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REVISING PROCESS

For the past 15 years—since early in my graduate school career—I have been struggling to create theoretical, pedagogical, and practical ways to improve the status of undergraduate voices and undergraduate writing in English studies. But in a very real sense, the idea that I could engage in this struggle in ways that mattered grew out of my undergraduate education. It was through undergraduate courses in rhetoric, writing, women’s studies, and modern theories of grammar and composition that I became aware that a person could, in fact, pursue goals that were rich and complex in nature, goals that included improving the conditions of life for oneself and others in inter-related ways.

When Dr. Monica Weis, the professor of my undergraduate course in “Modern Theories of Grammar and Composition” invited me to attend the Conference on College Composition and Communication, I was both shocked and deeply honored. After all, I had been less than accepting of some of the theories we studied in that course, especially those that I thought talked down to “non-traditional” students like myself. I was particularly skeptical about expressivist theories like the one I had been subjected to years before when I was a traditional-age student, theories that were quite popular in the late 1980s when I took that theory course. Still, here I was invited by my professor to attend the major conference of the field—with financial support to do so from the college and department that I had clearly thrived in, but which I had never simply identified with. I remember clearly the power of the invitation and the ways in which it made me stretch beyond any kind of thinking I had ever done while trying to figure out what something meant. I also remember the ways in which the invitation made me begin to consider the possibility that there might be a place for me in the world that would continue to stretch my thinking in this way, one where I would not be required to be
happy with the way things are in order to belong. It was the first
time that I considered the possibility that there might be a way for
me to give back as much as I got from my study of writing. It was a
rush. I was never very cool before that, but the idea of this possibil-
ity squelched any chance I had of being cool—I was on fire. And I
have been on fire ever since.

That fire comes from and fuels the desire to participate in and
contribute to something rather than merely gain from it. The form
it takes in this study is to suggest that revising the prewrite-write-
rewrite notion of process that has driven first-year composition in
this country in our recent past can enhance structural, curricular,
and disciplinary opportunities for participation and contribution.
These revisions are theoretical and pedagogical and practical; they
are meant to open spaces for a wider range of people to partici-
pate in and contribute to composition studies. What happens once
these spaces are open will be so informed by the opportunities they
will afford us that the arguments I am making here should not
be thought of as transformational; they should be understood as
transitional. To open the possibilities for transition I am discussing
here, I will illustrate and argue for a continuation of recent trends
that position analysis rather than mastery as critical to and in com-
position studies. I will, however, extend the recent focus on analy-
sis in ways that challenge a more general tendency to favor adap-
tation over contribution and to valorize consumption (especially
consumption of first-phase process models) over participation in
our configurations of writing in first-year composition classes. In
the end, I will suggest that using the concepts of participation and
contribution to revise our views of and approaches to composition
studies allows us to live up to the promise of the process movement
without being bound by its limitations.

While many revised process-based approaches claim transfor-
mative power, as suggested above, I am more interested in creating
a transitional approach, one that acknowledges first-phase process
model assumptions as the starting point for many teachers and
students, and that attempts to create ways for us to move together
toward literacy practices that center participation and contribu-
tion as possibilities for all members of the writing classes. This is
especially important in our first-year writing courses where students internalize assumptions about the relationship between language and reality. Making transitions toward practices that change reality in substantial ways is more difficult than identifying methodologies and pedagogies that we think and hope will change individual consciousnesses, but it is also more important. As James Slevin notes, our discipline is used to thinking of professionals as those who participate in and contribute to the field while amateurs/students are positioned as embodying our contributions. Slevin suggests beginning to move away from these assumptions and the realities they create. He states:

We could, for example, look to the model of the liberal arts college and find there an understanding of disciplinarity that saw teaching and intimate intellectual conversations with students and colleagues at the center of life in that discipline. It would be possible (though let me stress, too, very hard) to imagine this work as primary, with research and publication valuable as they nourish the education of students and extend the collegial conversation to a wider audience. Let me say again that it is hard to think these thoughts—they seem generically pastoral or idyllic, an escapism set against the harsh urbanity and metropolitanism of today’s academy. They seem fond wishes rather than empowering conceptual frameworks. (43)

To some of us, those frameworks of and for teaching and learning seem less pastoral and idyllic than the result of commitment and hard work, silenced and undervalued though the work seems to be in the larger scheme of things. How many of us have an understanding of the model Slevin refers to here? How many of us have seen it in actual practice? How valued is that understanding and practice in the larger professional and discursive spaces that constitute the discipline? What takes the place of these absent possibilities in the field?

To say that composition studies should raise students’ individual consciousnesses about advertising, or history, or literature, or about academic discourse is not necessarily a bad thing. It is possible, however, to understand consciousness-raising as one of the obstacles to participation and contribution, if consciousness-raising
takes the place of participation and contribution, and/or if people are configured as unconscious when they are not, and/or if raised consciousness does nothing to alter the relationships to power made available to those whose consciousness has been raised. The ways these dilemmas about consciousness raising as an end of writing instruction become apparent in composition studies is clear, for example, in the ways that we talk about rather than with our undergraduate students. As Susan Miller notes in Textual Carnivals, empirical work about students’ texts has long captured the imagination of compositionists (200). In her introduction to Landmark Essays on Process, Sondra Perl notes that empirical work about student texts defines one of the most important methodological moves behind the process movement itself. While this methodological approach is one method for increasing how student writing can come into the field, it also blocks student participation in significant ways. For example, student writing can be illustrative, teaching us things about how certain practices affect the process or products produced, but students are not included in the processes of analysis that construct such knowledge from their texts. Positioning students in relation to the discipline in such limiting ways is part of a larger related habit of excluding students from our discussions more generally. The idea that we can change the terms of this material reality by raising and/or empowering individual consciousesses without challenging these limited notions of literacy in our disciplinary and professional spaces is misinformed. The deferral of the discipline (i.e., perpetuating the idea that thousands of students can take composition classes but can’t tell you anything about the disciplinary knowledge of the field) becomes the repression of literate subjectivity (i.e., one can experience and act in the field without ever affecting or engaging in the practices of the discipline). As Kurt Spellmeyer reminds us in “Inventing the University Student,” within this scene “nothing could be less helpful . . . than to embrace once again an image of academic intellectuals as representative of ‘the people,’ ‘the silenced,’ and so on” (43). This is especially true as we struggle to revise composition studies in ways that open new spaces for student writing and student subjectivities.
This level of revision is never easy. However, exploring student assumptions about the concepts we use, and consider using, to ground our introductory writing courses is something we must do if we want to open new spaces for student subjectivity. Mina Shaughnesssey and others took such an exploratory approach toward issues of grammatical correctness and standardization. But few people who are attempting to revise first-year writing courses take engaging students in this part of the endeavor very seriously. Perhaps that is because the work seems too much like drawing a composite or dishonoring the “individual” student writer so entrenched in first-phase process approaches to first-year writing. Or maybe, as Miller indicates, our first-year writing students are so over-constructed as “innocent” literacy vessels that this kind of research just doesn’t fit with the program (196). In any case, exploring student assumptions about the concepts we propose making central to the teaching of writing is a fundamental step in finding ways to invite them into our field as participants. Invitations to these activities raise questions about ability, confidence, expectation, and, especially, self/other relationships that many people in the education system are not used to facing together. But this kind of work also indicates very real connections between our concerns with the limitations of first-phase process movement pedagogies and the limitations on literacy assumed by our students.

Before I move to the empirical data that illustrate this point, let me emphasize that breaking through such discursive restrictions is not a new thing for composition teachers and students. For example, many people spent the first phase of the process writing movement trying to create approaches to writing that challenged restrictions regarding what students could write about in our classrooms, and students have, in many cases, embodied this break. One major component of this first phase was the prewrite-write-rewrite model dominating that pedagogical scene of writing. The model centered approaches that allowed students to explore their own experiences, and, in some cases, use “their own voices,” to create discourses about subjects that had been considered inappropriate in the past. As many scholars of the field have noted, decentering literary texts in favor of centering student texts, when
combined with an emphasis on “authentic” voices and experience, led to the disciplinary construction of a decontextualized student subjectivity (Crowley, DeJoy, Ede, Miller). The primary assumption of the model was that prewriting, writing, and rewriting strategies were constructed, through adaptation of classical rhetoric, secondary and primary research activities, etc., by the scholar/researcher members of the writing class and presented, through textbooks and teachers, as instruction, advice, direction (sometimes heuristic) to the student members of that class. The students were, therefore, invited to talk about unlimited and innumerable subjects, to embody the radical potential of the model, as long as they did so in individualistic ways and as long as knowledge about the disciplinary matters addressed by the profession were not the subject of student discourse. So while at one level, teachers and students were collaborators in breaking the bounds of academic discourse, on another level they were also engaged in a process that maintained the gaps among and between student discourses, teacher discourses, and the professional discourses of composition studies. Students could (and sometimes had to) write about everything from their sex lives and drug use to their dreams and aspirations and everything in between; but they were not, in general, invited to write about the histories, theories, pedagogies, or practices informing their literacy educations or constructing their literacy experiences in writing classrooms. This deferral of disciplinary conversations constituted the major differences between professo-rial members and student members of the writing class. And it is this deferral that has informed many of the revisions to first phase process movement pedagogies. In “What Is Composition and (if you know what that is) Why Do We Teach It?” David Bartholomae makes this point when he says:

It is too convenient to say that students, because they are students, do not share in the general problems of writing . . . like writing history or writing literary criticisms, like the problem of the writer’s relationship to the discourse that enables his or her writing. (17)

I am not suggesting that revisionist approaches to first phase process movements have discussed this deferral of the discipline
as important to their revision activities. What I am suggesting is that we must understand those revisionist critiques in relation to the disciplinary matters that constitute that deferral if we are to create a transitional moment in composition studies. These revisionist pedagogies point to a gap that we have all too often tried to step over as we have attempted to move forward from first phase process models to more social, critical, and/or community-based practices. We have, in some ways, leapt over the discipline in our attempts to put students in relation to the social, to the cultural, to the institutional, to the world. But we must address and be willing to step into this gap, to alter the relationships between and among members of the writing classes, before we can hope to have any effect on the world. Our world cannot be any different if our profession stays the same. The point here is not just that we are part of the world, although that is something to remember. The point is that if we can’t do it, we certainly have no right to position students—or anybody else for that matter—as people who must embody such change for us.

This is why I think transition is a better metaphor than transformation as we attempt to deal with the possibilities opened up by revisions to first-phase process movement approaches to composition studies, particularly those theories, pedagogies, and practices aimed at first-year writing. People make transitions; they get transformed. It is, indeed, a particular kind of material error to think of first-year writing as transformational given the structural devaluation of the course, its students, its pedagogies, and its role in material matters like departmental budgets. These devaluations allow first-year writing’s active role in the constitution of composition studies to be set aside in the same way that first-phase process model pedagogies allowed the professional and disciplinary matters of the field to be set aside in the classroom. In an odd, but symmetrical way, within this drama the teachers and students of the first-year writing class can be equally disconnected from the discipline. But, first-year writing is best thought of as a place where all members of the writing classes can make transitions that, ideally, are about participation and contribution, rather than a place where all members of the writing classes are transformed. The
revisions to process writing that I will discuss here confront this devaluing of first-year writing and the members of its classes in a number of ways if we read them as challenges to these disconnections.

**REVISING ANALYSIS**

In an earlier article about the work of James Berlin ("Reconfiguring"), I illustrated the ways that he repositions cultural analysis as a major invention activity in first-year writing courses. He accomplishes this by prescribing invention activities that ask students to identify the binary oppositions, cultural codes, and narrative patterns in the texts they read and in their own experiences. In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, Berlin outlines the following structure for first-year writing courses:

The course provides students with a set of heuristics—innovation strategies—that grow out of the interaction of rhetoric, structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, and cultural studies. . . . In examining any text—print, film, television—students must locate the key terms in the discourse and situate these terms within the structure of meaning of which they form a part. (117)

Locating these key terms occurs when “students first consider the context of the piece, exploring the characteristics of the readership of the [text under consideration] and the historical events surrounding the essay’s production, particularly as indicated within the text” (117). Once these terms are located, then, the following process of contextualization occurs. The terms “are first set in relation to their binary opposites as suggested by the text itself . . .” (117). “In [the next] phase, students place these terms within the narrative structural forms suggested by the text, the culturally coded patterns of behavior appropriate for people within certain situations” (118). When students turn to look at their own experiences (as workers, audiences for popular culture media, etc.), they use these same terms to analyze and understand those experiences, thus bridging the gap between the analytic activities constructed through the theories informing the pedagogies and those used by students. In addition, the invention strategies that
inform student reading and those that inform student writing are similar in significant ways. There is, of course, still the fact that someone has figured out which strategies will be engaged before the students have even arrived in class, that many approaches have been considered and rejected, while others have been selected, synthesized, and translated into guidelines for practice. But like Richard Ohmann’s radical view of the profession, Berlin’s pedagogy takes critical understanding rather than mastery of the way things are as the purpose of participating in the writing class.⁹ Students are not always already positioned to favor relationships of identification with the texts of the course, or their ideologies of production. Configuring this kind of analysis as key to invention overtly positions something other than adaptation as the process being explored. Clearly, consciousness raising takes a more prominent place than concerns about where the student writing ends up in Berlin’s approach. But, bridging the gap between what “real” cultural critics do and what student critics do is a significant revision here, one that gives the course value as an important part of becoming a member of a democratic society who seeks understanding of culture for purposes other than adaptation. Clearly, these revisions are based primarily on introducing invention strategies usually reserved for certain members of the writing classes (theorists) to members not usually thought of as engaging those strategies (undergraduate students, especially first-year undergraduate students in a variety of majors). As my empirical work will show, by the end of high school it is possible that students themselves perceive the use of such critical strategies as inappropriate and/or unexpected. It is possible that the fundamental split between identification of and identification with the terms for making meaning that approaches like Berlin’s suggest is foreign to most students by the time they graduate from high school.

James Slevin makes a different but related call for analysis in *Introducing English: Essays in the Intellectual Work of Composition*. Here, Slevin gives the following advice to those who wish to help students “understand and control their writing, and not just adapt to the signifying system we call ‘academic discourse’” (193). To reach this goal, Slevin states, students “need to engage fully in its
production, to question it, perhaps even to challenge its purpose—in effect, they need to become involved in the kind of analysis that composition scholars and teachers themselves often undertake” (193). This study of academic genres “questions them as well as masters them . . . by both writing within them and contextualizing them” (195). While Slevin proposes that students focus on the history of literacy in America and Berlin proposes that they study a range of texts about a variety of subjects, they agree that students need to analyze and contextualize both the content of their readings and their own related experiences. Consequently, invention activities must position students in ways that prepare them to do something more than merely identify with what they read, study, experience, and write. While Berlin and Slevin are different in many ways, for both revising invention in the writing class is a matter of recovering context. They do not, as Lad Tobin notes of some set of unnamed presenters he heard one year at the “Conference on College Composition and Communication”, revise process in relation to content for the purpose of re-imagining content outside of the focus on the personal that Tobin sees at the heart of composition studies. In his introduction to Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement in the ’90s, Tobin states:

If the emphasis on material culture in literary studies is the “comeback of history,” then this movement [the critique of process pedagogy] is the “comeback of content.” According to this argument, we need to restore real content (in this case Supreme Court cases or advertisements or historical documents and artifacts); to move students away from thinking and writing about their own individual ethnocentric experiences and feelings; to teach the secret tropes and conventions of academic discourse; and to emphasize cultural studies, situatedness, and critique. (6)

Of course, neither Berlin nor Slevin would make the easy distinction between process and content that Tobin asserts here. More importantly, for both Slevin and Berlin, and for many others attempting to revise process, student experiences are deep and significant parts of the picture; experience is, in fact, the thing being contextualized. So, while Tobin does not name what
many attempts to revise process are all about in any accurate way, he does articulate what replacing invention activities that center experience in particular contextualized ways looks like and feels like for thousands of writing teachers who were and are initiated into the first-phase process movement. As Lisa Ede reminds us later in this same collection, and as many others have noted, the model of process that became popularized was “mechanistic” and “has inevitably oversimplified and distorted a phenomenon whose richness and complexity we have yet adequately to acknowledge” (35). Furthermore, oversimplified versions of writing as a process did not merely create mechanistic pedagogies for student writing. They also created mechanistic approaches to faculty development within which

Overzealous language arts coordinators and writing program administrators . . . assumed that the process approach to teaching could be taught in one or two in-service sessions by all those who (including myself) forgot that the term “writing process movement” refers not to a concrete and material reality but to an ideologically-charged construct. (Ede 35)

In other words, thousands of teachers constructed themselves in identification with a version of process that, as it turns out, positioned them in relation to disciplinary matters in the same ways than it positioned students: as embodying practices they did not necessarily understand and that represented watered-down versions of reality, as experiencing and acting out composition studies without necessarily practicing it. In the midst of such critiques of the proposed revisions (e.g. Tobin’s) and of the original process movement (e.g. Ede’s), how can the hordes of teachers who helped make first-phase process writing the norm in higher education help but feel betrayed?

In other discussions, the call for connecting analysis and invention focuses on strategies used to challenge particular dominant social norms. In “Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing Within the Academy,” for example, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles discusses the writing activities she has seen challenging “patriarchal discourse practices” (57). She names these alternative practices
“toying with academic writing; the risk of challenging conventions; writing without an argument; experiments with form; differences in ways of working” (58). Here, it becomes clear that although knowledge of certain discursive forms (e.g., academic writing and conventions) is part of the picture, it is not the whole picture, and it certainly presents writers as agents who must consider options other than identification with those certain discursive forms as they write. “Finally,” as Bridwell-Bowles states, in this context “teaching students to write involves teaching them ways to critique not only their material and their potential readers’ needs but also the rhetorical conventions that they are expected to employ in the academy” (43). In a very real sense, Bridwell-Bowles clarifies the need to construct something other than consumption and adaptation as the end of literate activity by including both texts and strategies whose purposes are different.

Like many others, Bridwell-Bowles names this process of revising writing instruction to emphasize something other than consumption and adaptation “critique.” The “something other” that this process of critique emphasizes is practice. And, as all of these attempts to revise process indicate, the rhetoric of deliberate action (activism) that comes from the process of critique may spring from and/or be encoded in texts very different from the textbooks and other materials we institutionalized in first-phase process movements. Krista Ratcliffe’s Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions explores this possibility, as do Miriam Brody’s Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition, and Mary Daly’s Wickadery. My own “I Was a Process-Model Baby” takes this approach to revising process, suggesting that the work of feminist writers like Naomi Wolf, bell hooks, Gloria Steinem and others invites us to consider alternatives to the rhetorical invention, arrangement, and revision strategies over-valorized by dominant renditions of the prewrite-write-rewrite model of composing. What we recover in these feminist revisions to the prewrite part of the writing process movement are alternative ways to think about making meaning with language, ways that do not over-value identification with discourse conventions, even as they acknowledge the importance of being able to do identification of those conventions. But to propose such a
methodology reintroduces questions about the relationship between writing and reading. The texts that scholars and graduate students are reading become invitations to write in new ways; the translation of those writing practices and/or texts into classroom pedagogies alters the expectations for student writing; and questions about the relationships between what is being read to create those pedagogies and practices, and what can and should be read in the composition classroom reassert themselves in new ways.

There are many more examples of work that revises first-phase process model approaches to composition by proposing, in whole or in part, revisions to the prewriting activities informing dominant first-phase conceptions of writing as process. This is not surprising since, as Sharon Crowley reminds us in “Around 1971: Current-Traditional Rhetoric and Process Models of Composing,” invention was the main focus of institutionalizing first-phase writing process movement models (64–74). Ultimately, these revisions challenge not only the specific prewriting activities popularized by those models—freewriting, brainstorming, clustering, etc.—but also the idea that invention activities available to some members of the writing classes should be radically different from those available to other members of the writing classes. Perhaps most importantly, these revisionist pedagogies institute a generative break between identification of and identification with that questions and explores conventions and status-quo assumptions, rather than merely accepting or rejecting them. The professional members of the class recognized these possibilities early on and began weaving analysis of status quo-assumptions about writing and writing instruction as well as personal narrative into the discourse of the profession, the latter in ways not totally incompatible with the ways students were encouraged to use narrative. Critiquing the processes held out as appropriate for the production of student discourses, especially the particular ways they positioned the writing processes of our students as “the subject matter for composition studies” is an important stage in acknowledging both the failures of first-phase process movements and their potential (Daiker 2, emphasis mine).

Some of the assumptions about the reading/writing relationship inscribed in such notions of student discourse have made
understanding that discourse as contributing to and participating in composition studies a difficult endeavor. People who teach writing, especially those who teach first-year writing—are reading a variety of texts in their roles as teachers and scholars, and those texts are often affecting how they teach writing and their expectations as readers. Although I couldn’t have had any idea how much my commitment to understanding the implications of this situation would affect my life and my career, no idea of the possibilities and limitations it would present, it has allowed me to listen to and to learn—especially from students—in ways that always urged me to keep opportunities for others clearly in my range of vision. I still remember the first time I took students in one of my undergraduate writing classes to CCCC, still remember their reactions to the ways presenters talked about undergraduate students. In fact, the ways that all of the students I have invited into our professional forums have reacted to the ways they were discussed there has always helped me to understand how much they had to contribute. It would be impossible to measure the ways that these student readings of our discussions inform my work. It would be equally impossible to measure the affects of revising my first-year writing curriculum to include my students and I in community literacy work. Those discussions have enhanced our abilities to rethink and to practice participation and to make contributions to our communities. Everyone involved remembers the first time one of our GED students passed the exam, the first semester that the writing section of the exam (which used to be the biggest cause of failure for our GED students) became the part of the exam everyone passed. We still remember the first time one of the adult basic education students—a man in his sixties—wrote his name for the first time, and the way that his tutor, Nick, much to our surprise, returned semester after semester to help make this happen. We still remember the first time one of the students in our ESL community literacy class moved up into our GED class. We helped make these things possible, my students and I, by participating as tutors in community literacy classes and by thinking about how what we were studying about composition might allow us to contribute to those classes in productive ways, and to invite others to do the same. We have
written reports for our Project READ partners, worked on recruitment and retention campaigns with them, and done book drives for their library. In the process of studying and acting, we have broken through many of the restrictive notions of student discourse in higher education, not the least of which is that student literacy is usually a tool for evaluation of students, and, increasingly program assessment, and not much else. But student expectations that their literacy work can contribute in these ways is very low at the start of each semester. The expectation that they might contribute to the discipline is even lower, as I will discuss in the next section; this is something to remember as we attempt to create transitions that invite such activities.

REVISING EXPECTATIONS

There is no doubt that the transition to college writing can be difficult for many students. Understanding the differences between students’ learned assumptions about literacy and the absent possibilities inscribed within those assumptions is important if we want to see those absent possibilities. As it turns out, understanding student assumptions about literacy is critical to re-imagining student writing as vital to our profession. While I am not proposing that my students are representative of the population more generally, their assumptions about participation and contribution help us begin to map a course as we attempt to engage in more inclusive literacy activities than those espoused by dominant institutionalized notions of writing as process.

The data that I am about to present were collected from a set of placement exams that incoming first-year students wrote in the fall of 2002. The institution the data come from is a small private university whose mission is to connect the theoretical and the practical. It is a school that has always had a strong commitment to providing education to (mostly) traditional-age students who need some kind of financial support. At the time of this study, all incoming students wrote a short timed essay (50 minutes) that was used to determine which students needed to be in an enhanced first-semester writing course that included more intensive one-on-one tutoring than did other sections of the course. For the
past few years the English department has been using the following prompt for the placement essay.

The faculty of our first-year writing program is busy preparing for your arrival, and you can help by writing an essay in which you explain your strengths as a reader and writer. Conclude by stating both what you will contribute to your first-semester Critical Writing, Reading, and Researching class and what you hope to gain from that class.

Six hundred seventeen students took the fall 2002 placement exam. I read each of the essays three times. During the third reading, I created a list of the ways each student discussed what they hoped to gain and what they hoped to contribute to their first-semester class. Because I was most interested in the profile of the group, I created lists of desired gains and contributions, not profiles of individual students. Student consultants I had talked with about this project thought it would be important to code what people hoped to gain as well as what they said they could contribute in case they were hoping to gain opportunities for using literacy to participate in and/or contribute to things like the school newspaper. Not every student who wrote the placement exam discussed both participation and contribution, but most made at least some attempt to address these issues in their conclusion as the prompt requested. After I had made these lists, I met with my student assistant, Travis Meisenheimer, to discuss how we might group these responses.¹¹ We decided that our two major categories—gains and contributions—would be further divided into those most related to writing, those most related to reading, and those most related to researching. After student responses were categorized, Travis and I met with two small focus groups of advanced English majors. All but one of these students had taken the course; one student had transferred from community college and had taken first-year writing there. I wanted to open up interpretation of the data from the placement exams to students who could reflect upon the meaning of the responses in a variety of ways. While it is not unusual to use student writing as a database in our field, it is unusual to include students in analysis of that data. But opening up these disciplinary conversations to our students is
critical to our field if we are to expand the possibilities for participation and contribution.

I have included fairly lengthy excerpts from our conversations in this section to illustrate the rich ways that students can help us to understand the disciplinary matters at issue here. Our conversations took several hours. For the sake of presenting those conversations in relation to issues, I have sometimes rearranged the order of our comments, especially so that comments about the same issues from the first and second sessions could be read together. The student consultants agreed that this would be the best way to deal with presenting our dialogue, and each read these pages before any of them have been made public. I invited all students in the “Internship in the Teaching of Writing” course (a course required of all of our English Secondary Education majors) and all of my advisees who had articulated an interest in graduate school to be in the focus groups; six students agreed to meet for three one-hour taped sessions to discuss the placement exam data. Our conversations began with a consideration of the fact that the data come from placement exams, a particular writing situation that may reflect much about student expectations for their first semester class and about what they think they are expected to say.

Nicole: I remember when I wrote this essay, and I was thinking that I wanted to impress the English professors that would be reading it. I remember sitting there that day thinking that, maybe they [the students writing the placement exams] felt like somebody was going to read it and if they put the wrong thing, then they might go into their first class at already somewhat of a disadvantage.

Linda: So these essays are kind of layers of expectations. It’s what the students think is expected of them, what they’re expected to say.

Carrie: I noticed that too. I thought . . . a lot of these answers are what you might put on an application to college . . . even though it’s just a placement essay, it somehow might matter.

Jennifer: And I almost get the feel from a lot of these that they’re really struggling to say what they think that you want to hear. Almost like it’s a job interview; very interesting.
Nancy: In an odd way though, that would show a kind of audience awareness at work, an awareness that isn’t articulated as a skill or a strength anywhere in the essays. What you’re saying is they have a particular notion of the audience and a particular notion of the purpose of the essay they’re writing, and so they’re giving these responses, but not putting in the response that audience awareness and knowing what you’re “supposed to” say are important. Or, as somebody else said, it’s what they think we want to hear which, of course, is telling us a lot about what they think about literacy education, and literacy educators.

Nicole: I think also that . . . in the back of their minds they are thinking I can’t come right out and say all I want is an A because then somebody will know that I don’t really care about the class.

Jennifer: It seems like a lot of these things [that the students mention] are things that would have been marked on a paper in some way—like especially in a high school classroom—needs more organizational skills, needs more support of argument, or vary your sentence style.

Nancy: Now it’s interesting because I hadn’t thought of that, and yesterday people said the same thing: that this clearly reflects what they’ve seen written on their papers.

Linda: This reminds me of all the things I hate about being a student. But you know why they say these things—because this is the expectation. . . . You learn that these are acceptable skills or contributions. . . . These just show you what they expect the priorities to be.

For the student consultants, the essays represent two major writing concerns: a sense that there may be negative consequences for student writers’ performances and a concern for meeting audience expectations. The student consultants all assume that the essay writers are bringing past experiences about expectations to bear in their essays. There are many contemporary disciplinary conversations about these matters, both as separate issues and as connected issues. Recall, for example, Peter Elbow’s “Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument For Ignoring Audience,” or Ede
and Lunsford’s “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy” and the work it draws from (Ong), or Park’s “The Meaning of Audience,” or the discussion of audience in Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University.” Consider also the rich historical materials available here: Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the introduction to Christine dePizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies*. We have to start to wonder why these disciplinary discussions and historical texts are not generally seen as content for courses that address students who bring the knowledge and assumptions indicated here with them into our classrooms. We have to start to wonder why we create separate types of discussions about these matters for our students (e.g., rubrics for audience analysis that students are supposed to enact rather than question or explore as particular ways to put writers and readers in relationship with one another). Certainly, student experience in general has not been bracketed from the first-year writing classroom. But the expectation is common that the disciplinary discourses about these concerns will be bracketed, especially in first-year courses.

Another of the more interesting conversations came when one of the student consultants made a connection between the specific context for this writing and the larger educational context behind the scene. As Meg illustrates, at stake here is the possibility that people have internalized limited notions of the ways that writing can create self/other relationships (and/or limited sets of largely mechanical matters that they think ground those relationships). Meg refers here to the fact that very few students talked about their written language as being able to contribute to the class, but that many defined their contributions in relationship to their oral literacy (talking in class) and to working hard.

*Meg:* Maybe students—by the time they’ve graduated from high school—perceive their contributions primarily in this way. That they can say something in class, they can participate in the discussion, but their idea of being able to contribute in any other way—maybe there’s so many of those because it’s the one way people feel like they can contribute—they say that because they don’t have anything else to say. The idea that their reading or writing might contribute to class is, for
whatever reason, like Kathy was saying before, about how they just expect to read something and come in and repeat what it said rather than do something else with it. They don’t see that as contributions. They may see it as some type of performance, but they don’t see it as contributions.

Nancy: So, why is it that working hard and having opinions are considered primary and safe ways to think about contribution?

Jennifer: It implies on some level that you care about the course. Having an opinion is the same thing. Even if the work you are doing isn’t of high quality, but you’re doing something—if you’re writing something, or just fixing grammatical errors . . .

Linda: Everybody’s told them they’ll have to work hard. And it sounds good.

Nancy: Well, it does sound good to say you’re going to work hard. But, think about it this way for a minute. What if those are just the default things that these students say? Like they get to the part where they’re supposed to talk about the things they can contribute, and they don’t know what to say. So the default mode is to say that you’ll work hard and express your opinion in class.

Jennifer: It doesn’t imply any kind of progress or insight. You just have to be there and talk and do something. It doesn’t matter what you do or what you say as long as you’re functioning on some level as a student of the class.

Linda: Yes, [talking in class and working hard] sound like default answers, what they think teachers want to hear. Of course, work hard, and if you have an opinion you’re going to speak up in class.

Nancy: What else do you think? There’s a section here where people talked about product-centered contributions. Only 24 people said that their actual writing—like their papers—were going to be part of what they actually contributed to the course. Only 24 people said that their actual papers would be something they were contributing. That is the thing that shocked me the most.

Jennifer: I think that says something about the way these students perceive their own ability as writers in a writing class, if they don’t think they are contributing their own writing on some level.
Linda: I’m still trying to picture what I would say. I don’t think that people would say stuff like “I’m going to contribute my fantastic writing” because it doesn’t sound very humble. You don’t know anything—you’re a student. That’s why you’re a student. It’s almost an unfair question. What are you going to contribute as somebody who’s been trained for years that you’re not a contributor. You’re an empty vessel to be filled.

Jennifer: Well, like Linda said, to assert something like that [that student papers could contribute to a course of study] would be an act of self-empowerment almost. Like this is something that I did, and it’s important and I’m contributing with it. Not to say that implies a lot of distance between yourself and the product. [But this] conception of literacy has gotten them this far.

Kathy: Going back to knowledge, I kind of got the feeling they thought knowledge was—they expressed knowledge as the action of doing the writing instead of what they generated . . .

Nancy: I hadn’t put those two things together until you said that.

Kathy: It felt like they viewed knowledge as . . . skills.

Jennifer: But [their responses are] not [about] the process of writing either, it’s the end result—grammatically correct and organized well, etc.

Meg: I think they think they are writing just for teachers, so why would [their writing] ever contribute to other students?

Carrie: They’re just creating to get a good grade.

Linda: And, of course, if all you get from reading is comprehension, then all you need from writing is to show that you understood [what you read].

Jennifer: Along with that, it’s interesting to me, there’s nothing about challenging the research [you are presented with].

Nancy: No, there’s nothing about adding to it or challenging it. Although analyzing could mean that you say some is good research and some isn’t. Again, mostly about skills.

Jennifer: And knowledge of the system. These all seem very removed from the student, too . . . it’s all part of the process of getting this thing done in a certain way. It’s not involved. There’s no questioning or challenging.

Nancy: The way that it’s supposed to be is already set. And what you’re doing is trying to figure out how to get there. That
came up yesterday a lot too. Like Meg said at one point, “I just wish I could hug all these poor children. I think they’re in a lot of pain.”

We could see that student writers are often more worried about meeting the expectations of an audience who will evaluate their work than they are about the relationship between their work and the discipline as a larger context within which it might have meaning. As student consultants noted, this conceptualization of audience valorizes comprehension and repetition as the end of composition. The data also present us with a way to understand the connections between, on the one hand, that concern and a focus on mechanical and organizational matters and, on the other hand, a generalized conception of knowledge as skill in relation to writing. I asked student consultants to consider the definition of writing implied by our data.

Nancy: If you had just this data, if somebody said, “Here’s some information. From this construct a definition of writing.”

Jennifer: I think for the most part, ideal writing would be cohesive, grammatically correct, organized well. It’s not really about the content itself.

Nancy: Here we have a group of people who have been getting some sort of literacy education since they were at least 5. How is it possible that people who have been practicing something this long—now think about it, say it was the piano and you had been practicing for 15 years—and not expect to be pretty good at it?

Linda: No, not if you started at lesson 1 every year. Because that’s that whole blank slate thing. You walk in with the expectation that you have to do whatever that particular instructor wants, and they assume you know nothing at all, so you start over and over and over. So there is no getting better.

Nancy: Do you think students spend at least as much time trying to figure out [what the teacher wants] as they do learning things about writing and reading?

Jennifer: I think they spend more time with that.

Linda: Yes, because the real point of each course is what you have to do to survive.
Jennifer: It just kind of turns you into a grade collector at some level. And then once you have this perfect formula of exactly how much you have to do and what way you do it to achieve your desired level of progress or evaluation, then you’re set. There’s this removal from the content.

Perhaps this explains, at least in part, why there were only 24 responses about the ways student writing could be seen as a contribution in any way, when 617 students discussed what they hoped to contribute to their first semester Critical Writing, Reading, and Research course. Furthermore, the responses indicate that even those few people who see their writing as contributing to the course at all do so primarily in relation to undefined issues of quality. Here are all of the contributions that the incoming students were able to imagine:

**Writing Contributions**

- Good papers
- Good papers
- Good essays
- Good essays
- Good research papers and essays
- Good papers
- Some good writing
- Thoughtful pieces
- Produce quality research
- Best work (writing)
- Work I can be proud of
- Make my writing stand out
- A lot of writing
- Good writing skills
- Write with power
- Well-written essays
- My writing
- Many writing styles
- Expressive writing
- A lot of emotion in my papers
Balance of humor and seriousness in my work
Unique writing style
Read my own papers thoroughly and correct them
Contribute a little in finding out what I want to write about

But as my student consultants predicted, when we combine this set of responses with what students said they hope to gain as writers in the class, an interesting picture emerges, one that helps us to understand what students think they need to become better writers. What is most striking, even if not surprising, is that although there were only 24 responses about student writing possibly counting as a course contribution, there are 653 responses regarding what students hope to gain as writers (obviously, some of the 617 students said more than one thing about what they hoped to gain as writers).

**Writing Gains**

- Improve mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation) 44
- Improve writing skills (unspecified) 44
- Become better at process of putting things down on paper 36
- Become a better writer (unspecified) 30
- Improve structure/orrganization 29
- Improve quality of my writing 27
- Improve expressive abilities 26
- Better knowledge of writing 22
- Improve/expand ability to write in different styles 21
- Improve vocabulary 19
- Improve clarity 14
- Improve ability to communicate in writing 11
- Improve focus in writing 10
- Learn to write for college 11
- Gain confidence as a writer 12
- Gain experience as a writer 9
- Improve conclusions 8
- Like writing more 9
- Improve introductions 6
- Improve writing techniques 5
- Opportunity to write about a topic of interest 6
Improve research writing skills 6
Improve creativity 5
Make writing easier 3
Gain experience as a peer editor 2
Miscellaneous 24
Total 439

In addition to these more specific gains, 107 students also articulated a general desire to improve on their strengths and weaknesses as readers and writers, 81 expressed a desire to improve reading and writing skills, 26 expressed a desire to improve reading, writing, and research skills and/or products. These general comments reflect students’ tendency to conclude their essays with a general statement about what they hope to gain across the categories they were asked to discuss in the essay. In any case, these responses indicate that student expectations for writing classes still revolve around current-traditional notions of the importance of surface structures and correctness. They also reflect only a fraction of what one might hope to gain as a writer in a writing class and, as student consultants propose, it may be that this image of themselves as writers is a representation of how they have been taught to act as writers.

Obviously, many of the alternatives to invention, like Berlin’s, set purposes for composition instruction—consciousness raising and participation in civic discourse, for example—that challenge the conception of writing and writing courses indicated by these data. But the idea that analyzing invention strategies and discourse more generally—rather than adherence to the prewriting activities and forms of “student” discourse prescribed by first-phase process teachers and textbooks—raises questions about what is to be analyzed as well as how it is to be analyzed. It also raises questions about positioning others in the restrictive ways that oversimplification of writing issues positioned us. Most pointedly, the dominant notion of process positioned reading materials as incapable of giving us information about process. Donald Murray was one of the biggest proponents of this view of reading. As my student consultants and I noticed, this conceptualization of reading fits students’ expectations about the role of reading in their literacy lives in
significant ways; that is, in both scenarios, the professional and the empirical, you can’t learn much about writing from reading. Since these assumptions about the reading/writing relationship are reflected in our data, I move now to a discussion of that data.

**Reading Contributions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation skills</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good reading skills</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help others understanding materials</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension skills</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading skills taught in high school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help others love reading</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work hard at understanding readings so I can give good ideas/opinions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick understanding and observation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding, knowledge, abilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting facts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Desired Reading Gains**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gain Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better Reading and Writing skills</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve comprehension</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve knowledge of literature</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve reading, writing, and research</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve speed/read faster</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve reading skills</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy reading more</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read faster and improve comprehension</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to new readings</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve analysis/interpretation skills</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow down while reading</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>293</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One hundred ninety students said that they would contribute ideas and opinions in class (64 said ideas, good ideas, or original
ideas; 73 said my opinion/point of view or unique opinions and views; 53 said participation in class discussions). We also noticed that while many students cited a form of speaking in class as a way to contribute, only 8 students said that being a good listener would count as a form of contribution.14 I asked student consultants to begin by considering the definition of literacy at work in the data about reading contributions and gains.

Nancy: So, thinking about all this together—the gains and contributions part [of the section about reading]—I’m going to ask again—this is a hard question—what do these people think literacy is? If you had to draw an operational definition of literacy from this information, what would you say literacy is?

Linda: The ability to read and comprehend other people’s ideas and reorganize them and put them on paper and prove that you comprehended them.

Jennifer: And it really doesn’t go beyond that: comprehending, reading, being able to write cohesively and grammatically and having something to say. It doesn’t imply anything about applying or challenging it [what you read].

Nancy: And there’s a lot about reading faster and understanding more. That is one of the biggest categories here.

Linda: I think that reflects the prior speculation about what we read for—to comprehend what somebody else says or thinks and write to show that you comprehend it.

Nancy: But the writing gains aren’t about showing that you understood what you read as much as they are about mechanics, style, and organization.

Linda: What they don’t say is, again, anything about content.

Jennifer: So their definition of writing doesn’t concern the content at all. It’s just the art of being able to write for the assignment. It seems like reading and writing are two very separate things for them. And they really don’t consider themselves very good readers or writers.

Nancy: Even though they’ve been doing it for a long time. This idea that reading and writing seem to be separate things for them came up in yesterday’s session too. People were saying that seemed really weird. They don’t think they can learn
anything about how to write from reading and they don’t think they can learn anything about how to read from writing.

Jennifer: It seems like the expectations placed on them for reading and writing are very different. There’s attention to grammar and to structure and to all of these mechanical surface things with writing, but with reading it’s more comprehension and identification. There isn’t really like a personal level with either of them, but they’re different. And neither of those sets of expectations really gets to the . . . I think they’re still very distant and kind of stop at comprehension. It seems like they do reading as a means to an end. It’s like something that you have to defeat or conquer. It’s not a process of learning. You have to demolish the book. I’m going to read it faster and more efficient[ly]. I’m going to dominate it, and that’s going to be it. And it’s not even about personal growth or anything . . . But knowing what you have to know.

Nancy: Nobody says I want to use reading to become a better person, or to help me understand the world more, or whatever.

Jennifer: Or [be] a better writer.

Travis: Of course not—everything’s segmented.

Nancy: That’s becoming more and more of a theme here—everything’s segmented out.

Travis: Reading and writing don’t mix.

Jennifer: And the ways you go about becoming a better writer are completely different than the ways you go about becoming a better reader.

But revisions to first-phase process that open the conversation about student/discipline relationships make no such assumption. In fact, revised approaches to composition assert that a variety of kinds of knowledge can be gained both from reading things other than student papers in writing classes and from reading student papers in new ways. What’s more, revised approaches that create an important place for analysis in invention also discuss inclusion as a textual matter. According to Slevin, we can learn about the history of literacy in America and about how that history positions
literate subjectivity in ways that call for multiple responses such as resistance, adherence, and rejection in relation to our own experiences. According to Berlin, we can learn about and decode status-quo cultural assumptions and personal experience by analyzing a variety of texts from popular culture. According to Bridwell-Bowles, we can learn about how to generate “more critical readings of patriarchal discourse practices” by reading feminist texts. This list could go on and on. The point here is that those who have revised the writing process movement have struggled to connect reading and writing in ways that acknowledge and enact both the generative and the analytic possibilities of literate rhetorical action. In doing so, they emphasize the fact that arrangement is never merely about the order of words and sentences and paragraphs on a page; arrangement is always also about the relationships referred to and implied by texts, and, therefore, about the world. This is a very different struggle than those favored by textbooks that defer the question of reading—even readings of themselves—in favor of presenting instructional materials that it is assumed students will identify with—or at least pretend to—in order to succeed. Analysis—or at least the kinds of analysis engaged by people who are serious about revising process—proposes ways of reading and writing that break the cycle of identification of/identification with often assumed in literacy studies. Comprehension is not restricted to learning only about the text, and what it helps us learn about is not expected to generate simple identifications. In a very real sense, the idea that texts can be used to forward the inclusion of new methods of analysis opens both the materials and the methods of composition studies to critique, even to student critique, as anyone who has tried such an approach will tell you. That these revisions have occurred primarily without simultaneous attention to the matters of participation and contribution means, I believe that, despite the possibilities they open, they are always in danger of merely calling up the same “student writer,” whose writing and subjectivity are restricted to embodying and consuming rather than participating in and contributing to composition studies. This is why I am calling for further revisions, revisions that make participation and contribution central to composition studies.
Whereas first-phase models of process positioned the rewriting of student texts as the locus for revision, revisions to process tend to center some aspect of student subjectivity as the thing being revised through composition studies. The writing might be intransitive, but the consciousness it comes from and affects is not. For example, Berlin’s goal is to change student consciousness, Bridwell-Bowles would like to change the relationship between student writers and their experiences as writers, Slevin wants to revise students’ relationships to what he constructs as disciplinary knowledge and action, and so on. In each case, something other than merely a student product is being revised, usually not for the primary purpose of adapting to traditional standards for student prose, but for the purpose of inviting some form of critical consciousness and/or critique. This is not to say that first-phase approaches did not attempt to—and in some cases succeed in—revising theory, pedagogy, and practice. The point is that they did not apply the same notion of revision to their instructional materials for students; there, revision was—and still is—primarily restricted to rewriting and to whatever textual matters need to be addressed as students move toward the final version of a product (see the essays in *Crisis and Change* for a variety of discussions about this matter). One of the major differences between first-phase models of writing as process and current revisions to those models is that in the first-phase approaches prewriting, writing, and rewriting are matters of production and are assumed to be universally applicable in any writing situation and for any purpose, while attempts to revise these approaches recognize the ways that prescribed notions of production are ideologically particular. In fact, like many contemporary methods of critique, those employed by people attempting to change the theories, pedagogies, and practices of first-phase process movement assumptions in revisionary ways are not only engaged in revision activities. They are configuring revision as central to composition studies—both in relation to student subjectivity and to English studies more generally—in ways that are radically different from the revision practices that define student writing in first-phase
notions of process writing. Bartholomae presents a particular case in point in “What Is Composition and (if you know what that is) Why Do We Teach It?” He states:

[Composition] is . . . a way of committing professional time and energy to the revision of the [student] essay—both as it is the product of institutional goals and practices (composition, then, is a commitment to study, critique and change writing in the schools) and as the product of a particular writing at a particular point in time (composition, then, is a commitment to intervene in and direct the practices of individual writers). Composition would take its work to be revision; the form of composition I am willing to teach would direct the revision of the [student] essay as an exercise in criticism (even, I think I would say, cultural criticism—that is I would want students not only to question the force of the text but also the way the text positions them in relationship to the history of writing).

This binds composition to the ordinary in ways that are professionally difficult. It takes as its subject the [student] essay rather than Toulmin, and this buys less in the academic marketplace. And it ends with revisions that are small, local, and difficult to value. It assumes the direct intervention in specific projects where (from a certain angle of vision) the gains are small. (21)

Bartholomae’s process of revision revolves around the reading of other texts (in this essay Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*) and teacher “intervention.” Despite the fact that the role of reading texts other-than-student texts is not discussed as part of this program for composition studies, reimagining the role of reading in composition does constitute a major ground for revising process. Unlike Bartholomae, I do not believe that we can or should maintain an either/or binary between the texts of our discipline and student discourses, especially the student discourses of first-year writing class students. The assumption that revisions related to student writing must be “small, local, and difficult to value” sets aside the possibility that students and student discourses can and do participate in and contribute to composition studies. In many ways, these assumptions imply what I will make overt: revising composition studies in ways that make the promises of first-phase process
movements a reality requires us to explore the absent possibility of student participation and contribution in relation to a variety of disciplinary matters, including the dominant prewrite/write/rewrite paradigm valorized by those movements. That paradigm centered a process/product binary that re-covered the possibility of challenging the ideology of consumption/adaptation, thereby re-inscribing limited—and limiting—roles for student writing in composition studies.