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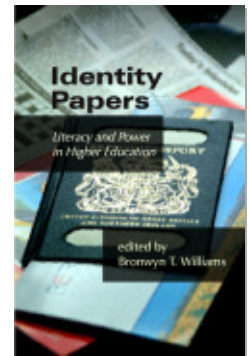
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LITERACY, IDENTITY AND THE “SUCCESSFUL” STUDENT WRITER

William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo

What would it mean for the field of composition to study the literacy habits of undergraduate students identified as talented, privileged, and academically successful? What new information can this group of writers tell us about the relationship between literacy development and education? How might our pedagogies and our theories benefit from examining the ways in which these students discuss their literacies?

In this chapter, we investigate these questions by examining the written literacy narratives of students working as undergraduate Writing Associates at Lafayette College, our home institution. We seek to contribute a different perspective to current research in literacy studies, which, as the programs from the most recent Watson Conference and CCCC demonstrate, has come to focus almost exclusively on nontraditional students. Instead, we focus on the literacy habits of students who are reasonably well prepared to do academic writing, but whose (mostly successful) experiences with writing have not encouraged them to reflect on the different identities they construct (and have constructed) through literacy and at various literacy sites. Our aim, then, in looking at writing by “successful” students, is not to gather “tips” on good writing, but rather to think broadly about the means and ends of academic writing.

Although we think our project offers a different perspective, we nonetheless see ourselves working in the tradition of scholars such as David Bartholomae (2001), Mariolina Salvatori (1988), and Min-Zhan Lu (1999), who have made powerful arguments about students’ texts as complex cultural artifacts that invite and demand sustained critical interpretation.¹ Though our students differ, in particular, from the kinds of students Bartholomae and Lu write about, like them, and like Salvatori, we are similarly concerned with the ways in which our students negotiate academic discourse, and we try to situate that struggle with respect to the politics of speaking (or not) in the academy. In addition, there are a number of longitudinal studies that have been important precedents for ours, including Marilyn Sternglass’ *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal*

Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level (1997), and, more recently Lee Ann Carroll's *Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop as Writers* (2002) and Nancy Sommers' project on undergraduate writing at Harvard (2003). Though the discussion in this chapter is not the result of a longitudinal study, it does mark for us the beginning of a long-term project about the ways in which participation in our College Writing Program changes the Writing Associates' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Our reading of the narratives, so far, has been based on three questions: How do new Writing Associates describe themselves as readers and writers? How do returning Writing Associates describe themselves as readers and writers? To what do new Writing Associates attribute the changes they see? Like Sternglass, Carol, and Sommers, then, we are looking at how writers develop over time, but for the purposes of the present discussion, we focus exclusively on students' reflections on their writing. We are not interested in the quality of writing in the narratives, but rather in how our students write about writing.

Briefly, then, here is some background about our institution and our program. Lafayette College is a private, highly selective, liberal arts college in Easton, Pennsylvania, with a student population of approximately 2,200. Lafayette has always been a competitive institution, but in recent years, the College has raised its admission standards, admitting students with higher GPAs and standardized test scores. Many of these students identify themselves and have been identified as highly literate, meaning that they have always been recognized for good critical thinking, reading and writing skills. Since 1985, the College Writing Program has recruited and trained 30 to 50 Writing Associates a year to work with professors teaching the College's first-year and sophomore seminars and other writing courses. Writing Associates come from all majors and generally have at least 3.0 GPAs. In addition, they have excellent communication skills, and they participate in a range of campus activities.

Writing Associates occupy a unique position on campus, as they are simultaneously students, peer readers, and professional representatives of the CWP. They function not as editors or proofreaders, but as informed and intelligent readers who help students formulate tough questions about their own writing. Writing Associates also provide faculty with invaluable feedback on assignment design, student progress, and strategies for the evaluation of written work. (Writing Associates do not grade student work.) The College Writing Program sponsors a summer workshop each year as well as weekly staff meetings in which Writing Associates discuss the theory and practice of writing. In preparation for

the summer workshop, new and returning Writing Associates alike compose literacy narratives—histories of their experiences as readers and writers. The work of reflecting on their literacy histories helps prepare Writing Associates to see their peers as individual writers who likewise have literacy histories of their own.

Our chapter, a qualitative study of more than 130 literacy narratives written between 1999 and 2001, compares narratives by new and returning Writing Associates in order to show how participation in the College Writing Program shapes their identities as readers and writers. For most, working as a Writing Associate complicates what they previously assumed about the work of writing. New Writing Associates' narratives tend to be success stories about how they have always had a "natural" talent for writing, or how their perseverance in the face of a demanding teacher or assignment eventually paid off in the form of a good grade, an award, or a lesson about why writing is an important skill. Returning Writing Associates' narratives focus on students' revised assumptions about writing as a process over which they have varying degrees of control. Most returning Writing Associates attribute changes they see in their writing, or their thinking about writing, to interactions with their peers. As one returning Writing Associate wrote, "by examining others' writing, the Writing Associate also ends up examining his or her own written work. . . . I learned that writing is not an absolute process" (Menon 2001).

LITERACY NARRATIVES BY NEW WRITING ASSOCIATES

Thanks mainly to Kenneth Burke, we know that all ways of seeing are ways of not seeing, too. In organizing our realities into coherence we favor some interpretations over others. We construct narratives that identify certain relationships among events and leave other relationships, other possibilities, unrecognized. Our decisions in organizing and constructing our narratives materialize in the language forms we utter or write. Thus we create artifacts that communicate simultaneously what we see and what we do not. In so doing, we open ourselves to interpretive strategies of others who seek to comprehend the relationship between what is said and what is not, who search for the ways in which our narrative decisions uncover certain truths while burying others.

New Writing Associates are asked to write literacy narratives in which they "identify a handful of formative experiences" that have affected their senses of themselves as writers. The assignment asks specifically that the narratives be written "as a story, arranged in chronological order." So in sense, a key interpretive strategy is made for them by us:

that they arrange moments in their literacy development as a progression of sequenced events. To help the Writing Associates invent ideas, we include a list of broadly defined events—such as one's first attempt to spell a name or one's most difficult writing assignment in high school—recognizing, of course, that such suggestions might limit the scope of some writers as it broadens that of others. The assignment then asks the Writing Associates to reflect on the significance of these events in shaping their identities as readers and writers, a concept we leave broadly defined so as to encourage the Writing Associates to reach their own conclusions about the effects of their upbringing and schooling on their language use.

This is an interesting rhetorical situation for the new Writing Associates. Not yet fully oriented to the theoretical and practical frameworks surrounding their position, and perhaps still feeling the need to impress those who hired them, they must work within a genre that few have any experience with.² Given this unfamiliar rhetorical situation, as well as the assignment's implicit and explicit demands to create sequential relationships among events, it is little wonder that new Writing Associates often write within familiar narrative forms. For most, these forms mirror those of the heroic narrative, the telling of the hero's journey toward home or some other promised land. The hero is the earnest student confronted at various times by progressively difficult tasks, each of which teaches her something about herself and about academic writing.

For many of the new Writing Associates, academic literacy is achieved—or at least perceived to be achieved—through struggle, though it is a kind of struggle marked mainly by gaps in a string of academic successes. In other words, struggle occurs when the usually successful methods for responding to assignments no longer garner the same rewards or higher grades. These moments introduce obstacles for the Writing Associate—heroes to overcome, lest they perish in the marshes of academic mediocrity. They often write of the demanding language arts teacher who had to be appeased, of the difficult assignment that had to be unlocked, and of the physical and emotional terrains of the educational system that had to be navigated. In some scenes there is confusion and frustration, as the students confront unsettling moments of failure or diminished performance that force them to seek a hidden map for writing or to unravel the riddles of their teachers. In other scenes, the students rediscover success as they learn to refocus their energies and apply what they have learned from their struggles. The

ease with which these narratives come into focus under the hero-lens speaks not only to expectations stated and implied in the assignment, but also to these young writers' perceptions and theories of the interdependent relationships among education, identity, and writing.

Adam Scheer, hired as a junior in 2000, writes a narrative indicative of those of his peers. In his section on the transition between high school and college, he tries to analyze the relationships among his high school's standards, his performance, and his own identity as a student and a writer.

I was always very much turned off by the educational realities of my high school, for it seemed that grades and most of the other evaluation mechanisms had very little to do with the content of the student's work and even less to do with his/her overall academic prowess. My grades were good throughout high school, but not great. Although I was able to identify the shortcomings of my high school and understand that my grades there did not define my worth as a student, I was not able to truly internalize this. Going into my freshman year at Lafayette, I did not have a tremendous amount of confidence in my academic abilities. One paper later, I was a different student.

The passage encourages two conflicting readings: that Scheer's own "academic prowess" was not recognized by his teachers, resulting in decent grades but also a diminished self-esteem; or that Scheer's "good . . . but not great" grades reflect some level of grade inflation at the school, resulting in academic success but also a fragile self-confidence. Scheer explains that grades at his school did not represent effort or ability, but he does not explain whether the discrepancies are caused by over- or underappreciation of the students' work. And while he does give himself credit for recognizing his school's "shortcomings," he does not divulge what those shortcomings are, nor what he means when he admits that he could not "truly internalize" the idea that his "grades . . . did not define [his] worth as a student." That the entire passage rests on ambiguity signals Scheer's own uncertainty about how well his high school prepared him for college. The hero faces a test of his confidence—albeit a short one.

We read Scheer's description of his high school as a key dramatic component of his narrative, one that enables its heroic story arc. Its ambiguity aside, the majority of the passage offers reasons for Scheer's penultimate point: that as a first-year college student, he initially felt underprepared for academic work. The high school becomes

a metaphorical limbo, a place that does not allow Scheer to claim an identity as a student or a writer. As the last sentence of the passage suggests, this state of existence does not last for long. "One paper" written after high school frees Scheer from his academic limbo, returning the hero to the path toward success, but also allowing the narrative to continue along a comfortable, familiar story arc. The sudden transition at the end of the passage is indicative of transitions found within the new Writing Associates' narratives. In Scheer's case, it enables him to present a difficulty as a narrative convenience, one that re-emphasizes his ability to overcome adversity. Scheer, like other new Writing Associates, associates his literacy development with his successes over adversities, rather than with the adversities themselves. This is a crucial point, for it implies that these students, at this stage, consider literacy as a problem-solving heuristic, and see themselves as quick-learning problem solvers. Note, for instance, how Scheer explains the revelatory experience of writing his first college-level paper.

My first paper as a Lafayette student was for my FYS [First-Year Seminar] class and had to be only a few pages long. I wrote about the many archetypes concerning men that suggest they cannot achieve true intimacy with each other. I would have rather written about the prevalence of iron deficiencies in prematurely balding men or the role of the earthworm in the animal food chain. Regardless of the topic, I knew I was going to try my hardest to write a coherent, well-organized, thought-provoking and overall solid paper. After a short writing process, a few meetings with our Writing Associate, and the teacher finally grading the paper, I was convinced that I had found a good blueprint for my future writings and that I would continue my development as a writer. Over the rest of my FYS course and that entire year, my progression continued. Once again, however, that progression was to be hindered as I spent my sophomore year studying in Malaga, Spain.

The problem in this passage is a much more external one than that of the previous excerpt; Scheer faces an uninteresting, and perhaps uncomfortable, topic for his paper. He seems to have lost, rather quickly, the internal strife of a writer unsure of his abilities and has replaced it with a confidence borne of hard work and good planning. The hero-narrative form he has chosen encourages him to stress individual struggles with assignments at the expense of a holistic analysis of his writing abilities. Absent from this passage—from the entire narrative—is any discussion of how he comes to value and to achieve "a coherent, well-organized,

thought-provoking and overall solid paper.” Rather, he presents the steps he took to achieve this paper, his “good blueprint” for college writing. By presenting these characteristics as unquestioned goals, Scheer presents himself as one who can perform the most demanding of tasks, thus marking himself as a successful writer. The topic on which he writes so well is ultimately of little importance, as is the process he performed and the help he encountered. More important for Scheer, he acquires what he thinks are some of the general skills needed to succeed as a college writer. His last sentence, reminiscent of that in his previous passage, continues the story arc by presenting another challenge—writing in a second language—which will be overcome by perseverance and which will teach him additional skills. Like many of his new Writing Associate peers, Scheer discusses his literacy development as a succession of skill-acquiring episodes that enables him to overcome academic challenges.

Other new Writing Associates’ narratives complicate the hero story arc more than Scheer’s, but most present literacy development as a result of changes in academic standards. Kate Edelstein, for example, at first evokes miracle imagery to explain how she learned to write in high school. “[M]y grades flip-flopped around in the B-C range until one day, as if the clouds parted and I saw the light, I got it. I wish I could explain what I mean by this, but something just clicked.” Edelstein cannot maintain the quasireligious rhetoric for very long, though, and by the next sentence she is explaining what she means.

It was really not until my junior year in high school when my AP U.S. history teacher told me, “Kate, you need to reread your paper like you know nothing about the subject on which you are writing.” That was it. What would a stranger say about my paper? What would they question about it? . . . I began asking myself these questions and adjusting my papers accordingly. . . . With these questions came more praise from my teachers and better grades on my report card. By the end of high school I had really learned how to write an effective paper.

Edelstein’s narrative tells of her learning to write reader-based prose instead of writer-based prose, an important development in any student’s literacy education. We would not expect her to have that sort of vocabulary to describe what she undergoes. We are, however, interested in the extent to which the realization triggered by her teacher is interpreted by her to be the sole elixir needed to succeed as a high school writer. Unlike Scheer, Edelstein articulates some of the process that

enabled her to think more carefully about her audience and to write more successfully for her teachers. But just like Scheer, she centers her narrative on a comfortable motif: that of the hero overcoming an obstacle by acquiring a particular skill.

Some new Writing Associates seek to subvert the heroic narrative formula, but their attempts often result in their positioning themselves as heroes nonetheless. In other words, the hero motif appears even as Writing Associates recount moments in which they do not overcome a specific problem. For example, Catriona Mhairi Duncanson, an international student hired in 1999, offers a stinging critique of her grade school and high school English courses. She depicts herself in her narrative not as the hero who can surpasses an obstacle on her way toward better writing, but rather as the rebellious hero who can recognize, endure, and subvert a rigid pedagogy.

When I moved to America, seven years ago, I was introduced to the infamous district writing sample and the five-paragraph essay. The hardest part of a writing sample was sticking to the formula, and limiting my opinion to five paragraphs. . . . I fought with teachers over the length of essays. I did not finish my papers until I had finished what I wanted to say. When I was old enough to deserve an explanation, I was told that students need to start with a rigid model and they will learn to branch out from there.

Duncanson recognizes an adversarial relationship between herself and her teachers, one in which her individuality is at stake. She takes it as a point of pride that "sticking to the formula" gave her the most difficulty, not inventing ideas or structuring paragraphs. In Duncanson's narrative, she is an anti-hero of sorts, the Cool-Hand Luke of the English class. And like Luke, she learns to submit when victory becomes impossible. Later in the same passage, she explains that the "rigid model" expected in her English courses taught her only "to be abrupt." "I became submissive to my English teachers," she writes, "and I saved my more eloquent work for papers in history class because they were less regimented." We read her passage as an attempt to reclaim some authority in her past literacy moments and to establish herself in the present as a survivor—activities performed by other new Writing Associates throughout their narratives as well.

The hero narrative format so easily detected in these texts leads us to some preliminary conclusions about how these students identify themselves as writers. Clearly, most have been rewarded in the past for writing

organized, sometimes lockstep papers, and that training may have affected the analytical lenses they apply in their narratives. New Writing Associates try to construct as coherent of narratives as possible, perhaps in attempts to systematize what are often unsystematic patterns of literacy development. These are not students comfortable with disorganization or meandering exploration. Indeed, they may have been penalized for such things in the past. They prefer familiar, though not rigid, structures, and they thrive in environments where they can work from “blueprints” for their assignments. They are eager to please authority figures, yet capable of recognizing the dangers such eagerness poses to their individuality. The new Writing Associates view their educations as series of shifting standards and expectations, signaled usually by changes in schools or teachers. Their narratives show us that these students claim identities as writers by demonstrating swift abilities to accommodate (or, in Duncanson’s case, reject intentionally) these difficult transitions.

LITERACY NARRATIVES BY VETERAN WRITING ASSOCIATES

The literacy narrative assignment for returning Writing Associates asks them to describe their histories as writers of the last year in a “focused and detailed history of the recent past which could serve as an addendum—but also as a development of some of the questions posed and discoveries made previously.” Like the assignment for new Writing Associates, this one for returning Writing Associates asks for a story. But, returning Writing Associates rarely produce “tidy” narratives. Rather, when we read their narratives, we see the following patterns: Returning Writing Associate’s narratives are more conscious about writing as a recursive process—one, that is, with multiple, recurring, subprocesses, as opposed to one driven by abstract forces like “inspiration” or “creativity.” Veteran Writing Associates also tend to be more critical of their own composing processes, though many also admit they struggle to follow the same advice they give their peers. Veteran Writing Associates, in general, are more conscious of the *difficulty* of writing well. In comparison to new Writing Associates’ narratives, veteran narratives are not, by and large, plotted as progress narratives where hard work and perseverance pay off. For veterans, hard work and perseverance may lead to an improved understanding of how writing happens rather than an improvement in their writing per se.³

Consider, for example, the following passage from Andrew Colton’s narrative, written after his first year in the Program, which describes his revised understanding of his writing process:

It used to be commonplace in my world of academia to hand in a paper, cross my fingers and hope for the best a week or so later. The story is much different nowadays. The phrase “rough draft” is no longer an excuse for a crappy paper; it is an integral part of the paper. The draft is read and analyzed, not simply for those sneaky spelling errors or the inconspicuous absence of punctuation, but for Higher Order Concerns that make or break a paper.

We are struck, initially, by the phrase “my world of academia.” The possessive pronoun “my” which modifies “world of academia” sets up a distinction between “academia,” on one hand, and then Colton’s *experience* of “academia” on the other. Although Colton is talking in general terms, rather than about speaking within a particular academic discourse, the way he appropriates for himself a habitable space from which to speak is similar to the process of identification Bartholomae describes in “Inventing the University,” whereby students “have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do so as though they were easily or comfortably one with their audience” (515). Like many of our students, Colton was taught, at some point, how to write papers in drafts. Either because he didn’t understand the goal of a rough draft—or perhaps because he did—Colton’s appropriation of the form results in his using it in a way other than his teacher intended: “as an excuse for a crappy paper.” As Bartholomae explains, “writers who can successfully manipulate an audience (or, to use a less pointed language, writers who can accommodate their motives to their readers’ expectations) are writers who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege” (515). The “position of privilege” for Colton is knowing how, in Bartholomae’s words, to “bluff” (511) his way through a rough draft.

Writers like Colton are, of course, on the margins of Bartholomae’s discussion, which focuses primarily on how basic writers struggle to negotiate a space from which to speak in the academy. And, currently, such writers are on the margins of research in Composition. But as Colton’s narrative reminds us, Bartholomae’s argument describes a problem faced not just by basic writers but by writers in general, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees.⁴ Colton both does and does not have control over his writing. On one hand, even though he does not completely understand the required form (or, perhaps, does not accept its value or necessity) he can nonetheless produce it. This ability gives him a degree of control over his writing. But on the other hand, he also describes a loss of control: once the paper is written, he is left to “cross

[his] fingers and hope for the best a week or so later.” Of course, such a sentence might have been written by any student about his or her writing process.⁵ But we find this kind of “wait-and-see” approach especially prevalent among our students, most of whom are competent writers, but who have not had the opportunity to reflect on what makes their writing successful (or not).

It is tempting in light of Colton’s narrative to conclude that training in the Writing Associate Program is responsible for his revised understanding of writing. The last sentence of the above passage, Colton “read[s] and analyz[es]” his rough draft not for sentence-level errors, but “Higher Order Concerns.” Reading for “higher” as opposed to “lower” order concerns (i.e. “sneaky spelling errors or the inconspicuous absence of punctuation”), is a strategy Writing Associates learn early on and one they rely on for talking to their peers about works-in-progress. Like many veteran Writing Associate narratives, this one shows how Colton uses his Writing Associate training to help him read his own writing. Courtney de Thomas, for example, describes her disappointment at being told by her thesis advisor that an early draft of the project was “not Thesis appropriate writing”: “The inexperienced writer who Linda Flower talks about in “Inventing the University” was me!”⁶ She writes, “I was unable to compose ‘reader-based prose’ (446); I knew what I wanted to write, but I could not write as if I was writing for a psychological scholarly journal.”

Though it is apparent in veteran Writing Associate narratives that training allows these students to reflect on their writing, veteran Writing Associates, Colton and de Thomas included, most often attribute changes in their writing to interactions with their peers. The above discussion from Colton’s narrative, for example, is framed in this way:

Undoubtedly, the most formative experience of the past year occurred during my time as a Writing Associate. First and foremost, it’s obvious, but still vital, to point out the new perspective gained from serving as a peer editor. It used to be commonplace in my world of academia to hand in a paper, cross my fingers and hope for the best a week or so later. The story is much different nowadays. The phrase “rough draft” is no longer an excuse for a crappy paper; it is an integral part of the paper. The draft is read and analyzed, not simply for those sneaky spelling errors or the inconspicuous absence of punctuation, but for Higher Order Concerns that make or break a paper.

As he represents it here, Colton’s “new perspective” on his writing comes “first and foremost” from working on writing of—and with—his fellow

students. Though, of course, the training he receives in staff meetings is what helps him do this work, it is not what he mentions “first.”

For some Writing Associates, the meta-awareness gained as a result of working with their peers causes not just a shift in identity, but, at least initially, an identity crisis. They discover, for better and worse, that they are not the writers they think they are. Jenelle Zelinsky, for example, describes her struggle focusing a paper she had to write after gathering “an overabundance of information”:

As a beginning Writing Associate I had trouble teaching writers to improve their problem areas because as a writer myself I never had a problem focusing. I just wrote my papers in one sitting scribbling furiously for hours, with the ideas simply falling into place in a logical order in my head. As a Writing Associate I was a hypocrite—I never outlined, never stated a clear thesis, never did much of what I found myself preaching to other writers. This had always worked fine for me. But, when my raw method of writing started to fail me I suddenly took my own advice and found it to work quite well.

Zelinsky’s story sounds, perhaps, like the kind of success story told by new Writing Associates: She met a problem head on and persevered until she resolved it. And, we might wonder what she means when she writes that following her own advice “work[ed] quite well.” In the paragraph that follows the passage above, however, she provides more insight into the process of changing her thinking about her writing, a process facilitated by interaction with a fellow Writing Associate:

My conferences with my own Writing Associate were also different. I found myself thinking more like a Writing Associate, trying to act as that ideal student, rather than the quiet, listener that I had been the year before. My questions of her were more focused as I saw the errors in my own writing as I identified them in other’s [*sic*] writing. I also accepted my resentment for her constructive criticism. Writing is very personal, and criticism often seems like an attack on feelings and thoughts rather than on words. Coming from a peer, it becomes extremely easy to dismiss because the Writing Associate is “no better” than yourself. But, I made sure to listen carefully, ignore these feelings of annoyance, and change my problem areas as she had pointed out.

It is uncertain whether the “errors” Zelinsky mentions fall into the category of “higher” or “lower” order concerns (e.g. does she mean “errors” in the thesis, organization, transitions, etc. or “errors” at the

level of the sentence?) But the idea that the questions she asked her Writing Associate “were more focused” as a result of working with other writers suggests she has learned to see her writing differently. Perhaps more important, she has begun to re-imagine a different relationship to her writing. Recognizing that “writing is very personal,” she understands why she resents advice, especially from a peer. As she explains in her narrative, this awareness helped her to be a better writer and a better Writing Associate: “Each gave me the understanding and the insight necessary to become better at the other.” Again, though, we recognize that this is a “success” story of sorts. Ideally, that is, a Writing Associate’s experience in the College Writing Program brings about the kind of changes Zelinsky describes. What interests us is the emphasis on a change of thinking about how writing happens, in particular, a recognition that producing “good” writing is intellectual work and not a matter of luck (crossing your fingers), inspiration, or natural ability. The change we think most significant, then, is Zelinsky’s emerging awareness of the “personal” as well as the social dimension of her writing.

While some Writing Associates, like Zelinsky do, indeed, point to changes for the better in the writing, the majority report that, at least initially, their writing seems to get worse. Heather Bastian writes, for example, that she became “completely frantic” about the papers she wrote during her first year as a Writing Associate:

Every sentence needed to be perfect. My cohesion needed to be perfect. My organization needed to be perfect. My thoughts needed to be perfect. This was the first time I felt pressure to write a perfect paper, and my anxiety level skyrocketed.

The way in which Bastian lists her concerns is interesting: sentences, cohesion, organization, thoughts. The order reflects (though perhaps not intentionally) a situation most writers have encountered at one moment or another when faced with the task of revising their own writing. Tinker with a sentence, and you may find (or cause) cohesion problems. Revise for cohesion, and you may also discover (or create) problems of organization. And so on. Tinker long enough, and, inevitably, you end up revising your thinking. In the concluding paragraph of this narrative, which she wrote at the beginning of her second year in the program, Bastian notes that she hopes to overcome these anxieties about her writing (which are also affecting her ability to work effec-

tively with her peers). The implication, then, is that she has not yet overcome them.

In her narrative, Bastian describes herself as in the process of revising not just her writing, but her thinking about writing. Although she is anxious, she manages to learn from the situation “through a lot of thought and reflection about what went wrong.” Like most veteran Writing Associates, Bastian’s understanding of the changes she sees occurs through a process of “reflection,” initiated by the ways in which her assumptions, themselves, are “reflected” through interactions with her peers as well as engaging with her own writing.

SOME WORKING CONCLUSIONS

The literacy habits of students like those who appear in this piece might often be taken for granted by educators, since so many resources are often (rightfully) targeted for students who have difficulty navigating the educational system. But we believe these students’ experiences and reflections provide a valuable means of insight into the effects our theories and practices have on how all students employ writing in their academic, personal, and professional lives. Our readings of the narratives suggest that these students’ identities as writers are formed first by extrinsic responses to their texts rather than by the content of their texts themselves. What teachers tell them about their writing, what grades they receive, how parents and peers respond, the effects their writing had—the Writing Associates discuss these responses in their early descriptions of their writing identities in far more detail than the characteristics of the texts. This speaks to a rather materialistic view of writing—and perhaps of identity, too. New Writing Associates’ narratives often describe their literacy training as the amassing of what we might call academic currency: grades, comments, praise, criticisms, results. This currency, materialized in the documents and artifacts they create and receive, has enabled many of these students to prosper in the educational economy (while causing a few, such as Duncanson, to identify themselves as marginalized). In such a materialist view, the obstacles Writing Associates must overcome appear as dips in this economy, as moments when the currency is harder to come by. Transitions to new schools, dealings with new teachers or assignments, and exposures to new subjects make for unstable times, which lessen these students’ performances in their classes, thus lessening whatever cultural/educational capital they attained. When the obstacles are cleared, the currency

becomes stronger, and the associates' identities as successful students, as successful members of the economy, strengthen as well.

The economic metaphor speaks to how very literally these students have identified with their grades and assessments. As the new Writing Associates we discussed earlier demonstrate, success (or lack thereof) in school and, more specifically, in academic writing often serves as the foundation for writerly identities. Many times in the narratives they refer to their earlier selves in ways that denote an intricate connection to the comments heard about their writing: "B student," "creative writer," "inventive thinker," and so on. When we remember that students spend at least nine months in school each year, seven to eight hours a day, five days a week, we can understand how grades and scores, so prevalent in our nation's assessment-obsessed schools, can heavily influence how students identify themselves as writers. The more successful student writers, it seems, not only embrace these labels, but use them as motivation to figure out and respond to the changed expectations they experience during their time in school. Like some members of upper economic classes fearful of losing status, some of these students look for ways to assimilate into new environments without thinking about what such assimilation means in terms of individuality and self-knowledge.

Narratives by returning Writing Associates, however, tell us that the importance of external labels may lessen for some students as they begin to take more thoughtful positions toward their writing and their education and as they mature into their various social settings. The economy of education does not dissipate for returning Writing Associates; grades and rewards still provide a type of currency. We see that new associates describe writing and learning processes as means to such currency and, ultimately, their identities as student writers. Returning Writing Associates, though, often write of these processes as indicative of their identities. The processes may lead to good grades, but more important, they represent these writers' own interpretations of why and how they write as they do. The returning narratives show students complicating their identities as writers by focusing less on extrinsic responses to their writing and more on their own intrinsic responses to their questions and concerns within the composing process.

These findings lead us to consider some implications for the teaching of writing. First, we question the role of extrinsic rewards. As many of the new Writing Associates' narratives demonstrate, such rewards—grades, test scores, stickers, prizes—often become the ends of the writing process. They also play some role in how students identify themselves in

regards to education and their peers. Clearly, it is time for the fields of Education and Composition to examine more closely the purposes of graded writing courses at all educational levels. Our study also encourages us to explore how extrinsic rewards (or lack thereof) affect students' writing and reflection processes. We wonder if such rewards hinder the literacy development of students identified as successful writers.

Finally, Writing Associate narratives speak to the important role that reflective practices play in students' improved awareness of themselves as individuals who think, read, write, and speak in the world. Veteran Writing Associates seem capable of applying to their own writing the same reflective strategies they encourage in their student conferences. We cannot say to what extent this ability is related to Program training, but we suspect there is a correlation because of how—in writing and in conferences—they appropriate and adapt critical methodologies and language they encounter in staff meetings. It seems as though the training they receive provides a critical vocabulary for reflecting on their writing, and, consequently, helps them see the range of identities they assume and construct as writing (and written) subjects. But such reflection, we strongly suspect, is also the product of regular interactions with peers (Writing Associates and other students alike), in which Writing Associates discuss the work of writing and its subsequent artifacts. These interactions provide opportunity to test the uses and discover the limits of their working critical vocabulary, and, thus, as Freire (1970) might say, to make that vocabulary part of themselves.

We know that reflective practices have become part of the mainstream in composition courses, but we wonder what role they have (or should have) in other college courses in which students must demonstrate mastery of the material in writing. Most of our students assume that writing plays an important role in critical thinking; but hardly any of them understand how that might be so. As a result, most see writing as merely a reflection of their thinking rather than a technology by means of which they discover what they think. Returning Writing Associate narratives make a strong case for why—and how—teachers should make reflection (what Freire would call "consciousness of consciousness") (60) part of any course in which writing is a vehicle for learning. Why?—because, as we have seen with our returning Writing Associates, all of whom are solid writers, students don't know something unless they understand *how* they know it. How?—writings assignment that let students explore and situate their emergent ways of knowing the material. As writing program administrators, too often we see assignments

that ask students to summarize or paraphrase a reading assignment—as if those mechanisms or and purposes behind these kinds of reading strategies, widely practiced in the academy, are self-evident. Not surprisingly, many students struggle with such assignments. And the ones who can produce the appropriate responses often cannot describe how they did; thus the work has no relevance or lasting meaning. Based on what our Writing Associates tell us about how they develop as writers, it seems that a student's relationship to his or her own processes of knowing is crucial to learning, but is also hard won—it occurs in fits and starts, and the trajectory is not necessarily obvious. As teachers, we can facilitate a student's understanding of this process, but, perhaps, it is naïve to imagine we control it in any authentic way.