THE USE OF LITERARY LETTERS WITH POST-SECONDARY NON-NATIVE STUDENTS

By Laura Bauer and Linda Sweeney, National-Louis University

Abstract

This study examines the methodology of using novel reading and letter exchange based upon the novels to enhance reading/writing skills in non-native speakers at the college freshman level. In addition, it refers to theories on which such methodology is based and offers samples from student work.

According to transactional theory, reading and writing are reciprocal, part of the same process (Rosenblatt, 1994). Research further indicates that intensive reading and writing are natural ways to gain command of a language—prolific writing, in particular, produces fluency (Deen, 1992).

Of course, such research is primarily based on instruction with native speakers of English. As instructors of second-language students, we have always believed that a similar approach—intensive reading and writing—would also give such students a greater command of the English language. With the use of literary letters, a free-form exchange between teacher and student or student and student, based upon the shared reading of novels, we found a wonderful tool that melds the reading/writing process ... and goes far beyond.

Communication Development —Pre-101 English With Second Language Freshmen

The non-native students at National-Louis University have usually completed the acclaimed ESOL program of the University's Department of Applied Language. These students, mainly Polish, with a mix of Latin American, Asian, and students from other countries, were already high school graduates or had received their GEDs before entering the ESOL program. They may have taken as many as five to six quarters of English already and have a solid background in grammar, basic vocabulary development, and sentence composition. If they decide to continue their studies in one of the University degree programs, they must take a placement exam which may require them to complete Communication Development I and II, two ten week quarters of six hours-per-week intensive developmental English classes meant to hone their reading, writing, and speaking skills. An important goal of Communication Development has simply been to get students to relax with their new language, to make it their own while they're acquiring further skills for an American institution of higher learning.

Through the years, reading articles, stories, and short novels has been included in the syllabi of both Communication Development I and II. In addition, vocabulary acquisition and study skills have been emphasized, as well as the writing of essays and a variety of creative, "fun" approaches to composition, such as writing answers to newspaper advice columns or composing class-collaborative stories. Acculturization has also been a goal, though not an overt one set down to help students "fit into" American society, but rather, the presentation and explanation of attitudes or approaches that lead to success in this country's universities and workplaces.

Attempting to make writing fun while sharing attitudes about culture is not easy. Essays are good practice but do not always engage a student at the level at which he or she will willingly wrestle with new vocabulary and enthusiastically embrace higher thinking skills with which to express him or herself.

When we encountered Jeanne Henry's book, If Not Now, Developmental Readers in the College Classroom (1995), which explores the technique and process of reading novels and exchanging letters about them, we adopted it with delight. In turn, Henry had read In the Middle—Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents by Nancie Atwell (1987) and adapted the fiction reading/dialogue journal technique that Atwell details in her book. Though Atwell's students were junior high students and Henry's native born, we thought a similar approach would work with second-language freshmen. Like Atwell and Henry, we preferred *inspired* practice to skills tactics. For though nonfiction expresses the mind of a culture, we believe fiction is its heart ... and what is more powerful than the heart?

Our Initial Approach and Expectations

Laura and Linda required that a novel be read each quarter and allotted time in classes for silent sustained reading. We also required the students to write letters about the novels, though we varied in our methods. Laura began with a single novel assignment but moved to a free choice of novel for two quarters. Her students were expected to submit one letter per week based on their reading—a letter to the instructor, as well as one to a student peer (which was not read by the instructor). Linda, on the other hand, to reduce the complexity of the task and the time involved for the instructor, assigned one novel for Communication Development I classes and gave a choice of two or three novels for Communication Development II classes. Linda required at least three letters between student and instructor and two between peers during the ten week quarter. Neither instructor specified, even at repeated requests from students, how many pages a letter "should" be.

Whether or not there was more than one book being read by different groups within the class, both Laura and Linda divided the students into separate discussion teams or "literary circles" (Daniels, 1994). Discussion was an important part of the process in all classes, along with reading and writing, since speaking English could be worked on that way and questions about the text interpreted or explained. Laura found it particularly effective to return a complete set of each student's letters along with instructor replies by the second to last week

of class. Students reread these sets, then wrote a final letter on how they felt about the process and how they had changed as readers and writers.

Initially, we expected the students to use English in a free, safe way—we did not correct the letters, though we asked questions in our own replies to prod the students to elaborate or revisit the text when we couldn't understand what the student was trying to say. This particular approach has also been used by other educators with ESL students via dialogue journals (Holmes & Moulton, 1997). As in the use of journals, we wanted to "focus on interaction rather than form" (p. 616). We wanted to provide a safe environment for interaction between the text, students, and instructor. If we felt a student needed to learn correct usage, we wanted them to do so by reading our more fluent letters to them. We modeled English, rather than taught it directly.

More importantly, we hoped to engage students at a deeper level than the most literal, to encourage them to interact with the text, to compare events in it to their own lives and experience. We hoped the students would be highly motivated by interest in this unique way of communicating, from the authenticity of partners engaging in a two-way written interaction (Edelsky, 1986).

We offered reading options from a wide variety of texts from which discussion and writing were based, other than length—Communication Development I needed a shorter book—and complexity of vocabulary. Novel choices ranged from classics such as Salinger's Catcher in the Rye (1945) to modern literature such as Barbara Kingsolver's Animal Dreams (1990) or Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping (1980), to plain old popular fiction such as Michael Crichton thrillers or Nevada Barr environmental mysteries.

Though the choice of novels could not help but depend on our own knowledge of available novels, on what we ourselves had read, we tried to avoid imposing our ideas of what was interesting, as long as most of the class liked or were engaged by what they were reading. We hoped against hope we had found a way for them to lose themselves in the language.

Results from A Year's Worth of Experience

No assignment is perfect. Just as in any other situation, there were some students who said they didn't like the tasks expected of them, who claimed they were bored by their books, and who insisted that writing so much was far too difficult. Each quarter, a student or two might want to abandon the novel. However, through our letters and discussions, we persuaded the student to "hang tough," and sometimes allowed that student to choose a topic in which articles might be found to share with the class. Luckily, such students were in the minority.

The first class of each quarter started with students eyeing American novels suspiciously and counting the pages with alarm. Yet, they seemed interested by the initial letters they received which invited their individual responses. As the weeks wore on, we spotted Communication

Development students in the lounge area of the school and in the cafeteria ... actually reading the novels on their own time. Some finished their novels before the end of the quarter and asked for additional novels by the same author or recommendations for similar novels.

Furthermore, throughout the quarter, the students actively participated in discussions about the books and most wrote longer and longer letters as the exchange went on, often "testing" new vocabulary words. Some told us how much they liked the experience: *Dear Laura—I enjoy reading letters, especially which are from friends. Do you mind being my friend? I like to read them as soon as I receive them. I always read them again after a short time.* (Min, Chinese, CD2, based on Animal Dreams)

Many other students expressed in their letters their profound surprise that their teacher would write letters to *them,* that they had our undivided attention. They were also sensitive to the amount of time instructors spent responding to each student and expressed their appreciation.

Touched by Min's letter quoted above, Laura answered with encouragement: *I'm so happy you're enjoying your letters. I'd love to be your friend. Thank you for asking.*

It was no use trying to get into a lecture or other project when we handed our response letters back to Communication Development students. As soon as they received them, they became engrossed in reading. As instructors, we also had to admit we loved getting letters from the students, which varied from the expected summary of events in the text, to surprisingly personal disclosures about students' lives, to more simple topics we hadn't even thought of when we began the letter exchange process, such as the type of greeting one "should" use in an American style letter: *I am sorry this letter is late. I hope you don't mind. I hope Dear Ms. Sweeney is the right way to start. Actually I didn't feel very good these days. I felt annoyed because there was an unhappy arguement between my friend and I. When I am in a bad mood, I don't want to do anything except to work out ... Is it a little far from the book? OK, I am coming back.* (Xan, Chinese, CD1, based on A River Runs Through It)

Linda answered: *Yes, either Dear Linda or Dear Ms. Sweeney would be considered the correct way to start an American letter ... I can understand your being in a really down mood after fighting with a friend. I'm surprised to learn you were in a bad mood at all, though, since you always look and act so happy. I guess it only goes to prove that no one can tell what is going on in another person's head. All of us can be good at hiding our emotions.* Then Linda went on to ask Xan what kind of exercise he practiced, another unobtrusive way to "connect" before continuing on with comments and questions about the book and Xan's interpretation/reaction.

Most students had no trouble relating to the events in the novel or understanding the basic action and emotion, even when they didn't know every single word they read: *The story is so sad that it makes me full of sadness. Cosima led an unhappy life in Grace. Her mother death is a blight on her. She says she is a stranger in her hometown, which makes me think about my feelings to my village.* (Min, CD2, based on Animal Dreams)

Laura replied: *I'm sorry that Animal Dreams makes you sad. Please believe me when I tell you there are some happy parts of the novel, too.* Furthermore, Laura reinforced Min's identification with the situation by admitting, *For me, when I go back home, I feel as if I no longer belong, that life there has gone on without me and I've missed important events with my family.*

Almost all students made predictions about where the novels' plots were heading, some with no prompting from instructors' letters, others because of the questions posed to them. In her initial letter to one class, the instructor asked: *This book is full of emotion and has some interesting characters who suffer a lot. Can you identify with any of them? What do you think might happen next?*

A student answered: *First, I thought this is a women book—borring and telling a love story, but later I found out that it's going to be something more ... I knew something interesting and bad will happened.* (Rafal, Polish, CD2, based on The Horse Whisperer, 1995).

Many students backed up their opinions by revisiting the text and quoting it in their letters: *The more I read, the more I'm convinced how little I know. Many books give us knowledge and teach us in many ways. Camps for Japanese? In the United States? ... Hatsue's soul was "made impure," living among white people "has tainted" her (Chapter 14, p. 202).* (Bianca, Polish, CD2, based on Snow Falling on Cedars, 1995.)

The instructor admitted: *I'm ashamed to say that I didn't know about Japanese concentration camps either until some years back. Prejudice causes such terrible things!* To get the student to think critically, however, the instructor asked Bianca if the Japanese were also being prejudiced when they thought that Hatsue's soul had been tainted by Caucasians.

The ability to not only predict the action a novel's storyline will be taking but also reviewing those predictions shows a high level of reading comprehension. As Rosenblatt (1994) states, "From a to-and-fro interplay between reader, text, and context emerges a synthesis or organization, more or less coherent and complete" (p. 1064) and, again, "The reader may return to the original text to recapture how it entered into the transaction, but must 'find words' for explaining the evocation and the interpretation" (p. 1074).

Based on most of the letters we received, we were elated that CD students understood so much about what they were reading. Prolific readers ourselves, with many literature courses in our backgrounds, we found that some students made literary interpretations that could be considered products of very high level thinking (Holmes & Moulton, 1997), helping to explain events to other students, as well as the instructor: *But in my opinion, Tom Booker made a suicidal after Annie told him that she's going to let her husband know about them and live him. He didn't want to crash their marriage so he killed himself. And I also think the kind of death he choose, Tom did on purpose. He wanted to be killed by a horse as a*

symbol. The horse connected Tom and Annie and because of the horse he could be close to her. (Rafal, CD2, based on The Horse Whisperer ,1995.)

Students did not have to possess high level writing skills to understand the basics of what they were reading or why the author wrote the way he or she did, but were encouraged to work with the language before they had complete control of it. For example, a young Chinese woman who had trouble articulating words aloud and wrote short letters because the process was so difficult for her, nevertheless, composed an insightful statement about A River Runs Through It (1976) that could be considered literary criticism as to how the structure and style of the novel reflected one of its main themes: *I had ever been fishing, but this was many years ago. I think the book moves slow because the story told how to fish. Fishing is very slow action ...* (Su, CD1).

Some students identified deeply with characters. Van Horn (1997) speculates that readers pretending to be a character or trying to help a character figure out a problem will not only make reading a more meaningful experience, but will come to see themselves as readers/writers who have a duty to think and create. Min, the Chinese student mentioned earlier, wrote these poignant comments about two major characters in Animal Dreams, an estranged father and daughter: *I'm a person who hides love deep in my heart, just like Dr. Homer. I sometimes hate Cosima. No matter how he seems to be a bad father, he is her only real father. I don't want her to regret not treating him nicely when he's still in her sight. Whenever I think the person I love is gone without knowing my love, my heart crashes like glass.*

In reply, the instructor wrote: *The relationship between Doc Homer and Codi is pretty strange to me, too. I feel the same way you do about relationships with parents. Even if they make us crazy, we have to be there for them when they need us.*

A young Polish man in CD1 identified so much with the doomed brother in A River Runs Through It that he changed his name in his letters from Pawel (which is Paul in Polish) to Poul, to, finally, Paul. His remarks about the character showed his growing attachment: *I hope we will talk about Paul in class because his person is very interesting and hard to describe* (first letter). *It is almost not possible to find the cause of his* (Paul's) *death because Norman is a person who tells us this story, and we know that Paul didn't like to talk with him about his problems, so the Paul's inside is unknown for us, and we can just speculate about the reasons of his death* (second letter). *You wrote in your letter that another student came up with opinion that Paul felt inferior to Norman. My opinion is different. I think that Paul felt better than Norman and more independent. He was better at fly-fishing which both brothers knew and I think that Paul had more freedom* (third letter). *My final opinion about this book—I think that Norman wrote this book like document which should tell us that he wasn't guilty Paul's death* (fourth letter).

Of course, the student actually did think Norman guilty of neglecting to save his brother, somehow, and expressed this in class. In response to both letters and discussion, the

instructor wrote: *Perhaps you are right about Norman not being brave enough to approach his brother regarding his problems ... However, as adults, we have to allow each other to make our own decisions. Think about the alcoholics you've known—were their families able to change them? Still, I admire your deep feelings on this matter. If a person were in trouble, he or she should appreciate having a friend or brother like you. I think you would fight to the death for the people you love.*

The instructor also added: *I'm so happy you found a character to care about in A River Runs Through It. I think caring about Paul is the whole point of this book. If he were alive, Norman Maclean would be thrilled to know that his work touched you, that you made Paul, his beloved brother, come back to life, if only in your mind and words.*

We believe the support for his opinions may have helped Pawel/Paul be willing to learn so much from his own process of reading and writing, as is shown in the introduction to his final essay, a compare/contrast summary of A River Runs Through It and the film that was based on the book: *I would like to send a few words to my teacher which was the best I've ever had. I would like to thank you for your all work which you had to do to teach me and my friends. I feel that I've learned a lot and I'm really appreciate. When I learned my own language in Poland, my teacher didn't like when I wrote a composition about the book which included my deep feelings. She always said to me that I was flew so high in my imagination and I could fail my final exam because somebody could dislike my interpretation. I thought about it a lot and know that it didn't make sence, but sometimes when I read my previous compositions I couldn't understand myself because I wrote on paper my feelings which I had in my head right after reading the book.*

I liked the idea about writing the letters because I could write about everything which I wanted. Sometimes my opinions were misleading, but everybody can interpretate the book in a different way. These letters were like sheets of paper which were a copies of our picture which book made in our minds.

Rosenblatt (1994) would certainly agree that everyone can interpret a book in a different way:

> There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are in reality only the potential millions of individual readers of individual literary works ... The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader (p.1057).

From the transactional standpoint, we had met our goals of helping our students increase their reading comprehension. We had helped pave the way for them to express themselves as sophisticated readers in English, readers who could consciously articulate information about a character's emotional state (Barton, 1990) and remark on their own processes. Furthermore, and of great importance, the quotes from students above show an increased

level of trust and connection by the student for the instructor, minds reaching across cultural boundaries and communicating, if only for the transient and fragile interlude of three letter exchanges.

The process of acculturization can only be enhanced by such an approach. In two students' own words: *I am so happy you liked this process too. From your letter, I know you more and want to continue our communication* (Su, CD1). *I know I will never be an American but my Polish roots aren't as pure as they were. The question where I belong to, will always come to my mind. Dilemmas are the price we have to pay for freedom* (Bianca, CD2).

We believe that interaction with a novel and with letter exchanges between instructors and students regarding that novel are complicated transactions, reciprocal relationships within the classroom environment which broadens to include the whole institutional, social, and cultural context of the situation (Rosenblatt, 1994). We became far more enlightened about what was going on with our students, particularly the silent, reluctant population that attended class but never had much to say. We believe many students got to know us better as well, along with the complex American culture that shaped us. We found ourselves explaining (and sometimes looking up) anything from who General Custer was to why the United States became embroiled in military problems with El Salvador.

Implications and A Few Final Words

Literary letters are a powerful tool for enhancing literacy. Though we have no official count, since the inception of this classroom tool in 1997, the number of students who are admitted to English 101 from Communication Development II, rather than continuing in yet another developmental writing class, has increased from 20-30% to 50% or more.

We do not offer this information with graphs and official statistics. Rather, we present it as practical inquiry (Richardson, 1994). Like most teachers, we like to begin with a general idea, focus on content and activities, then connect our experiences with formal research as we examine the results of what we have done.

Are there drawbacks to the letter and novel reading method? Absolutely. Like dialogue journal writing, the process is labor intensive (Holmes & Moulton, 1997). It helps if instructors have computers and know how to use a keyboard. They also need to believe their efforts will make a lasting difference in the abilities of their students (Holmes & Moulton, 1997).

We do.

We constantly encounter students from past classes in the hallways who say, "I still have all your letters and I read them again once in awhile." We respond the same way, "So do I."

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CONVERSATION WITH MARCIA BAXTER MAGOLDA

By Gideon L. Weinstein, American University

In early October of 1998, the Midwest College Learning Center Association convened its 13th annual conference, titled "Foundations of Learning." The keynote speaker was Marcia Baxter Magolda, a professor of educational leadership at Miami University of Ohio, and the author of Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development. Her book refines earlier work on "ways of knowing" by Perry (1970) and Belenky et al. (1986) and provides a thorough discussion of the implications for improving academic and student affairs. To oversimplify, the "ways of knowing" literature states that students begin college with absolute, black-and-white views of the world, and that they slowly progress to more contextual, shades-of-gray views. In her keynote address, Dr. Baxter Magolda shared young adults' stories that revealed various ways they learned, offered examples of effective teaching, and exemplified principles for promoting learning. I listened to this presentation with great interest because I am very interested in the ways college students know mathematics, and I had, in fact, used Dr. Baxter Magolda's ideas as a major framework for my dissertation work on the development of mathematical sophistication in college students. Over the course of the conference, I engaged her in conversation several times, and our discussion continued afterwards by email. I have reconstructed some of our conversations here in the form of an interview, although by no means was our communication as linear and orderly as is presented.

GLW: Let me review my understanding of what you said in your keynote address. I heard three main points. The first was your main thesis, "Teachers and students live in different worlds." Indeed, your diagnosis of many problems in higher education flows from that thesis, and is essentially "Teachers and students *are unaware* that they live in different worlds." Second, you pointed out that this disconnection is caused by differences in teachers' and students' ways of making meaning and constructing knowledge. And finally, you suggested that the gap caused by that disconnection can be bridged by three characteristics of successful teachers: they validate the students' ability as knowers; they situate learning in their students' experience; and they mutually construct meaning with their students.

MBM: Yes, you've captured the essence of my remarks, if not the nuances, specific quotes, and details I also mentioned. What questions do you have that might be particularly relevant to people working in learning assistance?

GLW: I believe people who are effective learning assistance professionals are very aware of the fact that teachers and students live in different worlds. In fact, I think a metaphor for their work might be that of helping build bridges between these worlds. What is your impression of learning assistance professionals and their work?

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MBM: I like the bridge builder metaphor for learning assistance professionals. I have always thought of them as translators—people who help teachers understand students' learning needs and who help students understand teachers' expectations. As bridge builders, they help students understand their learning tasks and develop strategies to use for success; they help teachers understand students' approach to the task and develop strategies for teachers to use to assist students to succeed. Learning assistance professionals, I suspect, offer the connection that is so often lacking in the classroom.

GLW: One way you explain the differences between students and teachers is that students are at earlier stages in your model for students' intellectual development than teachers expect. Ironically, this is just as true in freshman courses as in senior seminars, because teachers' expectations increase over time, continually providing a moving target more advanced than most students' preferred types of intellectual activity. In contrast to this approach based on intellectual development, many learning assistance professionals think of their students' academic approaches in terms of learning styles, viewing them as auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learners, or field-dependent/field-independent learners, or a variety of other styles of learner. Isn't it possible that much of the differences you see between students and teachers can be explained by mismatches in learning and teaching styles? How do the two models (intellectual development and learning styles) relate to each other?

MBM: In my mind, learning styles and intellectual development are two layers of students' ways of knowing and learning. Based on my research on gender-related patterns, I think learning styles are actually preferences that exist inside of ways of knowing. For example, an absolute knower could be auditory or visual or kinesthetic - both layers would affect how the person approaches learning. Certainly, some of the mismatch may be in learning styles; yet it could also be in intellectual development. Kegan (1994) has a nice chapter on difference in which he talks about structure (which in this case would be way of knowing) and style (in this case, learning style). Both are important, and both contribute to the picture of understanding students and how they approach a learning task.

GLW: Could you give some examples of the characteristics of successful teaching in basic topics, such as grammar in a writing course, or fractional arithmetic in mathematics? What does it mean to "mutually construct knowledge with students" in courses like this? What kind of knowledge do they have for us to acknowledge? What abilities as learners do they have at this level that we can validate?

MBM: I haven't observed teaching in the courses you mention, so I cannot offer examples. I can respond, though, to the question of what students in this setting have to offer. Regardless of the content, students come with some perception and understanding based on their experience. It is there, like it or not, and if we wish to transform whatever it is, we have to engage it—otherwise teachers' knowledge lives alongside students' knowledge. Students always have the capacity to know—even if they are not versed in the topic. What we are validating is their ability to learn and know, their ability to offer their own experience and to work with us and peers in making some sense of it. We aren't validating *what* they know

per se, but their ability to interpret, make sense, and essentially to learn. This could go a long way in beginning courses toward building self esteem and risk-taking behavior.

GLW: Learning assistance professionals often work with students who struggle because they are at the earliest stages of your model for intellectual development. Did you interview students like that in your research? And, if so, please share some of the stories of their successes and failures, and let us know what lessons we might learn from these stories.

MBM: Yes, there were students in my study who struggled because they were at the earliest stages of the model. Their primary struggle was their belief that knowledge was certain, which was reinforced in some classes, but challenged in other classes. Their successes came from environments in which teachers connected with their way of knowing, supported it to a degree, but also helped them see it another way. These teachers listened to students and then helped them understand new possibilities. Failures occurred when teacher and student did not connect.

GLW: Your model for intellectual development described in your book is based on interviews of many students. You started interviewing them their freshman year and followed up with a yearly interview for five years. I understand you have continued to follow these students; what else have you learned from them that might shed light on how they learned as undergraduates?

MBM: That's correct; I'm in my twelfth year of contact with these young adults. To date, I have continued to follow them to age 30. Although I am still processing and interpreting this data, one insight is that even those who became contextual knowers (the highest stage in the model) learned a formula of sorts to make sense of uncertainty. This formula did not hold up during their twenties and thus had to be abandoned for a more internal way of knowing. This insight leads me to believe that we may be too procedural in college, yielding ways of knowing that are not sufficiently flexible for complex society. I can't say too much about this right now given the tentative and preliminary state of my thinking.

GLW: Some skeptics might look at your work and say "Fine, I like your ideas about the ways of knowing of college students, and I even believe your suggestions about improving teaching, but in *my* content area, things are different. It won't work." In your MCLCA conference keynote address, you briefly mentioned three studies you have done to respond to the challenges of skeptics regarding teaching science, teaching mathematics, and teaching in large lecture halls. What would you like to say to the skeptics as a result of your studies?

MBM: To the skeptics: there is extensive evidence in mathematics, the sciences, and large lecture classes that constructivist teaching does work to help students learn content. The three courses I observed, one mathematics, one zoology, and one with 286 students revealed that subject matter learning could be successful while students made progress on self authorship, as well. In the mathematics course, the teacher helped students draw out the discoveries they made during their individual and group explorations of mathematical topics,

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***Gideon L. Weinstein**, Ph.D
at American University.*

explicitly connecting new ideas to their existing knowledge of mathematical structure. In the zoology course, the teacher helped put scientific concepts in the students' experiences by using classroom demonstrations that connected zoological theories with everyday situations. In the large lecture course, performances and storytelling sessions were used to provide students with concrete contexts which were then analyzed with respect to weekly themes. The details of these three examples of successful constructivist teaching, as well as citations of much of the related literature, can be found in my forthcoming book, Creating Contexts for Self-Authorship and Learning: Constructive-Developmental Pedagogy, published by Vanderbilt University Press. The constructivist teaching literature addresses this issue as well.

GLW: By bringing up the idea of "constructivist teaching," you remind me of some literature that expounds on the use of "connected teaching" (Becker, 1995; Buerk, 1985; Damarin, 1993; Koch, 1996). Connected teaching is sensitive to ways of knowing that match the intellectual styles most common in women as described in Belenky et al. (1986) and your work. Connected teachers call for engaging students in the process of thinking by talking about their own thinking in public dialogue, thus exposing students to "the process of gestation" by which knowledge is created and discovered. In fact, Belenky et al. (1986) use the metaphor of teacher as midwife. In other words, the teacher is one who draws out knowledge, assisting the students in giving birth to their own ideas, one who helps women (and men) articulate and expand their latent knowledge. Midwife-teachers foster the evolution of their students' thinking and focus not on their own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the students' knowledge. How does this description of effective teaching gibe with your own ideas?

MBM: Perfectly! The mid-wife metaphor resonates with my idea that validating students as knowers and situating learning in their experience is important. Indeed, connected teaching links to my ideas about intellectual development better than purely constructivist teaching philosophies do. Belenky et al. (1986) have what I would call a constructivist-developmental perspective, meaning that people construct knowledge, but do so in the context of their current assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

In Conclusion

Marcia Baxter Magolda's work has contributed to improving educational practice, as well as advancing educational theory, and I'd like to thank her not only for these contributions, but also for the time and effort she devoted to her discussions with me. I hope you've been able to benefit from these conversations, and I look forward to your contributions to the ongoing conversation on how to enrich and improve our interactions with students.

***Gideon L. Weinstein**, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at American University.*

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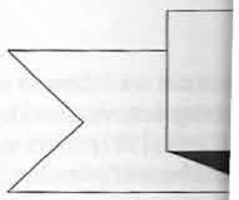

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By Shevawn B. Eat

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT AND LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTERS: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND GROWTH POSSIBILITIES

By Shevawn B. Eaton, Northern Illinois University

Learning assistance centers are often caught in the throws of controversy at institutions of higher education. The purpose of this issue's "Join the Conversation" is to examine some of the causal contributors to this controversy and to help learning assistance professionals identify the strategies necessary to preserve their centers' integrity in good and difficult financial times.

Enrollment Management and Learning Assistance

Back in the 1970s, admissions and student retention were viewed as separate functions of the institution. As American demographics began to shift, however, and many colleges and universities were faced with the challenge of a declining student population, institutions began to realize that retention and admissions were partners in the management of enrollment.

By the mid-1980s, many colleges began to institute enrollment management strategies and plans by which to maintain fiscal as well as academic success on their campuses. According to Hossler and Bean (1990), enrollment management systems may include Admissions, Financial Aid, Orientation and Academic Advising, Campus Activities and Residence Life, Career Planning and Placement, Institutional Research, Faculty Development, and Learning Assistance Centers (pp. 7-12). In the best case scenario, these programs work together towards protecting the academic and fiscal stability of an institution.

Hossler and Bean (1990) also state that learning centers are very important to enrollment management, because these centers are where the retention of underprepared students is best served. Learning centers have the capacity to evaluate and assess enrollment trends and student success. They can point to groups of underprepared students who are not successful and help enrollment management teams develop programs and services to better serve them.

The authors note that learning centers also hold the capacity to provide positive reinforcement for underprepared students who perform well academically. Further, they can

help students enhance and develop academic skills and confidence that can contribute to a sense of belonging at the institution. In the most basic terms, learning centers provide opportunities for the most at-risk students to develop a sense of what Tinto (1987) refers to as academic integration, an important component within the theoretical base of retention.

So, why is it that learning assistance is so often viewed as peripheral on college campuses? Why are centers so often required to justify their very existence? Let's examine the cycle of enrollment and retention to see where and why this might happen.

The Enrollment/Retention Cycle and the Role of Learning Assistance

When enrollments are stable, or high, the institution is affected in a number of ways. Selection of students becomes more discretionary. The best and brightest are more likely to be included in the new admissions cohort. The skills and abilities of students as an aggregate are strong. There seems to be less need for academic services. Why spend money for students to be successful, when we can select students who appear to already have the necessary skills? Perhaps funds must also be shifted to serve the increased number of students enrolled in service courses and general education curriculum. Placement scores may shift upward, and funds may be perceived to be needed at a different point in the curriculum than our programs serve.

However, when enrollments decline, finances decline. As finances decline, budgets are cut, but institutional awareness of student needs increases. Again, at this stage, if retrenchment and reallocation of funding are needed, the institution may choose to look at programs that are seen as "peripheral" to the institution's academic function. Again, as the watchful eyes of high level administrators look for financial slack in the system, programs like academic support services may seem expendable.

If an enrollment decline continues over some time, retaining each student becomes an institutional priority. The institution must hold on to the students it has, and it must create ways to attract new students more effectively. From my experience, there seem to be three primary approaches to dealing with an enrollment crisis--retention of existing students through graduation, attracting new populations of students, and staying competitive with other institutions in the area by offering attractive services and programs. When an institution is in this position, learning centers and academic support services may be in higher demand than ever before to attract students who recognize the importance of academic support to their educational success.

Admissions offices can use learning assistance programs and activities as marketing tools. Maxwell (1997) stated that learning assistance programs can make significant contributions to minority retention rates (p. 19). Having extensive tutoring programs on campus may indicate a more student-oriented college environment. In short, our programs shift from being institutional liabilities to institutional perks.

In order to increase retention and graduation rates, academic success is paramount. Institutions interested in competitive retention strategies become more creative and innovative in the programs and services they offer to students. Funding shifts can result, bringing more dollars to new, unique, or high demand academic services.

In this role, learning center administrators who are well-versed in programmatic possibilities may be sought out for their unique expertise. Programs such as first-year student experience seminars, supplemental instruction, video supplemental instruction, on-line curriculum and tutoring services, focused interest groups, and learning community models are all programs that may find new interest (and funding) within the institution, and a new home in the learning center.

Along with new marketing and program strategies, bringing in new students may require an institution to "tweak" admission standards. This may result in a subtle or not-so-subtle shift in the skills of students. They may be recruited from high schools with weaker reputations and preparatory programs, or the aggregate group may have on average, lower high school ranks, GPAs, or SAT/ACT scores. In some way or another, changes in admissions criteria mean changes in the needs of admitted students.

In this position, learning centers have the capacity to provide a wealth of support and information for the institution, both as program delivery systems and as program evaluators. As Hossler and Bean (1990) observed, learning centers have the capacity to provide feedback about the characteristics and academic needs of each entering class. By maintaining good, longitudinal data about students served and their successes, learning centers can offer the administration unique knowledge about how admission trends are impacting classroom performance.

Centers that do placement testing and host developmental coursework can also speak to placement numbers, developmental course success, and subsequent course success for students. In this manner, as learning center administrators view themselves as part of the enrollment management team, they can provide valuable information to high level administrators, and make themselves indispensable in assessing the effect of admissions strategies.

Learning center professionals have their finger on the pulse of student performance on campus. They can show where the strengths and weaknesses are within the academic fabric of the institution. In some respects, this can be precarious knowledge to hold, but on the other hand, it is also knowledge that is vital to the continued financial stability of the institution. Drops in enrollments and fewer applications can result in fiscal crisis.

Survival Characteristics of Learning Center Administrators

In sum, all good administrators have strong skills in the areas of supervision, fiscal responsibility, and training. Learning center administrators also should exhibit expertise in

three other areas in order to be adequately prepared to participate in each of our institution's enrollment management function.

First, it behooves each administrator to stay in touch with enrollment and admissions data and trends. In this way, we can be prepared to speak to the necessity of our programs in enrollment slumps, and to broaden our programs during high enrollment periods and in response to changes in admissions patterns.

Second, it is imperative that we develop comprehensive evaluation programs for our services. By providing information about student performance, needs and success, we move our programs from being secondary to the academic mission to being primary to the management of enrollment. Our services and programs are key to the academic success and self-confidence of students. We must be able to provide that information routinely to administrators. The more vital our function appears to high level administration, the less likely we are to disappear.

Finally, we have an obligation to our home institutions to stay as current as possible about innovations and programmatic possibilities within our profession. Membership in professional organizations, attendance at conferences and workshops, participation in informal networking and discussion, such as the listserve LRNASST, and scanning the web for new and innovative ideas from other colleges should be an important part of our role. In my years in this profession, it has become clear that each of our institutions has ebbs and flows of possibility for programmatic initiatives that help students. The more we know, the more likely we can offer ideas and solutions as others on campus begin to identify needs. We have to create, as well as wait for, our opportunities.

Shevawn B. Eaton *is the President of MCLCA and Director of ACCESS in the Department of Education Services and Programs at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois.*

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BOOK REVIEW

THE COURAGE TO TEACH: EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF A TEACHER'S LIFE

Reviewed By Darren J. Smith, The Teachers College, Emporia State University

Palmer, P. J. (1998). The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pass it on! Parker J. Palmer's book, The Courage To Teach..., autobiographical in nature, serves as a reflective memoir that reveals the ebb and flow of cognitive and affective issues that educators may experience when they cross the threshold of that sacred place called "classroom" or when they are charged with the responsibility of fostering a "good" learning environment for others. The overriding premise that informs Palmer's book is **WE TEACH WHO WE ARE.** And, who we are needs to be reassessed to ensure a healthy balance of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual sustenance, otherwise, the person we are may cause undue damage to others. Palmer takes readers on a journey whereby they are asked to take the "road less traveled by," thus becoming more mindful of their human gifts and frailties.

In Chapter One, "The Heart of a Teacher...," Palmer explores issues dealing with self-concept. Who am I as a teacher? What does it mean to be a student? Which mask do I wear as a teacher? Which mask do I wear as a student? Palmer expertly uses vignettes and metaphors to illuminate the experiences that spotlight the way teachers may present themselves in public, namely inside classrooms. Also, what's applicable to the persona teachers project onto others is akin to how students reveal themselves in public.

In Chapter Two, "A Culture of Fear...," Palmer suggests that teachers and students wear masks out of fear of revealing the truth about what they see, how they listen, who they speak to, and why they think the way they do on a daily basis. In particular, teachers have conditioned themselves to hide behind their credentials, their lecture material, their questions with predetermined, correct answers, and their power as specialist. On the other hand, students have conditioned themselves to avoid failure, to avoid not understanding, to avoid looking foolish, to avoid being drawn into heated discussions about content information, and to avoid having their ignorance exposed. If only the system were different, so some naively ponder privately to themselves. As is the case when counseling addicts, Palmer posits that

teachers and students need to first admit and then name the fear or fears that have separately and collectively resulted in an identity crisis, a crisis that diminishes a person's integrity.

In Chapter Three, "The Hidden Wholeness...," Palmer invites readers to explore the dualities, many of which are paradoxes, that exist in educational settings. These dualities include separating our cognitive sensibilities from our affective intuitions, separating theory from practice, separating teaching from learning, and separating our individual sense-of-self from our socially constructed sense-of-self. Once educators close the doors of their classrooms, the aforementioned dualities invariably complement or cancel each other out. Unfortunately, the latter happens more than the former because many preoccupy themselves with "fix-it" strategies rather than delve into more critical issues; these issues include how "every [educator's] strength is also a weakness, a limitation, a dimension of identity that serves [him or her] and others well under some circumstances but not all the time" (pp. 71-72). The biggest challenge of all is coming to terms with the power of "suffering" through these dualities. This suffering is softened through authentic conversations with caring souls who will speak and listen with passion and with discipline.

In Chapter Four, "Knowing in Community...," Palmer asks readers to reclaim fears as agents of untold growth potential. Whereas diversity, ambiguity, conflict, honesty, humility, and freedom are things that many fear, in this chapter readers are reminded that genuine learning comes about by seeing fears as learning opportunities-in-waiting. It's a matter of choice how we live through daily events. For Palmer, the therapeutic, civic, and marketing models of community have served man and woman dishonorably because each one has pitted people against each other or has placed a disproportionate amount of emphasis on the system. A viable alternative is a community of truth, having the subject as the centerpiece. We, in this community of truth, are asked to teach in a circular, interactive, and dynamic manner. Everything and everyone become alive in a community of truth, and all are invited to form meaningful relationships with all the "stuff" that finds its way into the classroom atmosphere. The key will be everyone's willingness to submit his/her assumptions, his/her observations, his/her theories—indeed, him or herself—to its scrutiny.

In Chapter Five, "Teaching in Community...," Palmer illustrates what it means to have the subject as the centerpiece of education. Two examples are used to explore the generativeness of a subject-centered curriculum. One example is about how a medical school transformed itself from a cut-throat, survival-of-the-fittest environment into one where students regained their initial reasons for pursuing a career in medicine, i.e., embracing whole-heartedly the Socratic Oath. In the second example, Palmer uses his social science class as a basis for having his students critically ponder the question, what does it mean to define someone's race? In both instances, readers are invited to do what C. S. Lewis (1996) discusses in Mere Christianity: Be authentic and transform the system to serve more lofty goals and needs than the egos of insecure or disingenuous people.

In Chapter Six, "Learning in Community...," Palmer notes that leaders are important and they play a key role in instilling a will and desire in educators or students to work to their full

potential. For example, the Quaker religion, particularly through its "clearness committee" meetings, serves as an empowering model by which to explore leadership issues and determine a situation's successes and liabilities. In a manner similar to what P. Freire (1970) addressed in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Palmer suggests that recreating and analyzing life events offer people a chance to own their successes and short-comings more completely. In essence, this chapter acknowledges the importance of looking behind the mask we tend to wear, knowing that underneath the mask lie our multiple selves.

In Chapter Seven, "Divided No More...," Palmer challenges all to account for why they choose TO BE OR NOT TO BE among the best. In the real world of public education, to be the best can also mean being the worst if your power base is rooted in controlling or coercing others into submission. For Palmer, he takes heed from the civil rights and social activist movements that have given voice to the voiceless, hope to the hopeless, and power to the powerless. In the spirit of self-actualization and self-determination, four stages must coalesce:

1. individuals take a stand by challenging traditional and new-wave practices that dictate normative behavior and thought;

2. individuals gather supporters for affirmation and mutual reassurance when the majority rule mind set argues that alternative ways (of learning) are subversive gimmicks;

3. individuals go public to win massive empathy and to refine their stance as a result of the constant, negative criticism by some who may discount the need for change; and

4. individuals redefine their measurements of success so as to sustain hope while the traditional system slowly changes for the better.

Yes, The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, is a must read for educators, preservice teachers, school administrators, counselors, and students. It is filled with profound wisdom stated in refreshingly honest, yet pointedly blunt, terms about why bad things tend to happen to good people who accept the call to teach. Moreover, Palmer's ideas represent eternal flames of faith, hope, charity, and love for educators and those who cry out for a quality education for all. And, so I again say, PASS IT ON!

Darren J. Smith, *Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Teachers College at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas.*

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MCLCA Annual Conference

October 6-8, 1999

Omni-Orrington: Evanston, Illinois

Learning Centers: Creating Opportunities for Success

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"Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher" and
"A Conversation with Stephen Brookfield"

Pre-Conference: Johanna Dvorak
"Building Your College Learning Center"

Post-Conference: Shevawn Eaton
"Creating Effective Program Evaluation"

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Midwest College Learning Center Association

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The Learning Assistance Review

The Learning Assistance Review is a publication of the Midwest College Learning Association (MCLCA). It is published twice a year, in the fall and spring.

The journal seeks to expand and disseminate knowledge about learning centers and to foster communication among learning center professionals. Its audience includes learning center administrators, teaching staff, and tutors as well as other faculty and administrators across the curriculum who are interested in improving the learning skills of postsecondary students.

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PUBLICATION GUIDELINES

As an official publication of the Midwest College Learning Center Association, The Learning Assistance Review seeks to expand and disseminate knowledge about learning centers and to foster communication among learning center professionals. Its audience includes learning center administrators, teaching staff and tutors, as well as other faculty and administrators across the curriculum who are interested in improving the learning skills of postsecondary students.

The journal aims to publish scholarly articles and reviews that address issues of interest to a broad range of learning center professionals. Primary consideration will be given to articles about program design and evaluation, classroom-based research, the application of theory and research to practice, innovative teaching strategies, student assessment, and other topics that bridge gaps within our diverse discipline.

1. Prepare a manuscript that is approximately 12 to 15 pages in length and includes an introduction, bibliography, and subheadings throughout the text.

2. Include an abstract of 100 words or less that clearly describes the focus of your paper and summarizes its contents.

3. Type the text with double spacing and number the pages. Follow APA style (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 4th edition, 1994).

4. Include your name, title, address, institutional affiliation and telephone number along with the title of the article on a separate cover sheet; the manuscript pages should include a running title at the top of each page with no additional identifying information.

5. Submit all tables or charts camera ready on separate pages.

6. Do not send manuscripts that are under consideration or have been published elsewhere.

7. Send four copies of your manuscript to the following address: Nancy Bornstein, Co-Editor, The Learning Assistance Review, Alverno College, 3401 S. 39th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53215.

You will receive a letter of acknowledgment that your manuscript has been received. The review process will then take approximately three to six weeks at which time you will receive further notification related to your work. If your manuscript is accepted for publication, a computer disk will be requested.

MCLCA MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

What is MCLCA?

The Midwest College Learning Center Association (MCLCA) is a regional organization dedicated to promoting excellence among learning center personnel in 12 midwestern states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. MCLCA defines a learning center as a place where all students, from entering freshmen to graduate and professional school students, can be taught to become more efficient and effective learners.

What Does MCLCA Do?

The MCLCA Constitution identifies the following objectives for the organization:

- To promote professional standards for learning centers through education, curriculum design, research, and evaluation.
- To promote support for learning centers by acting on issues affecting learning assistance programs.
- To assist in the development of new learning centers.
- To assist in the professional development of personnel in learning assistance programs by providing opportunities for sharing professional methods, techniques, and strategies.
- To provide an annual conference for the exchange of ideas, methods, and expertise in learning assistance programs.
- To publish educational information and research in the field.
- To develop and expand a communications network among learning assistance professionals.
- To coordinate efforts with similar professional groups.

How Can I Participate?

The MCLCA Executive Board is anxious to involve as many learning center professionals as possible in achieving its objectives and meeting our mutual needs. Therefore, we invite you to become a member of the Midwest College Learning Center Association. The membership year extends from October 1 through September 30, and annual dues are $40.00. Membership includes the MCLCA Newsletter and The Learning Assistance Review, discounted registration for the annual MCLCA Conference, workshops, in-service events, and announcements regarding upcoming MCLCA activities. We look forward to having you as an active member of our growing organization.

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