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# A Pedagogy of Love: Exploring Emotions, Spirit and Intellect in the Basic Writing Classroom

Peggy L. Johnson

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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A PEDAGOGY OF LOVE: EXPLORING EMOTIONS, SPIRIT  
AND INTELLECT IN THE BASIC WRITING CLASSROOM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Peggy L. Johnson

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
The School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Peggy L. Johnson

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

---

Claude Mark Hurlbert, D. A.  
Professor of English, Advisor

---

Bennett Rafoth, Ed.D.  
Professor of English

---

Gian Pagnucci, Ph.D.  
Professor of English

ACCEPTED

---

Michele. S. Schwietz, Ph.D.  
Assistant Dean for Research  
The School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: A Pedagogy of Love: Exploring Emotions, Spirit and Intellect in the Basic Writing Classroom

Author: Peggy L. Johnson

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Claude Mark Hurlbert

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Ben Rafoth  
Dr. Gian Pagnucci

My first experiences in teaching basic writing to students who were enrolled in the college's remedial writing program met with abject failure. I could not get past the overwhelming lack of academic ability on the part of most basic writers, and as a result, I suffered in the classroom along with my students. As the number of students who entered our college doors underprepared for college level work increased, I began to question the effectiveness of my teaching because it focused on students' failure and not their potential. This dissertation addresses what I believe to be the most important question in the teaching of marginalized students: How do we best respond?

What I learned in this dissertation was that by examining a teaching ideal that unites the emotional, spiritual and intellectual aspects of the teaching and learning process, basic writing students may achieve personal and academic growth. This teaching ideal, which I refer to as a pedagogy of love, a concept articulated by bell hooks and further enhanced by Paulo Freire, Mike Rose, and the Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious order, calls teachers to nurture an emotional connection with their students alongside best practice and calls on teachers to respond

to student weakness with compassion. A pedagogy of love empowers students, increases their competence, nurtures their whole self-image and confirms them as valuable human beings with worth and dignity

For this study, I researched scholars in the field of Composition who uphold a standard of care that sympathizes with basic writing students' educational obstacles and experiences, that promotes students' emotional and academic flourishing, and that works to change basic writing students' and basic writing programs' marginalized conditions. This study also includes interviews and stories of teachers who share their struggles in teaching basic writing students as well as of teachers who have adapted a compassionate ideal in their classrooms. Ultimately this dissertation addresses teachers' belief systems as they relate to basic writing students, calls teachers to question belief systems that may dehumanize students, and brings issues of emotion and spirit into our discussions of teaching and learning.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	INTRODUCTION .....	1
	Background of the Study .....	2
	The Advancement and Discussion of Love .....	8
	Scholarly Influences on a Pedagogy of Love .....	15
	Outline of Chapters .....	22
	Teaching and Learning in the Basic Writing Classroom .....	25
Chapter		
2	MY EXPERIENCES TEACHING BASIC WRITING STUDENTS.....	35
	Teaching Experiences at a Public College.....	35
	Teaching Experiences at a Catholic University.....	41
	Complexity of Applying Christian Brothers' Philosophy to Practice.....	47
	Influence of Scholars on Teaching.....	51
	Re-formation of Teaching Theory and Practice.....	56
Chapter		
3	LITERATURE REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN BASIC WRITING .....	65
	Background Influences of Field of Composition.....	65
	Contextual Model's Influence on Changing Conditions.....	70
	Contextual Model's Influence on Shaping Theories.....	80
	Contextual Model's Influence on Reflective Practice.....	89
	Overview of Shifts in Teaching Basic Writing.....	97

Chapter

4	PEDAGOGY OF LOVE: TEACHERS' AND SCHOLARS' PERSPECTIVES.....	99
	Refining of a Pedagogy of Love: Emphasis on Compassion.....	99
	Complexities of the Compassionate Ideal.....	102
	Compassionate Ideal and the Promotion of Educational Achievement.....	110
	Illustrations of the Compassionate Ideal.....	116
Chapter		
5	THE COMPASSIONATE IDEAL.....	125
	Meeting Students Where They Are.....	125
	Disjunct Between Caring and Compassionate Ideal.....	131
	Call for Future Research in the Field.....	138
	Contributions of this Study.....	139
	REFERENCES.....	142



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Last year the private Catholic university where I teach installed its new president, who recently unveiled to the faculty his new vision for the university. Such a revelation is expected, even eagerly awaited, by faculty because it not only sets the tone for the new administration, but it also provides the faculty with keen insights into the educational philosophy of the person who will guide the university. After months of anticipation, the faculty was told the news: the university would open its doors to all students who desired an education, regardless of their financial or intellectual limitations. The president's words, "If a student wants an education, no matter his or her circumstances, we will not pass them by," met with faculty confusion and a bit of panic. How will the university service these students who will surely come through the university's doors significantly underprepared for academic work? What will become of the institution's reputation for high standards? How many bright students will this news turn away? I, too, asked these questions and wondered especially how we could teach a greater number of students who possessed low standardized test scores, students who would be turned down for admittance to all other colleges of their choice. I began to ponder: how would this change in student population affect my work with student writers? After giving careful thought to my role as a teaching professional and to the university's mission of service, I came to see that the only question that must be addressed, the only question that matters to any significant degree, is the question: how do we respond? This study is my quest to answer that question in the most valuable and important way possible.

## *Background of the Study*

The idea for this study emerged six years ago during my research courses as a doctoral student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, a medium-sized mid-Atlantic university, but the beginnings of this study began rumbling much earlier than that. It is a study that grew from my personal story of the struggle that comes from teaching students whose educational journey has been sharply different from my own. I grew up with a love for school, a love for the possibilities that were opened to me, especially through reading and writing. School was the place I was accepted and affirmed, and I blossomed as a result. Yet the students I taught in college writing classes were those who were marked as “underprepared” because a pattern of poor grades and test scores labeled them as such.

When I faced a group of writing students at a community college in northern Minnesota for the first time two decades ago, I was afraid, and that fear stemmed from a lack of knowledge about how to connect academically and emotionally to my students. How could I build a relationship with Brian<sup>1</sup>, who came to class sporadically and only spoke in mumbles when he was present? Or with Mary, who was overcome by a migraine every time an assignment was due? How could I reach Tina, who hated writing and wanted nothing more than to get through the gen-ed class so she could take the more exciting courses in her major that would help her land a job? I hid my fears under the mask of “Minnesota nice,” and I reassured myself that I was an effective teacher. But underneath the surface of classroom activity, teaching students like Brian, Mary and Tina was difficult because I knew their desires for the class were so different from my own:

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this dissertation.

they wanted to get out of the classroom with a passing grade, expending the least amount of energy possible, and I wanted teaching moments that were meaningful, moments that turned them on to writing to such a degree that they wanted to linger long after class ended. I worked to overcome students' pessimistic perceptions of writing classes, yet for my efforts I felt indifference from the students whose attitudes toward writing I most wanted to change. This dissertation is a reflection of my journey to examine how nurturing an emotional, spiritual and intellectual connection with basic writing students might impact the teaching and learning process to the degree that student attitudes about writing, and my own attitude toward students, are improved. The focus of this dissertation observes how an emphasis on nurturing teacher-student classroom interactions, in addition to course content, might impact learning outcomes.

Adding to my questions about how to teach students in basic writing classes was the memory of my first doctoral course professor, who was determined to keep the question, "How is this meaningful?" in the center of our research. I could ask that question about the knowledge I was learning in the field of composition and about my own work as a scholar, but I avoided applying that question to my work of teaching writing in a classroom, often to students who were considered at-risk, because I found that segment of the student population most difficult to teach. After taking several courses in which professors challenged me to consider composition scholarship as a collaborative, complex, reflective and practical field, I saw that the question ultimately centers on the teaching and learning processes in the classroom, including the basic writing classroom, the area I attempted to avoid because basic writing students' needs seemed so much more profound than mainstreamed students' needs. I was forced to

consider, how is what I do meaningful for students? I cannot teach, in one short semester, what students need to know as college students, but how does the work I assign in the classroom matter for students like Brian, Mary and Tina? I began to look within myself to find the answers, but instead I came up with more questions. How could I find success in my work with students who reacted strongly against writing and who seemed ambivalent about the course in general? I began to look at scholarship with a new eye—and a twinge of desperation—and while I found a field varied and rich in resources, most noticeable to me was scholarship (Rose, 1989; Villanueva, 1993; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998; Palmer, 1998; Rodriguez, 1982, O'Reilly, 1993; hooks, 2003) that addressed the emotional questions about our work, questions that, according to Frankl (1959/1984), are necessary in the process of finding a sense of purpose in our existence and discovering meaning in our lives. Palmer (1998) believes that for teachers, purpose and meaning are found not in specific teaching methods but in the heart, where “intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (p. 11). In my own teaching, I did not seem to know how to get in touch with that point of convergence necessary in order to teach honestly and effectively.

In his book *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), Mike Rose takes Palmer's (1998) discussion of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual convergence that occurs when we have meaningful relationships with our students and advances it: he suggests that we must consider specifically those students who are most invisible on our campuses: the “educational underclass”—those students labeled as underprepared, developmental, slow or remedial and considered the most difficult to teach (p. xi). In Rose's discussion of his own struggles in the education system, he points to specific mentor-teachers whose

motivations were to bring students “inside the circle, nudging us out into the chatter, always just behind us, whispering to try this step, then this one, encouraging us to feel the moves for ourselves” (p. 58). In other words, the intellectual and emotional aspects of our teaching unite when we center our attention on inspiring students to believe in their own potential and guide them in ways that help them progress. Through reading Rose’s work, I realized that in my own teaching, the intellectual and emotional aspects of my human self were not united because somehow as a teacher I could not witness, and therefore could not take part in, the celebration of student development.

Through Arthur, a successful student in the Veteran’s Program in which Rose taught during his early career, Rose (1989) provides further insight into the power of intellectual and emotional connections that can occur between teacher and students. Rose uses Arthur as a fitting example of the learning progress that occurs as a result of solidarity between teacher and students who are single minded in their noble goal of student achievement:

Arthur tended to turn his papers in late, and sometimes he wouldn’t make it to school. But he did okay in our program, handling its challenges and its many potential threats. . . . He worked well and finished most of his courses. When I was growing up, I didn’t see many people regenerate themselves [like Arthur]. A lot of men and women seemed lost on South Vermont, Lou Minton took his own life, and my father’s health never reversed itself. Here, now, was someone emerging from the deepest misery. Slowly, slowly moving out of isolating madness. The majesty of small progress. I had not seen it on South Vermont, for

I was knee-high to the neighborhood's unhappiness. But I was seeing it now, and it was a powerful revelation. Even at the extreme, there is possibility. (p. 159)

In this passage, not only does Rose suggest that students' academic achievement is intellectual, but he also shows that student achievement, the growth that occurs in optimal teaching and learning settings, is emotional. Rose talks of Arthur and students like him in the educational underclass as emerging from despair into new life as a result of educators who care. He talks of the "majesty" of rebirth as students transform their "misery" into "possibility" (p. 159). Purpel (1989) says that religious language provides us with the essential dimension of education—meaning. According to Purpel, the purpose of education is to help students "see, hear, and experience the world more clearly, more completely, and with more understanding" (p. 27), and religious language gives us the tools to envision education as meaningful. In this sense Rose uses religious language to contend that the educational story of those students who are labeled underprepared, remedial, slow and developmental becomes meaningful when classrooms center on emotion, in addition to intellect.

And yet the intellectual and emotional story of the basic writing classroom is one we do not often tell. While scholarship clearly and impressively gives breadth and depth to our discussions of the teaching of writing, generally it provides less insight into the emotional and spiritual aspects of the work we do. A search of journals in the field shows a scarcity of articles about the emotional side of teaching, although scholars such as Rose (1989), Freire (1993; 1997; 1998), hooks (2003), Palmer (1998; 1998), Villanueva (1993), and O'Reilly (1993), to name a few, directly establish the link of emotion or spirit to the practice of teaching in the books they have authored. The insights

of these scholars can help us unlock answers to this research question, which is the primary focus of this dissertation: What is teachers' and scholars' understanding of a pedagogy of love, a concept articulated by bell hooks and further enhanced by Paulo Freire, Mike Rose, and the Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious order, which calls teachers to nurture an emotional connection with their students alongside best practice and which calls teachers to respond to student weakness with compassion?

Freire (1998) contends that our mission "is to be caring teachers" (p. 3), and in order to fulfill that mission, we must "dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific" (p. xviii). In other words, Freire embraces the educational story as a story centered in emotion by naming the central aspect of teaching as "love." He says, "It is not possible to be a teacher without loving one's students" (p. 15). Like Rose (1989), Freire presents the act of teaching as a vocation that calls teachers to understand the emotional capacity of their work. This ideal of teaching with love as an act of service (1998, p. 15) is seen vividly in Freire's dedication of his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), in which he writes: "To the oppressed, and to those who suffer with them and fight at their side." In this text, Freire gives readers the critical tools to reflect on, understand and teach the oppressed in our classrooms by encouraging and equipping students to learn and respond to the world in which they will live and work. The emphasis of Freire's pedagogy lies in overcoming oppression through upholding human dignity.

The educational conceptions of the Christian Brothers, formally called the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a religious order of men who have devoted their lives to overcoming societal injustices by serving students through education, also contend that

the vocation of teaching requires profound emotional resources in order to teach students well. Yet the Christian Brothers believe the emotional aspect of teaching must be grounded in Catholic spirituality. The Christian Brothers' conception of teaching, to love and serve those most marginalized, is founded in the works of mercy admonished by the Catholic Church: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to instruct the ignorant, to comfort the sorrowful, among others (*Catholic Source Book*, 1987). In this sense, the Christian Brothers present teaching as a spiritual, emotional and service-oriented enterprise.

The Christian Brothers further define human dignity as the controlling element of the classroom by using Catholic social teaching as its framework. Catholic social teaching refers to the belief that every human life is sacred and that all human beings, especially the poor, have equal opportunity to reach their potential (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986). In their 1986 pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All" that outlines social responsibility, the U.S. Catholic Bishops explain that the duty of Catholics is to measure society "by how it touches human life and whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person." Without an emphasis on teaching as an emotional as well as spiritual endeavor in which human dignity is embraced, the Christian Brothers suggest that education fails to change students (and teachers) into individuals who will live fuller and richer lives individually and collectively.

### *The Advancement and Discussion of Love*

In his text *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach*, Freire (1998) provides several qualities he believes are indispensable for teachers. He



suggests that humility, courage, tolerance and lovingness are virtues that help teachers dignify the educational process. Humility, Freire explains, involves “listening to all that come to us, regardless of their intellectual level” because it is a “human duty” that helps us identify “with democracy and not with elitism.” “Courage” is also a necessary quality because it helps us conquer the fears that limit and control us. “Tolerance” allows education to be progressive because it teaches us to live and work with those who are different. And “lovingness,” says Freire, gives our work meaning (pp. 39-42).

Of Freire’s (1998) four primary teaching qualities, feminist scholar bell hooks (2003) considers love to be the essential characteristic that best enhances the teaching and learning process because through love, the relationship between teacher and students thrives. hooks emphasizes that Freire’s pedagogy makes sense because it is centered in love, an emotion that will lead to change for students as well as teachers. This change occurs because love between teacher and students is derived through the feminine spirit that captures the qualities of nurturing and caring that are characteristic of the feminist approach (Noddings, 1984).

Like hooks (2003) and Noddings (1984), Catholic scholar Robert Barron (2002), in his text *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path*, also defines love from a feminist approach, but he puts forth the idea that love has a spiritual foundation. Feminist ideals of love in terms of relationships from a Catholic standpoint were first brought forth by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Catholic feminine mystic Julian of Norwich, who emphasized the feminine aspects of nurturing love. Through her *Showings*, Julian insisted on the motherhood qualities of God and contended that the relational ideal is centered on lovingness (Farina, 2002). Julian’s work brought forth the feminist concept

that all human interactions must be centered in love. This concept supports feminist pedagogy, which contends that the only way optimal learning can occur is if our classrooms become more loving. In other words, love presents the best opportunity for greater life and growth in the classroom because love is founded on the human yearning for relatedness (Noddings, 1984). Barron says that to love another means to will the good of another (p. 149); in this sense, teachers who nurture emotional connections desire to create classroom conditions that advance student growth. hooks (2003) more specifically identifies these classroom conditions as a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust in the classroom (p. 131). Through this feminist pedagogy of love, hooks reinforces the concept articulated by Freire that the emotional interaction between teacher and students in the classroom acts as the *unum necessarium*, what Barron (2002) defines as the one necessary reality “around which everything else clusters and in terms of which everything else becomes meaningful” (p. 34).

While Palmer, Rose, Freire, hooks and the Christian Brothers, among other scholars, advance the notion that love is the emotional element of teaching that is critical for student achievement, practitioners in the basic writing classroom generally avoid discussion of the issue. In my own observations and from educational conversations and experiences with colleagues at my own Catholic college and at other institutions who teach basic writing students, I have discovered that the emotional aspect of our work, including the relationships we hold with our students, was *least* addressed regarding the work done in basic writing classrooms. Perhaps one significant reason that we minimize talk of emotion and relationships as they pertain to our classrooms is because of the

limitations placed on our perceptions of the term “love.” We believe that loving students is inappropriate and thus speaking of love in relation to teaching is taboo (hooks 2003; Palmer, 1998). Perhaps issues of emotion rarely enter our classrooms and conversations because of the confusion and complexity of the word love. When we speak of love, we reserve the word for relationships of intimacy. For us love defines the deepest emotions of the human heart, and we equate it with passion and desire and adoration. Love is unbounded, relentless emotion that often results in both heartbreak and victory—and can be regarded as the antithesis of intellect because it can obscure and contort clear thinking. The Catholic Church defines this notion of love, which the church calls the love of concupiscence, as self-interested love in which we love another in order to fulfill our own needs and desires (Haddon, 1980).

When we speak of love, then, we keep it separate from our mission of teaching because it can bring danger to the interactions we have with students. Love, a term packed full of sentiment, can lure us into inappropriate teacher-student relationships and cause us to use faulty judgment. I can think of colleagues at several universities, including my own, who have possessed romantic feelings for students, and many times colleagues have acted on those feelings. For this reason alone, discussing love in the classroom setting is problematic and conflicted.

Another conflict arises in the classroom when a teacher’s love sends confusing messages to students. What happens when students misinterpret love from a teacher? Allowing emotions into our teaching makes us vulnerable because love invites intimacy between teacher and students, and students may take liberties with the teacher because of that intimacy. Ian, a colleague at a public university who began teaching the basic

writing course two years ago, said students at the outset had taken advantage of his friendly manner; they believed that because Ian had worked to establish a caring classroom environment, one in which they shared about each others' lives, he would be more lenient in his grading of their essays. When students' realized that Ian would hold them to high academic standards, they often became rude and belligerent. Julie's initial attempts to establish a caring classroom environment were as limited as Ian's. Julie, who has taught the basic writing course for the past decade, realized that in order to redirect students' overly relaxed attitude toward her because of her gender and nurturing personality, she needed to establish her authority. By wearing a blazer, slacks and big belt buckle to the classroom, or what she considered as more masculine dress, students took her, as well as her classroom instruction, more seriously. Students were able to accept her encouragement and care in a respectful way, but they could not separate their admiration of her, and her care for them, from the assessment of their ability. In both Ian's and Julie's cases, students felt offended when the grades they received on their course work were lower than they expected because the teacher "loved" them. Teachers may find that loving students can invite divergence into the classroom.

While establishing emotional relationships with students is part of the mission of private religious universities, the connection between religion and love may be troublesome to those who are non-religious or objectivist. The Christian Brothers mission, for instance, involves "giving a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it" (De la Salle education mission). The mission of the Franciscan Catholic religious order emphasizes the works of mercy and on-going spiritual conversion to students in high

school and college settings, among other Catholic church ministries (Franciscan Third Order). The mission of the Jesuits (Society of Jesus) seeks to provide an “integral, quality human education valid for all who appreciate its intrinsic value of concern for firm moral foundations, academic excellence and sincere respect for all that is good and true in others” (Loyola University Chicago). Given the fact that the Catholic Church has been embroiled in lawsuits involving priests who have sexually abused children, society’s most vulnerable population, the tie between religion and education of young people may be upsetting and bothersome. This horrific exploitation and maltreatment of human beings may turn many people away from any pedagogy involving a Catholic perspective of love.

Loving students potentially brings along so much discord that college administrators and teachers fear that course content may be weakened if emotion becomes part of the course pedagogy, according to hooks (2003) and Palmer (1998). Administrators and teachers also may believe that the need for skill development is so significant among this population of students who are considered the most at-risk of failure in our colleges that taking time to establish emotional connections in the classroom will take away time from academics (Soliday, 2003; Shaughnessy, 2003). Perhaps as an attempt to steer away from potential crisis, talk of love for our students is minimized, and primary attention in the basic writing classroom is given to curriculum development. According to Shaughnessy (2003), basic writing teachers often follow traditional pedagogy that centers on teaching mechanics and sentence structure so that students’ at-risk position is minimized in the academy. Adler-Kassner (2000), Bernstein (2004), Burnham (2001), and O’Connor (1998) suggest that many basic writing teachers

may follow an expressivist pedagogy, which gives the writer highest value in the writing process by encouraging a sense of writer presence in all types of writing assignments. Other basic writing teachers may follow critical pedagogy, which focuses on themes of social justice and commitment to education through citizenship (George, 2001). Still other basic writing teachers may follow pedagogical variations similar to curriculum taught to students in mainstream composition classes. Teachers believe that by following these methods, at-risk students are provided with writing experiences necessary for them to see themselves as writers with a voice that has worth and value.

But we teachers often have not reflected on the emotional aspect of our work, nor have we placed at the center of our basic writing classrooms the goal of establishing caring, collaborative classroom interactions which are necessary for successful student-teacher relationships that can lead to enhanced teaching and learning (Creswell, 1998). In his book *Reflective Teaching*, Henderson (1992) explains that institutions encourage teachers to love the act of teaching and expect teachers to know the subject matter and be able to teach it well, but institutions also expect teachers to respond to a variety of problems in the classroom, including student inattentiveness and ambivalence. Noddings (1984) contends that caring is always characterized by a move away from the self (p. 16). In other words, Noddings centers the notion of caring in the emotional realm and asks us to bring our understanding of the human longing to care and be cared for into the classroom. Ultimately, Noddings' concept of caring suggests that our primary obligation is to be caring in all relationships. This feminist approach challenges us to keep in mind the nurturing aspect of our work and to understand that the act of nurturing does not weaken or detract from the academic dimension of our classrooms.

Struggles and conflicts can arise at secular universities over discussions of a pedagogy of love and even over the term “love.” Substituting Noddings’ (1984) term “caring” may alleviate some of the difficulty and misinterpretations associated with the term “love,” which may allow teachers at objectivist universities to consider how the teaching and learning process can flourish when, in addition to devoting ourselves to the act of teaching and caring significantly about subject matter, we reflect on the meaningfulness of our relationships with students. But I suggest that the term “love” is radical and necessarily so because it calls us into a new way of thinking and acting. I suggest that the term “love” be understood not from romantic ideals, not from the love of concupiscence, not even from a fully nurturing standpoint but with a Catholic social justice lens that takes the most spiritual act, love, and actively applies it to those students most in need of academic development. The Catholic Church defines this type of love, the love of benevolence, as a selfless love of another person for that person’s own sake, for that person’s own good (Hardon, 1980).

### *Scholarly Influences on a Pedagogy of Love*

The emotional aspect of teaching from a Rosian, Freirian, hooksian perspective upholds the love of benevolence to show the primary need to embrace the human dignity of those marginalized on our campuses. This topic is all the more meaningful, and perhaps less convoluted, for me because I teach at a Catholic university operated by the Christian Brothers. The Christian Brothers most notably serve children, young people and the poor and marginalized by defending their rights, helping them to find meaning in their lives, and promoting their active participation in the world (Rodriguez, 2003). This

mission falls under the Christian Brothers' overarching responsibility to use education as a means of salvation.

I contend that the Christian Brothers' stance toward education, however, may overemphasize the spiritual aspect of the classroom in that it suggests that teachers, who are not Christian Brothers or members of any religious order, are responsible for influencing the spiritual growth of students, a task that the Christian Brothers believe is equally important, if not more so, than students' academic and emotional growth. In an attempt to clarify this notion of "salvation" of students' souls, Brother William Mann, president of a Christian Brothers university, explains that salvation means that "students must be saved *from* those things that imprison them and saved *for* things that awaken them" (emphasis his). Mann believes teachers are the means to achieving that salvation for students. Confusion arises when the Christian Brothers' mission of "saving students' souls" is not clearly defined and does not explain how teachers should achieve that goal. Challenges also arise when writing teachers do not believe they should teach to save students' souls—and most probably do not. Yet the Christian Brothers offer what Mann calls a "mystical" perspective of education in which teachers understand that the vocation of teaching requires an "interior journey" so that teachers can commit not to the worst in students, but to students' goodness.

I also contend that hooks' belief that loving relationships between teacher and students result in optimal teaching and learning may be too idealistic for a basic writing classroom setting in which students' social and intellectual needs are so demanding (Troyka, 1987; O'Reilly, 1993; Rose, 2003). hooks' work does not take into account the complexity of the basic writing classroom: basic writing students possess different



educational and emotional needs than their mainstream peers. In other words, while hooks' contention that nurturing must be a foundational quality of our teaching, hooks' work has not been applied to classrooms in which students are underprepared or are considered marginalized. Yet from a basic writing standpoint, hooks' feminist conceptions of love and nurturing might be even more valuable for those students with whom teachers find it more difficult to connect emotionally and intellectually because at its heart, hooks' pedagogy emphasizes the belief that optimal growth occurs through relationships. hooks' work forces us to consider the primary value of loving students who are difficult to love.

Freirian scholarship is most influential in that it specifically addresses the issue of marginalization of students and the overcoming of marginalization through concrete acts of love. Using an educational framework that emphasizes teaching with justice, Freire challenges teachers to help students overcome struggles and barriers in order to achieve and advance in school and ultimately in the society in which they will live and work. Friere places significant emphasis on human dignity and rights and uses the language of hope perhaps more than any other scholar; his educational pedagogy enhances the basic writing classroom because of its focus on actively moving students out of their oppression.

Rosian scholarship gives a human face to the basic writing classroom; Rose reveals through his experiences of teaching and learning the disadvantages underprepared students must overcome to succeed in education. He shares a conversation he held with his master teacher Mrs. Naumann that occurred while he was a student teacher in charge of underprepared students: "I asked Rosealie for some guidance. She simply said, 'Do

something nice with them. Their lives are pretty dreary’” (p. 197). Rose’s work is influential in that it provides an insider’s look into the human condition of struggling students, students who “possessed long and complex life histories, and they were trying to reclaim a place in the classroom they once lost or never really had” (1989, p. 146). Rose presents the educational story of the basic writing classroom as a sympathetic scholar and asks teachers to do the same. He describes successful teaching as that which connects students to writing, and through this connection, students become less isolated and more developed in cognitive ability. What Rose presents is a perspective of teaching that embraces the human effort to overcome adversity so that education no longer fails to serve the human spirit of those students marginalized on college campuses.

I believe that the best approach to teaching underprepared students on our campuses may lie in a combination of the emotional, spiritual and intellectual ideals brought forth by Rose, who argues for an element of empathy and care on the part of teachers for their students; Freire, who envisions the classroom as a place where teachers actively help students overcome their marginalization; hooks, who embraces the classroom as a place to build loving teacher-student relationships; and the Christian Brothers, who focus on education as a sacred act of service. Combined, these approaches unite the nurturing, spiritual and intellectual qualities of teaching in a way that upholds human dignity and promotes optimal student growth and success. While Rose, Freire, hooks and the Christian Brothers introduce and discuss several qualities, such as care, love, service, courage, humility and tolerance, that promote an intellectual, emotional and spiritual convergence in the classroom, I suggest that compassion, a quality Rose, Freire, hooks and the Christian Brothers do not mention directly in their work, is the overarching

characteristic that binds together these concepts and presents the clearest way to teach using a pedagogy of love because the quality of compassion calls us to be in unity with our basic writing students in their complex educational journeys. Purpel (1989) contends that compassion “acknowledges the social reality of connectedness, the political reality of human relationships, and the moral impulse to care and nurture” (p. 42). While a pedagogy of love used in this context may raise concern, especially at objectivist universities, because of religious undertones, I contend that studying a pedagogy of love through the lens of compassion may help teachers to understand more significantly their role in influencing change not only within our basic writing students, but also in their attitudes toward basic writing students. A Catholic perspective of a pedagogy of love concedes that compassion, with its emphasis on alleviating the hardship of another or even suffering with another (Hardon, 1980; Purpel, 1989), can establish thriving and meaningful relationships with students because it encourages collaboration and interdependence in the classroom (Purpel, 1989, p. 42), regardless of our own personal beliefs and stance on faith.

The purpose of this study is to consider the possibility of incorporating a pedagogy of love that emphasizes the quality of compassion into the basic writing classroom at a Catholic Christian Brothers university, whose educational conceptions center on holistic student development. The Christian Brothers religious order is focused on providing education that encourages students’ search for meaning and purpose in life. The primary way this is achieved is through teaching based on the qualities of compassion and service. The teaching and learning process upholds the nurturing of

emotional relationships between teachers and their students as primary to student development (Grass, 2007; Van Grieken, 1999; Koch, 1990).

A decade ago the Christian Brothers university where I teach implemented an educational support program for basic writers, called the PASS (Path to Academic SuccesS) program, to be taught by full-time English teachers. The program included basic skills courses in writing, reading, math and study skills, all of which were housed in three classrooms of 12 students each. I was one of the initial teachers who taught this basic writing course. The English department chairperson established the basic writing course curriculum, which centered on grammar and sentence instruction. Teachers were required to quiz students daily on grammar issues and to lecture weekly on sentence structure and paragraph writing. Most importantly, the course emphasized the building of strong teacher-student relationships that would precipitate learning. Teachers were encouraged to invite students to their homes for dinner or movie nights; order pizza for the class or bring in breakfast pastries; allow for home phone calls during weeknight and weekend hours. In this way the university believed the course would follow the Lasallian mission of “teaching minds and touching hearts.” Brother Pat, a long-time advocate of teaching as an emotional, spiritual and intellectual enterprise and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, convinced the university administration that courses must emphasize the emotional connection between teacher and students in addition to upholding an intellectual curriculum in order to follow Lasallian charism.

Yet despite these efforts toward relationship building, students’ progress in the course was weak. Based on end-of-semester student evaluations, students continued to hold lackluster attitudes toward not only writing, but also toward the PASS writing class

because students believed it did not prepare them for the academic writing they were facing in other courses. Despite teachers' efforts to establish a relationship with their students, that relationship did not help students overcome the loathing they felt toward instruction in grammar and basic sentence and paragraph structure. In his work *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose (1989) speaks to this challenge; he says that a developmental writing curriculum that emphasizes grammatical correctness "breeds a deep social and intellectual isolation from print; it fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, *keep* students from becoming fully, richly literate" (emphasis his) (p. 211). Not surprisingly, teacher-student interactions were weakened as a result of course curriculum.

Following the chairperson's retirement, the PASS basic writing course continued to follow a curriculum based on grammar skills and formal structure, and the building of teacher-student relationships continued to falter; fulltime teachers (both tenured and non-tenured) voiced their objections to teaching the course at an annual meeting with the PASS director, citing the level of student underpreparedness as too daunting and end-of-semester course evaluations as too low. I was one of those teachers. While I rebelliously had chosen to follow an expressivist pedagogy that focused on students' social, psychological, spiritual and intellectual development (Burnham, 2001) through incorporating reflective writing into every assignment, I found the lower maturity level of basic writing students, in addition to their underpreparedness, exhausting. Teaching the course required more physical, intellectual and emotional energy than I was willing to give, and I felt resentful and frustrated toward the class in general and toward students in particular. Stanley (2003) talks about the "disdainful embrace" that teachers give basic

writing students and claims that teachers and institutions treat basic writers with the same disdain as the lowest classes of society. I fit into this category. The scorn by fulltime faculty members resulted in relegating instruction of the PASS course as well as the traditional writing skills course to adjunct faculty members, who, at that point, were the only people willing to teach the courses. The Christian Brothers' educational motto of "teaching minds and touching hearts" had faltered in the basic writing classroom; community building activities did not equate consistently to higher academic achievement. Even though teachers and students liked each other, that mutual regard did not seem to contribute to enhanced learning. There existed a disjunction between the emotional and intellectual aspects of the teaching and learning process. It seemed that teaching traditionalist methods and content stymied teachers' acts of nurturing and care.

This study seeks to understand how the Christian Brothers' mission of "teaching hearts," or nurturing teacher-student relationships, best can be applied in the basic writing classroom in order to improve student learning. A second purpose of this study is to add to the current body of knowledge centering on the teaching of basic writing students in the college setting. Current scholarship on basic writing pedagogy reveals rich and varied curricula. Current scholarship in general, however, provides less insight into how the emotional and spiritual aspects of our work in the basic writing classroom can be integrated successfully with the intellectual aspect of the teaching and learning process.

### *Outline of Chapters*

In chapters one, I present an overview of how basic writing students are perceived by the academy, and I consider the idea that an emphasis on the emotional and spiritual

aspects of teaching in addition to an intellectual emphasis may be valuable in basic writing classrooms. It is generally held that basic writing students are not only underprepared as they enter the higher education setting, but they also may be ambivalent and apathetic about learning, perhaps because they do not want to risk the changes in their lives that learning may bring (Troyka, 1987; Rodriguez, 1982) or because students have learned to doubt their knowledge and abilities (Rose, 1989). Other basic writing students are ambitious, driven and highly motivated to earn a degree and reach their career goals. Understanding students' ambivalence as well as students' need for belonging and acceptance may help students in our basic writing courses further unlock their academic potential. If we reflect on the emotional and spiritual connections we have with our students, we may be able to discover ways these connections can contribute to student learning. It must be reiterated that at the university where I teach, there was no significant relationship between improved writing skills and positive teacher-student relationships in the basic writing classroom. The university overemphasized nurturing teacher-student relationships at the expense of developing curriculum that centered on best practice. The result was teachers who played a parenting role and students who were not challenged in significant ways to overcome their writing obstacles. In other words, teacher-student connections failed to enhance students' intellectual capabilities because the curriculum itself was weak. The university attempted to surmount curriculum weaknesses by nurturing students through efforts to get to know them personally in the hopes that students' skills would improve because students liked the teacher.

To examine a pedagogy of love that emphasizes the quality of compassion as the nucleus of this study, I address my own journey in becoming aware of the importance of providing an emotional dimension in the classroom. The second chapter explores my introduction to a concept of teaching that integrates emotions, spirit and academics in the classroom, encouraged by the example of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Christian Brothers) at the university where I teach. This chapter explains how the insight I gained from the model of teaching enacted by the Christian Brothers helped me to broaden my understanding of the texts *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (hooks, 2003), *The Peaceable Classroom* (O'Reilley, 1993), and *Letters of the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age* (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998), among others. Through this research I began to understand the complexity of the emotional and spiritual aspects of teaching within the basic writing course, which prompted me to reflect on my own teaching experiences and attitudes.

Insight into scholarship of current practices in the basic writing classroom clarifies the complexity of our work with students. Chapter three focuses on a broad range of practices by teachers and scholars in the field of basic writing and further shapes the discussion of how and what we teach. This chapter also investigates how an ethic of care has been instrumental in forming current basic writing pedagogy. Milton Mayeroff, cited by Noddings (1984), says “to care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself” (p. 9). Noddings emphatically believes that the goal of education must be “the maintenance and enhancement of caring” (p. 17).

Conversations with teachers in the field of basic writing contributes to the insights we can gain regarding the emotional and spiritual aspects of teaching because talking



with teachers can help us understand how a pedagogy of love might contribute to the teaching and learning process in the basic writing classroom. Chapter four provides the insights I gained from speaking with practitioners, which has expanded my notion of teaching to include a sense of active compassion. This chapter also explores the relationship between scholarship and classroom practices.

Chapter five discusses the complexity of teaching basic writing students and how a pedagogy of love, with an emphasis on compassion, might augment current practices in the basic writing classroom. Through examination of three main texts (hooks, 2003; O'Reilley, 1993; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998) among others; the Christian Brothers' conceptions of education; a review of the current teaching practices in the basic writing classroom; and conversations with teachers of basic writing, I will discuss in this chapter the insights I have gained about students and the basic writing course in general.

### *Teaching and Learning in the Basic Writing Classroom*

This study is not meant to suggest that emotional connection with students is primarily absent from classrooms. Most people can easily recall a favorite teacher whose imprint on their lives remained long after the class faded. It only takes a moment for me to remember my own experiences as a student and know that I not only chose a career in teaching, but also advanced in that career, because of the connection I felt with many of my teachers whose knowledge, care and insight were woven into the fabric of my life. It is easy for me to recall Mrs. Bakke, my third grade teacher, whose teaching style nurtured my need for belonging, or Professor Murray, who challenged me to reflect on a world greater than my own small self.

Many teachers like Mrs. Bakke and Dr. Murray are in the profession because they are passionate about teaching students and about their field of interest—and as a result became effective mentors to students. There is no lack of signs of a successful teacher: high marks from student evaluations, phone calls and emails and letters from graduates who keep in touch as a tribute to a person who changed their lives, awards bestowed by colleagues. One professor refers to the chemistry that comes from interactions in the classroom as “magic” (McDaniel, 2007). He and so many teachers like him are deeply committed to education as a worthy and meaningful endeavor, and there is no shortage of anecdotes of teachers at both public and private universities who have significantly touched the lives of their students.

Yet according to hooks (2003), there are teachers in our classrooms who cannot connect to students so they “focus more on the task of sharing information, facts, data, their interpretations, with no regard for listening to and hearing from students” (p. 129). This “objectivism,” says hooks, creates a gap between academics and emotion and prevents teachers from nurturing a personal relationship with students. While “objectivist” teachers can easily love the process of teaching and the product they are teaching, they cannot love the students themselves, hooks contends. While loving students may not be a requirement for good teaching, hooks believes it enhances student learning and can lead to optimal academic and personal growth. As hooks writes, “No one gives testimony about how much they learned from professors who were disassociated, unable to connect, and self-obsessed” (p. 129). This distant-teacher style of placing information and content over and above relationships is accepted in the academy, hooks suggests. Safety for some members of the academy comes in abstract,

detached form, far removed from the personal and emotional, which relationships demand (Palmer, 1998; hooks, 2003). Perhaps because strong boundaries between teacher and students are accepted, the act of nurturing an emotional connection with them may be difficult to generate in our classes.

In his text, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Palmer (1998) says teachers are suffocated by a fear that tells us our teaching is deceptive because our techniques are not enough to meet the needs or the interests of our students. He says we are afraid to integrate daily the personal and professional aspects of our lives in our classrooms because doing so opens us to judgment and indifference from our students, and as a result we continue to maintain boundaries that allow us to meet academic requirements but prevent us from developing deeper relationships with our students that encourage optimal academic and psychological growth.

In an effort to minimize this multi-layered fear (fear of failing as well as fear of the emotional giving that teaching requires), teachers create a mask of academic status or position that we present to students the moment they step into our classes. The risk in developing relationships with students is minimized and held at bay behind a wall of performance, yet we weaken the power of the educational process and “destroy our ability to teach and learn” (Palmer, 1998, p. 39) because our teaching is based on fear.

Another obstacle to our willingness to nurture the emotional and spiritual aspects of our teaching is our need to be liked by our students, a need so strong that it becomes primary to our teaching. Palmer (1998) says this need to be popular with students is “pathological” (p. 49); it plays into our ego and prevents us from teaching students well because we attempt to serve our own needs over and above students’ needs. It becomes

more important to gain students' approval than to guide students in their attempts to reach their potential.

The teaching and learning process is also impacted by the fear students feel toward teachers. They sense that learning to write is personal and requires a vulnerability that demands they be open to judgment (Rodriguez, 1982). As a Spanish-speaking student being educated in English in public schools, Rodriguez (1982) explains in his novel, *Hunger of Memory*, the complication of using words that reveal his private thoughts. He talks of his reticence about giving expression to his personal memories because they leave him vulnerable to be explored by another. Students in the basic writing classroom share this reticence about writing because their attempts at expression often result in failure so that they become hardened to writing instruction. Their failure to meet writing standards has caused colleges and universities to label these students as "underprepared," "inadequate," "substandard" and "different" (Bernstein, 2004; Rose, 1989; 2003; Soliday, 2003; Villanueva, 1993). These labels, along with a separate, lower-level writing course (or two) they are required to take, distinguish basic writing students from the majority in negative ways, including the way basic writing students perceive themselves, a perception shaped by years of school experiences that marked them as limited and grounded them as academically poor.

hooks (2003) believes these dehumanizing labels result in teaching students "learned helplessness," in which students doubt their abilities as well as their capacity to obtain knowledge, to think academically, and to act similar to the dominant academic culture (p. 130). This learned helplessness places students in a marginalized position in the classroom while teachers are ensured their dominant place. Most problematic about

learned helplessness is that students see it as a survival mechanism necessary to protect themselves from an academic world from which they feel disempowered and alien (Villanueva, 1993; Rose, 1989).

In my own basic writing classroom, where students often dread writing academic essays, hooks' (2003) insights about learned helplessness ring true; they point to an educational system (at least in the states the students in my class live) in which learned helplessness has been established and reinforced to the point that the process of academic writing is associated with struggle. This negative association with writing is clear from my conversations with the majority of students in the basic writing classroom who admit to feeling stress over the act of writing because they lack confidence in their ability to produce writing that meets the teacher's course standards. Rose (1989) explains that students' negative association with writing is shaped by years of academic feedback that was meant to strengthen student writing abilities, but in effect weakened student confidence and resolve. Students' fear of failure causes them to become passive in situations that require complex thought and action and may even subconsciously destroy their success in writing (Rose, 1989; 2003).

The skirmish over basic writing skills that began as early as the 1940s in colleges and universities nationwide suggests that students' lack of confidence in their abilities as well as their fear of failure are consequences of on-going controversy over remedial programs. In an article that highlights State University of Iowa's clash in 1944 over the induction of basic skills programs for students who could not demonstrate competence in writing, Crowley (1998) showcases faculty members' strong negative attitudes toward remedial courses and the belief that basic skills was not a college level course. Despite

the university's attempt to focus on student needs in order to enhance their intellectual and emotional growth, the conflict over the place of basic writing within liberal arts education raged on and continues over sixty years later at most colleges and universities. According to Byrd (2004), advocates of the basic writing program believe the course is necessary to serve students who have not progressed enough in the secondary educational system as well as students who are returning to education after a long absence. Critics of the basic writing program believe the course is a refunding of secondary education, and colleges should not be required to teach (and pay for) skills instruction students should have mastered in high school. The on-going quarrel has produced what Stanley (2003) calls the "disdainful embrace" of teachers (and institutions) for basic writing students.

Olson's (2006) work supports the argument that negative attitudes toward the basic writing course can destroy student success in writing. Olson explains that when we consider basic writing as a distinct break from our academies rather than a pattern within our academies, we run the risk of encouraging student failure because we see remedial writing courses and basic writers as holding temporary positions, with their presence on campuses as necessarily short-term. We believe they must change to meet the standards and become mainstream students or leave. Perhaps because we hold basic writing students to a standard that requires them to overcome their lack of confidence in their writing ability and to improve their writing skills in one semester (or two), we teach students to fear teachers and expend their efforts in trying to please them in order to pass the required course.

In her work that examines basic writers, Troyka (1987) notes that the result of a fear-based classroom is the development of passive and disengaged students who are

resistant to active learning and who have little confidence that college writing classes promise students anything other than the same out-of-reach standards they have grown accustomed to during their previous years of education. Troyka explains that students' shame about their academic limitations breeds their attitude of indifference and ambivalence toward the act of writing and toward the student-teacher relationship.

This indifference and ambivalence become defense mechanisms in case students fail to meet the course's academic standards. O'Reilley (1993), in her text, *The Peaceable Classroom*, suggests the need for teachers to understand this complex threshold facing at-risk students so that it becomes easier for teachers to comprehend how the fears and frustrations of writing can work to limit and suppress students' academic growth. O'Reilley explains that students may hide behind the protective shield of what they claim are useless writing assignments, or they may blame teachers in their attempts to overcome these feelings of fear and inadequacy.

Without an understanding of the complexity of the writing process for many at-risk students, Palmer (1998) says teachers fuel students' insecurity and limit their academic achievement by criticizing the writing they produce. In his work, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Palmer tells stories of many teachers he has met through his speaking engagements who list a litany of complaints about student attitudes and ability, most notably that students do not engage well with ideas; have short attention spans; dismiss the world of ideas; and have narrow views of what is relevant and useful. In other words, Palmer says many teachers generally consider their students "brain-dead" (p. 41). Bernstein (2004) and Traub (1993) suggest that this disjuncture with teachers may feed negative emotions in at-risk

students, who get the sense that teachers do not understand or cannot identify clearly their writing potential. Students place teachers in the role of judge and jury and become apprehensive of teachers because they regard them as representatives of a society in which assimilation eludes them (Traub).

There are also obstacles that prevent teachers from connecting emotionally with their students, the strongest of which O'Reilley (1993) names as the unwillingness of teachers to be honest with their students. O'Reilley says teachers put up boundaries because without them teachers open themselves, and the field they are passionate about, to criticism by students who may fall asleep in class, continuously watch the clock, study for another class or even send text-messages rather than focus on the topic of writing. This feeling of being rejected by students causes teachers to build walls around themselves to the point that teaching becomes a performance. Perhaps because of our fear of rejection by our students, we become insular to the point where we distance ourselves from our students in an effort to isolate ourselves. What results is a "self-protective split of personhood from practice" (Palmer, 1998, p. 17), or what hooks (2003) would call an overemphasis on objectivity in order to avoid the emotional, human aspects of the classroom.

Most at-risk students realize there are high stakes associated with the basic writing course: they have a greater chance at failing the course than becoming successful at academic writing. If they fail to "get" the instruction in the course, students know they will continue to occupy a position at the margins of the academy (Bernstein, 2004; Ross, 1996; Henning, 1991), and the cycle of inadequacy, shame and fear continues. Ideally basic writing teachers use writing to help students overcome their unfamiliarity with



using standard language, to identify their own unique qualities, and to affirm diversity (Bernstein, 2004; Graff, 1995; Faigley, 1992), but at-risk students may instead view teachers as people who hold power to cause them harm and anxiety. hooks (2003) suggests the primary way this fear can be overcome is through following a pedagogy of love, which combines care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust, in the basic writing classroom.

Yet enhancing the emotional aspect of our teaching in order to achieve higher learning outcomes through following a pedagogy of love may be a complicated endeavor. Shaughnessy (2003) believes nurturing teacher-student relationships in order to improve learning is made more difficult by basic writing students who differ from mainstream students in that they possess a much higher level of uncertainty of their academic potential. Positive, nurturing interactions between one teacher and 20-some students during the duration of a semester may not result in students developing enough confidence that they can overcome their writing limitations. Additional complications arise when teachers are ignorant of the deep uncertainties students face over their writing limitations. Yet Rose (2003) suggests that if we adopt educational practices that promote a stronger academy by focusing on the skills students lack or on their at-risk position rather than adopt educational practices that enhance students' intellectual and personal growth, we minimize opportunities for their academic success. In other words, Rose believes student growth is realized as a result of the integration of education and emotion.

As basic writing teachers desiring to educate students in meaningful ways, especially those the academic community has recognized as most at-risk, it is necessary that we question if the ways in which we teach students in our basic writing classrooms

provide clear opportunities for students' academic and personal development.

Incorporating a pedagogy that emphasizes relationships between teachers and students; a commitment to knowledge of students and of the basic writing field; responsibility to the needs of student writers; and mutual care, respect and trust might provide students with greater opportunities for growth and achievement.

## CHAPTER 2

### MY EXPERIENCES TEACHING BASIC WRITING STUDENTS

In this chapter, I explore through narrative writing my own experiences of teaching student writers, as well as my responses to scholars and teachers in the field, to showcase not only my authentic struggles with teaching but to underscore my process of discovery and learning. I honor specific teachers' stories and ground them in my own lived experiences in order to see the basic writing classroom anew. I acknowledge my weaknesses and fears as a teacher and as a human being through this chapter to gain a clearer understanding of the vocation of teaching, which becomes crucial to my understanding of basic writing students and my vision of a pedagogy of love.

#### *Teaching Experiences at a Public College*

As a fresh-faced 27-year-old adjunct instructor at a Midwestern community college armed with three years of journalism experience, a Masters of Arts degree and two years of teaching high school English, I wore an ego that was as thin as my shirt sleeve. Between that ego and positive student evaluations, I developed a false identity that told me I was a capable teacher, that my students liked me, and that I had adequate professional knowledge. This false sense of my capabilities in the classroom, lack of scholarship, and deficient insight into my own identity prevented me from getting past the need for my students to like me; it never occurred to me to wonder if I enjoyed or was enriched by my students and the relationship I shared with them.

Perhaps as a result of my focus on my popularity with my students, I rarely questioned the quality of my work of teaching writing. I agreed with composition

scholars (Macrorie, 1968; Elbow, 1973; Graves, 1998; Burnham, 2001) who suggest that course curriculum must give students opportunities for writing, such as narrative writing, journaling and reflective writing, which allow for self-discovery. Through these methods, I knew that students could come to own their work and become interested in, even passionate about, writing (Macrorie, 1968; Elbow, 1973; O'Reilley, 1993). I believed that the act of writing could connect them to themselves as well as to another: the reader.

Even though I witnessed my composition students change and evolve through the writing process, I maintained an emotional distance from them. While I could respond to their writing as students, I could not respond to students as unique individuals. I remember one student, Brad, who wrote about an imaginary meeting with his hero, the legendary musician Stevie Ray Vaughan. He talked about their chance encounter at a bar and the loneliness of life that could not seem to be drowned by a bottle. He wrote of Vaughan's feelings of invisibility in a crowded room of people, of the feeling of fear being stronger than the feeling of success.

Through his writing, I understood the ache in Brad's soul; I recognized his leap in self-awareness. And yet I could not accept his words in their authenticity; I could not move him beyond that initial moment of revelation of himself through his writing. I could not see him as an invisible person in a crowded room; I could not recognize the loneliness of his life because I did not see him as a human being. I saw him as an essay that needed a grade. I could not seem to move from being a distant teacher with a friendly smile to being an encouraging, caring and loving one.

A large part of the reason for the distance I placed between my students and me was my underlying lack of commitment to my students. In addition to being an adjunct teacher, I was a mother of three very young children and partner to a man who was building his career. I saw my teaching as a job that held less priority than my familial responsibilities, and because of this I placed minimal time toward learning to understand my students or gaining knowledge in the field of composition.

As I reflected on my work as a teacher of writing, I saw how my teaching did not lead to optimal learning—the proof that I could not connect to students beyond the sharing of information, facts and interpretations. I did not respond to or connect with Brad’s essay as an interested and caring reader; I responded to it as a teacher whose primary focus was determining a fair grade for the assignment. In other words, I did not grant Brad the respect he deserved as a student, as a human being, in my class; I did not recognize that the act of writing could hold profound meaning to students like Brad by helping them to explain and clarify some of their deepest held emotions.

Brad was not the only student I failed; I failed Dale even more profoundly. Dale wrote his first essay about his father and how as a young child he smelled alcohol on his father’s breath when his father returned home from his work as a janitor. He told of the crucifix Sister Helen, his teacher, had given him at his Catholic elementary school and how his father had come into his room in a drunken stupor one night and broke the crucifix in half. Soon afterward his father left their home, and Dale never saw him again. While I empathized with Dale, I never took the time to genuinely look at Dale as a human being who could use the writing process to understand his emotions; I saw him instead as an “essay” that needed teacher-ly responses. While I knew that writing could challenge

my students to get in touch with the complex layers of their identity, I did not allow writing to challenge me as a teacher and as a human being to encourage my students as well as myself on our journey to self-awareness and how writing was an integral part of that. After each assignment ended, the insight ended as well.

I falsely believed I had embraced expressivist pedagogy in teaching writing, yet in reality that pedagogy only extended to the type of essays I assigned to students. While the assignments focused on intimate, reflective writing as a method to encourage students to develop an interest in writing as a means to stake their place in the world, I was grading student essays on assignment rules and formatting. As a young teacher, I did not know how the intimacy and reflection I read on the pages of student writing could be reflected in the writing classroom. I avoided the act of reflection and examination that I asked of my students and instead paid attention to more superficial writing concerns in the grading process such as punctuation marks, spelling errors and sentence structure. In the process I took away the opportunity to nurture emotional interactions with my students, which could have significantly enhanced their learning and my teaching experience. In my naïveté, I believed that getting my students to like me, even if it meant sacrificing the advancement of meaningful work, could occur most successfully if they saw me as “nice” –not someone who would question them and challenge them to dig deeper inside themselves.

What I did not know then was that a “nice teacher” did not equal a “good teacher”—and this fallacy prevented me from taking the time and effort to develop knowledge about my students and about the composition field. Yet my private world did not hold enough space to gain the sort of knowledge required of good teaching. Outside

of those twelve hours each week I devoted to teaching two classes, I focused on raising children, often at the expense of the meaningful work of teaching. My role as teacher was supplemental to my roles as wife and mother. In this full life, I could not see that my teaching performance could, or should, improve.

Perhaps because of my inability to devote more time and effort to my teaching, I felt a deep sense of inadequacy as a teacher. To overcome these feelings, I made remarkable efforts to be friendly to my students. I stood at the classroom door before each class period to greet my students; I cracked jokes; I was an easy grader. I thought somehow that students' affection toward me signaled that my teaching was acceptable, even good; therefore I was acceptable, even good. This false perception was fueled by student evaluations that told me I was valued by them. I "learned" that my primary task in the classroom was to develop a relatively superficial relationship with my students that made us both feel good. But it was not a relationship that challenged my students' thoughts and perceptions or my own; it did not call us to reveal our inner selves to each other, the part of us where genuine relationship develops. My attempts to overcome my fear of inadequacy became my primary motivation in the classroom, with the actual teaching and learning process coming in a distant second place. What I did not understand then was how my inability to commit to my students, my lack of knowledge, and my limited responsibility to my teaching led to my incapacity to establish meaningful teacher-student interactions in the classroom and significantly diminished the impact of my teaching.

Yet I believed I was an effective teacher in part because I refused to teach grammar drills to students who had failed their grammar lessons miserably in elementary

and secondary school and as a result hated the process of writing. I believed that ultimately, to teach writing is to teach thinking, which skill sets do not teach; I agreed with Murray's (1968) comment that "one teacher may concentrate grimly on grammar, . . . others make their cause the active verb or the subordinate clause or simply the lowly comma. This is not a [writing] program; it is a series of individual skirmishes in a losing war" (p. 215). Yet while I did not focus on grammar exercises, I did incorporate the skill sets of traditional academic writing into my curriculum: students learned to organize their thoughts around a central idea, to support those thoughts with logic, and to express those thoughts clearly and concisely.

While I believed mastering skill sets should not be the only goal of a writing course, I was upholding a model that indeed focused solely on skill sets—including the skill of writing a thesis statement and the skill of higher level vocabulary. I focused on the process of writing as an act external to students rather than the voice, the representative, of the students themselves. I saw my writing class as a group of essays rather than a group of human beings engaged in critical thinking and scholarly endeavor.

During those early years of teaching I did not allow myself occasions to reflect on my work, on my capabilities as a teacher, or on my need to be accepted by my students. Much of that lack of reflection came from the fact that I felt guilty over taking any time away from my family. I had lost my father at a very young age and had grown up in a single parent household where the pain of loss and struggle was palpable. In my desire for my children to have the advantages of life, I devoted my energies to parenting and partnership but in the process limited my growth as a teacher.



### *Teaching Experiences at a Catholic University*

The real stirrings of change in my teaching began within me more than 10 years ago when I moved with my family from the prairie lands of North Dakota to the bluff country of Minnesota in a town that housed the campus of a small Midwestern Catholic university run by the Christian Brothers religious order. Based on my previous college teaching experience at the public university where I taught students like Brad and Dale, I was hired to teach freshman composition and basic writing courses part-time at the Catholic university. I remember savoring my good job fortune as I meandered across the college grounds. Then my eye caught a small group of students talking intimately with two men who seemed to float across campus wearing dramatic white collars and long black dress-like robes, and I was intimidated. (I later learned that many Christian Brothers typically dress in black shirts and slacks with a more modest white collar, similar to the dress code of priests.) As a person educated by public schools and a teacher at public institutions, I had never met a Christian Brother before, and I had no formal understanding of how to be their colleague. The idea of working alongside members of a religious order seemed intimidating because I held them in such high esteem. What would this religious institution require of me that my previous work at public institutions did not? Was I up for the task?

These questions were soon answered by students in one of the writing courses I was teaching that fall semester. They voiced their distain over my teaching methods and choices of material: “Nobody else is reading a novel by Maya Angelou in their writing class,” they notified me. “Nobody else has to write about their families.” Despite their initial reticence about the assignment, they eventually wrote poignantly of their family

relationships. One student wrote of her stepfather and step-siblings and the awkwardness of learning to live in a blended household where she often rebelled in order to be noticed. Yet despite their successes in writing, those students in the Catholic university classroom demanded more of me than publicly-educated students like Brad and Dale did; they insisted that I care about their writing as an extension of themselves. They were attending this college, they often reminded me, because of the special “student-teacher bond” of which the school boasted.

After enduring a semester of teaching at a Catholic university, I felt lost; gone were students who felt like members of my own family. Suburban rich kids from Chicago and Minneapolis with high demands had replaced students from farms and small towns who believed teachers were their friends. I had to learn new techniques to reach students in the classroom—which required more effort and intentionality.

And so I began to become more deliberate in studying the student-teacher relationship among the Christian Brothers as well as the Lasallian charism upon which the university was organized. The Christian Brothers order was founded by John Baptist de La Salle, a Catholic priest and cathedral canon of the diocese of Rheims, France, during the 17th century. La Salle’s purpose in venturing into education was twofold: he wanted to teach boys of underprivileged urban families, the poorest of the poor, so they would earn an education that would enable them to break free from hunger and the cycle of poverty, and he wanted to prepare men to be qualified and effective teachers. De La Salle’s desire was that all students had equal access to quality education, despite their financial standing (Blain, 2000; Van Grieken, 1999; Koch, 1990; Grass, 2007).

I was moved by de La Salle's efforts to break down class barriers through education, and by participating in faculty seminars and retreats I learned that the Christian Brothers' primary focus of learning was holistic student development, including students' spiritual and philosophical search for meaning and purpose in life. I began to understand that the Christian Brothers' philosophy of education placed teaching theory as secondary to building meaningful relationships with students in the context of teaching and learning so that students would become, at the most, more faithful Catholics and, at the least, more effective citizens. In essence care of, respect for and commitment to students, love for them, was the primary component of the classroom. This philosophy held true for the writing classroom as well; among the English teachers at the university where I teach, all held advanced educational degrees in Literature. Perhaps because department members were not versed in composition theory, formal and informal discussions of composition theory, especially as it regarded developmental writing, were seldom held, yet conversations among all faculty on how to better apply Lasallian philosophy to teaching practices were highly valued. At that time I readily accepted this exclusion of pedagogical principles because I had no formal training as a Compositionist.

Lasallian philosophy thus became significant to my development as a teacher, more significant at that point in my life than the discipline of Composition, perhaps, because it touched upon the idea that the act of teaching was based on compassion and service. These foundational teaching characteristics made sense to me; I was personally drawn to qualities of compassion and service because they seemed natural to my own warm and nurturing personality, and they paralleled my own spiritual values. While I had not dedicated much time to attaining new knowledge of the field of Composition,

that fact did not appear to matter; essential to the university was nurturing strong bonds with students, and it was a safe assumption that teachers had a strong understanding of their fields.

There was perhaps no place this emphasis on bonding was more evident than in the example of Brother Stan, a curmudgeonly English professor with a thick, gray toupee and a penchant for cigarettes. I watched how at the end of every class period Brother Stan, in his traditional black robe, stood at attention at the top of the second story staircase to greet students. He knew them all by name; he knew their friends, their families, the police citations they received after a weekend of partying, the girlfriends and boyfriends they had left behind on their trip to the small college in the middle of the bluffs. In his basic writing classroom he was a stickler about teaching grammar rules, but that came second to the relationships he built with students that focused on their human needs for acceptance, belonging and self-awareness. Initially I saw Brother Stan's warm relationship with students as too close. I felt uncomfortable with the open friendship they shared because that type of unconditional caring left me feeling embarrassed by its level of intimacy.

I saw that this unique challenge of the intentionality of teaching students, and the level of intimacy it required, would demand more from me emotionally than any other teaching position I had held. Being part of an institution that holds students as central to the institution's mission *and* vocation is challenging because it involves being ultimately concerned with students' human development—their sense of self and purpose in life (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). Perhaps more than that, it involves love. Teachers who love in this Lasallian way “use the gifts of heart and mind to bring others

to profound awareness that they are loved” (Robeson, 2007, p. 25). These efforts to love students came out of a sense of devotion to helping students develop into good citizens.

These efforts in the writing classroom also included teaching traditional concepts—grammar rules, strict organizational structure, and clear development of ideas. And while I fully disagreed with teaching traditional curriculum in the writing classroom and instead embraced more expressivist concepts, I was given no voice at department meetings because I was a teacher with no rank or status. Tenured track English professors shaped the writing courses, and they believed that courses should include the more traditionalist methods that they had learned. The frustration I felt, and continue to feel, over the department’s unwillingness to consider more effective Composition theories created a barrier between my colleagues and me because I could not adopt curriculum that I believed was weak, and they would not consider theories different from their own. The common goal for all of us was the Lasallian mission to love our students in profound ways. Our loving devotion to students not only made us unique; it also allowed us to underemphasize the importance of Composition scholarship.

As I further reflected on this Lasallian conception of education that balanced between religious calling and traditional teaching methods, it seemed that this standard of education would be virtually impossible for me to attain because at its core—its dedication to serving and nurturing students—was elusive to me. I was being asked to serve and nurture students as I served and nurtured my own children, and I had built a strict boundary between myself and my students that allowed me to interact with them as a teacher but not as a confidant or friend.

Yet I was intrigued by the Christian Brothers' mission that showcased education as a relational endeavor and was drawn to this type of teaching enterprise that included 2,700 faculty members at 65 Christian Brothers universities in 83 nations, including seven universities in the United States, all of which were guided by the belief that holistic education results in human flourishing (Lefevere, 2006; Smith, 2006). I wanted to learn how to become a colleague. My first step in learning to embrace the Lasallian educational conceptions was to understand that central to the Christian Brothers mission is the awareness of the individual student as a person with dignity, which translates into having respect for life and working for human rights (Koch, 1990; Smith, 2006). Yet I began to see in my teaching of developmental writing students that fulfilling this mission would not come easily, especially when students seem apathetic and indifferent to learning academic writing strategies. The Composition field contends that student indifference is typical; Flynn (2002) says it is normal to meet student apathy or resistance in the classroom, and the challenge to writing teachers is to make productive use of that resistance (p. 135). Yet attempting to build caring relationships with individuals who appeared not to care was difficult for me because teacher-student interactions were centered on pedagogy that upheld traditional grammar instruction, pedagogy that I did not embrace even though most of my colleagues did. I could not uphold the Lasallian charism on one hand and traditionalist curriculum on the other hand and intertwine them. For me, they were at odds, and I brought that conundrum with me to my classroom.

### *Complexity of Applying Christian Brothers' Philosophy to Practice*

Evan was an apathetic student in my basic writing class. He sauntered into room 13, skateboard under one arm and book bag in the other, with the attitude that he did not belong in the “remedial” writing course and because of a major gaffe made in the registrar’s office, he was stuck in the class against his will. Nothing was more humiliating than the snide remarks Evan muttered under his breath yet loud enough for me to hear. After I returned the first graded essay to students, a tantrum erupted in the classroom like a small volcano when Evan saw my notation on his two-page essay that he failed to use paragraphs to mark changes in ideas. “But you never told me I had to use paragraphs!” he yelled, frustrated over his low grade.

Difficult moments like these made me both fear and despise teaching lower level writing courses, and my instinct was to emotionally withdraw from all students in the class, not just the troubled few. Even though Flynn’s (2002) challenge to me was to make productive use of Evan’s resistance, I had yet to discover a way to overcome my own resistance to students like Evan who deeply troubled me and to a curriculum I found unsatisfactory. The Christian Brothers believe the most effective way for teachers to overcome their resistance to and connect with apathetic, even hostile students is to go beyond typical classroom procedures that center on teaching academics in order to establish a welcoming and inclusive family atmosphere which allows teachers to recognize more fully the scope of the struggle for human dignity for those students who are most vulnerable on our campuses (Meister, 1992; Poutet, 1997). Palmer (1999) appropriately defines this inclusiveness as spirituality, “the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our own

egos—with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive” (p. 6). So, ultimately, teaching basic writers requires looking behind students’ mask of ambivalence, indifference, even hostility and connecting to the vulnerability and fear hidden beneath the surface.

In other words, nurturing emotional and spiritual connections with students is the solution to student apathy in developmental writing classrooms, according to the Christian Brothers. This solution upholds emotional and spiritual connections with students as primary to the teaching and learning process, and current research of the field is given secondary status. Yet without broader knowledge of the field of composition or knowledge of students’ academic needs, hooks (2003) suggests love cannot be fully realized in the classroom.

The struggles I encountered in the developmental writing classroom were based upon this imbalance of knowledge and care. I admired that spiritual ideal of teaching that resulted in students’ personal and academic flourishing, yet it continued to elude me because I had learned to consider my students’ emotional response to me as more valuable than classroom pedagogy. I took students’ misbehavior personally: some slept in class; most sighed in dread over each assignment; many could not seem to or did not want to maintain an academic conversation; most failed to appreciate my hard work. In essence, they just did not care—at least not to the extent that I believed they should care, and because of that, the “human quest” for connectedness that Palmer (1999) talks about was absent for me. I felt a bit like O’Reilly (1993) when she discovered she had begun to hate students, who “sat silent, resistant, glowering” in her English 102 class (p. 64).



Perhaps no student could have been more obvious in her resistance to my teaching than Brittney. I thought her eyes were permanently scarred from the amount of eye-rolling she did during each class period. It seemed that regardless of what assignment I presented, her body language gave off loud clues that she was annoyed. Discuss a topic in groups? Brittney crossed her arms over her chest as she rolled her eyes. Role play an assignment? Brittney responded with a heavy moan as she rolled her eyes. Free write in journals? Brittney snapped her head back as she rolled her eyes. The class was not making Brittney happy, and she took her aggravation out on me. “We never had to do this in high school,” she scolded me at the beginning of class one day. “I don’t understand why we have to do this now! This just doesn’t make sense!” Sadly, there were several “Brittneys” in every writing skills class.

I often sat in my office at the end of the day, pondering students’ immaturity and other character flaws. They were manipulative. They were not willing to work hard to improve their skills. They expected me to do their work for them. They were often demanding, rude and indignant. But they were 18 years old. And I pushed against their weaknesses instead of working with their weaknesses; I regarded my students, and their abilities, as substandard. Through my introspection I saw that I did not allow the deep emotions of care and honor and love, qualities that are the hallmark of the Christian Brothers and the essence of spirituality, to cross the threshold into my classroom where I often met students who seemed at times unreceptive to me and unwilling to consider their own academic growth.

The teacher I had become at this Catholic university was in many ways the teacher I was at my previous institution: I was equating a “good teacher,” one who had a

positive relationship with students, with a “loving teacher,” one who cared on a significant and profound level about student growth and development. Yet when I considered hooks’ (2003) definition of love, which she describes as a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust, I realized that emotional connection in the classroom is much more complex than I imagined. I began to understand that love requires a commitment on our part to engage students in academic work that develops their interest in writing and their understanding of themselves. It requires a responsibility to serve students’ best interests in an academic forum that focuses on the development of students as writers. It requires mutual trust between teacher and students that the common good of the classroom is at the forefront of curriculum.

Yet it seemed to me that administrators, all those teachers who had never taught the basic writing course, and basic writing students themselves believed my role was to be a kind of miracle worker who could fix students’ complex writing challenges and passive or antagonistic attitude with a sweep of a wand—but I felt more like a janitor whose job was to clean up the messiness that comes from profound writing issues and negative attitudes. O’Reilly (1993) quotes Henry Ottinger in his 1971 *The New York Times* piece as saying that freshmen composition students were “the most silent, reticent, paranoid bunch of people he had ever encountered in a group” (p. 68). Upon reading Ottinger’s words, I saw that I was not the only teacher whose classroom practices did not always result in flourishing—for students or the teacher. Yet the despair I felt over teaching basic writing students was so palpable that at times I wondered how long I would last in the profession.

### *Influence of Scholars on Teaching*

So in my “sink or swim” mode, O’Reilley’s (1993) question, “Is there any way we can interrupt this hardening process and keep ourselves alive in the classroom?” (p. 69) became *my* question. It was also a question that connected to hooks’ (2003) concept of a pedagogy of love because it focuses on the mutuality of loving relationships. I had learned that the Christian Brothers’ conception of education was focused primarily on student needs and interests and less on teachers’; but when I failed to consider my own needs in the classroom, or I considered them as less valuable than students’, I felt myself “hardening,” as O’Reilley describes (p. 69). How could I encourage mutual love in the classroom, which hooks says is necessary in order to integrate a pedagogy of love? Key to finding that answer, I discovered, was looking inside my inner landscape not with judgment or criticism, but with kindness, or, as O’Reilley explains, putting on the “glasses of tenderness” so that we become “tender-hearted and sympathizing” (p. 84). Through the lens of tenderness I began to accept that my weaknesses as a teacher stemmed from my need to be liked and accepted by my students and a deep fear if I was not. It stemmed from a desire to avoid feeling uncomfortable in my relationships with students and in my teaching in general. But mainly it stemmed from an overemphasis on my own insecurities rather than on seeing students as human beings with their own deeply felt needs of acceptance and belonging. I had begun to learn through this process of examination that my teaching was not intended to be about *me*—it was about an interconnected humanity struggling in their efforts to reach their potential.

It was not until I began my third year of doctoral studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania that my ideas of teacher-student relationships took another leap. I began to

read Blitz and Hurlbert's *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age* (1998) as required reading in a course taught by the author, Claude Mark Hurlbert. Its introductory line struck me like no phrase had impacted me before: "No more pretending." With that three word sentence, I began to more fully delve into the answer to O'Reilly's (1993) question of how to keep myself alive, how to give and receive love, in the classroom: I was being asked by Blitz and Hurlbert to discover the authenticity of *my own* identity and to bring that identity, with all its complexity, into my writing classrooms. In essence I was asked to significantly probe my inner thoughts and feelings, especially those most painful, to find what I had hidden from myself and to be willing to teach from that inner core. Without doing so, our real lives become "secondary or irrelevant to the work of teaching" (p. 2). And so I began (again) the process of examination.

I love the monastic wisdom tale that speaks to this idea of examination, or what Joan Chittister (2000) describes as "the compelling search for wholeness, for a life lived to the full" (p. 14): "A brother went to see Abba Moses in his hermitage at Scetis and begged him for a word. And the old man said: 'Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything'" (p. 21). When I think upon these words, I realize the "cell" is a place within; it is our core, our center, our soul. After being in my "cell," I realized I had spent years evaluating my relationship with students based on a superficial understanding of my emotional, spiritual and intellectual connection with them. Throughout my years of teaching, relationship had taken precedence over course content, perhaps because my understanding of pedagogy was weak. At times I had prided myself that students liked me as I liked them. Yet when I began to teach underprepared students who had a history

of writing struggles, I took students' dislike of the course as a personal assault. I had bought into the ideal that service was the hallmark of love, and I worked diligently on building relationships with students by attempting to serve their emotional needs in the hopes that they would be interested in growing academically. At times that worked. Yet when traditional pedagogy did not engage developmental writing students, I did not take the time to fight for changes in the department's curriculum requirements that I believed should take place for the students' best interests. While I was a full-time member of the faculty, I was not a tenured one—and therefore my viewpoints on Composition pedagogy were disregarded. For instance at one department meeting, I requested that all faculty who taught the basic writing course should consider teaching grammar instruction in the context of student writing rather than as separate drills found in a workbook. The chair of the department at the time told me he did not regard new theories on writing as valuable because he did not believe they advanced student writing in any effective way. Yet to acknowledge the work I had undertaken in pursuing a Ph.D. degree in Composition studies, and to be fair to all teachers, the department gave me permission to teach the course in the way I found most effective, and other teachers were given that leeway, too; to this day, every teacher besides myself who teaches or has taught the course follows a workbook focused on improving sentence structure.

I began to reconsider the Christian Brothers' emphasis on nurturing relationships as it pertained to developmental writing students and how it pertained to me. I could accept the belief that some basic writing students, most basic writing students, respond to teachers who they believe care about them. They flower under direct guidance. Yet despite my attempts to care for my students, to break down my boundaries for them, to

desire their growth, I was far from understanding what it meant to love them. Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) suggest that the love hooks (2003) writes about cannot occur in the classroom unless I take the time to discover the whole of myself, which is significantly more complex than the part of me that I called teacher.

One premise of Blitz and Hurlbert's (1998) book outlines how living two separate lives, one outside of school and one within, causes us to limit our impact in the classroom by restricting and withholding our own honesty, our own identity from our students. In order to follow our mission as teachers to "mak[e] better neighborhoods, better communities, a better world" and guide our students to do the same (p. 1), we must see our students, like ourselves, as human beings who struggle through common characteristics of sorrow, death, joy, confusion and success that are all part of the human condition. I think we must also realize, as O'Reilley (1993) says, that part of that new awareness of students as full human beings requires us to hold back from believing we can control students' reactions to us or to the course and that the only thing we can control is our own "inner weather" (p. 72). In other words, the teaching and learning process is a free, relational enterprise, and in order for both teachers and students to be changed by that process, both parties must be willing to be honest about who we are and where we come from.

What I came to understand was that as a teacher I had to be truthful to the whole person that I was; I could not block out the vulnerability that came with the experience of parenting three children; of growing up poor on the cold prairie land of North Dakota; of losing a father at a young age; of feeling the pain of a broken marriage. I had to be present to all of these aspects of my identity if I wanted to teach and learn in a way that

allowed me to be available to students as a full human being rather than as a teacher who possessed the power to make or break their classroom learning experience. Palmer (1993) says that good teaching “depends less on technique than it does on the human condition of the teacher, and only by knowing the truth of our own condition can we hope to know the true condition of our students” (p. 10). In other words, I could only begin to understand the writing of students like Brad and Dale and Evan as an intimate reflection of who they were when I was in touch with my own complexity of thoughts, emotions, beliefs and experiences. To be a better teacher, a better human being, I had to be open to what my students could teach me, “things so important that to ignore them is to commit an act of cruelty” (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998, p. 69). I was beginning to accept the idea that the building of community can only happen when honest, intimate, compassionate sharing takes place. Through gaining a greater understanding of the field of Composition and what it means on a substantive level to teach writing, I saw that not only were my students complex human beings—I was, too. I felt compassion for my students because I could finally feel compassion for my own weaknesses as a teacher, as a mother, as a partner. I saw that as I put more emphasis on learning about my students, about my field, about the complexity of love, I was losing the support of what a marriage can bring. The more I grew professionally and personally from my quest, the less I felt cared for in my personal life. This vulnerability was difficult to bring to the classroom because it required me to shed my tendency to separate and hide painful parts of my life in order to present an invincible persona—but without this vulnerability, I could not teach honestly.

Like O’Reilly (1993), Palmer (1993), and the Christian Brothers, Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) believe that what we teach our students or how we teach them is

secondary; what is primary in the classroom is learning how to live (p. 8). The classroom, then, becomes its own journey story in that both students and teachers in the teaching and learning process are shaped and changed by the intimacy that comes from honest, authentic relationship. What Blitz and Hurlbert ask of us who teach writing is to consider that helping students in their search for relevance and meaning can only be achieved when we ask questions of ourselves in the work we do and in the lives we lead. If we “remain strange to ourselves and to others, we remain incapable of forming the kinds of intimacy that can make a social whole possible” (p. 7). This sort of shared authenticity is the guiding force that binds teachers and students together.

#### *Re-formation of Teaching Theory and Practice*

I began to re-image the experience of the teacher-student relationship I formed from my prior teaching experiences and started to see relationship more in terms of partnership rather than as a benevolent hierarchy. When I specifically examined the work done on the Christian Brothers campus where I teach, I saw a model of education that placed support of and dedication to students as the top priority in and outside classrooms, the result of which was strong, connected relationships between teachers and students. Yet in essence I began to see that this education model places teachers *in loco parentis* to protect students’ well-being and ensure their development as well as to nurture teacher-student relationships (Tristano, 2006). One colleague described this relationship as requiring teachers to “drop everything to help students with crises large and small” (Eubank, 2007). The Christian Brothers, and the faculty who work on the campuses they



operate, believe this model of education that places such intense devotion to students sets them apart from their public university counterparts.

Yet I began to see that the hierarchy inherent in the teacher-as-parent and student-as-child relationship makes teachers more responsible for students' holistic development than students themselves. According to Freire, (1998), when teachers serve as parent-substitutes, the teaching role takes the form of parental coddling, and teaching and learning is reduced to a feel-good process. For this reason, Freire says, the inclination to reduce the teacher role to a parent role devalues teaching, "which, by its very nature, involves rigorous intellectual pursuits" (p. 4). O'Reilley (1993) says this teaching hierarchy results in disproportion between what teachers' put out and what students' take in, which "ultimately makes us hate students" (p. 50). Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) believe exploring common human emotions and experiences, and not positioning ourselves in the role of parent to our students, allows us as teachers to foster real collaboration and places us in an atmosphere where all members of the classroom are responsible to one another.

It has taken me fifteen years to realize that teaching writing is so much more than assessing a written product, and it is more than caring for students in a way that is self-promotional, or teaching in ways that lead to students' flourishing but not my own. I have learned that ultimately teaching writing encompasses the continual discovery of my own identity in relation to the world around me and understanding the ways we as human beings are connected and disconnected from one another. If I fail to consider my own need for personal and professional growth and my own areas of struggle and pain, I risk teaching in a way that cannot promote students' full development or my own. Without deeper self reflection, I cannot understand the humanity students bring to the classroom.

But occasionally I gave the newly formed lessons I had learned only lip service in the classroom, especially when I encountered students like Brendan. Despite my intentionality in teaching basic writing students, the wisdom I had gained from the Christian Brothers, Blitz and Hurlbert (1998), O'Reilley (1993), Palmer (1993) Freire (1970; 1998), Rose (1989) and others who perceive the teaching and learning process as an interior act disappeared when I came face to face with Brendan. Having been dismissed from college the year earlier as a result of a dismal academic record, Brendan was back for another try. I was the lucky teacher to have him as a student in my basic writing class. Brendan and I sparred from day one over his unwillingness to work for his grades. He was the quintessential brownnoser, and when that did not sway me, he began to badger me in an attempt to force me to raise the grades on his essays, even to the point of telling me I was incompetent at my job and was trying to hide the fact that I was actually dumb. After Brendan began sending harassing emails, I responded the only way I believed I could: I reported him to college administrators, who required him to get professional counseling. I learned later that other teachers (all women) had gone through similar psychologically harmful experiences with Brendan.

I sighed in relief when the semester ended, and I chalked up my painful (and often fearful) encounter with Brendan as a fluke, a once-in-a-lifetime really horrible classroom experience. The thought that most thrilled me was that I would not have to see Brendan (other than in coincidental passing) or speak to him again. So when the new academic year began and Brendan came by my office to take pieces of chocolate from the "free" candy dish, I was more than mildly horrified; I felt intense fear well up inside me. Why me? How could I overcome these feelings of hatred and dread when I saw him? It was

clearly apparent he had changed: his demeanor was calm rather than antagonistic; he had some positive interactions with his peers rather than being a loner; he smiled. He was actually pleasant during those brief moments he came by my office that semester. And yet how could I forgive?

I delightfully stumbled upon hooks' (2003) book *Teaching Community* in which she writes a chapter titled, "Heart to Heart: Teaching with Love," and I began to learn how to heal the wounds that came from teaching. Through hooks' writing I learned that at the center of healing is the awareness that teaching is a spiritual enterprise, which requires self-discovery. It is only in this process of self-discovery that I can learn what alienates me from my true nature (p. 161). I came to understand Brendan as a source of my alienation, and this understanding allowed me to see the suffering and resistance in Brendan's life and his own efforts toward renewal. hooks says what enables us to recognize the "other"—the source of alienation—is love (p. 162). hooks outlines the concept of love as the primary factor in building a community of inclusivity. I understood when she tells of the ease we have in speaking of love in our classrooms when we teach students just like ourselves: same class, same race, same value systems. It is easy—although not always truthful—to say we love students when they are not much different from ourselves. Through hooks' words, I was challenged to practice the concept of love—and I realized, as I continued to spend many moments with Brendan that semester and several semesters to come, that it takes work.

My teaching is different now, especially with students like Brendan. I talk to them about the journey of learning they are just beginning and the journey of learning I have been on. We talk about how to make sense of the chaos of life, and we share how

our different experiences and value systems have shaped our deeply held opinions and judgments. I think of Danielle, a conservative Catholic who, when the topic of hip hop music was raised in class, censored it as “devil’s music” that has no place in popular culture. It was not until we watched the character D Jay rhyming his life story in *Hustle and Flow* (2005) could she more clearly understand the human struggle to survive. Through the film she was able to see hope in the midst of difficult circumstances. She saw how D Jay, a pimp and drug dealer, yearned for a better life, just as all human beings do. She came face to face with the real issue of our lives—how we make order of disorder, how we struggle to keep ourselves connected to something larger than ourselves. I have learned as a teacher to talk of the need to understand hardship and learn from it, of adopting a sense of compassion with ourselves as with others, of embracing a sympathetic identification with other people. In this way the classroom becomes safe for us to reveal our authenticity. Compassion becomes the essential element that allows us to teach with love.

Throughout this process of examination I have realized that we need a great deal of maturity and insight to do our teaching jobs well. From my own experience, I found that the only way I could reach, even momentarily, the level of compassionate nurturing in the classroom that hooks (2003) talks about is through the capability and willingness to be authentic. In other words, I came to realize that I could only teach from a religious, feminist approach because after studying scholars like Rose, Freire, O’Reilly, hooks and Noddings, I saw that those theories encompassed the ideals I most cherished and valued. I embraced Catholic social teaching that calls me to teach students in ways that help them realize their potential while upholding their human dignity; I embraced feminism’s

emphasis on nurturing and relationship. O'Reilley (1993) says, "It is a good thing to encourage an expression of the inner world" (p. 45) because it is this place, this inner world, that calls us to practice what we claim to be, to teach in the way that is compassionate, intimate, spiritual—all that is honest within us. And yet I have found that this type of teaching can be lonely, even at an institution where spirituality is accepted.

Throughout my two decades of teaching and learning experiences, there have been many basic writing teachers outside my own Christian Brothers institution who for various reasons believe it is *not* a good thing to encourage authenticity and compassion. It is reasonable, I suppose, to believe that talk of compassion and self-awareness is too idealistic for a classroom whose mission is to teach students how to write a college essay. Many teachers insist basic writers need to learn grammar and mechanics if they have any chance for survival in the academy because that is their weakest area. Dzubak (2007) says teachers must emphasize skills that lead to achievement of educational and career goals. If basic writers want to be able to compete with their peers in the college setting, they must be taught the tools that will help them do so. Other teachers, even colleagues at my own institution, believe expressivist teaching techniques are not academic enough and blur the lines of professionalism. I am the only writing teacher I know who chooses not to use a textbook in my classes; for my decision I receive quizzical looks and distant comments. Perhaps an underlying reason for my colleagues' lack of support for my teaching methods could be that none of the department members has studied Composition theory; even adjunct instructors who teach the course possess advanced degrees in Literature.

These negative responses also come from the fact that many basic writing teachers outside and inside my own institution believe using teaching methods that integrate authenticity and compassion into writing assignments is “soft” teaching. In fact, Levine (2005) says basic writing students have “grown up in an era that infiltrates them with unfettered pleasure and heaps of questionably justified positive feedback. Higher education has to avoid hitching itself to that pleasure-packed bandwagon” (p. B12). The glaring inconsistency in the Christian Brothers conception of education reveals on one hand a deep devotion to and care for students, and on the other hand an implementation of traditional teaching models that center on improvement of skill sets. Yet by following teaching methods that never stray from concrete, academic lesson plans, Freire (1998) and hooks (2003) say both teachers and students can miss opportunities to be fully and compassionately engaged.

One explanation for the Brothers’ inconsistency between the emotional and intellectual aspects of teaching could be the level of education being discussed. Christian Brothers’ conceptions of education were established primarily for students at the elementary through secondary levels, schools at which many of the Brothers teach or got their start in the profession (Koch, 1990; Grass, 2007); the Christian Brothers have adapted those conceptions of education at the primary and secondary school levels to the university setting. Perhaps for this reason, the Brothers have not emphasized the implementation of current writing pedagogy into the basic writing classroom; rather, they have adapted the educational concepts from primary, middle and secondary schools to higher education.

Given an under-emphasis on Composition theory, or the intellectual aspect of teaching, is the goal of incorporating a pedagogy of love, which requires the full integration of the emotional, spiritual and intellectual aspects into the teaching and learning process, too idealistic for many teachers who consider basic writing students as underprepared individuals who have skill sets to learn? I think of my colleague Sheila, who devotedly has taught basic writing students for over thirty years and shares an affable bond with them. Can she be convinced that she would be even more devoted to her students if she could get past teaching the rules of essay structure and consider advancements in methodology that would serve students more appropriately? Is it possible for Darryl, who has a friendly and enduring connection with students, to stop tallying points earned for grammar quizzes and become nurturing enough to consider teaching methods that align more solidly with the Christian Brothers emotional and spiritual focus of the classroom? Is it necessary for them to do so in order to love students? Brother William Mann says that only by upholding academic excellence can teachers help students access their full potential and give students “an opportunity to take a ride through the pathways of their minds and souls so they can see themselves in unglimped and unimagined ways” (2008). hooks (2003), Freire (1998) and Rose (1989) agree that nurturance, both academic and emotional, is necessary in our classrooms for optimal learning to take place.

I have found that following, or attempting to follow, a pedagogy of love, a concept which calls teachers to nurture an emotional connection with their students alongside best practice and which calls teachers to respond to student weakness with compassion, is crucial to my sense of purpose as a teacher. It has required me to learn

more about myself, my students, my field of Composition, my sense of spirituality than I ever thought necessary. I have seen that nurturing the emotional and spiritual aspects of teaching was more than saying I liked teaching or I cared about students. It has meant that I have had to commit to bringing my best self to the classroom—and that can only occur when I am honest about who I am. Perhaps the more important question to ponder is how this type of teaching pedagogy, this model of compassion that upholds the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of our work, can solidify its place in our writing classrooms.



## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN BASIC WRITING

I offer my investigation of articles in the field of Composition that provide an overview of the basic writing course and of basic writing students and which give insight into the teaching and learning process. I specifically aim to discover current teaching methodologies in order to determine the extent to which issues of emotion, spirit and intellect are incorporated into basic writing classrooms.

#### *Background Influences of Field of Composition*

Through much of its history, the presence of the basic writing course on college campuses has been controversial; while the course traditionally has focused on teaching students what they lack in the conventions of academic writing in comparison to non-basic writers (Adler-Kassner, 2000; Shaughnessy, 2003; Stanley, 2003; Mlynarczyk, 2006), scholars and practitioners have disagreed on how or why the remedial course should be taught. We need only to peruse the June 2007 issue of *College Composition and Communication* to note the controversy surrounding a course in writing remediation; in its reprinting of the May 1957 article “Has English Zero Seen Its Day?” we learn that scholars and practitioners deliberated then, as they have during the past sixty years, over similar topics: whether the basic writing course should be offered at all at higher education institutions; if it should earn full credit, half-credit or no credit; and how course content should be taught, whether instruction centers on grammar drills, paragraph writing or remedial reading (p. 545).

Discussions over remedial programming in writing intensified with the adoption of open admissions policies at state universities nationwide during the 1960s, which led to the development of formal basic writing programs on college campuses. The basic writing program began with the notion that educational justice could best occur through universal literacy and that open admissions policies were a means to address social inequality (Soliday, 2003; Laurence, 1995). Proponents of open admissions policies believed helping improve the literacy skills of underprivileged students could remediate educational injustice by giving the talented poor an opportunity to enter the middle class through education (Soliday; Laurence; Heath, 1983). Forty years later, colleges and universities nationwide are restricting, eliminating, or restructuring basic writing programs in an attempt to boost academic standards and retention rates (Yood, 2005; Shor, 2005; Goen & Gillotte-Tropp, 2003).

Yet it is because of these deliberate discussions among teachers and scholars that Adler-Kassner (2000) says at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the basic writing course, the students it serves, and the field of basic writing itself stands at a pivotal point. That pivotal point, says Mlynarczyk (2006), is characterized by a lack of widespread agreement among teachers and scholars of basic writing on the most appropriate type of writing to assign students in courses. Goen and Gillotte-Tropp (2003) go so far as to call it “the basic writing crisis” (p. 90). Gray-Rosendale (2006) sees this “crisis” as a major shift that has evolved in basic writing scholarship within the past decade as a result of greater consideration given on behalf of basic writing students. In other words, scholars and teachers of basic writers have placed the care and concern of their students at the

forefront of their teaching and scholarship, and the field has changed substantively as a result.

Gray-Rosendale (2006) explains that the prominence of the basic writer's identity in scholarship and teaching has resulted in a new conception regarding basic writing students: they are no longer primarily considered as students who lack basic skills and instead are viewed as students who bring valuable and worthwhile personal and academic experiences to the classroom. In her research of basic writing scholarship over the past decade published in *Journal of Basic Writing*, Gray-Rosendale discovered a significant movement in basic writing pedagogy. She notes that basic writing scholars and practitioners' perceptions of basic writers have shifted from what she has labeled the "conflict model," in which student diversity and experience is minimized in order to improve weaknesses of students' academic skills, to what she calls the "contextual model," in which student diversity and experience are upheld to maximize learning performance. In the conflict model, curriculum is shaped around the belief that basic writers lack necessary knowledge and must learn that knowledge to achieve academic success. The contextual model, on the other hand, considers the basic writer's variety of experiences and knowledge as valid to the classroom and uses this notion to shape pedagogy.

Teachers and scholars who continue to define the basic writer according to the conflict model do not consider how basic writers' diverse experiences can aid in the learning process; they do not see that by writing about their experiences, students become invested in the act of writing and desire to learn more. Acting from a deficit model, teachers uphold traditional instruction in grammar and sentence structure as necessary to

teach students the skills they seem to lack when compared to mainstream students. The contextual model includes what Gray-Rosendale (2006) describes as a “social context of care” or “ethic of care” that centers on the belief that basic writers have input into shaping the teaching and learning process in the classroom by participating in curriculum that engages students in active learning (p. 9). Acting from this contextual model, teachers uphold instruction that uses the knowledge students already possess as a foundation for coursework.

Perhaps a main reason for this movement away from the conflict model and toward the contextual model in basic writing scholarship and practice is the increasing number of students who need remedial course work. Adler-Kassner (2000) says because significantly more students are entering colleges underprepared, these students in need of additional academic support will be at the core of academic culture; in other words, because of their high numbers, basic writers will make up the majority of the college student body while traditionally-prepared college students will become the college minority (p. 229). Statistics by the Association of American Colleges and Universities support Adler-Kassner’s insights. Of students who enroll in college, 53 percent are required to take remedial courses (Darabi, 2006, p. 53). Thus teachers must reconsider the pedagogical strategies they use to work with students traditionally outside the mainstream and re-think the structures that surround the idea of “mainstream.”

Darabi (2006) says this reconsideration has caused tension between two-year and four-year colleges that enroll remedial students because of their differing notions on how best to serve basic writers. Teachers, administrators and leaders at both two-year and four-year institutions are wedged “between the need for an educated society, the need of

universities to uphold standards but at the same time educate those whom they admit, and the pressures on and from government to show greater effectiveness (that is, to retain and graduate more students) at lower costs” (p. 53). As a result of this tension, basic writing course curricula have changed. Institutions in general are attempting to eliminate curricula in basic writing programs that minimize and marginalize remedial students, especially curricula that focus on the skills and abilities that students lack. Institutions appear to be following innovative pedagogy that considers the wide variety of basic writers’ educational and personal experiences and uses these experiences as the central focus of instruction. In this way basic writing students become participants in shaping course pedagogy rather than recipients of pedagogy determined exclusively by teachers. Institutions may also intend to foster—and advertise—honors students and honors colleges, leaving less room on college campuses for students with remedial needs.

Yet while the focus of basic writing classrooms appears to be one in which teachers have adopted a more humane perspective of basic writing students, from regarding students from a deficit model to acknowledging the value of students’ lived experiences, this change in perspective does not appear to go beyond the goal of the classroom: to help students achieve academic success. This goal is in itself appropriate for the classroom, but it does not take into account students’ identity as full human beings and their unique potential. By solely focusing on students’ academic progress, basic writing teachers may limit students’ growth as full human beings.

### *The Contextual Model's Influence on Changing Conditions*

Gray-Rosendale (2006) contends that these innovative approaches that teachers, administrators and institutional leaders are following in basic writing courses is proof that in many colleges and universities, the cutting of remediation programs has led to the intentional development of programs employing the contextual model, in which basic writers' diverse experiences and knowledge are validated and addressed in order to enhance learning.

While many four-year universities nationwide have cut remediation programs, basic writing is still being taught to a restricted and limited audience—but with a different theoretical philosophy that focuses more on writing intensive courses, writing workshops and student seminars in which students engage in active learning, and curriculum that focuses on developing the knowledge students already possess (Yood, 2005). What is occurring at many four-year institutions, according to Yood (2005), is the emergence “of a common activity built for and with students but without the accompanying ‘body’ of beliefs” (p. 20). In other words, the literacy needs of basic writing students are addressed, but not through instruction that employs the traditional conflict model that primarily addresses the skills and knowledge that students lack.

The most noted action toward institutional change of the basic writing program from a conflict model to a contextual model occurred in 1999 when City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees voted to end open admissions and to disband the terms “remediation” and “basic writing” at its eleven four-year schools (Yood, 2005; McBeth, 2006). This action was a response to pressure from then Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who called for an overhaul of higher education institutions in order to raise educational

standards that would lead to stronger retention and graduation rates (Gale Group, 2001). The shift toward higher standards among students at CUNY is emblematic of four-year institutions and is a trend that continues to gain momentum as institutions respond to the demands for accountability with taxpayer dollars (Goen & Gillotte-Tropp, 2003). Yet while the motivation for change may have been increased retention rates, Yood (2005) claims that the CUNY system, as well as other institutions, have improved the way they address students' remedial needs by adopting programming that utilizes active learning based on the contextual model and eliminating programming that centered on students' academic deficits, or the conflict model.

Gray-Rosendale (2006) provides examples of other universities that have followed CUNY's lead in overhauling remedial programming. Specifically, she points to leaders at California State University, Chico who followed the contextual model in their reforms of remedial courses. Leaders worked to eliminate the category of "basic writer" at the institution and successfully helped students learn to write effectively through a critical workshop approach that replaced a traditional basic writing course. Another such example is Miami University's Oxford campus, at which composition scholars challenged the institution's decision to exclude basic writing students from enrollment. According to Tassoni (2006), the Oxford campus created a course that provides basic writing students with additional support while they are enrolled in mainstream courses and has offered opportunities for at-risk students to enroll in summer workshops taught by English faculty in an attempt to "increase understanding and respect" for diverse students (p. 118).

Similar changes have taken place at University of Tennessee at Martin.

Following a mandate by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to eliminate “remedial” or “developmental” courses from state-funded four-year institutions, the English Department at UTM designed and implemented a two-course program for students identified as underprepared. Huse, Wright, Clark, and Hacker (2005) developed a new program for underprepared students that attempts to accomplish in two semesters what a typical composition course accomplishes in one semester. Students in both programs follow the same curriculum centered on active learning but have different time constraints. The goal of both the two-year course program and the first-year composition course is to provide students with college-level assignments in reading and writing; students in the two-year course do not address developmental issues.

San Francisco State University created and implemented a program for basic writers that integrates reading and writing and eliminates remedial skills teaching in an effort to help students more effectively move “from the margins of the university to its academic center” (p. 91). Using data of student performance collected from the conventional basic writing course and the integrated reading and writing program, Goen and Gillotte-Troppe (2003) contend that students enrolled in the reading and writing program outperformed their peers enrolled in the conventional course (97 percent successful completion rate versus 84 percent successful completion in the control group) (p. 103). The success of this course implies that basic writing students can learn and produce critical writing and reading assignments that are required for their placement in the mainstream academy within one year of enrollment in remedial courses.



Institutional reform of remediation programs has also catapulted changes in basic writing curriculum at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, an open admissions university. In an attempt to improve retention rates among basic writing students, Darabi (2006) investigated the university's pilot program that houses the basic writing course within a learning community, which offers a smaller class setting (12 students compared to a traditional class setting of 22 students) and similar remedial courses to a specific group of underprepared students. The structure and components of the basic writing course remain the same as those of other basic writing courses, with its focus on active learning strategies and collaborative activities, but the added element of the smaller class size and familiarity among students increases positive interactions; as a result, Darabi notes that students achieve higher levels of engagement, which enhances the learning outcomes of typical basic writing strategies. Results of Darabi's study conclude that housing a basic writing course within a learning community rather than in a traditional class setting has positive outcomes, including improved attendance, increased participation, improved completion of assignments, and lower rates of failure. In fact, the retention rate of basic writing students in the pilot program was 82 percent after one year (p. 70).

The development and assessment of a newly created learning community for basic writers at the University of Wyoming supports Darabi's (2006) findings that learning communities, which offer smaller class sizes and classroom community building activities for a specific group of underprepared students, help basic writers better adapt to academic discourse than do typical basic writing courses. Learning communities also can increase student motivation and success. The synergy program, developed to help

students form stronger connections with faculty and peers, includes four courses (three in the fall semester; one in the spring semester), as well as a six-hour summer orientation session. According to Heaney (2006), basic writers focus on developing writing as well as reading and critical thinking skills, but the most important aspect of the program is its emphasis on encouraging students through class discussions to change their attitudes about academic discourse. Heaney claims that prior to participating in the program, students generally are “uninvested” in the academic hierarchy because it is vastly different from their own lifestyles, and mainstream introductory courses in writing tend to widen the gap between academic cultures and students’ home cultures. Instruction in the synergy program includes an ethnographic research project in which students are required to study their individual backgrounds. Through this project, teachers encourage students to be co-investigators into issues of identity formation so that students become interested in writing and invested in developing their writing abilities.

Since the synergy program’s inception in 2003, student grades and retention rates have improved significantly over grades and rates of conditionally admitted students who did not participate in the program (Heaney, 2006). The retention rate for students participating in the program was 87 percent compared to 81 percent of conditionally admitted students. This is especially impressive since students in the synergy program had lower high school grade point averages and lower English ACT scores compared to those conditionally admitted students who did not participate in the program (p. 48).

John Jay College of Criminal Justice has taken another approach to helping basic writers achieve admittance to four-year colleges by focusing on teaching academic and personal discourse and by requiring individual tutoring conferences. McBeth (2006)

discusses how the college reformulated its developmental course curricula in its associate degree program by creating writing assignments that integrate academic discourse with students' personal experience. These assignments also better prepare students to pass the required exam for admissions to the four-year college because they give students practice in academic writing, which is the central focus of the exam. McBeth explains that the six credit team-taught course, which requires an additional six hours of tutoring and a final portfolio, increases considerably the literacy abilities of students enrolled in the course.

The University of Akron created a separate college for students with lower ACT scores and lower high school GPAs called Summit College, a two-year technical and community college on the main campus. Thelin and Taczak (2007) developed a curriculum for Summit College similar to McBeth's (2006) that centers on teaching personal writing to basic writers. Thelin and Taczak's program encourages students to take ownership of their education by exploring the conditions of their admittance as students to Summit College through writing of their personal experiences. By following a pedagogy that places personal writing and not skill development as central to the course, teachers attempt to effect an attitudinal change among students toward writing. In this way students are given power to look critically at the academic system. Thelin and Taczak conclude that offering students choices to voice their beliefs is central to their transformation as students based on student evaluations of the course.

Basic writing scholarship, specifically within the past eight years, showcases many success stories of innovative basic writing programming at universities nationwide. This innovative programming attempts to erase the conflict model of education, with its

sole mission of teaching students the skills they lack. In its place, programming focuses on teaching instruction that regards basic writing students as similar to their mainstream peers. Teachers attempt to help basic writing students maximize their learning by incorporating writing assignments that focus on students' attitudes toward writing, providing activities that build classroom community, offering smaller class sizes, and integrating opportunities for collaboration and discussion.

Shor (2005) takes issue with this shift in basic writing curricula. He believes this shift eliminates underprepared students from universities because they are regarded as members of a second-class society. He suggests the reason behind the move by universities to erase remedial programs is because universities continue to regard basic writers as deficit students; universities have the goal of improving retention and graduation rates, not improving conditions for basic writing students. While some four-year institutions continue to have limited basic writing programs available to some basic writing students, the number of students who are admitted to these programs is restricted; most basic writing students are no longer admitted to universities and must instead prove their academic ability at two-year colleges. Shor contends that moving basic writing programs from the four-year institution to community colleges is a way for institutions to “rebrand” themselves in an attempt to seek higher status (Shor calls it the ‘Harvard model’); they raise admission standards so they can lure quality students. As a result, community colleges must absorb and manage students driven out of four-year institutions.

Limited student access to four-year colleges compounds the issue of remediation. Students enrolled in two-year colleges find it hardest to attend college, to stay enrolled, to

graduate, and to land better jobs. In addition, these students, who Shor (2005) says are the “least served and most needy” (p. 165; Thelin & Taczak, 2007), are accepted into less selective, more poorly funded subordinate institutions staffed with large numbers of adjuncts. Data from the U.S. Department of Education reports that almost two-thirds, or 65 percent, of faculty in two-year colleges and less selective public colleges are adjuncts (Buck, 2006). The federal Education Department has reported the percentage of adjunct teachers closer to 70 percent (Finder, 2007). Shor contends that this shift away from traditionally remedial programs for basic writers at four-year colleges encourages the “evolving crisis of social class” (p. 165) in higher education because students at community colleges will continue to be limited economically compared to their peers at four-year colleges; they will continue to lose out on the knowledge four-year colleges can offer them.

In an attempt to prevent, or at least address, this “crisis of social class,” a committee of Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) scholars chaired by Buck (2006) addressed the issue of status imbalance between four-year and two-year colleges for basic writers and suggested that changes in faculty preparation are necessary to provide basic writing students with quality instruction. The committee developed guidelines for the academic preparation of two-year college English faculty. Generally speaking, the guidelines recommend that adjunct faculty possess the same qualifications expected of full-time faculty, specifically a Master’s degree in English with coursework in composition theory or teaching of writing (p. 9). The committee noted that because not all two-year college English teachers were aware of, trained in, or supported recent pedagogical theories, they did not practice these theories in the classroom. Based on

information gained from nationwide interviews with college faculty, the TYCA committee proposed that community college faculty should be reflective teachers who involve students in the learning process by incorporating assignments that interest and engage students. Teachers should also avoid being rigid in their teaching delivery, treat students with consideration, and continue to gain knowledge of the field. Above all, their teaching should be grounded in research and theory (p. 14).

Addressing the TYCA report, Gleason (2006) suggests one method to improve teacher preparation is to encourage graduate schools to offer courses on basic writing theory, research and pedagogy that hold the contextual model as foundational. Gleason suggests that underprepared students will have greater access to higher education if they are taught by teachers who are trained in the field and know best how to guide students toward academic success. In addition to preparing students for specific professional roles, Gleason notes that graduate courses should offer topics such as: mainstreaming first year college writing classes; writing and reading curricula for nontraditional students; on-line instruction; writing assessment practices; and teaching and learning standardized English. Knowledge of these topics can help graduate students gain insight into the issues they will face in teaching underprepared writers. Graduate students should also explore the implications of representing students as “remedial” or “basic” writers (p. 55). All of these topics center on the contextual model that validates the basic writer’s academic and social experiences. It should be noted that no one has called for any exploration of topics that center on “teaching hearts,” which emphasizes the nurturing of teacher-student relationships in the basic writing classroom.

Despite TYCA's guidelines, Myers and Kircher (2007) showcase the challenges facing teachers of basic writing classes, most of whom have had no formal teacher preparation in basic writing instruction specifically or writing instruction in general. The authors cite an assessment study completed by students of an institution's first year basic writing program. The study revealed that basic writing students are not taught core academic writing strategies, including organization, development and sentence structure. The study also noted that basic writing pedagogy lacks cohesion because it is dependent upon the interests of individual teachers, many of whom are specialists in literature or creative writing and who lack graduate training in composition and rhetoric. Myers and Kircher conclude that institutions must commit to on-going, collaborative professional development opportunities for basic/first-year writing teachers so that they develop expertise and understanding of the field.

Teachers and scholars in the field point to actions taken by universities that concretely address basic writing students' academic needs and that specifically help students to succeed in college, yet basic writing students continue to be identified by their sometimes overwhelming academic weaknesses. In this sense, students are identified not by their strengths, but by their weaknesses and deficits. While universities are changing their programming in ways that will potentially help basic writing students become more academically successful, this programming does not address the value of teacher-student relationships, nor does this programming tackle issues beyond those grounded in academics.

### *The Contextual Model's Influence on Shaping Theories*

Providing basic writing teachers with opportunities for professional development is significant and necessary in order to replace conflict model-based curricula with contextual model-based curricula in basic writing classrooms nationwide. Gray-Rosendale (2006) claims that the remedial approach to teaching basic writing students must be replaced by college-level work in writing that provides underprepared students with opportunities to achieve academic, personal and professional success (p. 12). Scholars and teachers' renewed understanding of basic writing students has resulted in the reshaping of basic writing pedagogy that calls for critical reflection on the part of teachers in their support of students. This is most especially witnessed in the area of grammar instruction. Scholars and teachers hold significant disagreements on how best to teach students how to improve their grammar skills.

According to Rustick (2007), basic writing teachers at two-year colleges believe the trend of four-year colleges to restrict basic writers' access through anti-remediation policies has put more pressure on teachers at two-year colleges to help students gain "foundational skills" through students' mastery of standard English, often at a rapid pace. The result, according to Rustick, is a significantly renewed interest in how best to teach grammar and sentence-level instruction. Yet according to Blaauw-Hara (2007), many teachers have not questioned grammar instruction and as a result maintain formalist models. Blaauw-Hara suggests that best practice in teaching grammar requires assignments that do not devalue students' native dialect; that offer correction while also supporting students' agency; that teach students to edit their work. In other words, teaching "correction" to basic writers is a complex endeavor (p. 38) that succeeds when



teachers and students collaborate on grammar instruction in the context of student writing.

Many practitioners hold differing views of what correction in the basic writing course should look like. Rustick (2007) believes helping students increase their editing skills and sentence control is best accomplished through specific grammar games that allow students to “discover the relationship between word functions and sentence boundaries without relying on grammatical terminology and rules” (p. 45). Rustick’s assignments include games that build on students’ intuitive sense of grammar; students move around words in a sentence, change the meaning of a sentence, and change the grammatical function of words into logical combinations. Rustick suggests that students learn more through active approaches to grammar instruction; in this way students see language as a dynamic system rather than as rigid rules (p. 49).

Further evidence of revitalized grammar discussions among teachers and scholars is found in Machado’s (2005) review of grammar instruction in which he suggests that basic writing courses must address grammar as part of the course curriculum. Machado believes “students need and want to understand grammar and be able to apply it to communicate effectively in speaking and writing” (p. 82). Machado supports Rustick (2007) in his belief that teaching basic grammar lessons is necessary because it helps students analyze and improve their writing. Although scholarship devoted to this topic disputes the connection between grammar instruction and writing improvement, Machado cites the growth of remedial writing at the college level as reason for the need to offer grammar instruction.

Yet the threat of the conflict model arises when teachers follow grammar instruction that negatively singles out students who cannot meet the demands of formalized grammar rules and standard usage. Lynch-Binieck (2005) says basic writing teachers often label students as “illiterate” if they do not know or cannot learn traditional grammar and usage, yet they fail to take into account that language itself cannot be fixed by rules because language changes. In other words, following a curriculum that reflects a language ideal established by makers of textbooks and curricula places basic writers in an undeserving deficit position where teachers begin to see their students, who struggle with grammar rules, as remedial rather than recognize the fact that they haven’t yet mastered academic discourse (p. 35). Lynch-Binieck says teachers who focus on formalist grammar rules in their writing classrooms and become alarmed at students’ inability to master these rules take away students’ confidence in their ability to communicate.

A study by Fearn and Farnan (2007) supports Lynch-Binieck’s (2005) belief in the psychological harm that can result from formalist grammar instruction and suggests that students improve both grammar skills and writing skills if they are taught functional grammar in the writing classroom. In a five-week study of two sections of students in tenth grade English class in which one section of students was taught formal grammar (with its focus on identification, description and definition), and another section was taught functional grammar (with its focus on what words do in sentences), students who were taught functional grammar scored essentially the same on an exam that tested grammar and mechanical accuracy as students who were taught formal grammar. Study results also revealed that students taught functional grammar scored significantly better in a holistic rating of writing than students who were taught formal grammar. Based on

these findings, Fearn and Farnan conclude that a positive interaction between grammar instruction and writing performance exists if the grammar is functional and is used for writing purposes. While Fearn and Farnan believe grammar knowledge “is the elemental foundation for writing” (p. 79), they suggest that grammar instruction taught in the context of writing is more valuable than grammar instruction of sentence parts.

George (2001), Soliday (2003), Laurence (1995) and Gleason (1993) emphasize the importance for teachers to provide basic writing students with the grammar skills students believe they will need to succeed in the society in which they will live and work, and basic writing teachers should listen to requests from their students who seek a course that will teach them how to join the mainstream. Lutz and Fuller (2007) conducted a study of students in a writing class using interviews and a questionnaire that asked students to assess the value of the course’s curriculum and the teacher’s instruction. Results of the study showed that students appreciate teachers who dictate clear expectations, assignments and grades and who choose methodology, most notably methodology regarding grammar instruction, that serves student needs best. Lutz and Fuller conclude that following a contextual model means teachers must consider that students may have a goal to increase their grammar skills, and teachers should help students achieve that goal by offering formal grammar instruction.

Despite these complex and varied discussions of grammar instruction, there continues to be significant disagreement among teachers and scholars on the value placed on grammar knowledge. In the ACT’s 2005-2006 National Curriculum Survey of high school and college teachers, college teachers ranked grammar and usage skills as highest in importance of six general writing skills categories. High school teachers ranked

grammar and usage skills as lowest in importance of the six categories. Producers of the ACT survey believe a significant number (about 25 percent) of first-year college students require remedial help with their writing skills because students do not receive adequate instruction at the high school level. Results of student performance on the ACT standardized test supports the survey findings; of high school seniors who took the 2002 ACT test, 46 percent earned a score at or below 19 in the English category. ACT analysts claim that these scores suggest that students are marginally prepared or unprepared for college-level work in the area of solving grammatical problems, among other areas.

Despite these remediation statistics, a three-year study involving students from a community college and a two-year basic studies program supports reformulating the basic writing course and eliminating grammar instruction altogether. Simmons and McLaughlin (2003) reveal that basic writing students must be challenged to write more than “mechanically correct formulaic essays” (p. 416). Results of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) discovered that because many students enter colleges and universities unfamiliar with college writing standards, they receive remedial instruction, which often focuses on writing mechanically correct sentences and paragraphs as well as five paragraph themes, a form that “actually blocks the depth of thinking required in college writing” (p. 416). Results of the study indicate that students, even after having received remediation for one to two semesters and then being placed in a first year, non-remedial writing course, scored significantly lower on in-class essays than those college students who directly entered the first year non-remedial writing course. Additionally the study found that all

students who wrote extended essays (over 1,000 words) developed more significantly as writers than those students who wrote shorter, more modest assignments. This study supports institutional change that moves away from a remedial, conflict model of basic writing instruction to one that is contextual in its academic approach.

In his article, “Facilitating Students’ Collaborative Writing,” Speck (2002), too, favors an academic approach to teaching basic writing. He suggests that the contextual model calls on teachers to become students of the writing process, just as their students are. When teachers write with their students, both parties share their writing experiences, and the teacher’s role becomes collaborative rather than hierarchical. Speck also recommends that teachers should increase the complexity and length of collaborative writing assignments over time so that in the writing process, students are taught by all other students in the classroom and teach all other students in the classroom.

Mlynarczyk (2006) discusses how teachers and scholars should rethink pedagogy for the basic writing classroom in her article, “Personal and Academic Writing: Revisiting the Debate.” Mlynarczyk concludes that while teachers and scholars continue to strongly support personal writing or academic writing, a mixture of both processes are ideal for the basic writing classroom because they encourage the development from personal to formal language. Mlynarczyk cites Britton, who says, “Expressive language provides an essential starting point because it is language close to the self of the writer: and progress towards the transactional should be gradual enough to ensure that ‘the self’ is not lost on the way” (p. 12). Through a curriculum that combines personal and academic writing, students’ lived experiences hold as much importance in the shaping of writing as academic structure. In the basic writing course she teaches, Mlynarczyk

begins by introducing her students to journal writing and then uses those journal entries as a springboard for academic writing assignments that are generated around a thesis. Mlynarczyk believes personal writing can help basic writers to acquire academic discourse because students more easily can acquire academic language skills if they first learn to feel comfortable with their own personal, expressive language.

Moran (2004) revisits the topic of personal writing versus academic writing and suggests that personal writing is an important precursor to academic writing. Moran restructured her basic writing course so that personal writing forms the basis for all essays and progresses to academic writing. This supports older research in the field that calls for instruction to revolve around personal writing. Elbow (1973), Graves (1998) and Macrorie (1968) suggest that students can begin to see their words change and evolve when they understand that writing is a developmental process and begin writing from their own experience. They suggest that when teachers encourage students to become invested in their writing, students will desire to learn how to write more fluently. Similar to these scholars, Moran believes combining both personal and academic writing allows students to have personal, meaningful involvement with their writing.

In addition to creating meaningful work and developing a more authentic voice, Moran (2004) believes integrating the two pedagogies also helps students build confidence in their writing as well as a stronger prose style (p. 93). She cites a study of student attitudes toward writing as proof of the program's success. Moran gave her basic writing students a scale questionnaire (one = very negative to five = very positive) at the beginning of the course to determine their attitudes toward the course. Results of the scale questionnaire showed that students typically held very negative attitudes. By the

end of the semester, the majority of students indicated an improvement in their attitudes: 56 percent scored a higher number than they had at the beginning of the course. The average grade also improved six percentage points from the previous three academic years (p. 110). Findings of Moran's study suggest that integrating academic and personal writing in a basic writing course may increase students' interest in writing.

Corkery (2005) suggests teaching personal writing exclusively in the basic writing curriculum is ideal because it can lead to increased confidence in student writing. Corkery says personal writing is a successful tool in the classroom because it helps students identify the obstacles they have faced in learning to read and write.

Soliday (1994) supports the value of personal writing assignments, noting their ability to bridge the worlds of the student and of academics. Personal writing initiates students into academic discourse when they read stories and write their own stories. By reading and writing personal stories, Soliday suggests, students can discuss their own experiences, including their academic experiences. Through this discussion, students become invested in academic writing.

Yet some teachers and scholars believe personal writing does not have a place in the basic writing classroom because it does not sufficiently challenge the abilities of basic writing students. Del Principe (2004) explains that teachers of basic writing, most of whom are non-composition specialists, follow curricula in which basic writers are asked to write almost exclusively personal and autobiographical essays because basic writing students are the "lowest on the totem pole of essay writing ability" (p. 67). Many teachers believe students are not ready for more complex problem solving and research required of academic essays. Older research, including Lundsford (1979), has supported

this notion by suggesting that basic writers were cognitively deficient and had not reached a level of cognitive development that allowed them to form abstractions (p. 38). Hays (1987) also argued that sample essays revealed that basic writers were cognitively deficient. Today, scholars, including Lunsford and Hays, among many others, would no longer support the position on basic writers' cognitive deficiencies, yet they claim that basic writers cannot generally perform synthesis and analysis skills typically associated with college-level writing.

For this reason, Lunsford (2003) suggests that teachers must help students learn academic concepts by teaching exercises in skill sets that engage students in analytical reasoning. Students complete these exercises in writing workshop groups where they have opportunities to talk about their writing. Lunsford concludes that instruction that focuses on narration and description, often found in personal writing, cannot build the cognitive skills students need to achieve success in other college courses.

Del Principe (2004) argues that while basic writers are different in ability from their mainstream peers because they have less experience with Standard American English, they are not basic thinkers and therefore course curricula should include more challenging assignments than personal writing provides. She cites a study by Martinez and Martinez (1987) involving basic writers and graduate students. The writing abilities of the two groups of students were analyzed according to two different writing tasks. The authors conclude that while basic writers had more mechanical and spelling errors than graduate students, there were no significant differences between the two groups' abilities to perform writing and thinking tasks (p. 71). What classifies basic writers, says Del Principe, is their lack of experience and knowledge of the conventions of academic



writing, not any deficiencies as logical thinkers and writers. For this reason, she believes, basic writing courses should include assignments that give students conceptual and linguistic practice, including techniques in learning to write academic essays. In her own basic writing class, Del Principe assigns *The Odyssey* as reading material and requires students to participate in a series of writing assignments, from responses to the reading to several creative, non-graded pieces, then four to six essays. Del Principe suggests that basic writers “do not need special, different treatment”; rather, they should engage in what are truly considered college-level reading and writing projects (p. 75).

While teachers and scholars vastly differ on best practices in the basic writing classroom, teachers are incorporating pedagogy that encourages students to be invested in the course as well as in developing their writing abilities. Yet teachers do not appear to follow pedagogies that address more than academic course content. For instance, students’ personal experiences may be incorporated into the course for reasons that are solely academic, just as instruction in grammar may be incorporated for students’ academic advancement. In other words, teachers rely on curriculum that they believe best improves students’ ability to master college courses and best helps them to become part of the mainstream student population. This goal, however, does not include exploration of the deeper human needs of students or of the role of the teacher-student relationship in addressing those deeper human needs.

#### *The Contextual Model’s Influence on Reflective Practice*

In regard to basic writing course curricula and theories that best encourage and support basic writing students, Baker (2003) says the basic writing program may continue

to be one in which teachers and scholars are far apart and at odds regarding course expectations, especially in writing courses many students regard as “hard, dirty, uninteresting” (p. 408). Despite differences in pedagogy, Gray-Rosendale’s (2006) work reveals that, in general, current teachers and scholars desire to reflect on the practices followed in the basic writing course and how those practices influence and affect students. Gray-Rosendale suggests that past scholarship shows a field that focused primarily on teaching techniques and minimized teacher-student relationships, the result of which was a gap between our “professed care” for basic writing students and “how little we really know about them” (p. 17).

While the contextual model encourages teachers and scholars to examine what basic writers do in the classroom and to reflect on what they do, Jinks and Lorschach (2003) say many teachers continue to follow the conflict model of teaching, which emphasizes teacher-centered, whole-class instruction. Jinks and Lorschach believe the key to transforming the teacher-centered classroom into a student-centered one lies in teachers’ motivating their students in ways that help them develop confidence in their writing abilities. Gray-Rosendale (2006) argues that too many teachers of basic writers do not know students apart from their academic role in their classroom; in fact many teachers fail to see students as people. In response, Adler-Kassner (2000) calls for the need for teachers to consider basic writing students as complex individuals and not just as students in their classroom.

Jinks and Lorschach (2003) suggest the transformation from the conflict model to the contextual model in the basic writing classroom can best occur when teachers help students improve self-efficacy. Efficacy refers to the sense of confidence we have to

perform a particular task; in other words, students' belief about their abilities influences their performance. If teachers motivate students by using tools of efficacy, students will become "dynamic, highly influential players in the learning environment" (p. 113). This can be accomplished when teachers re-think what happens in the classroom and attempt to understand students' individual abilities so they may better achieve academically.

Maxson's (2005) efforts to improve students' self-efficacy involve assignments that ask students to play with academic language. In one assignment, students translate a passage of academic writing into slang of their choice; in this way students are granted opportunities to deflate the pretension of academic discourse—and in the process, present their writing using their own critical voice. He cites one student in a basic writing class who translated a portion of the Declaration of Independence as: "Dis nation we be in right now is where da freedom was born and that da government of da peeps, by da peeps and for da peeps will not go away from earth" (p. 24). These assignments showcase the difference between students' informal language and the formal language of the academy and allow students to develop a writing process which begins with informal language and progresses to academic language.

Maxson's (2005) curriculum supports scholarship by Graff (1995), Traub (1993), Henning (1991) and Shor (2001) that suggest that requiring basic writing students to join the academy's discourse community is unjust because they cannot identify with it; instead, students should be introduced to the elements of difference, multiculturalism, conflict and struggle, as well as be exposed to the structure of power of Western culture so they may understand what is at stake in learning to adapt academic vocabularies. Maxson's curriculum allows students to have authority in working through the layers of

meaning of a text. He believes that movement from informal to formal language can occur only when we start at the very fundamental stage and then work from that point.

Another method to build qualities of efficacy and reflection is through a basic writing curriculum centered on service learning—if it considers the basic writer's experiences as central to the curriculum. Based on their research on service learning in composition pedagogy, Kincaid and Sotiriou (2004) claim that the contextual model requires a change in the way teachers and scholars typically think of service learning. The authors argue that service learning generally occurs in situations where students are in positions of privilege assisting persons who are disadvantaged in their literacy abilities and who often have no ties to the institution. Kincaid and Sotiriou (2004) believe service learning is best applied in situations where there is no hierarchy or power imbalance; the goal is “to foster a sense of commonality between mentor and mentee” so that relationships can develop and meaningful learning can occur (p. 252). Yet scholarship on service learning focuses on the service given by students as part of the course curriculum; scholarship does not suggest that service learning should include teachers' service to students in the basic writing classroom.

Kincaid and Sotiriou (2004) explain the service learning program they developed in which basic first year writing students were matched with ESL learners, all enrolled at Los Angeles City College, in order to create a reciprocal concept of service-learning. Based on their teaching experiences, the authors report increases in grammar skills, writing development and discussion capabilities in both English and ESL students, which suggests that service learning curriculum enhances formal writing. They suggest that

establishing academic mentoring partnerships encourages both sets of students to scrutinize their work more carefully.

Davi (2006) supports service learning pedagogy and believes in its effectiveness in developing not only writing skills, but also in building awareness of diversity and multicultural issues. Davi teaches basic writing to students, many of whom are from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds, at a four-year business college. Davi believes that incorporating a service learning component to academic assignments will improve students' critical thinking, reading and writing skills. This improvement increases students' self-confidence as writers and as contributing members of the community and college. Through their participation in service learning projects that include working with struggling elementary students, basic writing students examine issues of race, class and gender in the context of education. Davi says this examination can "play a significant role in their academic growth" (p. 73).

Davi's (2006) service learning curriculum supports the scholarship of Burnham (2001) and Rose (1989), who say that student-centered writing opportunities promote the psychological, social, political and spiritual development of the writer, which in turn fosters individual consciousness and social behavior. When students are given opportunities to alternate between the roles of student and of teacher-mentor, they can reflect on their own negative elementary and high school experiences and begin to recognize their academic potential. The service learning component allows students who have experienced oppression to occupy a new and empowering position. Davi believes reflecting and critiquing past academic experiences as well as new ones move students toward greater awareness of their own value.

Yet Kraemer (2005) argues against service learning pedagogy in general and in the basic writing program specifically because such a curriculum misuses students' abilities and fails to introduce students to academic discourse. In other words, the structure of service learning curriculum does not follow a contextual model, Kraemer believes. He suggests that students in basic writing classes would be better served by focusing on learning academic discourse rather than writing for service learning projects because a curriculum in formal writing helps students meet the standards of the academy.

Kraemer gives the example of a service learning curriculum he integrated in the lower division and upper division writing courses he taught to determine its value for students, as well as to tie the work done in the classroom to the surrounding community. He ultimately determined that while service learning assignments garner student interest, they remove opportunities for students to address their core writing weaknesses and place students in a type of servant role where they serve as non-paid free-lance information workers. In other words, Kraemer suggests that service-learning curriculum may contribute to keeping basic writers in their marginalized status because teachers devote less time to helping students learn academic discourse, which, Kraemer claims, "is the best service writing teachers can provide" (p. 108). Kraemer believes that while writing for service learning assignments encourages students to do good deeds, in the process, students themselves do very little seeking, describing and understanding.

Another method used in teaching practices to develop student confidence and reflection in accordance with the contextual model is a renewed focus on teacher responses to student writing. Edgington (2004) argues that greater student involvement is needed to influence teacher responses to student texts so that teachers and students can

collaborate in the teaching and learning process. In his study of six students in an introductory college writing class who he asked to respond to three different types of teacher comments (marginal comments, personal letter/end comments and conferences), Edgington found overall that students in the study preferred response formats that provided more elaborate comments, such as those given in one-to-one conferences, because the format allowed them to have a voice in the revision process and to gain clarity on teacher comments. The purpose of his study was to use student reactions to recognize strengths and weaknesses of teacher comments.

Boynton (2003) supports the notion that one-to-one conferences with students are most effective in building students' confidence and writing ability because they allow the teacher and student to focus specifically on the student's work in a private space. Conferencing also provides more focused feedback about a student's writing than paper comments do. Ultimately, Boynton says conferencing helps ensure that students' needs are at the forefront of the meeting.

Helmbrecht (2007) believes when teachers make evaluative comments on student papers, they need to keep in mind students' perspectives of their comments. Using one basic writer's experience with teacher evaluative comments as the basis for her study, she concludes that students become angry and hurt over comments that reinforce the mindset that basic writing students are poor/bad/struggling writers. One teacher wrote this comment on a students' paper: "For a thoughtful person, your writing exhibits an almost stunning thoughtlessness" (p. 309). Another teacher's comment described the student's logic as being "slippery as spit" (p. 310). Both comments show how teachers may assert their authority in negative ways. The central problem, Helmbrecht believes, is that

teachers hold students to high discourse expectations, yet they fail to meet their own professional standards. One teacher who supports a collaborative learning environment commented on a student's paper, "This is the worst sentence I have ever read. Did you actually think when you wrote this?" (p. 314). To avoid this disconnect, Helmbrecht argues for critical reflection as a vital element of evaluation so that teachers can identify and address error in constructive ways. Without doing so, students' confidence may be shattered. Rather, evaluative comments should validate and encourage students' self-awareness in their writing.

Malesic (2006) further emphasizes the need for teachers to reflect on the identities of their students in order to better understand their work as basic writers. Malesic raises the issue of student plagiarism in a basic writing class and concludes that students can overcome their reliance on plagiarism when teachers help them discover what makes a piece of writing "good work" and how that differentiates between "bad work" (p. C3). Baker (2003) also takes up this issue; she, like Malesic, argues that the relationship between teachers and students is critical to the effectiveness of the work they as students—and we as teachers—produce. She suggests that if teachers want to "cure," or at least try to understand, student boredom or apathy, they must consider the effectiveness of their teaching methods. The course ultimately is about the relationship between teachers and students, not about course materials, Baker insists. Through self-study teachers can learn to remove themselves from the center of the learning process so students gain confidence in developing writing abilities on their own. Ultimately, Baker says, "we can only solve problems in our classrooms with our students' help" (p. 407). Baker believes that students can best influence course curricula when they have reflected



on their own work as writers and have concluded what their writing needs are so that teachers can best help them achieve academic success.

Teachers and scholars point to models of curricula that help basic writing students to gain ownership of their writing and to become comfortable with the act of writing, but the overall goal of the course continues to be academic success. In this way, the relationship between teacher and students does not extend beyond course content to include deeper emotional bonds that encourage the full development of students.

### *Overview of Shifts in Teaching Basic Writing*

Significant shifts within the past decade in the structure of the basic writing program, in the theories that shape basic writing curricula, and in reflective practices of basic writing teachers and students are a result of teachers and scholars following a contextual model, with its emphasis on valuing students' personal and academic experiences, rather than a conflict model that considers basic writers as deficit students. Yet Gray-Rosendale (2006) cites three significant limitations of the new model: scholars and teachers still may define the basic writer according to a deficit theory (conflict) model because they have not applied newer theories to their classrooms; the contextual model may place too much burden on students to make basic writing effective when teachers assign writing that requires them to reflect extensively on their experiences; one group of student voices, actions and perspectives are at risk of being privileged while other groups of student voices are marginalized.

These limitations call us to further reflect on how the contextual model should continue to advance, but, in the meantime, it is important to note the value of this

evolving instructional model that has called teachers and scholars to new ways of thinking about basic writers and how that forms basic writing programs, course curricula, and the teaching and learning process. The shift from the conflict model to the contextual model is monumental in its movement toward more authentic conversations about who we are as teachers and learners and how our students are impacted by these insights. Scholarship in the field proves that how we view the basic writing program and all that it entails is not the same; in fact, the changes in the field of basic writing are historic and significant. These changes have led to a stronger sense of who our basic writing students are and of our own mission in moving students toward educational and personal growth.

But we have not come far enough in our own movement toward understanding the emotional and spiritual aspects of the work we do, of the intimacy required in establishing solidarity with our students. Current scholarship on basic writing pedagogy reveals sources that are rich in curriculum development but that provide less insight into the emotional and spiritual aspects of the teaching and learning paradigm (Adler-Kassler, 2000; Gray-Rosendale, 2006; Darabi, 2006; Yood, 2005; Soliday, 2003; Gleason, 2006). Can learning how to incorporate compassion into our interactions with our basic writing students help us to gain greater awareness of what motivates our students to learn? Can a curriculum shaped with interiority in mind allow us to participate to a greater degree in our students' flourishing? Is it necessary to enter into our own inward confusion to determine what we teach students and how we teach them? I believe we need to unravel this emotional piece of the teaching and learning paradigm in order to determine the value of teaching writing as an internal exercise. We must also consider the worth of following pedagogy that interweaves critical thinking with lived experience.

## CHAPTER 4

### PEDAGOGY OF LOVE: TEACHERS' AND SCHOLARS' PERSPECTIVES

My intention in this chapter is to infuse examples of teachers' experiences with basic writing students into the scholarship on emotion and spirit in order to gain deeper insight into the issue of teaching with love. These examples are generally based on my knowledge of experiences of various teachers at the institution where I teach; they are also based on the experiences of teachers at nearby institutions who I interviewed last spring. I was granted IRB approval to conduct these interviews. While this study is not data driven, I use the interviews and stories as examples throughout the chapter to contribute to a more thoughtful understanding of the relationship between teachers and their basic writing students and how those relationships may influence a pedagogy of love as I envision it.

#### *Refining a Pedagogy of Love: An Emphasis on Compassion*

Perhaps the difficulty in awakening the emotional and spiritual aspects of our teaching so that we might teach from a pedagogy of love may lie in the vast diversity of the basic writing student population and our attitudes toward that population. While Rose (1989) so aptly discusses this marginalized segment of students on college campuses, he does so with a sympathetic understanding of their educational obstacles and experiences. Freire (1970) envisions the potential of those who are oppressed and works to help them out of oppression. hooks (2003) believes nurturing classroom relationships draws students out of their insecurities about the learning process and into engagement in their own growth and achievement. Rose, Freire and hooks center their pedagogies on the

notion that students in their past were not given the necessary educational opportunities to thrive, and shifting the way teachers think and act toward underprepared students will result in their academic and psychological flourishing. The key to a pedagogy of love from a Rosian, Freirian, hooksian perspective is upholding the human dignity of underprepared students in order to unleash their potential. To do so requires compassion, or the active nurturing of connectedness in our teacher-student relationships (Purpel, 1989). Purpel (1989) says compassion “nourish[es] and enrich[es] what is best in us” (p. 165) so that we, along with our students, can facilitate a world “of love, justice, and joy” (p. 10).

The Christian Brothers also believe education that embraces a pedagogy of love through the act of compassion can be the best means by which students reach their human potential because compassion encourages an atmosphere of inclusion and respite for students (Mann, 2008). Perhaps an ideal example of this mindset is Brother Daniel, a former university president and an avid swimmer who swam laps each morning at 5 with the university swim team. Brother Daniel had a desire to serve students and a belief in their potential, which was evident in the way he talked to them. “During the beginning of your first semester here, teachers are hosts and students are guests,” he explained to my classroom of basic writing students when he spoke as part of a panel presentation. “But by the end of your first semester here, you will have become hosts along with the teachers and will have achieved a sense of belonging that will help you make a stand on issues you disagree with and embrace the qualities of your campus that you believe in. You will have ownership in your university.” Brother Daniel believes that a Christian Brothers’ education would transform students from consumers of knowledge to producers

of knowledge, a key expressivist tenant. Perhaps more than that, he was convinced that education had to be emotional and spiritual in order to be transformative. The Christian Brothers believe that only when questions of faith are integrated into discussions of education can students become “whole human beings” who believe they can “make the world a better place” (Mann, 2008). In other words, the core of the Christian Brothers mission is to nurture the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of their teaching so that students “may have life to the full” (Lasallian Spiritual Vision, 2008). Teacher-student relationships that develop from compassion are ones that have become intertwined to the point that significant change can occur.

The key to understanding the Lasallian ideal of compassion, or “teaching minds and touching hearts,” is acknowledging the importance of an emphasis on teacher-student relationships. As a religious order that follows Catholic social teaching, The Christian Brothers believe loving relationships are ones in which teachers nurture a sense of hospitality and inclusiveness in the classroom to the point that teachers become “brother and sister with students and with one another as educators” (Short, 2007, p. 3). Intellectual and psychological flourishing results when teachers and students are each others’ “brothers’ and sisters’ keepers” and both have a stake in student growth and achievement. According to Rolheiser (1999), working for social justice involves acknowledging that all human beings, equally, are responsible to protect the dignity of everybody and everything (p. 175). Upholding the human dignity of both teacher and students becomes fundamental to the educational process.

### *Complexities of the Compassionate Ideal*

But even the Christian Brothers acknowledge that a pedagogy of love, in which teachers compassionately reach out to students in order to build dignified, loving relationships, may be an ideal rather than a common practice for some Lasallian educators. In his “Pastoral Letter 2000,” former Superior General John Johnston expressed his concern that non-religious educators at Lasallian schools and universities might be enacting a “watered down version” of the Christian Brothers’ mission that is “paternalistic” to students because it does not fully endorse the spiritual aspect of teaching (Short, 2007, p. 4). In other words, teachers may not embrace the notion that teaching is an apostolic ministry in which the teaching and learning process transforms students intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The Christian Brothers believe the act of teaching is a spiritual act, and teachers who do not possess the love of benevolence, or the selfless love of another person for that person’s own sake, for that person’s own good (Hardon, 1980), are not fully incorporating the Christian Brothers’ charism into their classrooms. Loving students through compassionate nurturing requires that teachers are fully invested in the pedagogy—yet the Christian Brothers may not realize how difficult and complex loving students can be when, for whatever reason, relationships between teacher and students go wrong.

Investing in a pedagogy that calls teachers to consider more than academics in the classroom, to consider students’ emotion and spirit as more valuable than intellect, may be a convoluted ideal that requires too much effort from lay teachers who have not devoted their lives to a religious ideal. An example of this complexity may be seen in one college writing teacher who has taught students for more than 15 years and whose

experiences with nurturing emotion and spirit with students caused her significant anguish. Call her Mary. Mary received rave evaluations from students and high marks from administrators for the close bond she easily established with students in the classroom. Students, forming a line outside her office door on most afternoons, were eager to receive her feedback on their papers and to hear her insights about life. She made them feel special, loved, cared for. But that changed six years ago when one student, Derek, to whom she was especially close, committed suicide in his dorm room right before final exam week began. The tragedy left her shattered. “I know I could have saved him,” she told me after the memorial Mass held on campus in his honor. “If only I would have known he was so troubled.” Teachers had not recognized any signs that signified Derek’s disturbed emotional state, yet Mary took his loss hard, perhaps because she had become too attached to an idealized vision of her role as teacher. She pulled back from students and from colleagues and began a slow decline that disconnected her from the Lasallian mission of compassion and service to the point that she became intolerant of student irresponsibility and weakness. It seemed that when Mary’s romantic ideal of teacher-student relationships shattered, she closed herself off from deep emotional connection to avoid another shock.

Over the past few years, some of Mary’s end-of-semester student evaluations have been below average, and a typical semester involves Mary dismissing a student from class for insubordination. Mary had experienced the positive results from nurturing her students, yet when her students, for whatever reason, could not achieve and grow, she took it as a personal failure and discarded the Lasallian educational ideals and adopted a “watered down version” that minimized the risk that love can bring. While Mary

represents watered down teaching in the sense that she developed relationships with her students that were at least in part based on self-interest, it would be naïve of me not to admit that there are real problems we have to consider when we speak of the very human issues surrounding love and of the difficulty in sorting out what is self-love and what is love for students' own good. Perhaps because of this difficulty, we cannot place ourselves in a position where we judge teachers on the value of their emotional connection to students. The complexity of our teaching experiences cannot be contained easily in a dissertation, and the reason we cannot simply explain away this complexity is because we are dealing with emotional issues, a territory where our motivations are complicated and answers are unclear. I do not propose to be able to present people in their full complexity; I only tell these stories to give attention to important issues so they can be discussed.

Teachers may also adopt a “watered down version” of a pedagogy of love because they become overwhelmed by students' significant lack of basic academic skills. They may avoid the emotional and spiritual aspects of teaching because the intellectual side of teaching is so ominous. Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary* speaks specifically to teachers who struggle with a sense of discouragement in their academic interactions with basic writing students. In fact, Rose's text acknowledges that avoiding emotion and spirit in the classroom is understandable when students' academic skills overwhelm us. He shows us how easy and tempting it is to focus on students' weaknesses while overlooking their strengths. At my own university, basic writing teachers are generally so overwhelmed by students' academic weaknesses that they either focus exclusively on teaching students the skills they lack, or they focus primarily on developing positive



teacher-student relationships in the hopes that students will feel comfortable in the academic setting and, as a result, grow in their desire to learn.

Rose also talks about students who feel like they are on the sidelines of the academic arena, invisible and insignificant—and he tells us why. He says we deny them access to the academic world because we do not know how to reach them. We do not know how to reach students who isolate themselves and “check out” of class because they feel disconnected and disengaged. We do not know how to reach “the least, the last and the lost,” as Brother William Mann calls students who have been limited in their opportunities to attain their academic potential. We yearn to teach students who are “wide-eyed, full of desire, simultaneously fretful and joyous” (p. 67), but often we open the door to a classroom where students watch as the clock ticks slowly, and we ourselves become disconnected and disengaged.

An example of how students’ academic weakness can lead to emotional disconnection can be seen in the example of Sharon, a teacher of basic writing students for almost 30 years at public universities and currently a teacher of basic writing at a public institution near the university where I teach. Sharon has never connected to the emotional and spiritual aspects of teaching because of the overwhelming lack of basic writing skills of entering freshmen. “They can’t put sentences together,” she said. “They can think it through, but there’s a disconnect between thinking it through and then writing it.” She explained that because of this disconnect, she found that she had to repeat her instruction often, and she often felt helpless and frustrated because students could not seem to master certain issues in writing and structure. Many basic writing students hand in writing assignments that are incomprehensible or the meaning is lost, she explained.

“You just say to yourself, ‘oh, boy’,” Sharon said, noting that she often feels overwhelmed and saddened by students’ lack of skills. “Teaching basic writing is heavy for me to get my brain wrapped around because there are so many areas that students struggle.” Sharon has become so enmeshed in teaching skill sets that the emotional aspect of teaching is passed over.

Like Sharon, we over-use the academic aspect of our teaching in an attempt to connect with and engage students with whom we emotionally struggle. This avoidance of emotion and spirit causes us to teach with ambiguity, or what Kirvan (1999) calls “half a heart” (p. 155). In other words, we cannot fully understand our students’ needs when we cultivate timidity in our classrooms, a timidity that prevents us from fully opening up emotionally to our students while keeping us from shutting students off completely. Twelfth century Catholic nun Hildegard of Bingen talks about human apathy that prevents us from acting with passion, acting with a clear stand and firm commitment to those we teach. She says, “We have not/surrendered our lives to bloodless evil,/ but neither are we/ in fiery pursuit of goodness./ We stare into an abyss/ so deep that we cannot glimpse its bottom,/ and at the same time raise our eyes to/ mountain tops/ that are unreachable./ And we stand between them/ wavering, unsettled and uncommitted” (Kirvan, p. 154). We spend our days and drown our energy trying to attend to the significant intellectual needs of our students, which keeps us from witnessing students’ deeper human potential. In our avoidance of becoming too overwhelmed by student needs and too disappointed by their lack of skills, we lose the opportunity to pursue fully with our students their goals of achievement. Instead, our avoidance and aversion maintains a conciliatory position; we move to the center, a place of certainty and

moderation where we cannot reach close enough to fully embrace our students nor far enough to discard them. Hildegard of Bingen replies to our apathy and says, “We are like mild, soft winds that blow/ but bring no nourishment to any living thing” (Kirvan, p. 158). We ignore the emotion required of teaching at our own, and our students’, risk.

When we ignore the emotion and spirit in our interactions with our students, Hurlbert and Blitz (1991) say our writing instruction can become limiting and rigid. While the act of writing involves “turmoil, uncertainty, and discomfort” (p. 1), we expect our students to write according to a programmatic standard that serves the purpose of helping students acquire useful, marketable writing skills. Formulaic writing instruction that sanitizes writing to a specific order results in the loss of emotion in our teaching and our students’ writing. In essence, both teachers and students become entrenched in an impassive and detached classroom where oftentimes grammar instruction and sentence and paragraph level writing become center stage.

To further understand the attention given to grammar in the basic writing classroom, I provide the example of one college teacher who began teaching basic writing classes last year after 20 years of teaching Composition courses to freshman students. Dorothy spends the majority of class time on issues of comma splices, subject/verb agreement, and pronoun reference and agreement, as well as tense and voice because students lack these basic skills. “I’ve had to spend quite a bit of time on basic sentence structure. I’ve talked to other faculty about this, and we feel almost guilty teaching this basic stuff, but it’s almost impossible to do anything else until you’re sure everyone’s with you,” Dorothy explained. We limit student expression in our attempts to help them improve their skills, and in the process of assigning work that focuses on skill

improvement, we dismiss the elements of emotion and spirit in our basic writing classrooms and create a chasm between our students and ourselves that limits student, as well as our own, growth. Rose (1989) says that when we fail to recognize the complex backgrounds of underprepared students, many of whom grew up in depressed communities, we fail to see how their journey through “the top levels of the American educational system will call for support and guidance at many points along the way” (p. 47). An overemphasis on course content encourages us to judge students by the skills they lack rather than as complex human beings in need of affirmation, development and support.

Rolheiser (1999) says that the root of social injustice is a “huge, blind system that is inherently unfair” (p. 169). Teaching that overemphasizes course content in exchange for emotion and spirit actually may work against our duty and obligation to work for social justice in our education systems and specifically in our basic writing classrooms. Freire (1998) contends that we teachers are part of that blind system when we fail to understand our responsibility to aid students in their process of discovery; he says we must be “intrinsically connected” to students so that helping them to overcome psychological and intellectual obstacles is possible. Without this connection, Freire claims that we can set students back in their search; our “incompetence, poor preparation, and irresponsibility in our practice may contribute to their failure” (p. 33). Perhaps the aspect of the basic writing classroom that most causes us to maintain our blindness is students’ negative attitudes, which often drain us and cause us to feel beaten down. Teachers’ response to poor student attitudes can be seen in the example of one college writing teacher who began teaching basic writing students only a year ago at a public

college. Tammy was shocked by students' self-isolation and apparent lack of desire to develop their abilities. Teaching basic writing students is like "pulling teeth," she explained. "You ask them, 'What did you think of the material? What did you like about the reading?' They're like, 'You tell me.' It's almost like you have to open their heads and pour the information in." Perhaps because basic writing students tend to be guarded and isolated, they do not know how to ask questions about the material so that the information becomes substantive. "It just feels very exhausting to teach that," said Tammy.

Student isolation hides their feelings of insecurity about themselves and their abilities, yet when we fail to affirm students, fail to nurture them, we allow this sense of inadequacy to remain as a significant roadblock to their achievement in the basic writing course. This often plays out in class attendance. My interview with Carol, who has taught basic writing students for a decade at a public college and considers teaching her life's work, provides insight into the issue of students' lack of investment in the class. Carol said as many as 60 percent of basic writing students fail to attend class regularly and as a result fail the course. "These are students who don't come to class and don't do the work. Sometimes when you see the high failure rates, your first response is, 'What did the teacher do wrong?' But these are the students who are failing themselves," said Carol. She explained that every semester, students in the course try to coast their way through and not turn in assignments. Carol believes students must be held accountable for the coursework, and those who are not responsible must pay the consequence of failure. "The students who show an interest and who are actively involved and want to learn, that's who I'm there for," said Carol.

Yet Freire (1998) asks us to dare to look at our teaching practices to determine if we contribute to student failure by allowing fear to take hold of the classroom. Freire says the issue in teaching apprehensive, apathetic, insecure students is “not allowing that fear to paralyze us, not allowing that fear to persuade us to quit, to face a challenging situation without an effort, without a fight” (p. 27). Yet we cannot take up the fight against fear without first loving our students and loving the act of teaching (Freire, 1998; hooks, 2003).

### *Compassionate Ideal and the Promotion of Educational Achievement*

The Christian Brothers refer to the love for students and the love for teaching as *association* (Johnston, 2007), which they believe must guide curriculum development. In association, teachers unite with their students to help them overcome their poverty, whether that poverty is intellectual, psychological or spiritual. Through association, the deep sense of unity with students, teachers ask how curriculum can enact social change for students so that students can overcome their marginalization in order to interact fully and effectively in society. The Christian Brothers believe this is best accomplished through cooperative, not competitive classrooms in which the more capable students help less capable students. In *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (originally published in 1720) written by John Baptist de La Salle, the order’s founder, he instructs teachers of young students to place weaker students next to more advanced ones so that weaker students progress while advanced students learn through mentoring (1720/1996, p. 107). In this way, intellect through academic rigor is developed and relationships are formed.

Freire (1998) contends that in addition to nurturing and best practice as central components of the classroom, stimulation of curiosity must also be considered in curriculum development. Curriculum that focuses solely on skill sets limits opportunities for students to realize that education is the means through which they can overcome their marginalization and enter the academic and social arenas. Purpel (1989) contends that teaching skill sets that over-focus on superficial or technical concerns can, in fact, be harmful to students because “it distracts us from the responsibility to engage in serious dialogue about how the educational process can facilitate a world of love, justice, and joy” (p. 10). In this regard, the Christian Brothers educational model put into practice at my university fails to consider best practice in shaping the basic writing course curriculum, although teachers at the university would contend that teaching skill sets to students who lack those skills should be considered as academically rigorous. There remains a disconnect between the Christian Brothers’ pedagogical philosophy, with its foundation of love and service to students in addition to the promotion of justice education “that helps students see a richness and depth to education that was not glimpsed before” (Mann, 2008), and its practice. In this regard, the fact that the university where I teach is operated by the Christian Brothers does not guarantee that its teachers are adequately trained in either justice education or the Lasallian charism.

The common goal that Freire and the Christian Brothers hold is that education is most transformative when it does not favor the gifted, but instead promotes the success of the less gifted (Tristano, 2006). Yet instruction for the “less gifted” that reduces knowledge to grammar and word choice does not ask students to envision their own human potential. Curriculum that focuses on “justice education,” which aids students in

developing social consciences that shape their awareness of themselves and their relationship to others in the world, is the most valid way students can overcome their own, and others', suffering (Johnston, 2007; Freire, 1970; 1998). As I have explained throughout this dissertation, while the Christian Brothers' focus on justice education has been adopted in some theology courses, most freshman seminars, one introduction to philosophy course and several global studies courses at my university, justice education has not found its way to the university's writing courses. The justice education theory expounded by the Christian Brothers has not been adopted into practice in writing courses for those students most marginalized on our campus because only a smattering of teachers at the university adhere to justice education pedagogy, none of whom is part of the English department. In other words, teachers who believe in the value of justice education center their courses on issues of social justice; however, most teachers at the university have not been exposed to or trained in justice education pedagogy.

In theory, assessment of curriculum according to the Christian Brothers must have as its goal the welfare of each student. The Christian Brothers contend that justice education, education that has a pedagogy of love at its core, must assess student knowledge not only based on their accomplishment of cognitive goals, but also based on their progress in comparison to themselves, or what the Christian Brothers call "self-emulation," the process of student achievement based on each student's individual goals and motivations (Poutet, 1997, p. 160). De La Salle (1720/1996) suggests that teachers should assess student progress in ways that do not discourage students "but should somehow advance them, encourage them, [so that they are] satisfied with even the little progress that they make" (p. 149). These two characteristics, a sensitivity to students'



emotional and spiritual needs and an upholding of academics, become the hallmarks of Lasallian assessment. Assessment that separates students and teachers by an overemphasis on measurement and objectivity (as seen in standardized testing, for example) reduces individual creativity and communal relationship (Tristano, 2006) and does not advance students' holistic development. Rose (1989) agrees. He says that "in the name of excellence, we test and measure [students].

. . . The sad thing is that though we strain to see, we miss so much. All students cringe under the scrutiny, but those most harshly affected, least successful in the competition, possess some of our greatest unperceived riches" (p. xi). Assessment that follows a pedagogy of love, according to a compassionate standard, refuses to compartmentalize the individual student based only on objective assessment of the material learned (quantification), focuses on student progress rather than student weakness and failure, and encourages cooperative learning among students of all abilities (Tristano, 2006).

This perspective of assessment was fully embraced by Brother Phil, who held his Global Issues students to high scholastic standards. Brother Phil typically wore white athletic shoes to help him scurry down the halls to his classes as talking to students in his office usually prevented him from reaching the classroom on time. He demanded that his students work hard to learn the course material that was usually beyond their grasp. This was most evident with Jessica, a polite but under-achieving student who was ashamed to ask for extra help, although it was evident that she would not pass the course without it. After Brother Phil gave her a failing grade on an essay, she arrived at his office and quietly asked him to sign a form that would formally drop her from the course. He refused. Instead, he met with Jessica daily to talk about the issues surrounding the

topic. He helped her plan an outline and to locate appropriate research, and he provided regular feedback on her writing. After multiple revisions on that essay and the three remaining essays for the course, Jessica passed the class with a “B.” More than that, she became a much stronger thinker and writer because Brother Phil saw and encouraged her potential to the degree that she began to see it in herself. Brother Phil embraced compassionate caring by fostering a deep sense of unity with students.

But what happens when students are not like Jessica or teachers are not like Brother Phil? When students are at times rude, unmotivated and immature? Is it reasonable to ask teachers to care deeply for students, to seek their welfare, to shape curriculum and assessment that advances students’ holistic growth, when students act in passive or aggressive ways toward teachers? The Christian Brothers’ assessment ideal, which promotes student achievement and students’ individual strengths, can become weakened or even unrealistic if teachers do not buy into a pedagogy that fully embraces students as they are, flaws and all. Perhaps it may be unrealistic to think that teachers who are disrespected by and weary of students are willing, or even capable, of developing curriculum and assessment that follows more subjective methods, and often colleges and universities seldom set goals to cultivate human caring and concern (Purpel, 1989, p. 41).

I learned of the difficulty in sustaining a caring and committed attitude toward disrespectful students through my interview with a college writing teacher who has taught basic writing students for almost two decades at a community college setting. In our interview, Jack said he tires more after each semester; he keeps hoping students will become more mature and responsible as they enter college, but instead he believes basic writing students are even more socially and intellectually behind than their predecessors.

“I shouldn’t have personally tolerated what I did in the courses sometimes,” said Jack.

“Students have been interruptive, have bad attitudes, are too outspoken, very immature. I thought, ‘They’re just wasting their money.’” Jack explained that basic writing students are often influenced by a leader of the class who sets the tone for the teaching and learning process. “Sometimes the students are just unruly; they want to get off topic and have fun. If one person in class is not feeling well and is just sitting there in their chair, everyone else shuts down. So you don’t know if you’re going to be having to pull teeth to get anything out of them or if it’s going to be just chaos. It’s just kind of day to day. It’s never predictable.” How do we expect teachers like Jack to respond when we ask them to teach in ways that access emotion and spirit, to develop curriculum that focuses on student achievement, and to assess student work in ways that promote student progress and esteem?

Is this a practical expectation of teachers when students are combative and do not want to be told what to do? “It’s frustrating because students don’t want to do the hard work. They say, ‘We have to read?’ ‘Yea, you have to read.’ And then writing. It’s tough to write. Anyone knows it’s a lot of revision, the first draft isn’t the final draft, and it’s very complex, but students don’t seem to want to make those choices,” Jack said. “I will give my all to students who are at a point in their life where they will accept what I have to offer. The teaching and structure I can provide, but the learning has to be theirs. If a student is not at the point where he or she is willing to make that bargain, I’m not a teacher who will call up a student and say, ‘Where are you today?’ That’s their responsibility. If they’re not there yet, that’s their issue.” It may be easy to understand why teachers shrink from individual students who are unwilling to meet them halfway,

yet a primary focus on individual failure tells students that their burdens are *their* problem and *they're* going to have deal with those burdens, which de-emphasizes classroom collaboration and interdependence. Purpel (1989) says that when we shut down our impulse to care, “we interfere with one of the very most precious essences of what it means to be human” (p. 42).

### *Illustrations of the Compassionate Ideal*

Responding with compassion to student ambivalence, derision and weakness perfectly expresses what a pedagogy of love is about. This embracing of students along with their failures and flaws, despite the challenge it brings us, is a sacred act specifically because we are willing to connect with those who others regard with disdain and to aid in their flourishing. In fact, Purpel (1989) says our vision of meaningful education must include emotional and spiritual involvement with our students so that the teaching and learning process can facilitate the highest good. I witnessed an ideal example of compassionate teaching in my interview with Cindy, a colleague at a public college who has devoted her ten year career to teaching writing, often to basic writing students. Cindy attempts to actualize students' potential in ways other teachers do not; she epitomizes Purpel's concept of providing “meaningful education” and stands apart from other teachers because she envisions students as human beings who possess great potential; she empathizes with their marginalized status and, like Brother Phil, she feels a deep sense of unity with her students. Cindy said, “It's such a feel-good time because they can see their growth, and so can I. I love teaching basic writing students as much as I love teaching anybody because when the light bulbs do go off and they do get motivated, it's exciting.

We talk about what it means to take advantage of this opportunity to claim your education and take charge of your life.” The essence of education, says Purpel (1989), is to provide students with critical tools of thinking and writing to enable them to participate in and understand their world.

Purpel’s (1989), Freire’s (1998), Rose’s (1989) and the Christian Brothers’ conceptions of education, conceptions which involve marginalized students in their own personal and psychological growth and which call teachers to connect to and care for students, require teachers to make serious commitments to students to share their burdens and make efforts to ease them. These educational models centered by a pedagogy of love have placed compassion at the heart because the very willingness to “suffer with” energizes our relationships with students and infuses intellectual rigor with a profound sense of nurturing. According to Purpel (1989), teaching with compassion allows us to embrace education as a means of change and an avenue where the important questions of human existence can be explored.

Rose (1989) provides examples of several teachers in his educational journey who connected in profound ways to their students through vivid acts of compassion that drew students to learning. He tells of Father Clint Albertson, whose questions about Shakespeare forced Rose to think carefully about language. Yet no matter how hard he tried, Rose said he could not understand the material. “The next day I would visit Father Albertson and tell him I was lost, ask him why this stuff was so damned hard. He’d listen and ask me to tell him why it made me so angry. I’d sputter some more, and then he’d draw me to the difficult passage, slowly opening the language up, helping me comprehend a distant, stylized literature, taking it apart, touching it” (p. 57). He tells of

round-faced Dr. Matzger, who “sat across from me and listened. . . . He encouraged me to talk, and I did” (p. 59). Rose recites passages of teachers whose sense of compassion touched him and moved him toward growth and achievement.

I provide the example of one college writing teacher whose motivation for teaching is based on a sense of compassion. For the past thirteen years, Lee has taught struggling students—“interesting students who have interesting lives”—at the community college level. Many of his students have worked through some type of addiction and are in recovery programs; still many others have been in abusive relationships or bad family situations or have suffered from poverty. Some students have escaped their country’s civil war. Lee tells of one student, a lost boy from Sudan, who escaped across the border and was forced to drink his own urine so he would not dehydrate. In his efforts to help alleviate their burdens, Lee tells his students that he “doesn’t want them to waste one minute in the class. I want them to learn.” He believes that if teachers can motivate students to read important work, write about issues, discuss ideas, and listen to other people’s ideas, teachers can “broaden students’ perspective of what it means to be an educated person and how to be an educable person.”

A significant part of Lee’s ability to connect with students, to care for them and treat them compassionately, is his own story of suffering. Lee tells his students of his own painful life story of growing up in Communist China and his harrowing experiences as a young Red Guard during China’s Cultural Revolution. He tells of the years throughout his childhood when education was banned and books were burned. He tells of his yearning to learn, his yearning to connect with ideas and the years it took to finally reach America where academic study would pave the way to a more fulfilling life. He

tells his story in order to motivate students to embrace their education as a means to reach their potential. He also encourages students who are unmotivated to quit school and work for two or three years at a job so they can learn to appreciate an education and establish goals for their lives. “I tell students if they really don’t want to learn, drop out. You don’t have to be here and suffer here. Eventually students will see that they don’t want to do factory work for the rest of their lives, and they want to come back. Education is valuable, and students have to have a desire to learn.” A significant part of Lee’s teaching is sharing with students his own experiences of writing. Lee, author of the book *Gang of One: Memoirs of a Red Guard* (2004), says that “when it comes to writing on my own, I am a slow learner, too. It took me seven years to write my book. It took me a long time to find my own voice. Many things I had to learn from scratch.” Perhaps the most valuable characteristic to teach students in the basic writing classroom is desire, said Lee, because students must see how education is useful to them. “At this point it’s a struggle to learn. They must start to see themselves down the road in their life.”

Lee’s classroom pedagogy legitimizes human relationships among teacher and students and nurtures student potential. Through acts of caring and compassion, students’ lived experiences are acknowledged and celebrated. Cindy, a colleague at a public college who was mentioned earlier, also relies on her own past experiences of teaching in China for four years to shape meaningful relationships with her students and to understand their marginalization. Cindy, who was regarded in China as the “foreign devil, the big nose, homecoming queen, town mascot, or the enemy, depending on who you asked,” did not fit into the Chinese culture and felt marginalized as a minority. “I have empathy for people who don’t fit in, who fall through the cracks, who are made to

feel marginalized because I know what that feels like,” Cindy explained. “I was also treated very well in my own town, much better than I probably deserved. So the level of generosity and nobility exhibited by ordinary Chinese toward me has really stuck with me to this day.” Cindy said her experiences of living in China and feeling insignificant and different made her “slower to judge basic writers” or demand that students meet certain academic standards, like being able to use a semi-colon correctly, “without first helping them process how their background and early literacy experiences have shaped them.”

By shaping curriculum that encourages students to talk, read and write about their own, and others’, experiences, Cindy helps basic writing students immerse themselves in writing and thinking. In this way, Cindy says she is able to convince students to believe that their voice matters. “I tell students that we’re a community of scholars; we’re going to make knowledge together. And I’m going to learn way more from you than I’m going to teach you. I will have learned more being in this class teaching you than you will learn from me. What does that tell a basic writer? It’s important that they can understand that they really matter.”

Cindy’s willingness to make allowances for students’ errors in order to encourage students’ cognitive and linguistic growth results in student transformation, from students on the margins of the academy to students who have gained significant confidence in their abilities. This transformation is achieved through a classroom centered in love. To help students achieve, “I think you have to care about them in a sincere way. I just love teaching, and I love learning about them,” Cindy said.



My interviews with other college writing teachers revealed specific instances in which teachers acted with compassion toward their students because of their own experiences of hardship. One such teacher is Mary Jo, who returned to graduate school at the age of 40 and for the past ten years has successfully taught basic writing students. Mary Jo concedes that her experiences in the Peace Corps, as well as her own financial and personal struggles, have given her greater insight into and compassion for basic writing students who often believe their problems are insurmountable. She tells of her experiences being a single parent and working two jobs, and she recalls her volunteer experiences working with women in the Dominican Republic who did not eat every day. “I realized that not everyone has a happy, middle class life,” said Mary Jo. She brings that understanding into the basic writing classroom so that she discovers the value of each student. “The more I teach, the more I understand that each student wants to be seen as an individual,” Mary Jo contends. “Even the quiet ones want to be noticed.”

Another teacher who spoke of his compassionate interactions in the classroom is a young teacher of basic writing students who is working on a Ph.D. degree. Joe believes that having life experiences that are similar to what basic writing students have gone through has helped him connect more significantly to students in their efforts to learn. “I was them,” Joe said. “I grew up in a very, very small community. I went to community college out of high school and had no idea about anything. I would characterize my socioeconomic status as theirs. I was no different. My interests were theirs when I was growing up. In lower economic situations, students tend to be much more fundamentalist in their religion. And I grew up with that, too. So besides being an avid reader, I wasn’t too much different from these students.”

Joe also talked about his feelings of inadequacy as a graduate student who was hired to do editing work for a senior level engineering class, an experience that helped him better realize the struggle basic writing students have with essay development. “These senior level engineering students would write 15 to 20 page essays, and they would give them to me to look at, and it was like reading a foreign language. It was so hard to work through sentence structure and paragraph structure and even the essay at large because I didn’t understand what they were talking about.” Joe believes that because he shares a background similar to many basic writing students, he is able to “approach students on their own terms.”

What Lee, Cindy, Mary Jo and Joe’s experiences of teaching with compassion tell us is that even at the extreme, when students and teachers are overwhelmed by education’s challenges and potential threats, loving students offers the best possibility for basic writing students to grow and achieve. They show us that their ability to help students move into unfamiliar territory in the classroom, into writing practices that are well beyond their command, is the result of understanding at a deep level the sense of marginalization that comes from feeling beaten down by a system that disregards their dignity and value as human beings. They show us that teaching with compassion may involve primarily the act of remembering the very human feeling of being perceived as unimportant. Compassionately loving may involve reminding ourselves of our own vulnerability when teaching our most vulnerable students.

Rose (1989) and Freire (1970; 1998) can understand this tie between our very human feelings of suffering and our profound need to alleviate others’ suffering. In his early educational journey, Rose was misidentified as a remedial student and spent years

in classrooms that truncated his potential. He has spent his professional life working with marginalized students and refusing to support teaching methods that suffocate their learning. Freire lost the comfort and financial stability of his middle class family during Brazil's economic crisis. He experienced the pangs of poverty and at the age of 11 vowed to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger and oppression. Rose and Freire's stories reveal that our deep sense of caring and compassion comes from our own yearning to care and be cared for (Noddings, 1984), and that when we become callous to these yearnings, we deny the meaningfulness of our teaching that nourishes and enriches that which is best in our students and ourselves.

What is original to the Christian Brothers education, and what is supported by the works of Rose (1989) and Freire (1970; 1998), is the invention of a system that teaches poor students well, that gives students skills to be productive in society, and that builds students' self-esteem in a society that ignores them (Tristano, 2006). Contradiction occurs when teachers at Christian Brothers institutions like the one where I teach do not practice fully the Christian Brothers' educational philosophy because they do not imbue in their classrooms the Christian Brothers' spirit of community "where love is dramatic and love confronts us" (Mann, 2008). There are no specific and well developed training guidelines in the Lasallian charism for teachers, nor are teaching expectations put in place that require the adoption of best practice curriculum in the classrooms, most notably pedagogy that emphasizes justice education. The value of the Christian Brothers education system is its foundation of love and its emphasis on compassion, which nurtures and deepens our motivation to learn and our commitment to knowledge and understanding (Purpel, 1989). This direction in education is of ultimate significance

because only through it can our teaching bring about change that helps students “see the world in a more full and extraordinary way” (Mann, 2008).

## CHAPTER 5

### THE COMPASSIONATE IDEAL

I attempt to accomplish in this chapter a clearer focus of a pedagogy of love by using a framework of compassion. I try to make sense of the complexity of teaching with love by clarifying its defining characteristics, and I make a call for future research in the field to encourage continued exploration of the issue of emotion and its role in our relationships with marginalized students. My desire is to open our questioning up to new levels of thought about teaching basic writing students.

#### *Meeting Students Where They Are*

The moment David stepped through the door of the room where I was to teach a PASS (Path to Academic SuccesS) writing skills class to freshman students, I predicted that his main motivation to be in school was to play basketball. Wearing bright red and white high tops and a white cap positioned sideways on his head, David sprawled out his lanky legs as he hunched over in his chair, his arms crossed in front of his red varsity basketball warm-up uniform. In his class journals he wrote about how he had grown up in a rough Chicago neighborhood where he lived with his grandparents, and basketball gave him a way out of struggle and toward a brighter future that an education could provide him.

In that same class, Chris lived a world apart from David, although they both claimed Chicago as their home. Sporting high-end brand name clothes and diamond studded earrings, Chris, like many students at the university where I teach, came from a background of privilege. News of his famous father arrived on campus even before Chris

did; the state's largest newspaper published an article on Chris's advent into college, virtually insuring that Chris's attempts at anonymity would backfire.

Kimberly, who sat next to Chris and David in the writing skills class, was raised on a family farm near a small agricultural town. She knew only the moral values taught to her by her close-knit Catholic community that shielded her from big city life. She was a Christian conservative who did not yet realize that the Lasallian value of inclusiveness embraced people of all walks of life, including the non-churched and those who were homosexual.

Pan and Ting were students from China who had been in America only for the past six months. They had not passed their entrance exams to prestigious universities in China, so they came to an American university where they could receive an education that would be esteemed by the people in their country. As a result of the slight language barrier, they kept to themselves and avoided contact with native-born students like Kimberly, Chris and David.

Vinnie was a second-year student who was repeating the writing skills class a third time. He had failed before as a result of poor attendance and significant personality issues with his teachers. An outburst in front of the class that included a strong verbal attack against the teacher led to his dismissal during his second semester on campus. Now Vinnie was back for a third and final try, and he was hoping a different teacher would be enough motivation for him to pass the course.

Poor attitudes, self-righteousness, avoidance, inflated egos, vulnerability, immaturity and weak writing skills all glared back at me the first day I opened the basic writing classroom door to St. Mary's Hall room 13, set my satchel on the bench, and

offered my first hello. Small voices responded, filled with a sense of both dread and hope at the same time. That first exchange reminded me that I had more to do with students' feelings of dread and hope than I realized or wanted; they looked to me as the person who either could see beyond their poor attitudes, self-righteousness, avoidance, inflated egos, vulnerability, immaturity and weak writing skills to uncover the treasure of potential hidden within—or could not.

I never wondered how they saw me, how I appeared to them on that first day when I marched to the front of the class and spoke their names aloud for the first time. I never asked myself how they must have felt when they read through the lengthy required course syllabus that spelled out rules and deadlines. I never thought about their homesickness or how they were coping after leaving a beloved family pet or separating from a childhood best friend. I never wondered how they adjusted to waiting in lines to eat cafeteria food on institutional trays after sitting around a family dining room table most of their lives. I did not think about their losses, their fresh opportunities, or their new relationships. In their text, *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*, Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) have also tried to deal with issues that students struggle with. Without consideration of these issues of struggle, the chairs in the classroom were filled simply with students I met with three times a week: students who were immature, who had poor social and academic skills, who seemed spoiled and out of touch, whose weaknesses glared at me more strongly than their attributes.

Yet through this research I have learned that “meeting students where they are” and finding something admirable in them, as Noddings (1984, p. 121) contends, is a requirement of teaching with care. Uncovering the treasure of possibility within each

student is necessary, is essential, in order to teach well. I did not give credit to David, who, even though he was kicked out of the university because he physically harmed another young man in a fight on campus, made his grandparents proud for attempting college, something no one in his family had ever done. I never acknowledged the anguish Chris endured because of a learning disability that made it painstakingly difficult for him to read. And even though Kimberly had written about growing up with an alcoholic mother, I did not fully understand the courage it took her to leave her conservative, small town in order to start building a life for herself. I did not appreciate the intense effort Pan and Ting gave to learning to write English, nor did I value the fact that they never complained about the significant number of hours they devoted each week to finishing their writing assignments. I did not understand fully that Vinnie's deviant behavior masked his hatred of school, nor did I understand fully the strength it took him to finally end his suffering by admitting to his parents that his dream was to attend culinary school and not to get a four-year business degree. Until I recognized and admitted David's, Chris's, Kimberly's, Pan's, Ting's, and Vinnie's admirable qualities, I had difficulty in teaching them to move beyond their flaws and limitations. Noddings tells us that when we meet students "as they are" and notice what is good in students, what is admirable in them, they "may find the strength to become even more admirable. [They] are confirmed" (p. 179).

Reading Noddings (1984) has also taught me that when we confirm students we place them at the center of our teaching, which is essential because students "are infinitely more important than the subject matter" (p. 176). Noddings' statement means that Chris's learning disability, Kimberly's background of abuse, David's feelings of



exclusion, Vinnie's dread of school, and Pan and Ting's tireless efforts mattered more than the content I taught them in the course. In fact, Noddings teaches us that students are not only the priority of our teaching, but that they are the essential priority, the core; they do not just matter, they matter "infinitely" more than any other aspect of our classrooms.

The emotional and spiritual elements of our teaching, then, must take priority over the intellectual element because only in this way, by upholding relationships over content, can teachers optimally influence students, as Noddings (1984) explains (p. 177), so students are able to embrace themselves and their learning. In other words, how students generally feel about themselves—as students, as friends, as physical beings—contributes to their "enhancement or diminution" as human beings. Noddings says that if the pedagogy we follow in our classrooms diminishes our students, it must be rejected; if the pedagogy we follow neither enhances nor diminishes our students, then that pedagogy must be set aside or, at the least, approached with caution. Teachers must follow only pedagogy that enhances students as whole human beings. The Christian Brothers describe this as "teaching minds and touching hearts." This research has called this pedagogy a pedagogy of love, a concept articulated by bell hooks (2003) which calls teachers to nurture an emotional connection with their students alongside best academic practice and which calls teachers to respond to student weakness with compassion.

I have learned that the field of basic writing scholarship has supported a wide variety of pedagogy that both diminishes and enhances student development as well as pedagogy that has minimal influence on student growth. Gray-Rosendale (2006) contends that basic writing scholarship over the past decade reveals a major shift in how

teachers respond to and teach students. She says scholars and teachers of basic writers have placed the care and concern of students at the forefront of their teaching and scholarship, which has led to the development of curriculum that considers basic writing students' needs and that engages students in active learning (p. 9).

Yet basic writing scholarship reveals methodologies that center on teaching students the “foundational skills” of grammar and sentence-level instruction (Rustick, 2007) because teachers believe these methods will help basic writers catch up to their mainstream peers. In fact, many teachers of the basic writing course teach grammar lessons throughout the semester because they believe it helps students analyze and improve their writing (Machado, 2005). While scholars and teachers (Rustick, 2007; Blaauw-Hara, 2007; Machado, 2005) believe teaching grammar instruction should be the course's core methodology and consider it best practice because it helps students overcome significant weaknesses in grammar and sentence structure, they do not consider that formalist grammar instruction can be psychologically harmful to basic writing students. Lynch-Binieck (2005) and Fearn and Farnan (2007) suggest that formalist grammar instruction can result in psychological harm to basic writing students because if they do not master a language ideal, they feel less confident in their ability to communicate.

On another point, teachers and scholars differ on what constitutes best practice in writing pedagogy. Some believe basic writing students should write about their lived experiences to enhance their voice and to improve their attitude toward writing (Corkery, 2005), while others support the value of assigning both personal writing and academic writing in the basic writing course (Soliday, 1994). Still others believe personal writing

has no place in the basic writing classroom because it does not sufficiently challenge the abilities of basic writing students (Del Principe, 2004), so teachers must teach exercises in skill sets that engage students in analytical reasoning (Lunsford, 2003).

I have learned from reading scholarship in the basic writing field that teachers' and scholars' conception of best practices is contested. Yet Gray-Rosendale (2006) contends that what we choose to teach students is not as important as why we choose to teach it; in other words, the care and concern of students is undeniably the most important element in developing course curricula. We make decisions on what we teach based on what we believe will enhance student growth. In this sense, when teachers desire to improve students' sense of self and well-being alongside their academic development, they choose a pedagogy that they believe enhances students and does not diminish them or have minimal impact on them. Teachers' care for students leads them to choose methodology that they believe follows best practice.

### *Disjunct Between Caring and Compassionate Ideal*

The viewpoint of English department colleagues at the Christian Brothers university where I teach parallels Gray-Rosendale's (2006) conceptions to a certain extent. Colleagues believe that because they care for the well-being of students, they are choosing curriculum that will best enhance their academic development. Preferred practice for most teachers of the basic writing course at my university centers on teaching grammar exercises from a workbook and providing sentence-level and paragraph-level instruction so that students will learn to overcome their weaknesses in language usage. This choice of curriculum is supported by the department, which believes good teaching

revolves primarily around the teacher's attitude of care toward students. Department members believe that as a result of their consideration of students' needs, teachers will adopt instruction methods that help students academically progress—even though they have not read scholarship in the field that addresses the strengths and weaknesses of teaching methodologies. Their perception of best practice, then, is based on their own sense of who basic writing students are, what basic writing students need, and what textbooks tell them is appropriate methodology—and not on what is considered best practice in the field of composition.

I offer the example of a college writing teacher who has taught basic writing to students for the past twenty years at my university to showcase this viewpoint. Call him Rob. Rob has excellent rapport with students, who see him as their guide and mentor and as the bearer of standards they aspire to meet. There is no doubt that he cares deeply for his students; he receives consistently stellar student evaluations each year, and students keep in touch with him long after the course has ended. Yet his choice of methodology has not changed over these twenty years. He continues to require students to complete grammar exercises out of a workbook, and he assigns sentence and paragraph level work from a traditional reader. He believes, as does the department, that because students respond well to him and are generally successful in the course, then his choice of methodology is appropriate.

But I have learned that my colleagues' perception of care, and of best practice, which is closely tied to the concept of care, does not follow the perception of care that Noddings (1984), Freire (1970; 1998), hooks (2003), Rose (1989) or the Christian Brothers speak of. These scholars tell us that caring for students requires that teachers

nurture an emotional connection with them and that teachers place students' well-being as the primary element of their classrooms. The concept of nurturing emotional connections with students that Noddings, Freire, hooks, Rose and the Christian Brothers speak of is not synonymous with the concept of building positive relationships with them, although my colleagues may consider the concepts synonymous. Positive relationships imply that teachers' relationships with students are helpful, caring and considerate, yet not to the degree that students' whole self-image is foundational to how the basic writing course is constructed or to how teachers perceive their students and interact with them. When teachers nurture emotional connections with students, they commit fully to their students—not to education, not to a course and its methodology—but fully to their students whose lives they work to enhance. Noddings calls this the “ethical ideal” (p. 121) in which the collaboration between teacher and students produces not only a substantive relationship but also an increasing competence in students. The Christian Brothers call this unity between teachers and students “association,” whereby students and teachers commit to working together in a way that maintains and enhances caring as well as helps students assume greater academic responsibility. In other words, the classroom becomes a place where both teachers and students matter. The essence of the “ethical ideal” of caring for students means that teachers' interactions with them consider the whole self-image and not just the part we call academics. In the field of composition, the “ethical ideal” means that we combine care for our students with a practice informed with research and practical experience.

Scholarship in the field describes a concept of caring that considers students' needs and interests (Gray-Rosendale, 2006; Yood, 2005) but that does not go to the

extent of knowing and valuing students on a more profound level, where “students are infinitely more important than the subject matter” (Noddings, 1984, p. 176). Simply caring for students does not imply that we consider them as “infinitely more important than the subject matter” because we cannot create informed pedagogy for students unless we place students’ well-being as our top priority in the classroom. Noddings contends that teachers cannot nurture students academically without nurturing students emotionally “unless we are willing to risk producing monsters” (p. 121). I believe what Noddings means here is that the academic and emotional well-being of students cannot be separated, and that when we do separate academics from emotion, we shape students “into something less than fully human by the process” (p. 120). I believe a disjunct exists between the “ethical ideal” of care that Noddings speaks of (p. 121) and the concept of care that is taking place in our classrooms. In other words, our use of the word “care” does not identify the significantly different levels of care teachers employ with students. Perhaps the most distinctive difference between the two is the aim of education: the concept of care places academic achievement as its primary goal; the “ethical ideal” of care suggests that teaching “must serve something higher” (Noddings, p. 120), which encompasses the goal of developing students as full human beings.

I have explained the “ethical ideal” of care in this dissertation as a pedagogy of love. A pedagogy of love upholds the quality of compassion, with its emphasis on alleviating the hardship of another or suffering with another (Hardon, 1980; Purpel, 1989), as the most significant, appropriate, and effective way to establish thriving and meaningful relationships with students. The nature of compassion emphasizes collaboration and interdependence in the classroom (Purpel, 1989). The Christian

Brothers contend that the quality of compassion nurtures emotional relationships between teachers and their students and is primary and essential to students' holistic growth (Grass, 2007; Van Grieken, 1999; Koch, 1990). Unlike a concept of care, in which teachers consider the needs and interests of students as an important part of curriculum development, a pedagogy of love unites the nurturing, spiritual and intellectual qualities of the teaching and learning process through methods that uphold human dignity and promote student growth and success.

I have also learned, from this research project, that the desire to build emotional connections with students does not guarantee that students' academic needs are served. In other words, even though we may spend significant effort in nurturing relationships with our students, the methodology we employ in our classrooms may not uphold students' human dignity or promote their growth and success. This is evident at my own Christian Brothers university. Despite the Christian Brothers' call to teachers at their institutions to adopt pedagogy that encompasses justice education (Johnston, 2000), this pedagogy is not necessarily put into practice in our classrooms. Teachers can fall into the trap of believing they are superior teachers because they connect on a deeper level with students—and in one sense, this perception is true. Desiring to build right relationships with students is commendable, but right relationships do not, on their own, result in students' emotional, spiritual and academic flourishing. I do not believe we can follow a pedagogy of love if we do not identify and understand the scholarship of the basic writing field in addition to treating students with compassion. We cannot be in right relationships with our students if we do not realize the theories and practices that will best empower students, that will best increase their competence, that will nurture their

whole self-image, that will confirm them as valuable human beings with worth and dignity. Traditional grammar instruction does not meet the depth of students' needs because at its core, the methodology centers on the skills students lack and the deficiencies of their humanity. Grammar instruction, with its focus on correction, is not a nurturing methodology and does not take into account the importance of affirming students' sense of self worth.

Teaching methodologies that "meet students where they are" (Noddings, 1984, p. 121), that sympathize with basic writing students' educational obstacles and experiences (Rose, 1989), and that promote students' emotional, spiritual and academic flourishing center on justice education that exposes basic writing students' and basic writing programs' marginalized conditions and works to change those conditions (Freire, 1970). Students take part in critical workshops, reading and writing seminars, collaborative writing activities and individual conferences (Boynton, 2003) that build their self-efficacy, which refers to the sense of confidence students have to perform a particular task (Jinks & Lorschbach, 2003). Students also produce writing that reflects on and explores their personal experiences in order to give students power to look critically at aspects of the academic system and to develop and strengthen their ability to voice their viewpoints (Graff, 1995; Traub, 1993; Henning, 1991; Shor, 2001). Burnham (2001) and Rose (1989) contend that student-centered writing opportunities promote the emotional, social, political and spiritual development of the writer, which in turn fosters individual consciousness and social behavior. In these classrooms that utilize methodologies that "meet students where they are," grammar and sentence structure is addressed contextually when the need arises.



I have learned that the Christian Brothers philosophy of “teaching minds and touching hearts” offers tremendous insight into the teaching and learning processes. The educational philosophy demands that teachers serve students in compassionate ways that nurture a sense of hospitality and inclusiveness in the classroom. The philosophy also upholds standards of intellectual rigor so that students can thrive academically in addition to emotionally and spiritually. Yet I have found that at the Christian Brothers university where I teach, colleagues have mistaken intellectual rigor for best practice. Nurturing emotional connection to students must remain the primary foundation of the basic writing course, but teachers must go further if they want to serve students with compassion and love in order to bring about their flourishing. Teachers must investigate the value of justice education and consider how it can be incorporated into the basic writing classroom so that “intellect and emotion and spirit converge in the human self” (Palmer, 1998, p. 11). Teachers must be responsible to know the field of basic writing in order to understand best practice.

I also believe the discipline itself must consider more seriously the importance of holistic student development and the value of justice education that incorporates a pedagogy of love in the classroom, especially as it deals with marginalized students who struggle from psychological, social, emotional and intellectual setbacks. From this research I have learned that too much focus is given to educational achievement and not enough focus is given to the emotional and spiritual elements of our classrooms. For marginalized students, whose whole self-image is convoluted, emotional, spiritual and intellectual aspects must be in balance so that students can grow to the point where they have a chance to begin to leave their marginalized status.

### *Call for Future Research in the Field*

I believe the discipline would benefit by researching teachers who teach from the heart in order to learn about their teaching practices and their teaching presence. Case studies must be done on teachers who have strong emotional connections to their students and who also follow best practice. The classrooms of bell hooks, Parker Palmer, Mike Rose, Mary Rose O'Reilly, Claude Mark Hurlbert, Michael Blitz, Richard Rodriguez, Victor Villanueva, among other scholars who incorporate compassionate teaching in their instruction, should be studied. The research findings and discussion must be made public in journal articles that are easily accessible to teachers of basic writing students.

The Christian Brothers organization, and specifically Christian Brothers who teach basic writing students at the university level, should be further studied to determine the success of “teaching minds and touching hearts.” Case studies should investigate the convergence of educational, emotional and spiritual practices in the basic writing classrooms from a Christian Brother’s perspective. Research should also be done to determine if student achievement and development at the secondary school level parallels student achievement and development at the university level when teachers follow the “teaching minds and touching hearts” philosophy.

Research should also include the study of basic writing students who have been taught by teachers who teach from the heart. The discipline would benefit from student feedback that addresses this pedagogy to determine if students flourish in this classroom environment or if the environment has minimal impact on their learning. Student feedback is necessary to determine if teaching a pedagogy of love is practical to students and if students believe they are changed by such a pedagogy.

The discipline must also investigate the type of writing pedagogy being taught in Master of Arts and Ph.D. programs to determine if institutions give consideration to the concept of teaching from the heart. It is important to determine if teachers are being trained in justice education and compassionate teaching; it is also important to determine the pedagogies in which teachers are being trained in order to understand the variety of teaching instruction in our basic writing classrooms.

Finally, the discipline could benefit from making public the stories of teachers who have developed compassion as a result of human suffering and hardship and who have brought those life lessons with them into the classroom. These narratives of teachers' lived experiences could have an enormous impact on basic writing teachers who are used to upholding content as the primary goal of education; the stories could help them get in touch with their own stories that reveal life's challenges. In doing so, teachers could teach using more authentic, emotional practices.

### *Contributions of this Study*

I initially began this search of teaching practices that would allow me to better respond to basic writing students because I felt that my own teaching abilities with this student population were weak. I was a teacher who could not seem to get past students' academic deficits, and while my teaching was generally effective according to end of semester student evaluations, I was emotionally drained by the experience and was desperate to learn how to serve myself, and my students, better. This study not only expanded my knowledge and understanding of the vocation of teaching, but it also served as a process of discovery of my own attitudes and aptitudes regarding students who are

among the marginalized. I discovered through this quest that there are distinct levels of care teachers have toward their students and that the ideal of care which results in students' optimal growth and flourishing focuses not on what is negative and weak in students, but on what is good in them. Through this focus, teachers uphold the dignity of their students in order to encourage their potential.

I have also discovered through this study that the concept of care we find in the literature of the field is secondary to the ideal of care as proposed by scholars such as Freire, Rose, hooks, O'Reilly, Noddings, Blitz and Hulbert, the Christian Brothers, among others; while the concept of care places academic achievement as its primary goal, the ideal of care suggests that teaching must serve a higher purpose, which encompasses the goal of developing students as full human beings. In other words, our questions about how to teach well are not found in intellectual answers but in relationship. This study suggests that teacher-student relationships cannot be forged through discussion of curriculum, but through compassionate exchange and profound unity, qualities that are the hallmark of love. This meaningful exchange brings emotion into our discussion of teaching and learning and acknowledges the value, worth and importance of feeling with and for students. I have learned that the very willingness to feel with and for students energizes our relationships with them and infuses our curriculum with a profound sense of nurturing. This act of compassion implicates that teaching ultimately must be considered as a service-oriented enterprise.

As a result of this study, I have also gained from religious avenues substantive insights into how to teach and serve students. The educational philosophy of the Christian Brothers, a Catholic order, is based on the concept of serving "the least, the last,

and the lost” (Mann, 2008), which advocates for marginalized students through the Catholic conception of benevolent love, or the selfless love of another person for that person’s own sake, for that person’s own good. This definition of love is upheld over and above self-interested love, in which we love another in order to fulfill our own needs and desires.

I have also discovered through this research that a teaching ideal that places as much importance on emotion and spirit in the classroom as it does academics is an ideal that may be difficult to reach. Some teaching professionals have not considered how following “deficit model” curriculum may result in students’ limited growth, and so they may not believe changes to their pedagogy need to be made. Other teachers and scholars have been successful in addressing basic writing students’ needs by intentionally incorporating a concept of care into their curriculum, yet that concept holds academic achievement as its primary goal, not the goal of developing students as full human beings, and so that pedagogy ultimately can be limiting to student growth as well. The purpose of this study is to give attention to the emotional aspect of our teaching so that we may consider how best to incorporate emotion into our classrooms in ways that allow us to witness students’ deeper human potential. In this way, we become humane educators who, regardless of circumstance, will not pass students by.

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