students came from war-torn countries and as such, thought of guns as part of war. Still others came from urban areas where gun violence had taken the lives of friends and loved ones. Being in the same room together for 10 weeks might have been a start for understanding each other, but many clearly had difficulties listening to other viewpoints.

Complicating matters was that some of the students had had little schooling experiences that would prepare them for critical thinking. Those who had spent much of their schooling divided from mainstream students described their schooling as a “straight D” experience of being “pushed through.” College is often a place where students begin to challenge their world views, but should allowances be made for students on the autistic spectrum, for example? Such students may be brilliant in many fields, but may have very real difficulties relating to other people. While some students had clearly come to their view points after years of experiences and thoughtful consideration, some students likely were repeating what they had heard their parents saying.

As a teacher, I felt torn between pushing Jasmine and protecting her. I knew of the pain she carried with her of being called “stupid,” and I hoped college could be a positive change for her. Still, every student in that class carried some kind of pain. How

could I lead her toward a deeper understanding of the issues she was writing about and of other students' points of view while still supporting her efforts of redefining herself?

### **Motivation**

Despite her challenges, Jasmine was one of my most motivated students. She was one of only a few students with perfect attendance in the class. She always did her work and always on time. When I interviewed her after the quarter was over, she told me she felt her strengths were, "a good imagination, always had an idea, always could get length, and knew how to write an essay" (Interview with Jasmine, October, 2013).

"You're going to college, whether you want to or not," her mother had drilled into her head. In her portfolio essay, she wrote, "Another reason for going to college I want to break the curse in my family of not going to college or graduated from college" (Jasmine's Portfolio, September, 2013). Her father was the only one to go to college in her family, but he never graduated. She said that she and her two brothers were all "SPED," all with troubles in their K-12 schooling. She had one brother who was a trucker and one who was looking for work. The one who was still looking for work had been told by his teachers that he couldn't do anything, and Jasmine was afraid he still believed this. She thought the brother who was a trucker could have gone farther in his schooling if his disability had been caught earlier. By the time he received special education services, he had not been reading for so long that he had a nearly impossible time catching up.

Even though Jasmine had some similar negative experiences, she also had an advisor tell her, "If you are not going to do your homework, you're not going to get through college." Jasmine was determined, though, to follow her mother's wishes for her

to go to college and to prove to those who did not believe in her that she could make it through college. Jasmine wrote, “My own mother would take me to her job to teach me how bad it was to work for a job with minimum wage at her age while she was supporting not only herself but also her kids” (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013).

Jasmine decided to attend HCC to “get a level up,” to use it as a “stepping stone.” Eventually, she hopes to go to another college to become an ultrasound technician. Right now, she is working for a pizza place for minimum wage. She described her current job troubles in one of her portfolio essays:

Some of the bosses I work with like to take everything out on me. I have to pick up after one of my co-workers because he is slow and doesn’t take care of his tables. When he has to work he lets the plates build up and the customers’ cups get low. He doesn’t always wipe off his tables. (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013)

Jasmine wrote:

I want a job that I can do more than just pay the bills and suck, like one where I will either enjoy or have fun while doing it. Where I can be proud that I work there. Earn enough money in case I decide to get married later on in life and support any children I have. (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013)

Because she had such concrete goals, Jasmine sometimes had difficulty relating to other students in the class, who were not as motivated as she was. She did not understand

why some students would not come to class or not do the work. “You don’t have to be here—you’re paying for this,” she said. Throughout her experiences in Beginning Writing, she never wavered in her determination to do well in the class and eventually finish college.

### **Educational Significance**

I do not tell Jasmine’s story as representative of students with learning disabilities. Her story is her own, and it illustrates both her difficulties in adjusting to college life and the relief she felt to no longer be called the “SPED kid.” Still, her story does raise questions about curriculum in the writing classroom and about how colleges can better serve students with disabilities.

### **Jasmine’s Preparation**

In my interview with Jasmine (October, 2013), she discussed her previous English classes, saying that she did very little writing until 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Before 12<sup>th</sup> grade, she remembered reading about the Greek gods, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Great Gatsby*. The writing required for those classes involved short-answer responses. In 12<sup>th</sup> grade, she was required to write, but she said that the topics were about “simple things,” such as “What did you like?” “What happened when you were younger?” Much of this writing involved 1-2 pages. She mentioned fighting frequently with her English teacher and thinking that the teacher did not care very much. She said the teacher “just pushed me through.” When I asked what they fought about, she said it was often about mythology, but now that she thought about it, she was not sure why she argued so much.

When Jasmine began the course, she told me in her interview that she was most worried about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. She was also worried about her vocabulary, but mostly about how to spell “big words.” She told me that she left out some words because she did not know how to spell them. As she talked, I worried that *Beginning Writing* as it is perpetuates the assumption that English is all about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Because students are required to take and pass a common final exam that includes a grammar component, some of the class is necessarily devoted to such issues. In her Reflection Essay, Jasmine’s preoccupation was still with surface issues. She wrote, “I like to use big words now because I’m not afraid to spell them because of word check” (Jasmine’s Portfolio, September, 2013).

For writing teachers, it is important to realize that students from special education backgrounds likely did not take classes geared toward preparing them for college. Although Jasmine eventually placed into mainstream classes, she had many years of skills-based courses. Even in college, she still assumed the main purpose of the class to be to teach spelling and vocabulary. Unfortunately, the structure of the course did little to change that impression.

### **Teacher Preparation**

Although Hall Community College has a Diversity Office, there are no required trainings about teaching students with disabilities. Instructors are required to complete 3 diversity activities, but these are entirely instructor choice and can be fulfilled by attending a local ethnic festival. Instructors may be aware of the changing classroom, but they have few resources to learn how to best serve a population new to the college.

Instructors often receive “Request for Accommodation” forms, but they may have little understanding as to why a student might need to use a calculator or a spell-checker. Even more important could be some understanding of social issues related to disabilities. While I have read about colleges that embrace a more inclusive pedagogy, most of the colleges where I have taught have limited resources to support instructors in their transition to teaching students with disabilities.

A first step in teacher preparation would be a review of disability studies, an area of inquiry I was unaware of until very recently. According to Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann (2008):

Rather than viewing disability solely as an individual-based deficiency or pathology, or through the lens of medical or therapeutic discourses, disability studies approaches the topic from the perspective of disabled people. It draws on critical, social, and constructivist theories in order to understand disability in the contexts of history, culture, and society and to provide an enriched and coherent view of disability as part of universal human experience, by understanding and analyzing disability as a phenomenon that simultaneously manifests itself at the bodily, personal, and societal levels. (p. 1)

For instructors, an understanding of the complexities of the experiences of student disabilities can help them see beyond the list of accommodations given to them at the beginning of the quarter.

### **The Writing Classroom**

Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann (2008) point out that common practices in the writing classroom are often ones that are successful with students with learning disabilities: scaffolding writing, revising, group work, and teacher conferences can be helpful for all students. An additional practice that can be helpful is the use of technology, such as audiotapes and websites. For Jasmine, for example, the ability to access PowerPoints increased her comfort-level with the course. Group work, however, was problematic for Jasmine except when she was with another student with learning disabilities. Had I prepared students better, though, for the diversity of the classroom, perhaps the group work could have gone smoother earlier on.

To make for a more inclusive classroom, readings on disability should be incorporated, not as an “add-on,” but as a part of the structure of the class. Writing classes often already celebrate diversity of races, cultures, and gender identities, but most textbooks have not included readings on disability.

One danger is the temptation to spin stories on disability as something to “overcome” (Lewiecki-Wilson & Brueggemann, 2009). Even as I have written and analyzed Jasmine’s story, I have been careful not to oversimplify her experiences. Initially, I wanted to highlight her as a success story, someone who has been able to prove her high school classmates wrong. Indeed, she has completed Beginning Writing successfully, and beyond our class, she has continued to do well. Still, I understand the dangers of telling the narrative as an overcoming of a deficit.

Like Aniyah, Jasmine is a student who simply wants to be *known*. The writing classroom can be a place for such exploration, but it is not without conflict and

complications. In light of all that can happen in a classroom, my early goal of creating a safe class in which students can write without fear suddenly seems naïve. If students are to share their writing with others, they must be aware of how their stories may conflict with those of their classmates. As I design my future classes, I need to consider better these conflicting stories and how I can better support all students in their shift to college writing.

As colleges work to re-design their programs, Jasmine's story is important to keep in mind. For a student who has had little experience with writing and has had many years of IEPs (Individualized Educational Programs) that allowed for extra time with their work, an accelerated class could be a frustrating experience. Since she was able to complete her developmental coursework in two quarters rather than one, Jasmine was able to build her confidence and gain more writing experience before jumping into a college-level class. In a time when many colleges are either accelerating coursework or eliminating courses from their developmental sequence as a way to keep more students, some other students are undoubtedly left out in this process.

## CHAPTER 7

## KEEPING ETHAN

As we discuss process writing, I notice that Ethan is drawing, not taking notes like the others. When I go around the room to talk to students about topics, I am tempted to ask him to focus, considering he is one that was not very organized with his notebook. Instead, we talk about possible process papers, and he says he doesn't really want to write about work because it's annoying right now. Jasmine mentions that he could write about how to deal with annoying customers, and he makes a fist and waves it in the air. He tells a story about a woman calling the pizza place where he works and saying that she did not like the pizza she received three days ago. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked him. Ethan again forms his fist and hits the table—gently. I tell them he could certainly write about that experience but that he should not feel obligated to write about his job. He could write about something he enjoys doing. Jasmine says that he could write about drawing, noting that he can draw well. He nods his head, but is not clearly convinced. (Fieldnote, July, 2013)

Ethan was a white male in his early 20s, with spiked brown hair and black ear gauges. Each day, he wore a different metal band shirt. In a Midwestern suburban college, he stood out among the classmates who usually came dressed in state football sweatshirts and jeans. He usually participated in class, but often inappropriately and off topic. Ethan formed a fist several times that day, every time he was reminded about work.

Sometimes he would form it and unform it. Other times, he would hit the table, but not hard enough to cause alarm. Based on early writings and conversations, I knew he was a young man full of anger at the world. His grandfather had kicked him out of the house for stealing from him, a crime that he says he did not commit. He could not afford a book, and he spent the whole class without one. He also did not think he actually needed the class. On the second day of class, he arrived late, and told me he knew he could do better on the COMPASS test. A student like Ethan is not uncommon in Beginning Writing. How can I engage such a student in the classroom? At what point does his behavior become distracting to other students? How do I know if he is perhaps dangerous?

From previous experience, I thought of Ethan as the type of student to simply disappear from class and not return. He had already missed the first class and had been late to the next two. Since he had not bought a book yet and had done few assignments, he at this point had not become invested in the class. From reading his assignments that he did write, I knew that he had had few positive experiences in school, and I hoped that this class could be a new start. Although he did not disclose that he had depression until later in the quarter, I sensed this suffering early on based on the way he carried his body and the feeling of helplessness his words and actions portrayed. I have had students in previous classes who had been kicked out of their prior writing classes for inappropriate or even hostile behaviors, but they had been able to be successful in mine. One student, for example, had thrown a chair across a room after he had been told by his teacher it was time that he “learn correct English.” This student questioned nearly every rule in the book, but he stuck with the class and eventually passed. Although I know I should know better than to try to “save” my students, I remembered how this previous student had

calmed down after a couple weeks, and I tried my best to keep Ethan in class despite his distracting behaviors.

### **Classroom Experiences**

Although I have learned from experience and past readings that drawing can be a way for students, especially students with anger issues, to deal with anxiety, that day, I had a hard time watching Ethan spend so much of his class time drawing a picture of a dragon. The dragon took up a full page of his notebook, and he continued to add details to it throughout the class. Did he not know that he should be taking notes and writing? At the same time, I knew he was on edge, and it did not help that the class had been talking about workplace experiences, something that he did not want to think about. Early in the quarter, he had written about his family troubles:

My dad hadn't been feeling the greatest lately, he kept getting sick and looked like shit 24/7. The night before my mom had to pull me out of my grandparent's house because her father tried to explain to me how he thought I was stealing from him every time I came over. The guy I was supposed to trust didn't have an ounce of respect for anyone else but himself, so me being the black sheep of the family, I had to be the one to blame. (Ethan's Narrative Essay, September, 2013)

Much of that particular class period, he talked about his troubles at work. However, the last thing he wanted to do was write about these troubles. Although my pedagogy was based on drawing on student experiences, often the experiences that come to students' minds can cause unintended pain. I imagined myself as a beginning teacher,

and I knew I would have asked him to stop drawing, to pay attention. However, those dealing with anxiety, depression, or trauma may need a distraction to cope with the classroom environment. Certainly, part of his issue could have been boredom; however, he was paying attention and participating. While he was drawing, his hands were occupied, not hitting the table, as he had already done a few times.

In my first teaching experiences as a graduate student and then as an instructor at a research university, a request by me to stop drawing would have likely resulted in the student quietly obeying. In my experiences with university 18-year-olds, I remember very little resistance. Students came to class, did their work, and participated. Some might have been quieter than others; some might have not tried quite as hard, but for the most part, classes went smoothly.

It was not until I had taught at a vocational college a few years into my teaching that I encountered real resistance. I was teaching English 2 to a small class of surgical technology students, and on the very first day, one of the students asked me to explain every policy on my syllabus, from attendance and late policies to the requirement to type papers. Before this experience, I had assumed that everything I was requiring was a given across colleges everywhere. I was baffled that someone would challenge me on the first day. I later found out he had been recently released from prison, and he had a hard time dealing with anyone telling him what to do. Luckily, the other students in the class were supportive of their young teacher, and told him to quiet down. He continued questioning nearly everything throughout the term, including why we needed to use MLA format and why he had to use research in his research paper. Still, he persisted through the end of the

term. His friend who sat next to him said at the end, “You’re a good teacher—but loosen up.” At the time, I was hurt by the suggestion. Later, though, I realized that I really had not considered what the students had brought with them to class. I was teaching them as if they had spent most of their lives in college-prep classes and were now at a research university pursuing 4-year degrees. Instead, most had never expected to go to college and saw the program as training for a specific job. They accepted that they needed to take English to receive their certificate, but it was never their top priority. It had never occurred to me that some might not have computers at home to type their papers, even though having personal computers was less common at the time that it is today. I had also never had students in my class who had children at home.

The experience stuck with me, and I thought about those students as I was dealing with Ethan. In previous teaching experiences, I would have told students that not having a book was not an option. He was in college and needed the materials required for the class. I have had conversations such as this many times before. With Ethan, though, I was more subtle. When he would get a quiz back with a low grade, I would say, “I know you can get this... but it would be easier if you had a book to study at home.” “I know,” he would reply, each time with a different reason why he didn’t have the money. Often, his responses would be angry and sometimes incomprehensible, such as, “Damn, VA”—even though it was not clear that the VA was paying for his education and books.

Because he did not have a book, Ethan sat next to a different student each day, and most of them shared their books with him grudgingly. They would keep their books in front of themselves, only sliding the book slightly over to him when he offered to read

a passage or was required to respond to a question. Then they would promptly move the book in front of themselves.

Ethan was loud when other students were quiet. He did not seem to have the filter that most have, and would swear openly and without apology. As he got angry about a story he was telling or an issue he was describing, he assumed others would be as angry as he was, looking at others for approval. For example, when he was describing his rude customers at work, he just assumed that the best way to deal with them was a punch to the face. Most students, however, would look down as he talked, avoiding eye contact as much as possible. He also did not have a strong sense of personal boundaries, sometimes standing very close to the person as he talked to him or her.

Jasmine was the exception, perhaps because, as she once told me, she had “no filter” either. She would turn anything he said into something positive. As I thought about it later, her complimenting his drawing might have been a slight reason for him to return to class, something that was a struggle for him throughout the quarter.

### **Attendance Issues**

About the end of the discussion, Ethan comes in, nearly an hour late. He shows me his hand, which has a bandaged finger, and says, “This is why I haven’t been here.” I tell him to have a seat.

I wrap up what we were talking about and then tell the class to take a break. I give Ethan his missing handouts.

He still doesn’t have a book, so I have him sit closer to Juliet.

When it's his turn to answer, he looks in the book and attempts to answer, but since he hasn't read the chapter or been paying attention, it takes him several tries to get the correct answer.

He pays little attention to what is happening in class, instead, making up previous work.

Still, he tries to participate when he is called upon. (Fieldnote, August, 2013)

At this point in the quarter, I had started to think Ethan was a student who would quietly disappear from class. He had been gone a week, and had not communicated with me about why he had been absent. While it seemed odd that a broken (or burned, I couldn't tell which) finger could keep someone from coming to class for a week, I did not press the issue or ask him specifics about his injury. I also did not stop him from completing his make-up assignments in class, though I felt that he was being disrespectful for doing so. Even though he was not as angry as he had been on the day we discussed jobs, he was still visibly stressed. He clearly wanted to make up the work and stay in the class, though in previous situations, I may have told such a student that it was too late to pass the course because of missed classes and missed work.

I remember when I first started teaching at Hall, I had a woman in her early 20s in my class with some of the same challenges as Ethan. She could not afford a book, and she missed classes randomly early in the quarter. She was another student full of anger, but she also had a little more reason to miss classes since she was pregnant and had three children already. In her early writing, she disclosed that she had depression and that she

had lost one of her children due to a miscarriage. She was determined that the one she was carrying would survive. Though I was sensitive to her troubles, I told her she still needed a book—that not having a book was not an option. At the time, I also had a tougher attendance policy, one that allowed for only so many absences before a student would automatically fail the class. At one point, I had told her that she could not miss any more classes without failing the course. She came to one more class and then stopped coming entirely. I never knew what happened to her.

I have tried nearly every attendance policy possible to both encourage attendance and to not punish those who are genuinely working in the course but have legitimate reasons to be absent. I have had no attendance policies, “rewarding” policies in which students do not have to take the final if they have perfect attendance, policies that awarded automatic failures for a certain number of absences, and policies that deducted points for a certain number of absences. Now, I count attendance/participation as 10% of the final grade. This policy errs on the side of allowing students to miss more classes than I am comfortable with them missing, but as I think of Ethan and students like him, I would rather him come to class when he can than not at all. If students continue coming, at least there is some hope of success. At the same time, without the policy “encouraging” students to attend, some students may end up disappearing because they have missed too much to get caught up. Once students get into the habit of not coming to class, they often feel embarrassed about coming back.

Ethan, though, continued to come, and when he did not, he would call. One time, he called saying that he did not know what was wrong with him, but he felt sick to his

stomach. I told him to stay home and rest. Another time, he called to say he was not well. When I asked if he still had a stomach bug, he said, “No, I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” When he returned to school, he met me in my office and disclosed that he had depression. I asked him if he was getting help, and he said he was, but the medicines were not helping. I told him not to give up—to keep working with his doctor until they found the right medicine. “Thank you for caring,” he said to me, and then went to class. My sense was that someone caring was a rare experience for him.

### **The Computer Lab, Continued Frustrations**

As I realized many students did not own computers or if they did, they did not have internet connections, and as I realized friendships were not being created in the conference-room style classroom, I decided to move the class to the computer lab. For many, this switch was a welcome relief of the cramped feeling of the conference room, and for the younger students raised on computers, being able to sit in front of a computer was like coming home. For Ethan, however, the lab only added to his distress since he could not remember his college ID and password required to get into the campus computers.

Once everyone seems to have figured out the basic format for MLA, I bring Ethan to the instructor’s computer to try to re-set his password which he had forgotten.

Jasmine mentions that we should probably turn off the projector.

Ethan jokes that he doesn't care if anyone sees his password—  
“What? Are they going to log in and do my English homework for me?”

Ethan changes his password and then returns to his computer.

I check in with other students. Some have begun typing one of the papers due. Others are still figuring out how to save their documents. I help them individually.

Ethan is upset because his password he just re-set is not working. I ask him to wait a minute and try again. I ask the class if there is a lag time between password resetting and it working on another computer. No one knows. Logan doesn't think there is any lag time.

Ethan says he's now tried the password 5 times.

Destiny begins leaving a few minutes early, and another girl asks,  
“Are you leaving?”

Others continue to work.

Ethan says, “Damn dyslexia,” and I notice that he has finally successfully logged in.

As other students begin to get up, I say, “If you're done, I'll see you Monday.”

Ethan comes up and asks, “Am I failing?”

“Yes, you are right now,” I say.

“It’s this hand—it’s put me behind.” (Fieldnote, August, 2013)

Even though Ethan had missed nearly a third of the classes at that point and had turned in very little work, he seemed surprised that he was failing. He also seemed completely unaware of what he needed to accomplish to become a better student. Because he had not written down his ID and password anywhere, it took him nearly an hour of class time to get into the campus computers to begin work. By the time he figured out the issue, it was nearly time to go. Other students had been able to complete their entire papers during that time frame. While he assumed there was something wrong with the system, he had in fact simply switched two characters in his password as he was trying to log in. He blamed “dyslexia,” but aside from that day, he had never mentioned dyslexia before, and I had never received accommodations for a disability.

For students comfortable with computers, they were excited to be given some class time to focus on their writing. For those with limited computer skills, though, the switch added to student frustration that they were not ready for college requirements. Instructors often assume that students have grown up around computers and know how to use common programs, often better than the instructors themselves. However, in my experience, there are still quite a few that are frozen by the requirement to type their essays on computers and to use online course delivery systems to submit their work. For such students, the computer lab is a chance for instructor guidance, but it can also be a place of embarrassment for students as they watch others quickly fulfill assignments while they fall further behind.

For Ethan, his ability to use the required computers was compounded by anxiety. Each time he could not get into the computer, he became more and more anxious, making it more difficult for him to type slowly and deliberately. I have often had nightmares of forgetting a phone number I needed during an emergency, and in those nightmares I would type the wrong number in different combinations over and over again until I would wake up in a panic. I knew that this is what Ethan had been doing: typing in the wrong combination of numbers each time he tried to log in. However, in a class full of other students, each with a different issue, I could not spend the whole hour helping him remember his password.

When it was time to share his essays with classmates during peer workshops, Ethan was notably absent. As he missed each workshop, I began to think that he had finally given up on the class. Still, he attended the final workshop and he did write all of his essays. The essays he wrote were in many ways better than what his classmates had been able to produce, making it clear that many of his difficulties in schooling had more to do with issues other than academic abilities. Based on writing alone, he likely would have done well in a college-level composition class.

Ethan did return for presentation day, and he read his paper on “Metal Shows.” Students in the class who had not talked to him all quarter gave him positive comments in response: “I felt like I was there with you.” “Nice details.” “What’s your favorite band?” They asked him questions, and he happily responded. As I watched him speak, I wished he had been able to come to class more to be able to receive more of this type of feedback. I also felt that his writing could have been beneficial for his classmates to read.

Was there really anything more I could have done to encourage Ethan? Still, because so much of the course was based on the portfolio and the final exam, Ethan actually wound up passing—just barely.

### **Educational Significance**

In one person, Ethan represents many of the challenges developmental writing students might face: poverty, depression, anxiety, dyslexia (or the impression that he had dyslexia), an injury, lack of family support, and few connections on campus. Although his story is more than a story of anxiety or depression, an understanding of working with students with such backgrounds is important to community college instructors, especially those who work with developmental writing students.

The other day, I saw a bumper sticker that read, “Not all wounds are visible.” Although the sticker was referring to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and meant to call attention to the importance of helping Veterans recovering from traumatic war experiences, these words also can serve as a reminder to instructors working with their students. Upon first glance, there was nothing about Ethan that would make anyone think he had had a difficult life. Writing instructors are not licensed therapists, but when students invite them into their lives through their writing and conversations, some understanding of how to work with students with traumatic backgrounds is necessary.

### **Fear in the Classroom**

According to Perry (2006), a person becomes less capable of learning or retrieving cognitive content when threatened or when a threat is perceived. “The adult

learner with a history of trauma or with a background of educational failure or humiliation is sensitized and moves along the arousal continuum faster in the face of a significantly less challenge or perceived threat” (p. 23). Adults recovering from trauma may often be in a state of low-level fear. This state of arousal (or low-level fear) makes understanding and processing information difficult (Steele, 2007). For those who have experienced test anxiety, anxiety makes retrieval of information from the brain inaccessible (Steele, 2007). Awareness of this state is important in creating a safe environment for students.

As I worked with Ethan, it seemed that drawing or distracting himself otherwise might help keep his anxiety-level down. It seemed that what he needed was patience, not additional stress. The calmer I was, the calmer he would be.

### **Curriculum Decisions**

The more I have worked with students with traumatic backgrounds, the more I have been wary about having students write about their previous experiences. Although writing about a difficult experience can be healing, it also places students in a difficult position. An assignment as simple as writing about “home” can bring up traumatic memories for students who have had difficult home lives. I remember distinctly watching a student’s face turn to a frown as I talked to her about the possibility of writing about her childhood home. “No, it was not good. I can’t do that,” she said, and I quickly led her to a different topic. Such experiences have made me question how focused writing classes should be on writing from personal experiences.

Unfortunately, during this class, I went too far the other direction in focusing on form, and students may not have felt the topics were as meaningful as they could have been. Although I still had students write authority lists and directed students toward what they knew as possibilities for writing, I also used more of the required textbook this term, and many students chose topics from the book for their papers. While some of the book topics worked well, others were generic topics, such as “qualities of a good athlete” or the “importance of home-cooking.” Few students cared enough about such topics to spend much time in developing them beyond what was necessary to fulfill the assignment. Another direction I might have taken would have been to focus on issues meaningful to the students in the class. Nixon-Ponder (1995), for example, described a class in which students were required to “name the problem, generalize to others, and finally suggest alternatives or solutions to the problem” (p. 208). In one of the case studies Nixon-Ponder (1995) described, students studied issues in childcare, read a variety of materials related to the issue, wrote journal entries and shared oral histories, and then moved toward a solution, which included a real-life plan to help each other out with their child-care needs. Though this particular topic might not work with every class, focusing the class on issues important to them would have made for a more engaging class. As I plan future classes, such a direction could both draw on what students know but also not be as traumatic as writing about experiences students would rather forget.

### **Instructor Preparation and Campus Resources**

Much of the professional development offered at Hall Community College is based on technology preparation. Instructors are required to acquire 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills,

meaning completion of a series of modules in Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Newer professional development sessions have focused on “engaged learning,” which promotes reorganizing the classroom so that students take more responsibility for their own learning. Such a concept is important, but sessions still have had a technology-based focus, such as the use of iPad apps or videos to engage students. Only recently have more professional development sessions become available about “difficult” students, but this has been due more to increased worry about campus safety rather than how to work toward improved learning experiences. Far more could be done to help instructors work with a changing population of students.

In addition to professional development for instructors, more could be done outside of the classroom to help students with their emotional needs. On bigger campuses, counseling services may be available to students, either by professionals or by peer counselors. At Hall, however, no such services exist. Instructors have no person, no office, to refer students to if they suspect depression or other mental illness issues. When I asked the academic advising office about resources, I was referred to a list one of the previous advisors had made that included community-based resources. The list, however, emphasized that the offices listed were not endorsed by the college and had been compiled by a search of the phone book.

What is to be done with low-income students in real need of mental health services? Too many of my students have disclosed that they knew they needed help, but did not have the money to seek help. More training for campus employees and more resources for students would help make the college experience a better one for all

students. While I want to be the type of teacher students feel comfortable talking to, I am not a qualified therapist.

Although Ethan passed his courses during the term I had him in my class, I saw that he did not pass the one class he enrolled in the next term, and he is not currently enrolled at Hall. While I worried throughout the term that I had tried too hard to keep him in class and that any other instructor might have given up on him long ago, I still remember him saying, “Thanks for caring” as he left my office. I hope he will return and have a better experience of college the next time he enrolls.

Considering his strong writing abilities, Ethan is one of my students who may have benefitted from acceleration or mainstreaming, the direction developmental education is beginning to take. However, due to his outside issues, he may have also found himself far behind early in the quarter and unable to catch up. The traditional sequence did give him a chance to gain some confidence and see that he could finish a course successfully. More important for students like Ethan would be stronger support systems outside of the classroom to help with mental health issues that many students face.

## CHAPTER 8

### FROM MAE LA TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

#### My village in Thailand

Every morning before I woke up I could hear the sounded of the animals. The birds would sing and the wind would breathe on you. The dogs would bark on your neighbor or other dogs and the rooster and chicken would run around the house with the loud voice. This is the place when I was born and this is the place when I grew up with love and care. I'll never forget the place when I have the most memories' of.

My house is made of wood, it two story and their no basement. The entire villager' house were made of wood or bamboo and their no basement. The rooftop was made of tree leave and you have to change one every year. On the dry season the tree leaves would fall and people would get them and made with bamboo stick and put it in the roof. The bathroom is in the different place of the house. In my village people would build the toilet in the back of the house and you had to get out of the house to go to bathroom or toilet. These were the house look like in the village and these are how people would build the house.

Everyone in the villagers was famer and every morning they would pick up the tools and went to farm. Most of every ones in the village knew each other. Some people would do was they have a help from other people

like their neighbor and when the time come for other people we would do the same of them. It likes a trade and we called “eyes for eyes” and “tooth for tooth”. Most of the foods they grew were rice and in raining season they would plants rice and the dry season they having a haven. I sometime went to farm with my dad and after we clean up everything, we would go to hunting animals. Sometime we would to the river and fishing and something that we could eat in river. For my mom she always looks from vegetable. I don’t usually follow my mom but I follow my dad because I could become a man.

In my neighbor there were 8 houses around it. When you went up the hill there was a church and soccer fill. If you went opposite of the church you would walk thought my neighbor houses and then you see a river. If you continue on the church road and there been more houses and on the right side went up a hill there were a temple and school. If you continue on the houses after the church there been a shop and more houses there. The village has a solar energy for their house and their no electricity Co. went through the village.

Everything we need in the forest. Their no bills pay like electricity, gas, internet bill, etc. For me is a freedom if you work you eat, and if you don’t their no food for you. This is my childhood memories of my village look like. Thank to my parents for working hard for all of the children and

I have grew up in the town of peace and quiet place. (Eh Doh's Essay #1, November 2013)

Eh Doh is one of the hundreds of Karen refugees who have settled in Hall. Though his description of his home village seems idyllic, based on talks with him and other essays written, his life was far more complex than the simple farm life he describes. Even though born in Thailand, Eh Doh was not considered a Thai citizen. He and his family were registered as being a part of the Mae La refugee camp, a camp of about 45,000 refugees, but he said that they actually lived in the village nearby. His parents had left Burma to escape the persecution of the Burmese majority (Interview with Eh Doh, December, 2013). Although Karen refugees are one of the fastest growing refugee populations, few instructors at Hall know their history and experiences prior to their arrival at the community college.

Many Karen students at Hall tell their instructors simply that they are from Thailand, which usually prompts one of my colleagues to come tell me that he or she is excited about his or her new Thai student. However, unlike most Thai immigrants, Karen students have lived much of their lives in exile. In Dao's (1991) discussion of Southeast Asian American students, she argued the importance for teachers to understand the diversity within Asian groups. While some Asians have immigrated by choice, others have come to escape political tyranny. Likewise, Prior and Niesz (2013) have argued that educators should understand the difference between an immigrant, who likely has come to the United States by choice and a refugee, who has come to escape persecution. Although more and more educators are becoming aware of the "model minority"

stereotype, this stereotype of Asians still exists, causing many at-risk students to be left behind (Dao, 1991). Eh Doh's story provides context for an understanding of Karen students. Like the other stories presented, though, Eh Doh does not represent all Karen students; rather, learning his story may prompt instructors to learn more about their own students' histories.

### **Background on the Karen**

The Karen people have lived in Myanmar (previously called Burma) for hundreds of years, but most of these years have been in battle with the Burmese majority. Because the Karen people had been oppressed by the Burmese for nearly 100 years, when the Burmese were fighting the British, the Karen sided with the British. During World War II, Karen villages were destroyed and people massacred by the Burmese. Fighting continued between the Karen and the Burmese after the Burmese were granted independence from Great Britain after World War II. Continued fighting has caused many Karen people to cross the border into Thailand, where they have lived in limbo in refugee camps for entire generations (Prior & Niesz, 2013). Eh Doh, for example, was born in Thailand in exile. Neither he nor his parents have ever seen Myanmar, yet they were not Thai citizens either. Relocation outside of Thailand has been a fairly recent phenomenon, beginning in 2006 (Prior & Niesz, 2013). Because the Karen are relatively new to the area, educators are just beginning to understand their needs

### **Eh Doh's Early Schooling**

Eh Doh's early childhood was as he described it in his essay—living in the village with his parents, helping with rice farming. His mother was good at speaking

languages—she could speak Burmese, Karen, Thai, and English—but she could not read or write. His mother wanted Eh Doh to be able to speak and write Thai, so his parents sent him to a Thai school several hours away once he turned 7. Also, there was little opportunity for schooling in his village. Children who stayed in the village worked on the farms and did not attend school. At the Thai school, he had to live in a dorm with other children and could only come home twice a year. When I expressed to him how difficult it must have been to live so far away from his parents at such a young age, he said that there were grown-ups there to help: “I cried only one time—when father came back, I cried, but not hard” (Interview with Eh Doh, December, 2013).

Of the school, Eh Doh said: “Can’t say I liked it, spaced out a lot, a lot of good friends, got used to it” (Interview with Eh Doh, December, 2013). He had a difficult time with learning a new language and a new script. Thai was not only a new language to speak, but he had no experience with writing in any language. During our interview, he tried to write a word or two in Thai to illustrate what the script looked like, but he had trouble remembering what he had learned. He said that he went to the Thai school for 5 years, but he never got used to the teachers. He wrote: “The teacher was very mean; if you didn’t do your homework, they would hit you with a bamboo stick. It happened to me many times over years because I didn’t do my homework very much” (Eh Doh’s Portfolio Essay, December, 2013).

During class, Eh Doh read his paper on schooling, and most of his classmates had been paying little attention until one of them said, “You mean they hit you?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Where?” one asked. “Like on your hands?”

“No, on my neck, back.” Eh Doh laughed a little.

Although people in the United States might cringe at his treatment in the Thai school, he was at a distinct advantage educationally compared to other Karen refugees in Thailand. In describing Karen children’s schooling experiences prior to coming to the United States, Prior and Niesz (2013) wrote that none of the children interviewed had received any schooling in their camp in Tham Hin. It is important for educators to realize that experiences of Karen students may have varied widely.

When Eh Doh was in sixth grade, his parents decided to move him to the refugee camp school so that he could learn to read and write in his own language, Karen. Of his transition to the Karen school, Eh Doh wrote:

When I came to study at the Karen school the teacher put me in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade because I knew how to speak, but I didn’t know how to read and write. In the Karen school, the teacher did things a little differently than the Thai school, in but it was have some similar, too. For example, if you didn’t do your homework or something that the teacher told you would punish you, but not hit you. They would let you run and said something that embarrasses you or make you stand out of the class and wear something. Also in the Karen school, they would let you go to the next grade if you failed the class. In my two years in the Karen school, it was fun and my classmates were willing to help me out with my reading and writing. (Eh Doh’s Portfolio Essay, December, 2013)

During my interview with Eh Doh, I learned, though, that it was tricky for him to attend the refugee camp school since he was not actually living within the camp. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire, and comings and goings were heavily guarded. No matter where he went, he was supposed to carry “papers.” However, he had none. He would follow at the end of a large group so that by the time it was his turn, the guards often did not bother to ask for his papers. He says since he was young, he would not have been arrested for not having papers, but he said it was a constant practice to be asked for papers.

### **Transition to the United States**

Because his family had no status in Thailand, they put their names on a list to be considered to be moved to the United States. After two years of waiting, his family moved to Rochester, New York, where he was placed in the eighth grade. He said he couldn't even write his name in English, so he was placed in ESL classes initially. He described his transition to schooling in the United States:

My next school was in U.S. I was very confused when I first started the school because it was not likes my past two schools. When I was in the class with many people with different grades on his or her I.Ds my thought I was in the wrong class. Also you have to move around looking for your next class; it is not like staying in the same class like my past schools. In the U.S there is freedom because if you didn't do your homework or your chores nobody will hit you or punish you. You didn't want to fail the class because if you do have to retake the class, but you also move up to the

next grade also. When I first started school in the U.S, I didn't know any English, but as time went by I learned more and more. I got a lot of help along the way from family, teachers, and friends. (Eh Doh's Portfolio Essay, December, 2013)

After a year in Rochester, Eh Doh's father received a job at a factory near Hall, and a year later, the family followed him to Hall. Eh Doh continued with ELL classes at his new high school, but by his senior year, he no longer needed ELL classes. In high school, he took the traditional math sequence of Algebra, Geometry, and Advanced Algebra. He felt like math was his strongest subject since he had many years of math in his Thai and Karen schools. He described his previous reading instruction as memorization-based. When I asked the types of stories he had to memorize, he mentioned that they were often lessons teaching children to obey parents, such as a child dying in a fire because he did not listen to his parents (Interview with Eh Doh, December, 2013).

### **College Transition**

Now in college, Eh Doh said he still struggles with English. He said grammar was the hardest for him. At one point, he would remember a rule, but then he later would forget it again. "I feel like I need to use book," he told me. In his own language, he said that there were not many periods and there was little teaching about punctuation. In English, he felt he still had a problem with run-ons (Interview with Eh Doh, December, 2013).

In class, however, Eh Doh was one of my better students when it came to grammar lessons. He also seemed to be a much harder worker than he let on based on his previous schooling experiences. He always did his homework and did well on quizzes. However, when it came time to type essays, he seemed frozen. When he was required to have his first paper typed for a workshop, he was the only one without an essay. He did not make excuses during class, but when I asked about it later, he said he had an old computer and no Internet.

Despite telling him about the computer labs available on campus, he came to class for the second workshop without an essay again. This time, I was more direct. “If you do not have essays, you cannot pass the class,” I told him.

I honestly felt a little harsh in being so direct, but for the next class, he had his third essay completed and typed and the first two typed.

During class activities, Eh Doh worked only with another refugee student who sat next to him. Both rarely volunteered during large-group discussions, and both spent much of the class time either taking notes or working ahead on their assignments. When directly asked his opinion on a topic, Eh Doh would usually start by saying he did not understand the question, but he would often eventually try to respond. Other times, he would blame his English skills in not wanting to answer.

In other ways, though, Eh Doh was a dedicated student. He had come to Hall to study Automotive Technology, and he was proud to have come on a community scholarship. The scholarship paid for his classes, while FAFSA paid for his books. He was determined to do well so that he could learn to build his own car. Eh Doh mentioned

that Karen people were often cheated by automotive technicians in the area, and he wanted to be someone people in his community could come to when they needed their cars fixed. One day, he would like to own his own automotive shop (Interview with Eh Doh, December, 2013).

When I asked after the class was over how his transition to college has been, he was very positive. He has enjoyed it better than high school, especially the freedom involved. He particularly liked the fact that if a teacher happened to be sick that day, they could all just go home. He has also met many other Karen students through college, and he feels that they have a strong community. If he needs anything, he knows someone is out there to help him.

However, it would be unfair to say that Eh Doh's experience is representative of other refugee students' experiences. Dao (1991) pointed out that "there are those who are capable of adapting quickly and easily, those who can adapt to a limited extent, and those who cannot adapt" (p. 595). Although Eh Doh's experience as he described it to me has been positive, others I have worked with have had more difficulty in adapting to the United States.

For example, I watched a student with a similar background struggle throughout her writing class. She wrote about her extreme loneliness in the United States. Her father had been a respected teacher in their own country, but in the United States, she felt he was treated as "nothing." She felt awful for even suggesting to her family that they move to the United States and felt the decision was a huge mistake that was irrevocable. In one of her essays, she wrote about not being able to eat the food in the United States for

months. She was clearly homesick for her home country's food, her extended family members, and her friends. Unlike Eh Doh, she did not feel like she was a part of a community within the United States.

Juliet, a refugee from South Sudan, also had a difficult time with the transition from her village in South Sudan to Midwestern college life. She was in Beginning Writing for the second time, after failing all of her classes for two quarters. Most classes, she would both arrive late and stay late. She frequently was baffled by what was due each day and would try to complete the work during class while the class was doing other activities and at the end of the class as the class was leaving. During whole-group discussions, she rarely offered input unless directly asked; instead, she appeared to be working on her assignments, but then would promptly lose these assignments when it was time to turn them in. When we had the final exam, she was surprised. "The Final is today?" she asked. Still, she successfully completed the class, and later, I found that she had turned all of her grades around and had been successful for the quarter she was in my class and the quarter following it.

### **Educational Significance**

#### **Challenges for Recent Refugees**

Hall as a place for refugee resettlement has been a relatively recent phenomenon. While resettlement started in the 1980s, the biggest increases have occurred in the past 10 years. The public schools have increased their ELL (English Language Learners) resources, and their websites proudly claim that the district serves students who speak 57 different languages. At the same time, the community college has done little to prepare

instructors for the influx of students from such varied linguistic backgrounds. I have heard many instructors say that they do not know how to begin to teach a class with students from so many different first languages and so many different schooling experiences.

Although the college offers ELL instruction as part of continuing education, many students do not choose to take ELL classes since they are not credit-bearing. Instead, they enroll in developmental coursework, which has traditionally been geared toward students who either struggled through English through their K-12 schooling or have recently returned to college after a long break. The common textbook required by the college for Beginning Writing, for example, has only one chapter devoted to English for speakers of other languages. This chapter is actually rarely taught since the material is not on the common final exam. In addition, classes can be quite varied. One class might have 1-2 ELL students, while another section might have 10. In my recent experience, I have regularly had one class with very few ELL students and another that was primarily ELL students.

How can we best teach to such a diverse population? In such a technological age, instructors often assume students have certain technological skills and resources. We require papers to be typed and often uploaded to online sites. In my class, for example, major essays are turned in as Turnitin Assignments through Moodle, our online delivery platform. Every term, I have students who struggle with this requirement, but I am also always flexible with them if I know they are sincerely having trouble. I tell them I will help them if they can bring me a USB drive or their laptops. I also allow them to email

me the essays—whatever they seem to know how to do. Then again, there are those students who do not know how to save or do not have computers. In such cases, computer classrooms become even more important, but they are not always available for every class.

Although Eh Doh had a mother determined to educate her son, many of our refugee students had little chance for schooling experiences of any kind. Some of our Sudanese students, for example, were “lost boys,” orphaned children who spent much of their childhood dragged into fighting in the civil war or walking thousands of miles until they could be settled into a camp. They had little time for learning to read and write in their own language, let alone English. I remember watching one student just stare at his computer in a computer classroom until I realized that he did not know how to turn on the computer.

In the same class, however, I would have other students typing away, only placed into Beginning Writing because they had not tried very hard on their ACTs and had not realized they could take the COMPASS test to test out of the class.

Along with the linguistic difficulties our refugee students often face may come emotional difficulties as well. Dao (1991) pointed out that in order for students to learn, emotions must be dealt with first. Although Dao (1991) was writing about children overcoming traumatic experiences, as mentioned in the chapter on Ethan, people in a state of low-level fear cannot learn. Many instructors in our area may be aware of some of the trauma our Sudanese students have faced due to documentaries and local popular

books; however, they may not be aware of the trauma Karen students have faced and may lump them together in their minds with other “model” Asian students.

### **Importance of Community and Family**

Like others hoping to improve developmental education, I want my classes to be meaningful experiences for my students. I try to individualize the experience as much as possible, hoping that the more advanced students will push themselves more, while those who need more help will not be left behind. What often happens, though, is that the students who do not necessarily need the class will do the minimum amount of work required to pass (and sometimes not even that), and struggling students often simply disappear.

As much as I would like to build a community in my own classroom, it seems that the support of a community outside of the classroom is what leads to the most success. Even though the Sudanese students often had a community based on friendship with each other, since they had been orphaned, they had little guidance from older adults who cared about their schooling. Several years ago, I had Sudanese students in most of my classes. At this point in time, anyone who wanted to take classes could do so, no matter their test scores. Now, however, students with low test scores are routed to a Transitions Lab to help them gain skills that will better prepare them for college courses. While some students take advantage of this opportunity, many others simply leave after they have taken their exams and never come back to the college.

At about the same time, financial aid requirements changed so that students who continually failed their classes could not keep collecting financial aid. I remember some

students taking the first developmental writing classes over and over again, but never progressing. The failure to pass was not always due to ability but more often because of heavy work schedules students needed to maintain in order to survive. Still, some students were starting at such a low level of literacy that the combination of their starting points and their outside obligations made passing very difficult.

Today, Hall is seeing more diversity in its Beginning Writing classes, but instructors are also generally seeing more support from home. The refugee students we have now often moved here as families and are moving here to be near extended families. They are part of a larger community, but many of them also completed at least some schooling in the United States. In that sense, the students also have formed bonds with their high school classmates who are often from different countries but share the same transition experiences that they endured.

For Eh Doh, his mother was a constant support. Even though he was writing here about his mother's help when he went to the Karen school, in talking to him, I know that this support still remains:

When I was in Karen school in camp, it was really hard for me to learn the language because I suddenly change school. It was my mom who helped me in the language and taught me from the started to the end. Every morning and night, my mom gave up a time to teach me throughout the school year. I also did my best and I had also passed the class like everybody else did, thank to my mom who helped. (Eh Doh's Portfolio Essay: December, 2013)

While instructors can do little to replace missing parents and missing communities, an awareness of student backgrounds and experiences can help us shape a curriculum to fit students in our changing classrooms.

As with Aniyah, Jasmine, and Ethan, Eh Doh is someone to consider as educators re-think developmental education. For students who are new to the language, culture, and schooling of a new country, moving faster is unlikely to provide positive results. It had been because of students like Eh Doh that Hall had had four developmental levels of writing. Instructors had added multiple levels of developmental writing and reading to allow students more time to learn English and to do so without financial aid penalties for failing classes. Instructors trained in teaching ELL students had been hesitant to cut the levels to two. However, are the developmental courses really meant as places for students to learn English for the first time? What place does ELL instruction have in developmental writing? Students like Eh Doh are part of our community and are ready to contribute back by furthering their education and starting businesses of their own. The community college can be an important part of their story.

## CHAPTER 9

## FROM WORKER TO STUDENT

Before the third day of class, I hear a frantic knock on my office door (the door is locked since I am in the office alone that night). I see James, an African-American man in his late 30s, and he says, “I don’t think I can come to class tonight.” I ask him if he’s sick, and he says, “No, I have a chipped tooth that’s gotten infected—it needs to be pulled—I just got back from the hospital. I hate to miss class.” I tell him what we’re doing that night, and he hesitates, “Maybe I should come.” I tell him, “Only you know how much you can handle. I’ve had tooth pain before—I know it’s no fun.” He tells me, “I can’t afford to get it pulled. I’m not sure what I’m going to do.” I tell him I will check into resources, but he says he has a number to try. He just doesn’t know how he is going to pay for it. He has four kids and is working part-time at Subway. At the same time, he is in a custody battle with the mother of his first two kids. He is the soul support of the second two kids. I tell him I will work with him if he needs to leave. During class, though, I see him arrive on time. He participates through class, though clearly in pain and unable to speak clearly due to the missing part of the tooth and the pain killers he is on. (Fieldnote, July, 2013)

James’s story illustrates the growing number of students returning after 20 or more years absence from schooling. Like Ethan, James had an overwhelming number of challenges, but added to Ethan’s emotional challenges, James had physical issues and a family to support. Also unlike Ethan, James had not had a college preparatory schooling;

he dropped out of school young to help support his mother and siblings. As an adult unable to complete physical work, he felt that failure in school was not an option.

Since the first day of class, I had been worrying about James. On that first day, he was surprised to see me when he walked in the door. He had been expecting another instructor and told me so directly. I told him that the schedules had to be changed due to low enrollments in some of the classes. He wanted to know where the other instructor had gone, and I told him that she would not be teaching that quarter since she was part-time, with just this one class. He was visibly disturbed and walked out the door. As class was starting, though, he came back in and sat down. He listened to me go over the syllabus and participated during the get-to-know-you activity, but he was still uncertain about what to do about the class. During break, he said, “You know, that other teacher seemed easy. I couldn’t stay with the class, though, because of work. I really wanted to take her class.” I told him I was sure he would be fine—to try not to worry. He left a couple more times during class, and later said he was pacing the halls, trying to decide whether or not to stay in the class. At the end of class, he told me that he had to make it—he had four kids who were counting on him. He asked me if I thought he could get a B in the course. I told him it was too early to tell, but that he had every opportunity to succeed. He said, “Don’t be afraid to tell me if I’m messing up. I want to know.”

Although non-traditional students (students typically beyond the age of 25) are not new to the community college, instructors often have an over-inflated sense of their abilities based on previous positive experiences with non-traditional students. Some returning students may come after delaying college to have a family or to work, but many

of these students might have still had a college preparatory schooling background. Many might not necessarily feel like they are “school-smart,” but they have spent years reading or writing for pleasure, or they may have read or written for work. Instructors often love such students since they usually need just a little confidence before they excel in their coursework.

Another group of non-traditional students, though, are students who had never had positive experiences in school and had spent much of their work years in manual labor. Similar to Randy, who was described in the introduction, such students have worked hard much of their lives, but their work was with their hands. Some of my students with such backgrounds are excited about working with their minds instead of their bodies; for James, though, his body and way of life had been wrenched from him due to a devastating injury. Knowing his background and his story can help inform instructor practices.

### **Prior Schooling**

James was born in Mississippi, but moved to the Midwest when he was 7. He was the oldest of 9 children, and he had to work to help support them as soon as he was eligible to work. During high school, he started working for Kentucky Fried Chicken and then for Runza. James said his mother tried to support them the best she could, but she herself had only had just a 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade education. She grew up on a farm and had to help with chores on the farm; she was not expected to go to school. James said she was mistreated as a kid and that without structure and home stability, she had a hard time coping in society. She was able to survive with some help from the state and working, but

James felt he needed to contribute to the family. No father was around to help (Interview with James, December, 2013).

In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, James quit high school to go to work. He worked fast food until he learned about Job Corps and was able to learn a trade. Along with learning a trade, he also earned his GED at the age of 20. For the next 18 ½ years, he spent his life working construction jobs until an injury happened that would change his life (Interview with James, December, 2013).

### **Life in Construction**

When I asked James about whether he would have rather gone to college right out of high school, he said that he didn't think he had the right home environment and the structure necessary to go to college. He knew that even those who had everything they needed to succeed could often face challenges in school. He was happy to work construction; he felt he was good at it. He began his career working on streets and roads pouring pavement. After a move, he began working concrete in commercial buildings, such as schools and office buildings. At that time, he also learned framing, hanging doors, completing vertical concrete walls, and carpentry. He said it was an opportunity to learn, to work. He said it was decent money, making \$39,000 a year, and he was getting raises. If he kept moving up, he felt he could make \$50,000, \$60,000, or \$70,000 (Interview with James, December, 2013).

After working on the paving crew for a few years for a company, he decided to move to the pipe crew instead of paving. The company prided itself on piping rather than paving, and he had more opportunity to work year-round if he switched to the pipe crew.

One day, the crew was putting in a manhole, and during a break, he was speaking to his supervisor. All of a sudden, the supervisor pulled him down, and the next thing he knew, they were both in the air. They were knocked 15 feet into the air and then fell into the hole of the trench. As he was falling, James said he felt like he was going in slow motion and had enough time to say his prayers. He knew he was going to die. Once they hit the bottom, they bounced up “like a ball” and then back down. They had fallen 22 feet. He said they were lucky to be alive. It turned out that the operator had not seen them and that a counterweight had been coming for his head. The supervisor had knocked him to the ground in an effort to save him (Interview with James, December, 2013).

What followed was not only physical pain but emotional pain from fighting with Workers’ Compensation, his company, and various doctors. After various surgeries, a doctor that worked for his company designated him as fine to work. However, he was in so much pain that he could not keep up with the job. The doctor said that the injury was like a football injury, not necessarily caused by the accident on the job. A separate doctor, however, one who didn’t work for the company, gave him the truth about his back. He knew he was hurt, but his employer did not believe him (Interview with James, December, 2013).

He tried to work at various factories, but no one would hire him because of his injury. The companies were not willing to provide accommodations for him. He would be required to stand in the same spot every day, all day, just like everyone else. Despite his efforts to find work, he spent 14 months without income. The mother of his two younger kids worked for Taco Bell, and was able to support those two kids, but it was quite a

struggle. A low point was watching his little girls cry because of their puppy's death. They could not afford to take the dog to the vet. The mother of his older two girls worked, but he still owed child support for all of the kids (Interview with James, December, 2013).

A year after his accident, he got very sick. He said he was sweating constantly and had a high temperature. An X-ray showed a blackened chest. An MRI showed something the size of a 50 cent coin hanging off of his lungs. He said he was constantly, "sweating, chilling, huffing." After the MRI, he was put on steroids in order to breathe. A radiologist told him that he thought his trouble was caused by a severed piece of spleen from the accident that caused an infection. However, a lung doctor said that it was sleep apnea. Doctors ran every test possible, but they did not agree on the cause of his illness. He had a surgery, and is still suspicious of the doctor who performed the surgery since he did not come to talk to him after the surgery was over (Interview with James, December, 2013).

After the surgery, he was still sweating and feeling ill, but by the 6<sup>th</sup> day, he started feeling better. A few months later, his lungs had cleared up, and he could begin thinking about work again. He worked with Vocational Rehabilitation, which suggested cutting steel, but he could not physically handle the job. His back still hurt, and he had tailbone damage. Over all this time, he became depressed with all that had happened to him, dealing with his children, dealing with the children's mothers, and becoming broke financially (Interview with James, December, 2013).

### **Back to School**

James spent a lot of time in church, where he said that God told him he could go back to school. He had never been a “school person,” but he knew he would have to go back to school if he was going to be able to do anything aside from work at fast food restaurants. He wanted to be able to support his daughters, to be able to pay for weddings someday. He felt he had little choice (Interview with James, December, 2013).

A year and a half after his accident, he took the placement test at Hall, and tested into developmental courses in math and writing. He was proud that he did not have to take developmental reading courses. He did well in his writing courses, but had a D in math the first time he took it. The second time, though, he earned an A. He said he was in a “do or die situation”—that he was “not here to play.” He regarded the younger students as lucky since they seemed to have plenty of time to make mistakes and re-take courses as necessary (Interview with James, December, 2013).

In *Beginning Writing*, most of his issues were not with writing itself but with health and family issues. Early in the quarter, he was in constant pain from his tooth and back. Then he became concerned about the welfare of his oldest daughters, and had been going to court to determine a better custody arrangement. Near the end of the quarter, I received this email:

I came in to see you today but you were not here. I haven't been in school in a week because my kids mother was involved in a accident last tuesday in my vehicle. My vehicle was impounded and at this point it has a hold on it so i am not able to get my school books out of it. The reason you haven't heard from me is I have been having a hard time getting my

children to school and getting around without a car. Before i give up would you be willing to work with me to catch up? i will do whatever it takes, because i will have some help until school is out. My book and my essays for my portfolio are in the truck. If you could give me a call as soon as possible that would be great, i don't have access to a computer.

(September, 2013)

Luckily, we were near the end of the quarter, so the book was not as necessary as it was in the beginning of the quarter. However, all of his writing assignments were lost in the truck, which he could not afford to retrieve from the impound. Even though he had typed some of his work, most of what he had was still in the handwritten stage, and the work he had typed, he had not thought to save.

For many of my colleagues, the response to his email might have been along the lines of, “This might not be the best quarter for you to be taking courses. You will be far more successful when you do not have so much going on in your life.” This may well have been a conversation I would have had in the past—and may have with a future student. With James, however, I knew that such a response would be devastating. Also, he had done all of the work thus far. After the first day, he had become fully devoted to the course, despite all of his outside responsibilities. Instead, I told him that I had already given him credit for the previous work, but he would still need to rewrite the portfolio essays. I told him that since he was now a better writer that he might be in even better shape by writing the essays without looking at the earlier drafts.

Still, he was overwhelmed since it was not just the work in his writing class but in all of his classes that was missing. He did the best he could, but he had trouble remembering what he had written. It had taken him so long to write the essays the first time that the advice I had given him did not fit him as well as it would have someone with more experience. Since he was not used to computers or typing, it took him hours to complete each essay. He kept working, though, and he eventually completed all of his essays.

After the course was over, James said, “Writing is a monster to me, but you made students feel like they could do it” (Interview with James, December, 2013).

### **Perseverance**

Although James said multiple times that he would not be at college if it had not been for the accident, he also said it was a “blessing in disguise.” “I really needed to be here,” he told me. He has appreciated learning computers, becoming a better writer, and learning about personal finance. Right now, he is enrolled in the business program with a marketing focus, but he is considering the entrepreneur or the energy program. When he first started, he had a lot of fears and was not sure if he could make it through the difficult classes in the energy program. However, since he has now had some success in his classes, he is thinking about the possibilities of the energy major, which he knows would guarantee a good income (Interview with James, December, 2013).

James has been very pleased with his instructors, all of whom he has said have wanted to see him succeed. He was particularly pleased with our class, which he said had a positive energy. “I actually can write now,” he said; the class “got me writing about

things I'm passionate about—a way to express yourself.” He said that when he writes now, he can just go (Interview with James, December, 2013).

Despite all of his challenges, James has successfully completed 5 quarters. He has had to re-take a couple classes where he has received Ds, but he improved his grades the next time he took the classes. His transcript shows his determination to succeed.

### **Educational Significance**

Although James did eventually become a successful non-traditional college student, he did struggle quite a bit to get there. By the time I had interviewed him, he was feeling positive about his decision to go to college and about the people who had helped him along the way. However, during class, there were many moments where I had my doubts about whether he would be able to make it through Beginning Writing.

### **Patience**

As with the other students in the class, patience was a first step in dealing with an anxious student. I remember, for example, that James's early writing assignments were about God. While I am more open than some of my colleagues about topic possibilities, I still had to steer him toward more concrete topics. I often second-guess myself, though, not wanting an anxious student to feel even more anxious about his topic choices. At the same time, I know that religious topics are on many of my colleagues' "Don't Write About" lists. I compromised by allowing him to write about what he wanted to in his Writer's Notebook, but by leading him toward other topics for his more developed essays.

Early in the course, I noticed James struggling with getting started. In the time it took for him to come up with a topic, the woman sitting next to him would have already written a page. Once he got started, he might write only a sentence and then think until other students would begin leaving the class for the day. Then he would begin writing and sometimes would get on a roll and keep writing past the end time of class. Periodically, he would stop writing to shake out his hand.

I remember when I was new to teaching I was far more impatient with students like James. As others would be writing away, I would always have one who would not write. I sometimes thought that they were just wasting class time—that they should take advantage of the time that I was giving them. Until learning more about students' background experiences, I did not realize how limited some of their schooling experiences had been. I also did not fully understand the anxiety that could come with writing and how painful it can be to write about personal experiences.

### **Technology**

James emphasized to me that he was not a “school person,” and I thought about all of the non-school people I have had in my classes. They are in school, but very few of them took the college-preparatory track. I hear colleagues complain and express that they are not sure how their students graduated from high school. For many students, though, college was not necessarily an option when they were going through their early schooling. They were just hoping to survive. Work was far more important than school to them. Many of the expectations instructors have, such as experience with computers, experience with basic reading, math, and writing, are not backgrounds our students have.

James told me that he had never touched a computer before going to college. He called himself, “future dumb” (Interview with James, December, 2013).

In classes today, we are likely to have a combination of students who have grown up with technology, learning to type on computers before they learned to write, along with students who have spent their lives working with their hands. Students like James never imagined working in an office, sitting behind a desk. He certainly never saw himself as a scholar. How do we create a class for such diverse backgrounds? What skills can we reasonably expect of students who are making the transition from the manual workplace to the academic classroom?

### **Institutional Support**

As more students attend college who had not considered further schooling before, colleges can do more to support student beyond academic supports. For many of my students, the issues go beyond academics. At a commuter campus, especially, more resources to help students feel supported in their college work by people other than their instructors could help better retain students. Counseling services could be especially helpful, and if those cannot be available, peer support groups could be established. Although James had made it through several terms, he seemed notably alone in his journey, at least on campus. More could be done to help non-traditional students make the shift from the world of work to the world of school.

Like most of the students studied, James likely would have struggled in an accelerated developmental course format. He had had so little experience with schooling and had been out of school for so long that he had a hard enough time with the two-term

sequence before college composition. Although it had taken him two times to pass Beginning Writing, he successfully passed Intermediate Writing, and is now in Composition I. James's story can help inform both program-level and curriculum changes.

## CHAPTER 10

## BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

What caused Aniyah, Jasmine, Ethan, Eh Doh, and James to persist despite their obstacles? What happened to those who left?

Last communications:

“I am sending you this email concerning my attendance. I had to go to Mississippi due to health issues with my mother. I will be back in class Wednesday, July 24<sup>th</sup>.” (Email, Kayla, July 22, 2013)

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“I need to leave early to take my kid to the doctor.” (In class, Chris, July 29, 2013)

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“Hey I turned in my Essay #4. And if you could do as you did last time where you handed out my paper and emailed me other classmates paper so that i may still get the work shop credit. What will our Final Exam be over so that I may study? I will be back in class on make up day.” (Email, Anonymous, September 9, 2013)

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“I’ve been sick—uh, in the hospital. I have all of my papers ready, but I can’t be back until Monday.” (Phone call, Quentin, September 11, 2013)

Kayla came to one more class after she had sent the email about her mother's illness, but she said very little and did not return after that day. I never heard anything else from her, and she never dropped the class. She failed all of the courses she took that quarter, and has not returned since. Her reasons for leaving, though, were likely the easiest to explain since she was many miles away from a family that needed her.

I had high hopes for Chris since I knew he was trying to escape a difficult past and wanted a better life for his children. Still, he had a difficult time focusing in class, and even though he clearly wanted to prove everyone wrong about his ability to succeed in college, he had little support to do so. After he left early one day to take his child to the doctor, I never saw him again. He never contacted me, and like Kayla, he never dropped. He failed all of his classes that quarter and did not enroll again.

What surprised me more were the ones who had been in the course for nearly the whole term, completed all of their assignments, wrote all of their papers, but did not come to the last couple weeks of school. Every quarter, I have at least one or two who do this, and even though I cannot speak for others' mental states, it almost seems like self-sabotage. Such students may not feel they should pass or must have other reasons for not wanting to continue. I have had some who have taken an entire course but not the final exam or who have written every essay but not turned in a portfolio. Most of the time, I never see these students again to ask, "Why?"

From the stories I learned that quarter, I did find some themes common to those who succeeded and those who failed. Like those who conduct studies on student retention have found (Barbatis, 2010), home or community support seems to be one key factor in

student success. Their mothers' influence was mentioned to me several times by both Jasmine and Eh Doh, students from very different backgrounds but strong mothers. As an adult, James did not have strong family support, but he did have his church family's support. Whenever he talked about where he drew his strength, it was from his church and from God. Ethan had very little outside support, and though he made it through my class, he was not successful beyond his first quarter. Aniyah also finished the quarter in my class, but not the next.

What responsibility does the college have in helping students succeed? We cannot provide caring mothers, and a few caring teachers do not seem to be enough to counteract outside lives.

I remember in one of my smallest classes, only three students finished the class. . Since it was such a small class, the students felt free to talk openly with me in front of the others. One African American student in her late teens told me that she felt like she was alone at college and that no one at home cared whether she made it in college or not. She was the only one in her family to go to college, and they did not expect her to finish. As she was telling me this, a Ukrainian woman (also in her late teens) began crying, "Yes, that's exactly the way I feel." She then told the class that her boyfriend and friends had not wanted her to go to college, which is why she had stopped coming to her classes. She finally gathered the courage to break up with her boyfriend and was ready to come back to school, but she was feeling like she also had to abandon her friends as well if she wanted to move forward with her life. All of her friends, she said, did not work or go to school, but spent their time playing video games and partying. She was ready to leave

that life, but she did not have support to do so. The one male student in the class was the only one who felt supported by an older brother who was pushing him to go to school. He was living with his brother and his brother's wife and child. While his brother supported him financially and emotionally, his brother had not actually gone to college and knew little about what it took to succeed in college. On the one hand, the brother would tell him to study, but on the other hand, he used him as an on-call babysitter for his son, which meant that he had to sometimes miss class if the son was sick.

As a writing teacher, I have read many essays about caring teachers who turned students' lives around. Often, though, such teachers were middle school or high school teachers or coaches who saw something in a student that others had missed. That I have not read such papers about college teachers may be partly because I meet my students early in their college career, but I know it is also because college instructors and professors do not necessarily see it as part of their job to be that change in someone's life—unless it is a matter of awakening an interest in their subject matter. However, students who have received little schooling success in the past and have little support at home often need more than a professor passionate about his or her subject. Still, many may question whether it is really the teacher's job to fulfill roles beyond conveying the subject taught.

### **Analysis**

My students' and my own experiences made me question several of my own practices. First, I worried that the structure of my class, initially based around group collaboration, discussion, and peer review, was a failure for this set of students. In

previous classes, I rarely had students who would refuse to talk to each other. No matter the task, there had always been at least some strong personalities who would bring out the strengths in their fellow classmates. I would certainly always have a few quiet students, ones not unlike myself as an undergraduate, who would allow others to speak for them. However, this particular class was not just quiet, but at times hostile and other times just uncomfortable. For me, it seemed to take much longer than usual for students to begin to trust me and each other enough to speak freely with each other.

For many composition teachers, peer review is central to how they run their classes. A writing class is meant to mimic the writer's life of sharing writing, receiving feedback, and re-envisioning what was written. However, many developmental writing students are far from seeing themselves as writers having something important to say, and they feel even less qualified to critique their classmates' writing than they do their own writing. It takes time and trust for them to see that they have something to offer. A 10 ½ week class that meets only twice a week does not allow much time for students to become comfortable with each other and learn to trust each other. Without some positive peer voices in the classroom, it is difficult for them to see the value in group work.

I had a difficult time deciding whether how I reacted to conflict in the class was a matter of adjusting to the needs of a particular classroom or shying away from the stress of conflict. The shift toward more one-on-one conferences along with more large group discussions seemed to work in that those involved in the conflict stuck with the class and were positive about the class in the end. When I talked to other instructors who had had similar conflicts, they often told me that the students wound up dropping the class.

However, it is hard to say what would have happened with my particular students, and maybe the result would have been the same had I stuck to my original plans.

Another key issue during this quarter was attendance. I have had some classes where nearly everyone has had perfect attendance. For this class, though, only a few students had perfect attendance, while others had such random attendance that I felt moments of guilt for passing them. While I know instructors have debated attendance policies as long as there have been college classrooms, studying this class renewed the debate within myself about the best approach to attendance. I have wanted so much to encourage nontraditional students with outside obligations to continue their coursework despite the possibility of missing classes that I think I might have gone too far.

Technically, since I count attendance as only 10% of the grade, a student could miss all classes and still receive an A, assuming 100% on coursework. Of course, this is very unlikely to happen, but in Ethan's case especially, he was able to pass the course despite many absences. What is the purpose of the attendance policy? Is it to encourage students to attend, despite all of the factors that pull them away from class? Is it to protect them from themselves with the idea that without the policy, staying home to play video games might be a more attractive option than going to a writing class? Are we protecting the value of the course, making sure that earning a credit means something more than completing a few assignments? Since the course is not credit-bearing in the sense that it will not offer credit for graduation or transfer, I feel less guilty about the grades earned than I might a transfer-level course. Still, the policy is something I thought about throughout the quarter, especially knowing that the repeated absences made the prospect of a community in the classroom even more difficult.

Although I have been talking to students and listening to their stories informally for many years, in conducting interviews with my students, I was able to understand more deeply the strengths and challenges they brought with them to the classroom. Jasmine was relatively quiet through much of our class time together, but when I talked to her after the class was over, she was willing to talk to me at length about her previous schooling and her experiences in the classroom. When she told me about feeling afraid to come to class, I felt awful that I had not seen this earlier; at the same time, I knew that by the end of the class, she had trusted me enough to describe her feelings about the class. In reading her story, I hope others can see a bit of their own students in her.

Through Ethan, I learned the limitations of what I could do for a student. For those who read his story, though, I hope they do see some hope in that student that seems resistant to all we want to teach him. In the past, he might have been one of those students who I had hoped would just quietly go away. He made people uncomfortable. He did not understand social and classroom norms. Still, he was a person trying to make a change in his life, and college was an opportunity for him to express himself. His fellow students were able to appreciate him once they heard him read his writing; I hope it is a moment he remembers. For readers, I hope he inspires some patience for their more difficult students.

I must admit that since I have roots in Thailand, I became interested in hearing Eh Doh's story early on. Luckily, without influence from me, he wrote about life in his village and his schooling experiences naturally. Unlike for Jasmine and Ethan, whose issues were more hidden, most instructors would know right away that Eh Doh might

struggle due to his inexperience with the English language. At Hall, however, there are few resources for ELL students and little relevant support for refugees. Although Eh Doh initially identified himself as “Thai,” when I talked to him further, he talked about how as a Karen refugee in Thailand, he could not be a Thai citizen. He rarely talked to others about this status, though, since he considered it confusing and maybe embarrassing. He certainly would not want to have to tell his story to each person he met, but an understanding of his story can help colleges have a better knowledge of the resources necessary to meet the needs of our refugee students. Even though the city is committed to helping new refugees, many instructors have little awareness of what schooling must have been like for those born and raised in a refugee camp. Instructors assume today that many of their students have been raised with technology and are likely better at technology than they are. More students than we realize, though, have little experience with technology and may not have adequate access at home.

Though the slogan “Not all wounds are visible” applies to all of the students studied, I ended with James’s story since he exemplifies the growing population of non-traditional students, ones whose wounds are not always visible. He had grown up in a single-parent home and in poverty; as someone who had to work young to help support his mother and siblings, he had never even considered college as an option. Many of our instructors wonder why their students do not have the skills necessary for college; they and many outsiders think that some people may not be “college material.” However, as a returning student, James is committed to changing his life for his children. Because of a major injury, he is not able to do manual labor, something he had done all of his life and

had done successfully. He was a hard worker all of his life, but suddenly could not provide for his family.

While I did not initially know his story, I sensed early on that he needed someone who could be patient with him. He had been so upset on the first day of class to not have the instructor he was expecting that I had been tempted to try to find him another class. Instead, though, I talked him into staying, and I think it benefitted both of us.

### **Discussion**

Outside of the classroom, these students' stories bring many questions to mind. The national debate begins with whose responsibility it is to educate students who were not sufficiently educated in high school. Is it the university's responsibility? The community college? Independent tutoring centers? Those who blame high schools often misunderstand who is in our classes. Jasmine spent much of her time outside of the traditional classroom and in "SPED" classrooms designed to help her become an independent adult, not a college student. Eh Doh spent much of his schooling inside a refugee camp school and then in ELL classes in the United States. James spent his high school years working to support his family. Other students I have had spent much of their high school in vocational classes and/or skipped their classes, assuming that they were never going to college. It is difficult to blame the high schools or the students themselves for their lack of preparation, but how much can colleges be expected to do to assist such students?

As more and more states across the country are tying funding to college completion rates (Mangan, 2013), what effect will it have on students like James, Eh

Doh, Jasmine, and Ethan? Much of the current push is toward accelerating or eliminating developmental coursework, yet many of my students have specifically told me that they would not be able to handle a more rushed format. With so little academic work behind them, trying to build college skills in a few weeks will likely be unsuccessful. For some students, acceleration can work wonderfully. For example, I have known other nontraditional students who had had college preparatory schooling but did not go to college due to marriage, kids, or a job opportunity. Now that they have returned to college, they have forgotten many of the skills that they had learned. Still, they had had a solid foundation for schooling and may have been reading and writing for the past ten years, just not necessarily academic prose. Students such as these could benefit greatly from an accelerated class or from a traditional class with some additional support. What, though, would happen to those who have had little schooling experiences before attending college?

Changes to financial aid distribution and to cut scores for college entry have already cut the number of students in Hall's developmental writing classrooms. One effect has been a higher success rate, while another effect has been fewer students. At this moment, much of the impetus for research and experimentation with different modes of delivering developmental education is self-guided. The college simply would like to improve the success rates of its students. With outside pressure for even higher success rates, though, it seems one natural consequence would be further limitation of students entering the college. The Dean of Arts and Sciences, for example, has asked developmental instructors if they have felt the current cut score is working for our Beginning Writing classes. Should we feel that too many students are not passing, it

would be reasonable for us to say that the minimum score should be higher. As a result, though, more students would not have the opportunity to further their educations to pursue new careers.

Based on what I have learned from my students, one new method of delivering developmental education, contextualization, may have a greater success rate than the current method. In one example of this method, I-BEST, implemented in the Washington State Community and Technical College System, developmental skills are integrated into technical programs, which both contextualize and accelerate students' movement through their early college coursework (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009). The program has improved the colleges' retention and completion rates for those involved in the program. For students who have told me how difficult a time they had taking many hours of writing, math, and reading before ever reaching their vocational programs, I can imagine such a program would alleviate some of their distress. Hall is at the beginning stages of implementing a similar program for its manufacturing students. Still, the college's efforts at this stage seem disjointed. One program at one campus is trying one method, while another campus is experimenting with other methods, while another is still teaching the traditional sequence. While I think changes should grow from the specific needs of the institutions and the students they serve, some communication between the campuses would likely improve all of the programs.

### **Next Steps**

Based on the study conducted, next steps in research could include a longer-term study in which I follow what happens to study participants after they have finished their

developmental coursework. Future studies could focus specifically on vocational students, refugees in the community college, students from traumatic backgrounds in the community college, or African American women or men in a predominately white community college. Each topic could work well for an extended study.

### **Educational Significance**

The classroom's and students' stories raise questions about classroom practices as well as how to best revise curriculum. What should be the purpose of a developmental writing class? A narrow definition might be to prepare students for college-level composition. In fact, the catalog description of HCC's Intermediate Writing class is: "This is a developmental English course that prepares students to succeed in college-level composition." However, since the purpose of college-level composition itself is often debated as well, creating a course to prepare students for every possibility seems an impossible task. HCC's catalog description of Composition I is: "Composition I offers instructional practice in the techniques of effective writing. The process of planning, writing, revising, and editing essays for particular audiences and purposes and research-related skills are also emphasized." Aside from teaching the writing process, however, instructors may vary tremendously on what they view the purpose of the college-required writing class—from a chance for students to explore creative non-fiction to a preparation to academic writing to a preparation for workplace writing. The focus is often based on instructor-preference rather than an analysis of institutional or student needs.

The goal of Composition I is central to revision efforts of developmental writing, not just at the course-level but at the program-level as well. Like many colleges across

the country, Hall has been experimenting with acceleration as a way to move students more quickly through the developmental sequence. College English Studies is an intensive class that can be used to replace two levels of reading and two levels of writing in one class. The class reads a professional non-fiction work, practicing annotation, summary, and analysis throughout the course. Along with scholarly discussions about the work, students also review grammatical rules, MLA format, and technology. The course is meant to prepare students for the academic writing they will be required to do in Composition I and in their future college courses. For those who plan to be welders or automotive technicians, however, such a course can seem far removed from their goals. Although the course gives students an opportunity to move faster through the sequence, many students become overwhelmed quite quickly.

At the same time, all students must complete Composition I. Classes all have a combination of students from different majors and goals. Those who plan to eventually transfer to a 4-year institution would be very well-served by a course like College English Studies. As an intensive advisor for the course, I meet regularly with students taking the course, and those who successfully complete it often talk about how much they learned and how they appreciated the class. Still, would it be possible to meet the needs of more students in such a class?

I continue to raise the issue of acceleration since it is a program change that is occurring across the nation and is proposed as a way to improve developmental education success rates. However, an understanding of the students' educational backgrounds and experiences in the classroom could better inform these proposed reforms. As more

researchers outside of the classroom become involved in the study of developmental education, a narrative inquiry brings the discussion back into the classroom.

Since narrative inquiries have been traditionally more focused on K-12 settings (Cameron, 2012; Carger, 1996; Chan, 2006; Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Orr, Pearce, & Steeves, 2006; Clandinin, et. al., 2010; Paley, 1989), a study in a community college setting adds to narrative inquiry research as well. For those interested in studying the multicultural classroom, a study of the community college developmental writing classroom shows what may happen to students from diverse backgrounds once they have graduated high school. In addition, this narrative inquiry adds to the growing research on the community college (Cox, 2009; Herideen, 1998; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Tinberg & Nadeau, 2010) and on college student persistence (Barbatis, 2010; Tinto, 1997).

By conducting the research in my own classroom, I was able to learn from my students and grow from the experience. I hope the study inspires others to complete their own inquiries as both a means of professional development and as a way to add to the body of educational research. The research has brought me to a new “wakefulness,” a concept Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as an on-going reflection about an inquiry. This “wakefulness” is a mindset I will work to keep as I continue my teaching and my research. Although I had long thought of myself as a reflective teacher, through this research study, I was able to learn much more about my students and my practice than I had by simply thinking and talking to those around me about how to revise my classes. Through a focus on stories and re-telling these stories, I have understood better the lives of my students in my classroom and have been changed in the process. At the

same time, the research honors the students' lived experiences as sources of knowledge that can be used to improve developmental education.

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