A DESCRIPTION OF MEANINGFUL CONTEXTS, EMPATHIC

THINKING, AND PERSONAL BREAKTHROUGHS

IN THE PERFORMANCE OF ADULT

BASIC WRITERS

By

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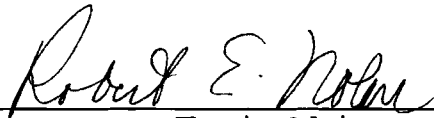
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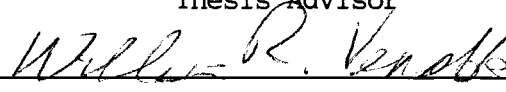University of the State of New York
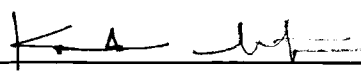
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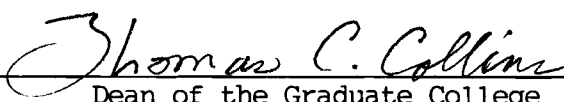A DESCRIPTION OF MEANINGFUL CONTEXTS, EMPATHIC

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In researching attitudes and abilities of adult
basic writers, educators have found patterns emerging
relating to the motivation and voice of these students
(See Literature Review section of this paper). The
data presented here addresses the incongruences in
these patterns for basic writers and for those of the
average writing student. Specifically, basic writers
have special needs that set them apart from many of the
more traditional students.

English classes in secondary schools often impart
stigma to students who are already having difficulties
with their studies. Writing seems inaccessible, and
topics required for composition usually carry no
interest for them. Later, as adults returning to
school, these students still remember English classes
as torture sessions of grammar, diagramming, and
irrelevant subject matter. Yet, as adults, they feel
they need basic writing skills not only to further
their education but to succeed in the workplace as
well. To aid the efforts of these adult
students, instructors need to find new approaches in
teaching basic writing, to make writing more
meaningful, and erase old prejudices.

Current research (Shaughnessy, 1981) suggests that teaching techniques of the past have proven ineffective in reaching this segment of adult learners. A more recent study (Krashen, 1984) emphasizes the importance of process instruction for writing and the role that meaningful context plays in such instruction. Yet instructors are still unsure about what contexts are meaningful for these students, or how those contexts can be accessed.

Given the diversity within most adult basic composition classes, instructors often find it impossible to create relevancy for all students. In fact, no single demographic profile can fully describe the variety of backgrounds from which basic writers come. Specific assignments that fit the relevancy needs for all these students are difficult to devise. Ultimately, the responsibility for creating meaningful context resides with each individual student. The role of the instructor is to help develop within the students a method of addressing their own needs of relevancy and of accessing contexts for themselves. In this manner, they encourage the writing process.

One method for accomplishing this goal is the instruction of empathic thinking skills as a complement to the critical thinking skills already emphasized within adult education. (See Definitions, p. 5.) Most

basic writers are not prepared for the rigor imposed through critical thinking exercises. Already suffering from self-concepts incongruent with the college image, these adults still struggle with confidence and motivation to even express their ideas on paper. To push them too quickly into defense of personal ideas, or to expect them to feel up to the task of formulating hypotheses, is too much to ask. Often, instructors come up against strong resistance from these students, generated mostly by fear and lack of adequate preparation in the writing process.

Empathic thinking skills can aid the students' initial task of accessing their own voices and philosophies. Such skills can help them feel part of the writing process. By discovering the relationship between their philosophies and their own experiences, they are validated and given a foundation on which to stand for further learning in new settings. This knowledge of student worlds aids the teacher as well. For just as instructors cannot provide meaningful context for each individual student, neither can they provide meaningful goals without truly understanding where a student begins the search.

Problem

This study addressed the instructor's recurring problem of creating meaningful context to encourage student involvement in the acquisition of writing skills. Lack of motivation and confidence in the ability to succeed as a student has always plagued basic writers. In the past, cognitive theorists have suggested that these students have not reached the higher level of formal logic stages necessary to further their education. Yet, recent research reveals that much more than remedial development is needed to encourage and help these adults. In essence, Basic Writing classes must begin to meet students within the borders of their own contextual frames of reference to encourage meaningful learning experiences.

Purpose

The study was undertaken to determine if instruction of empathic thinking skills facilitated student breakthroughs in writing development by helping them access personal contexts.

Writing is a process skill and should be taught as such. Basic writers are merely "stuck" somewhere along that process; they cannot move on to more critical

modes of thinking if they have not been able to first
work through the initial stages of expressing
themselves in writing. Errors are only symptoms of
distracted attention and arrested discovery. To
further retard that discovery with too much emphasis on
mechanics and grammar is to miss the opportunity to aid
basic writers in breakthrough experiences. Empathic
thinking skills could very well be the tools needed to
access personal relevancy and experience. These skills
help put students in touch with their own personal
frames of references, their own contexts which they
can, then, begin to explore and enlarge.

Definitions

Basic Writing is a term used to designate adult
writing classes, also referred to as developmental or
remedial writing. For the purpose of this paper, Basic
Writing classes are those college classes taken to
correct any deficiencies in English writing skills and
to prepare students for advancement to freshman
composition.

Context, as used in this paper, refers to the
subject matter of student compositions, and in a
broader sense, to the body of knowledge, experience,

and circumstances (whether personal or not) that
students draw on for content material in writing
assignments.

Empathic thinking refers to a process of
reflection whereby people rely on experience,
intuition, and feeling to evaluate ideas in relation to
their own personal philosophical orientation. Empathic
thinking is, for the most part, subjective in that
personality is involved in the process. The term
"empathic," in its strictest, dictionary sense involves
not only the personal, imaginative or cognitive,
apprehension of another's subjective condition but also
the projection of one's own subjective state on to the
surrounding environment.

Critical thinking refers to the process of
analysis whereby people use logic and measurable
observation to evaluate ideas for facts and probable
realities, usually for broader application than
individual relevancy. Critical thinking is more
objective in that an attempt is made to remove
personality from the process. Creative, or discovery,
thinking involves the combination of empathic and
critical thinking abilities; and writing, any writing,
is creative in nature.

Objectives

The study will:

1. Identify attitudes of basic writers toward the writing process and contextual subjects.

2. Identify teaching strategies used by instructors to help basic writers discover more meaningful contexts for composition.

3. Determine if these teaching strategies involve empathic thinking skills.

4. Determine if these strategies are identified by students as helping them improve in writing performance.

5. Determine if these strategies are perceived by instructors as effective methods in facilitating breakthroughs in writing performance.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

1. The current study surveys and interviews were limited to nine classes of basic writers attending school at a midwestern, two year community college.

2. The research was considered a qualitative study only and may or may not be representative of other Basic Writing classes elsewhere.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An Introduction to the Contextualistic Approach
to Life-Span Cognitive Development Theory

The Complexity of Cognitive Development

Before discussing the relationship between context
and basic writing, a brief overview of how context
influences cognitive development in general can help
clarify the role of context in thought and perception.
Life-span cognitive development theories propose that
thinking patterns and abilities change throughout the
life time of individuals. Several approaches to that
theory have been advanced. Some see cognitive
development occurring in stages correlating closely to
physical and psychological development, while others
explain cognitive maturation in terms of phases (tasks)
in social development. The contextualistic approach,
however, differs from these age specific approaches in
that it accounts for the complex contextual
interactions between changing individuals and
environments that are, themselves, changing and not
static. Contexts are seen as inherently active in
modifying growth and development.

This approach, then, recognizes the existence of multidirectional avenues of growth and insists that there is no fixed, absolute end toward which all growth proceeds. Effects of both immediate (proximal) and past (distal) contexts of development are given credence for influencing individual change (Rebok, 1987, p. 54). For example, cohorts growing up during World War II may have faced different ethical and logical dilemmas throughout their various stages of development as compared to those cohorts growing up during the Viet Nam era. In this regard, the contextualistic approach places stronger emphasis on individualized change and varying outcomes as opposed to set, universal stages or phases. For basic writers, whose backgrounds often differ markedly from those of traditional students, this acknowledgement validates their experiences and allows for greater understanding of their developmental paths.

A Dialectic Model of Growth

In also questioning whether formal, logical thinking should be the ideal standard by which cognitive development is judged, the contextualistic approach provides for the possibility of a more dialectic model of growth. That is, "It sees

individuals as both products and producers of the
context that provides a basis for their development.
As such, individuals may be seen as <u>producers</u> of their
development" (Lerner, 1981, p. 6). Each person is
active, not passive, in bringing to their own
developmental process unique attitudes, thoughts, and
behaviors which interact with contextual settings. For
instance, individualized life goals, determined by
personality and circumstance, will greatly influence
how a person approaches new situations or knowledge.
Often, the reasons that basic writers return to school
reflect goals from earlier life stages and may come
into conflict with the climate of academic regimens.
They may question the usefulness of their endeavors if
they cannot assimilate their new circumstances. These
conflicts have to be resolved for the students to
succeed in school.

An Informed Awareness

In fact, new levels (stages) of development can be
achieved through the resolution by individuals of
dialectic exchanges or contradictions between the
various areas of context (psychological, physical, or
sociological) with which they come in contact. The
contextualistic approach allows that an individual

cannot be an exception to the rule, but actually
creates a unique, perceptual rule of his/her own.
Instead of defining growth and behavior, this approach
attempts to interpret these in light of an evolving
relationship between person and matrix. Individual
choice, while influenced by previous experience and
choice, still remains the main determinant of
development, and is therefore, as strictly
unpredictable as human behavior (or life) itself.
Understanding human development becomes not a process
of labeling and matching, but of observation and
discovery. As indicated earlier, basic writers are not
only different from traditional students, but they are
also different from one another. Their success or
failure in educational pursuits cannot be judged solely
by past experiences, or even current levels of
development, but by personal choice and future
influences.

If individuals are, indeed, producers of their own
development, then this process of discovery should be
the main concern of educators. The current favored
goal of learner empowerment is seen as, not so much an
effort of elevating individuals' stages of growth to a
predetermined, logical end, but more as an endeavor to
help these individuals become more aware of their own
"contexts" and, therefore, begin to make conscious,

informed decisions concerning their development. This approach to learning admits all experience, both within individuals and surrounding them, and emphasizes instructional methods that help learners access and dialogue with their own knowledge precursory to further cognitive growth. This approach is essential, in particular, for understanding and working with basic writers of all backgrounds. Presumably, these writers cannot create meaningful contexts for writing without first discovering meaning in the contexts of their lives.

The Relationship of Context to Teaching
Basic Writing Skills to Adult Learners

Resistance in Basic Writing Classes

Although the benefits of literacy are well recognized, both by educators and adult learners, fear and resistance to Basic Writing classes still exist among students. This fear is not necessarily based on lack of ability, but most usually, on experiences with lack of success in previous writing classes. What has caused this failure? Writing classes, along with studies in language arts and English grammar, produce stigmas of pages marred by red ink and notations of

incomprehensible rules and grammar diagrams. Students may have a lot of worthwhile things to say, but never seem to get past the English class "critic," whether that critic is in the form of a flesh and blood teacher or a conjured image of a remembered censor. For the basic writer, in particular, the student who has not adapted well to the writing environment, or who has been away from that environment long enough to forget the rules, the writing classroom poses a veritable threat to self-esteem. As Murphy (1989) explains, it isn't enough that instructors ask their students to open up and share thoughts and ideas, they are also expected to do so in correct form.

Before teachers can legitimately ask basic writers to conform to academic standards, they must meet those students where they are and be willing to accept them on their own terms. This acceptance can only be accomplished by allowing students initial leeway in expressing their ideas. In other words, whatever the students offer tentatively for sharing, in whatever context, needs to be recognized as sufficient communication. In fact, the contexts of basic writers can serve as the best means to break down resistance to the writing process and help students develop more advanced writing skills.

The main reason for resistance to writing

instruction appears to be the inability of students to acknowledge their own voice within the academic world. Past failures can set up a feeling of incongruence whereby students have difficulty picturing themselves entering the new roles expected of them in higher education. Again, Murphy (1989) refers to basic writers' "grave personal fears about the traitorous implications of mainstream intellectual accomplishment" and suggests that this confrontation can make the "composition classroom an emotionally volatile experience for basic writing students" (p. 184). These students try to cope with this fear by establishing their own validation through their first attempts at writing. They write about themselves, about what means the most to them, either exploring subjects they feel confidence in, or confronting those feelings of inadequacies which are threatening them at that time. These personal experiences tend to dominate basic writers' compositions.

The Classroom in Context

Yet, working with adult students' personal experiences (contexts) can help bridge the gap between remedial writing and more critically advanced prose. Basic writers need validation for what they already

know and acknowledgement of their fears. To push them
academically when they have not had sufficient time to
work through this initial stage in the writing process
can actually hamper any further development they might
be able to attain. In this regard, Krashen (1984) has
said, "Remedial writers are probably the most in need
of reading and writing for meaning, and the most
damaged by excessive rule teaching" (p. 36). He
advocates allowing students time to respond affectively
to what he terms "comprehensible input" (p. 28), that
is, contexts and assignments that relate to the body of
experience which students already possess.
Performance, as well as competency, cannot be
accomplished by students without this practice in
meaningful dialogue.

So, the main purposes of teaching with context in
mind are, then, to establish relevancy, a meaningful
place to begin, and to encourage the beginning of
individual voices in students. This approach, Reuys
(1992) informs us, is:

> an attempt to push the pendulum in all these areas
> [of Basic Education] away from artificial, de-
> contextualized exercises in "skill building: and
> toward meaning and comprehension, critical
> thinking, and problem-solving; toward encounters
> with real texts to read and write, real problems

to analyze, and real contexts for learning and

assessing literacy. (p. 23)

With this newly found voice, students can begin to

realistically place themselves in the world around them

and to resolve the incongruent self-image of evolving

roles engendered by their education. Problem solving

and critical thinking skills cannot be developed

without this base firmly established. Nor can a

teacher construct the base for students; each

individual alone knows what is needed to establish

relevancy.

The reality is that adult basic writers represent

diverse and varied personal and academic backgrounds.

Instructors cannot always assess student needs

adequately, and even if they could, providing for those

needs in a classroom filled with such a diversity of

students would be an insurmountable task. Classrooms

of adult learners are typically conglomerates of

experience, ability, as well as backgrounds (Sommer,

1989). For the teacher to take on the task of

"herding" a class along the academic trail is to

believe in Mission Impossible. Society is not that

tidy, not even in the logical world of higher learning.

Writer-Based Prose

Instead, beginning Basic Writing is usually
expressed in prose based on writer perception, typified
by various dialects and personal, idiomatic speech.
Emphasis is placed on the writer's ideas, and the
reader's opinions often are not taken into account.
Not only is this writing self-consciously based in the
writer's often private world, but it usually reflects
more of the oral tradition the writer participates in
rather than a written language system. Because of this
tendency, the responsibility for interpreting this
prose into more academic styles must rest with the
student who has composed it. In other words, students
must be in charge of their own writing process, simply
because it is the students, as individuals, who best
understand their own writing. To accomplish this goal,
instructors themselves need to first understand the
complex nature of language, its multilayered structure,
and then accept that language forms cannot be imposed
on individuals, but must evolve out of previous layers
(Mayher, 1990). That is, language is acquired step by
step, each new feature building on what has been
learned previously, assimilated gradually into
pre-existing contexts. Those contexts, by virtue of
the nature of language acquisition, are impossible to
ignore, override, or eradicate.

Thus, addressing basic writers' personal, narrative style is an essential stage in the overall writing process. It is an essential stage because educators cannot realistically deny what already exists. Writer-based prose is the context out of which advanced writing development begins. The sooner that students can become comfortable with their own voices, the sooner further learning can take place. To express this another way: change cannot occur until a "problem" is acknowledged. This is not to say that it is the student who has the problem. In fact, Shaughnessy (1981) has written that, when dealing with Basic Writing classes, the instructor is often the one that eventually needs "remediation" (p. 67), since it is the instructor who must learn more about the basic writer and about the writing process itself. Educators must set aside their desires to "guard the tower" or "convert the natives" (Shaughnessy, 1981, p. 64). The problem, then, for students is more one of hearing their own voices clearly enough to also hear the differences between those voices and that of the academic world. Only then, can they begin to make adjustments in their language in accordance with their personal goals.

Writer-based prose, therefore, provides a cognitive foundation for later expository writing which

demands supported opinions and persuasions from the writer. Students must first be able to express their opinions, without ridicule or crippling criticism, before they can effectively support or fully develop those opinions. Educational research findings demonstrate that, after all, no real incompatibility exists between personal narrative styles and expository formats. Not only do these two modes of expression exist on a writing continuum, but often, the two forms overlap and support one another. Even the most academically acclaimed writers will call upon their personal powers of persuasion and experience to augment otherwise dry, dull texts. White (1989) supports this idea. Referring to what he considers "good writing," he claims:

> Such writing, at all levels, is never neutral,
> voiceless, wholly detached . . . [but] promot[es]
> individual thought, considered response,
> intellectual creativity, and the unifying power of
> the mind. (p. 68)

Complex thought can be expressed in any form of writing, not just the formally logic. In accepting basic writer's prose, educators must address their own narrow prejudices concerning what really constitutes "good writing."

Expanding Contexts

And when educators can validate personal voices in academic writing, then basic writers can begin to gain confidence in their own philosophies by connecting to their contextual experiences. They can start to have insights into their own worlds and to address the needs they see there, as well as celebrate the strengths they find.

Lindemann (1987) even maintains that "through the process of writing itself, we learn about thinking, discovery, imagination, and creativity" (p. 73). If this is true, then by allowing a certain amount of freedom in writing practice and exercise, instead of promoting surveillance and censorship, instructors also encourage the type of thinking that is essential for the quality of writing they are trying to elicit. Lindemann (1987) further explains that writing helps students resolve incongruities and dichotomies in their lives by providing practice in making choices:

> Those choices are generally determined more by who we are than by our ability to make unbiased observations based on "facts." What we write has a lot to do with what we see, how we interpret experiences, how we relate them to other experiences. (p. 72)

Problem solving skills spill over into every area of
life, writing and living, each area informing the
other, supporting growth and exploration.

Accessing context, thereby, promotes risk-taking
in Basic Writing students. Addressing personal
context, though, as stated previously, is the
responsibility of the student. While the teacher plays
an important, mediating role in encouraging reflective
writing, learning is always accomplished according to
the student's time table. Forcing direction or even
demanding particular styles of writing, whether
expository or narrative, does not belong in the domain
of the instructor. Knowles and his associates (1984)
have advocated student autonomy and self-directed
learning in adult education as the most productive
approach to the teaching process. Through wrestling
with one's own demons and angels, each individual adds
experience and understanding to the personal voice.
This work cannot be done by another. The ability to
examine past belief systems and compare them to others
is gained only through personal reflection, not from
direct confrontation outside one's self.

Breakthroughs in Resolving Incongruities

Breakthrough experiences are initiated when

students' perspectives are challenged through self-examination. These breakthroughs can be seen in the writing of the students. Marked improvement in grammar, structure, and organization of ideas occurs alongside shifts in self-understanding and expression of philosophies (Nelson, 1991). Initially, though, breakthroughs are characterized by writing regression and blocking; failure and fatigue seem to threaten the student. But eventually, further growth in writing and creative/cognitive development emerges, often in what many educators refer to as paradigm shifts or "quantum leaps." These times, prior to and throughout the breakthrough phases, can be very stressful for students. Along with whatever external events are occurring in their lives, the disorienting, internal shifting of belief systems, self-images, and role definitions can cause students to temporarily lose contact with daily life. Inside the classroom, performance may falter as they focus on and grapple with new-found ideas. This dialectic exchange occurs most often when students are given permission to include personal voices within their work (Nelson, 1991).

Yet, these breakthroughs, engendered by personal discovery, mark the stages from writer-based prose to reader-based prose, that is, expository writing that

acknowledges the presence and opinions of an audience.
Students have gained, through these experiences,
confidence and skill sufficient enough to answer their
worlds and the "others" they encounter. Their worlds
have broadened to include at least an understanding of
many of those "others" who previously appeared as alien
and untouchable. Ritchie (1989) applauds this movement
of students towards self-direction:

> Our students will be most valuable as members of
> our communities not by merely "fitting in," or
> acquiescing to the requirements of the
> institution, but by making some unique
> contribution to the evolving dialogue. The
> classroom, as seen here, [in accepting the
> diversity of voices and individual identity] can
> open for students a process of "becoming" which
> ultimately prepares them for more than the narrow
> vocation of academic life. (p. 173)

A Contextualistic Approach to Writing Development

Once again, the connection between the personal
life and the classroom must be acknowledged. Ellsworth
(1989), also recognizing the importance of an educated
society which has the ability to reform itself,
advocates the freedom of students to express divergent

voices; voices which, after having been challenged themselves, then, in turn, challenge the established traditions that house them. The basic writer has theoretically moved from the personal realm, through the academic world, to the community. For this reason, educators need to respect the integrity, unique contribution, and decision-making process of each adult student. No singular cognitive theory should define or confine the writing process and accompanying growth and development of cognition and creativity (Rose, 1988).

Educators need to trust the writing process in its more natural expression, to relinquish strong controls, and to realize that writing development, as well as human growth, cannot be engineered or predestined. The contexts of all our lives are dynamic, evolving, and unpredictable. They do not represent stable backgrounds from which we need to flee, but rather changing sceneries with which we need to interact. As Fox (1988) states, "the heart of the idea of empowerment involves people coming into a sense of their own power, a new relationship with their own contexts" (p. 2).

A model, then, of writing development reflects that of life-span development. That is, writers first become confident in their initial contexts by expressing their worlds through writer-based prose.

They then begin to resolve incongruities between those contexts and the new concepts they meet by accepting or rejecting this new data one piece at a time. Often, appearances suggest that more pieces have been rejected, or at least ignored, than have been accepted. Yet, breakthroughs occur when enough "pieces" have been internally assimilated to engender more global, outward, and measurable changes in performance. At this point, writing becomes more reader-based, more academic, and more grammatically sound. Not only are writers' contextual philosophies expanded, but writing techniques and skills increase as well (Nelson, 1991, p.174).

Breakthrough and the Relationship
of Empathic Thinking Skills to Context

Accessing Meaningful Context to Improve Writing Skills

As more and more adult students enter the classroom, particularly the Basic Writing class, instructors are beginning to understand the nature of basic writer needs and the scope of their abilities. These adults are not "hopeless causes," but legitimate students, capable of responding to attentive instruction and positive feedback. Shaughnessy (1977)

assures us that "severely unprepared freshmen showed improvement even after only low intensity instruction in basic writing needs" (pp. 282-283). With sincere effort on the part of educators, by dialoguing with students and listening to their concerns, educators have been able to better help these students. The key seems to be in finding more efficient ways to assess learner deficiencies and to measure progress of the learning process in general. By helping students access their personal contexts themselves, educators open the door to a wealth of knowledge concerning student needs. Only then can these deficiencies be addressed and students encouraged to continue in their writing development.

How, then, do instructors aid students in accessing meaningful context? What methods can be employed to elicit the viewpoints, opinions, and beliefs of basic writers? According to Sommers (1981), most basic writers still adhere to pre-set rules of grammar and writing which they learned, or attempted to learn, in high school. This tendency naturally limits their ability to expand thinking skills and prevents the discovery of new ideas. The students are too concerned with procedures and rules to allow themselves the freedom to explore possibilities beyond their philosophical "comfort zones."

In fact, the intense concentration of getting "it" right stymies almost any advancement of cognitive skills. Perl (1979), in reviewing this obsession in basic writers, tells us that this premature editing broke "the rhythm generated by thinking and writing," causing writers "to lose track of their ideas" (p. 333). Even with all this attention given, both by students and teachers, to error correction, significant improvement in mechanics is rarely experienced. In comparing good writers with the typical basic writer, Wall and Petrovsky (1981) found that these least able writers did not spend as much time thinking and taking notes during the writing process, but rather, just began writing and pushed forward to the end. In contrast, better writers reformulate, not only structure and organization, but ideas and thinking as well throughout the whole writing process (Pianko, 1979).

Students, then, may be unconsciously throwing context onto the paper, but what meaning it may carry is questionable. Yet the role of the instructor does not need to be one of monitoring writing refinement, but rather one of mediating. Teachers must help the student stop critiquing their writing long enough to listen to what they, as writers, are saying, and so, begin conscious self-dialogue. Becoming literate means

learning to look critically at one's world, in fact, to be an actor (Salvatori, 1990). This thinking process pushes past grammar and structure and focuses more on content.

Chomsky (1965) has done much to help educators understand more fully the nature of language and language acquisition. He confirms the idea that language and writing are learned naturally by doing, through practice, then gradually extrapolating principles encountered through this exercise. Writing is not developed by studying abstract concepts, but by the writing process itself. Again, instructors need to focus on encouraging the writing, and therefore, thinking processes, not censoring expression.

The Role of Thinking Skills in Writing Development

Breakthroughs in writing skills and cognitive development occur as the students learn, then, to listen to their own voices, monitor their own growth and development, and employ thinking skills in exploring their personal contextual worlds. This process is the essence of the contextualistic approach to life-span development theories, as cited earlier (Rebok, 1987). Writing is a perfect "playground" for this growth work. Moffett (1968) even tells us that

different styles and formats of writing will aid
certain kinds of thinking and answer different types of
questions. These modes of thinking and questioning, in
turn, influence the writing process.

Basically, two styles of thinking exist, each
adding strengths to different aspects of life.
However, they work most efficiently when combined in a
cognitive "partnership." Empathic thinking refers to a
process of reflection whereby people rely on
experience, intuition, and feeling to evaluate ideas in
relation to their own personal philosophical
orientation. This style of thinking is often referred
to as right brain processing, and is considered fairly
subjective in content since personality is thrown into
the process itself. On the other hand, critical
thinking refers to the process of analysis whereby
people use logic and measurable observation to evaluate
ideas for facts and probable realities, usually for
broader application than individual relevancy. This
thinking style is also known as left brain thinking,
and is felt to be more objective if the attempt to
remove personality from the thinking process is
successful. True creativity occurs when these two
methods of processing information and perceptions are
utilized together. Moreover, according to
contextualistic approaches, full cognitive development

cannot occur without the partnership of both thinking abilities (Rebok, 1987).

In relation to writing, empathic thinking has been shown to be of greater value in the initial stages of the writing process. At this stage, personal experiences and feelings most inform composition. Here, context is most revealing, and educators must also be the most accepting of student work. Rogers (1992) informs us that a wealth of knowledge is found in these personal narratives. Such knowledge expressed by students, particularly by basic writers, needs to be validated by teachers. Flower (1981), also, has written extensively on the value of personal expression, and favors the empathic styles of accessing contextual information. Concerning the writer-based prose of beginning basic writers, she writes:

> Writer-based prose is a workable concept which can
> help us teach writing. As a way to intervene in
> the thinking process, it taps intuitive
> communication strategies writers already have, but
> are not adequately using. (p. 269)

In fact, she claims that empathic, writer-based expression is not just a developmental stage, but that even the best of writers use it throughout their writing careers (p. 272). Again, this statement coincides with the concept of creativity growing out of the union of critical and empathic thinking.

Following a natural line of development, critical thinking skills emerge more strongly during later stages of writing, although they are present all along. These two thinking styles exist on a continuum, as well as in partnership. Lunsford (1981) explains that cognitive development moves from doing, to doing consciously, and only then to formal conceptualization. Here is another testament to the idea that logical thinking, in the form of expository writing, cannot be forced upon students who have not adequately engaged their empathic thinking skills in preparation for this later stage in development. Lunsford also tells us that students can be assisted in their development by practicing in classrooms the necessary thinking skills needed at each particular stage in the writing process.

Because adult basic writers come from such a diverse background, even to the extent of exhibiting differing cultural dialects (Montgomery, 1990), writing methodology must include intuitive techniques for accessing information. Basic writers must learn to think through the writing process in order to discover, and then answer, their own questions. No amount of instruction in method or modeling of "good" writing will compensate for lack of this individual, self-directed work.

Teaching Empathic Thinking Skills

Many teachers and educators are now experimenting with instructional methods to help students develop these more empathic, intuitive abilities. Most of these innovators would agree with Smith (1991) who says, "The heart of the learning process is developing the awareness and capacities for effective self-monitoring and active reflection" (p. 12). Collins (1983) also suggests that poor writers lack skill, not because of cognitive deficiencies, but because contextually meaningful practice has been insufficient.

One method of developing intuitive abilities in accessing context is through summary work. Instead of focusing on factual reporting of reading assignments, Barton (1989) sees summaries as interpretive acts, never completely objective. Therefore, teaching students to listen not only to an author's thoughts, but to their own as well generates more meaningful summary work. Bean (1986) writes:

> I have found that if students can place summary writing within a personally meaningful theoretical framework, their objections to summaries will largely disappear. (p. 344)

Through this acceptance of dialectic interchange,

students learn to focus their own thoughts and become
articulate in presenting their ideas in conjunction
with those of another. They learn that their thoughts
can be just as valid, in many respects, as those of
published writers.

Journaling and freewriting exercises where
students respond to ideas in selected, meaningful
reading texts can also generate empathic, reflective
thinking. Students not only are exposed to samples of
writing to absorb and emulate, but they can begin to
see how their ideas fit into a broader context than
they were aware of before. In speaking of the
freewrite exercises he assigns his students, Sheridan
(1992) reports:

> What happened was that their intuitive,
> spontaneous, emotional right sides kicked in and
> they dashed off the written pieces without
> interference. Of course, the pieces are
> disorganized and lack unity. Of course, the left-
> side editing-organizing function is important, but
> not now! Not at the genesis. One cannot edit
> nothing! Allow the right side free play to
> generate the words and ideas, however inchoate;
> afterward the left side can bring order to them.
> It is trust in the right side that gets one to
> start skipping on the brink of the abyss. (p. 55)

Carrying this teaching concept further, Bartholomae (1979) conducts Basic Writing classes with student compositions as the only texts. He encourages group discussions, analysis, and critiques of peer writing, and then assigns revisions and new approaches on previous work. Hoffman (1982) uses letters and diaries of ordinary people as textbooks in her writing classes. She finds that these journals help her writing students to recover their own voices since they can easily relate to what they read. Response writings demonstrate to basic writers the validity of their ideas, and help them recognize their own voices and express them with confidence. Nudleman (1981) identifies these techniques among those that successfully combine experiential (empathic) and expository (critical) modes of learning.

Providing an environment free from censure applies to group work as well as journaling. Odell (1991) writes that we should make sure that:

> Every student in the class participates in developing a classroom atmosphere in which students feel free to talk to one another about their writing and in which they develop trust in their ability to collaborate in rethinking and revising what they have written. (p. 19)

Group work is only beneficial if the interaction

promotes communication, not retards it. Often, work
with peers can act as an intermediary step in writing
assessment and critique before the instructor steps in
as "authority." Sheridan (1992) also includes the
class as a whole in setting up the evaluation process
for student papers. He contends that, if students
participate in the initial decision on how their
writings should be graded, they participate more in the
writing process itself. This technique positively
promotes self-direction in students.

Another method Sheridan (1992) uses to engage new
contexts for students is through real life
assignments. He asks students to imagine they are
writing letters or proposals to real people within the
community. This technique utilizes both empathic
thinking abilities (role play) and critical thinking
skills (persuasion). Simulating real life experiences,
a more experiential approach to teaching, asks students
to tackle writing assignments more holistically, and
less from a merely academic view of life.

Although such group work, brainstorming, and
freewriting are popular ways to help open communication
with students, recently tutoring also has been shown to
have a significant and positive impact on students
(Smith, 1988). Tutoring's relationship to empathic
skills is found in the one-on-one approach to

learning. More time is allowed for the student to
self-reflect and to entertain dialogue concerning those
reflections. Building on this idea, Bizzaro and Werner
(1985) even describe a program utilizing a counseling
component in a developmental writing course. The
counseling sessions address students' sense of
isolation through discussions on group formation, goal
setting, values clarification, and strength
identification. The success of the program is
demonstrated by the fact that participants outperform
nonremedial students in later composition courses.

The Affective Domain and Writing Development

Recognizing that emotions and personal
circumstance can affect work is a giant step in
addressing the needs of basic writers. Brand (1987)
states:

> Students may be able to improve at a wide range of
> writing tasks if they can appreciate and recruit
> certain emotions at critical junctures in the
> process. (p. 441)

He emphasizes that awareness of common attitudes, along
with these individual motivations, toward different
phases of the writing process can help students deal
with waning interest. For example, after completing

first drafts of assignments, students often experience

a sense of completion and find it difficult to continue

their efforts during the revision stages. Knowing that

this gestalt feeling is typical, students can

understand it for what it is: an emotion that can

serve as an affirmation of accomplishment. Then they

can look for a new refinement of their ideas to inspire

them to move into the revision process.

Interpreting subjective perceptions correctly can

not only help students counteract the tendency of some

emotions to interfere with the writing process but can

also aid them in adding conviction to that process

(McLeod, 1987). Whatever method or technique is used

in teaching, the important focus seems to be

encouraging the practice of this particular empathic

thinking skill. Breakthroughs in student writing occur

as students come to terms affectively with various, or

even conflicting, contextual demands, as they become

conscious of what they value and why. This process

moves basic writers from talking solely <u>about</u> feelings

to writing <u>with</u> feeling (Nelson, 1991).

At this bridge point, when subjectivity becomes

conscious, students enter new territory, discovering

more about themselves in reference to a newly emerging

context. The exploration of personal contexts, in

itself, can modify and broaden those contexts. Nelson

(1991) describes in detail how basic writers grapple with personal philosophies in relation to new contextual input. If allowed this freedom of discovery, these same struggling students advance successfully along the academic path to more critical awareness of self, composition, and community. Such research has shown that practice of empathic thinking skills does not retard basic writers' progress but actually propels students into greater cognitive development. As Odell (1991) insists, concerning the thinking processes involved in writing:

> Clearly the processes I have mentioned interact in complex and unpredictable ways. Further, thinking relies heavily on nonrational, intuitive processes that seem unknowable. But . . . some thinking processes are conscious. Through our writing assignments, we can help students use some of these processes as they try to make sense of what they hear, see, and read in our courses. (p. 17)

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Theory

The Approach to Research Used in This Study

The present study was undertaken as a qualitative study according to guidelines found in Stainback and Stainback (1988). Research focused holistically on participant viewpoints and values, how realities were described and interpreted by students. In line with this research philosophy advocating involvement of the subjects under observation, the researcher allowed the greatest amount of input from both instructors of Basic Writing and the students of those classes. The paper comprises a description of those responses.

This approach to research methodology suggests that subjects should participate in any research in which they are involved, in the process of assessment, and in the evaluation of results. In this manner, we consciously help participants understand and change their situations by providing more information to them about their learning. Too often, in the name of emancipation, researchers impose meaning on situations

rather than constructing meaning through negotiation with research participants (Lather, 1991).

Along with the belief that the personal is also political, this reciprocity in the research process validates individual voices and provides for self-determination among students (Heron, 1981). Interactive research helps educators develop an understanding of the world view of research participants through dialogue. Such dialectic techniques inspire and guide the dispossessed in the process of cultural transformation and demonstrate to them how their ideologies might also serve them poorly at times. The task, as Lather (1991) sees it, is to construct classroom relations that engender fresh confrontation with value and meaning, not to demonstrate to students their ignorance.

Research Method

General Description

In this study, students in nine sections of basic writing classes attending school at a two year community college were asked to complete a written survey and, immediately afterward, discuss their writing experiences. A smaller sample of students were

later interviewed on a one-on-one basis for similar information, using the survey as an interview schedule.

The instructors were also given a written survey to fill out privately, and later, they were interviewed for further discussion on their approaches to teaching Basic Writing.

Before proceeding, these surveys were presented to the Arts and Humanities division director at the college who oversees the Basic Writing courses. She gave her approval for the survey use. The individual instructors were then solicited for their permission and arrangements were made concerning presentation of the surveys to the students. Positive feedback from the instructors was received regarding the appropriateness of the survey questions. In all, six Basic Writing instructors participated, and nine classes were surveyed, with a total of 102 students participating. Of these students, 23 were also interviewed personally.

The instrument was pilot tested in one of the nine classes of basic writers. After analyzing the results of these surveys, it was determined that class discussions held immediately after the surveys were completed was needed to elicit more in-depth responses from students regarding the reasons behind the choices given in their written answers.

How The Survey Instruments Were Used

The purpose of using an individually answered form
(See Appendix E.) was to provide anonymity for
students. The issue of anonymity was important; the
researcher wanted the students, in particular, to feel
they could open up and share their ideas without
censor. In responding as individuals, the students
could express their views without also being influenced
by group comment.

The survey was administered in the classroom by
the researcher, or in some cases, by the instructor.
The students were allowed to fill the forms out at
their own pace, usually taking twenty to thirty minutes
to complete the survey.

The focus of the student survey differed from that
of the instructor's. The student form presented
questions that dealt with subjects (contexts) for
writing assignments, and student attitudes toward the
writing process. One question asked students to
identify learning activities (teaching techniques) and
to decide how helpful these activities were in
developing better writing skills.

On the other hand, the instructor's survey (See
Appendix D.) concentrated on the approaches and
teaching techniques used by the instructor to help

students access context and develop cognitive skills. As a check against the student survey, one question asked on the instructor survey addressed the issue of student motivation.

The contents of these surveys were devised in order to investigate both the problem established by this study and the purpose objectives outlined. In this regard, both surveys explored the validity of the problem, that is, the need to create meaningful context for students, and so, encourage writing development. Beyond this intent, the surveys further addressed the objectives of the study, specifically, identifying effective teaching techniques useful for accessing context.

Additionally, in accordance with the above research theory, the survey was used only to generate student or teacher comment and discussion. The questions themselves were not meant to gain point by point responses to the stated objectives. Rather, they were meant to work together, to approach the subjects of context, thinking skills, and writing development from a variety of directions. Responses to each question would naturally overlap responses to the others. This questioning technique provided students and teachers with more than one avenue to express thoughts and feelings regarding the writing

experience. All the responses to the survey questions
were brought together, along with discussion and
interview comments, to present an overall picture of
the basic writer's experience with writing instruction.

Group and Individual Interviews

In addition to the written forms, the classes had
time later to discuss the questions as a group. The
researcher was also able to interview a sample of
volunteer students individually. Written notes were
taken on these interviews, compiled, and compared with
the notes taken during class discussions. Instructors
were also given the opportunity to further discuss
their answers from the survey or bring up other points
not covered by the questions, if they so desired.
These discussions and interviews used the survey as a
schedule outline, providing more detailed feedback to
the questions.

Reporting and Feedback

After the data was collected the instructors and
the division director were provided with copies of the
results. The students were encouraged to contact
instructors for these results. Instructors were also

encouraged to discuss results with their current Basic
Writing class students. Feedback was elicited and
recorded after the initial study was completed.

A Summary of Procedure Steps

Steps used in data collection were as follows:

1. Contacted college Arts and Humanities division
director for approval of project and for information
regarding number of Basic Writing classes, instructors,
and procedures for contacting them.

2. Selected a sample of nine intact sections of
basic writing classes, and arranged with instructors
the manner of administering surveys and discussions.

3. Pilot tested survey to one basic writing
class of ten students.

4. Manually analyzed pilot test data and
determined to add class discussions and personal
interviews to study research.

5. Surveyed and interviewed instructors of these
classes in regards to their impressions of student
expectations and writing context as well as their own
teaching techniques.

6. Surveyed 102 students individually and
facilitated group discussions in the nine classes for
information parallel to that requested from teachers.

7. Interviewed 23 volunteer students for the same information, recording student comments manually.

8. Manually analyzed the survey and interview data according to objectives outlined by the study in Chapter I, page 7:

a. Identify attitudes of basic writers toward the writing process and contextual subjects.

b. Identify teaching strategies used by instructors to help basic writers discover more meaningful contexts for composition.

c. Determine if these teaching strategies involve empathic thinking skills.

d. Determine if these strategies are identified by students as helping them improve in writing performance.

e. Determine if these strategies are perceived by instructors as effective methods in facilitating breakthroughs in writing performance.

9. Provided a summary of data to the division director in order to make that information available to interested instructors or students.

Chapter IV will present the findings of this research while Chapter V will submit conclusions and recommendations in regards to these findings.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

General Overview

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In review, the problem proposed by this study was
the need for instructors to create meaningful contexts
for students in order to encourage student involvement
in the acquisition of writing skills. The purpose of
the study was to determine if instruction of empathic
thinking skills facilitated writing development by
helping students access these personal contexts. To
accomplish this purpose the following objectives were
proposed (See Chapter I, page 7.):

1. Identify attitudes of basic writers toward the
writing process and contextual subjects.

2. Identify teaching strategies used by
instructors to help basic writers discover more
meaningful contexts for composition.

3. Determine if these teaching strategies involve
empathic thinking skills.

4. Determine if these strategies are identified
by students as helping them improve in writing
performance.

5.   Determine if these strategies are perceived by
instructors as effective methods in facilitating
breakthroughs in writing performance.

Findings of this study are reported according to
the above objectives through narrative and tabled
data.   The information gathered from both instructor
and student surveys comprise the focus of the study,
providing the numerical data for the objectives.   The
responses from discussions and interviews are presented
under a separate heading in this chapter (Additional
Findings), and provide qualitative support for the
survey results.

Demographic Information Concerning Subjects

The subjects of this study were basic writing
students enrolled in developmental composition classes
at a midwestern, two year community college.   To
profile the overall student population of this college,
the following statistics are given:
     Eighty-five per cent of students attending this
college come from small towns or rural communities.
     Seventy nine per cent of the college population
are from white, non-hispanic ethnic backgrounds;
sixteen per cent are of Native American descent.

Sixty-five per cent are female and thirty-five per cent are male.

In regards to age, forty-four percent of the college population are between 17 years of age and 24, twenty-seven per cent are between the ages of 25 and 34, and twenty-nine per cent are over 35 years of age.

Demographics for the nine classes participating in this study are typical of the overall college statistics just provided. Specifically, of the 102 students surveyed, the demographics reported were as follows:

Fifty-nine students were female and forty-two students were male.

Thirty-eight students were between the ages of 18 and 20, twenty students were between 21 years of age and 25, twenty-one were between the ages of 26 and 35, while nineteen students were 36 or older.

All the students had completed their secondary education: sixteen students had received GED's; eighty-six had received high school diplomas.

Objective One: Attitudes of Basic Writers Toward
the Writing Process and Contextual Subjects

In addressing Objective One, the students were asked the following questions on their survey (See Student Survey, Appendix E.):

1. Do you enjoy writing? Why or why not? (Question 1 on survey)

2. Do you prefer that the teacher choose your topics for writing or do you like to choose? Why? (Question 2 on survey)

3. Do you like to write about subjects that you generally understand or subjects that you need to explore more about? (Question 4 on survey)

4. What subjects do you like to write about? Why? (Question 3 on survey)

Data gathered from the responses on these questions are presented in Tables I-IV respectively.

TABLE I

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WRITING
PROCESS AS CITED ON SURVEY

Attitude	Per Cent of Total Students Who Expressed the Attitude
Detachment/Ambivalence toward Writing	55
Does not like	26
Likes sometimes, but not always / it depends	21
Likes more now, but did not before class	8
Enjoyment/Ease with Writing	45
Writes to express feelings or ideas	27
Writes to create	8
Writes to explore new ideas / to learn	7
Writes to relieve tension and stress	3

Table I (p. 50) summarizes the findings concerning student attitudes toward the writing process. As noted, 55% of all students surveyed expressed a detachment or ambivalence toward writing. They either did not enjoy writing at all, or only sometimes, or were just beginning to feel comfortable with the process. Those students who stated that they did not like writing at all, comprising approximately 26% of the students, said that they lacked the ability or skills needed to express themselves on paper. Another 21% of the total students stated that they liked to write "sometimes," depending on their mood, the topic assigned, time allowed, or whether grades would be given. Eight per cent of the students said that they liked writing better now than they did in the past because they felt like they had improved in their skills and, therefore, now felt more comfortable with the writing process.

Forty-five per cent of all students surveyed said they enjoyed writing. Twenty-seven per cent gave self-expression as the reason for this affinity. Another 8% of all students said writing was a form of creative expression, a means to explore their imaginations. A small percentage of students, 3%, said they used writing as a means to release tension and deal with stress. Only 7% of the students surveyed

gave self-development, learning, or exploring new ideas
as reasons for enjoying the writing process.

In addition to the questions asked of students,
the instructors were also asked the following as a
verification of student attitudes: do you find
students initially receptive to learning writing
skills, and what attitudes do you encounter? (See
Instructor Survey, Appendix D, Question 1) In response
to these questions, instructors expressed recognition
of typical student fear and resistance. While five
instructors claimed having more experience with
negative student attitudes, one instructor believed
that this response was only temporary, and that
students generally wanted to succeed, and tried hard to
do so.

In summarizing responses to the question regarding
the selection of writing topics, Table II (p. 53)
presents student preferences in this area. Sixty-three
percent of students surveyed preferred to choose their
own topics for writing assignments. Thirteen per cent
preferred the teacher to choose, while 24% stated that
a combination of both worked best for them.

TABLE II

Attitudes Toward Choosing Topics for
Writing as Expressed by Students on Survey

Attitude	Per Cent of Total Students Who Expressed the Attitude
Prefer to choose own topic	63
Prefer teacher to choose	13
Both / either / depends	24

Similarly, Table III (p. 53) summarizes student attitudes toward familiar or unfamiliar topics for writing assignments. Sixty-four per cent of all students surveyed preferred to write on subjects which they had some understanding of or enjoyed writing about. Only 8% claimed a preference for topics which required some amount of research. Twenty-eight per cent preferred a combination of both types of subject matter for assignments.

TABLE III

PREFERENCES TOWARD FAMILIAR OR UNFAMILIAR TOPICS
FOR WRITING AS CITED BY STUDENTS ON SURVEY

Preference	Per Cent of Total Students Who Expressed the Preference
Familiar Topics: topics which student has an understanding of or enjoys writing about	64
Unfamiliar Topics: topics which student needs to research or learn more about	8
Both / it depends on time or information available for exploring topic	28

TABLE IV

PREFERRED WRITING TOPICS
CITED BY BASIC WRITERS ON SURVEY

Subject	Number of Times Cited
Personal Experiences/Events	35
Sports	13
Family	12
Personal Issues/Feelings	10
Animals	10
Nature	10
Art/Stories	10
Friends	6
Work	6
Current Events/Social Issues	6
Love/Relationships	4
Hobbies	4
Cars/Motorcycles	4
Music	4
People	4
History	3
Environmental Concerns	2
Electronics/Computers	2
Law/Criminal Justice	2
Ethnic Origins	2
Medical Field	2
Children	2
Others	4

Table IV (p. 54) summarizes the preferred writing topics identified by students on the survey. At least 83% of the subjects listed concerned personal interests and experiences. Only 17% of the listed subjects concerned more social contexts, such as environmental or political controversies.

Instructors were asked the following additional question regarding relevancy and context: is the concern for relevancy or meaningful context ever expressed by the students, and if so, how do you try to address this question? (See Appendix D, question 2.) In response to this question, all six instructors verified that meaningful context was important for students. All spent time helping students access those contexts. The issue of relevancy was addressed early in the semester, and only one instructor said that relevant context ever became an issue for students. The main technique, initially, for providing meaningful context was given by instructors as student choice in selecting topics for writing assignments. All the instructors helped students in that selection by providing lists of topics, suggestions to work from.

Objective Two: Teaching Strategies

that Access Meaningful Context

In addressing the second objective of this study, students were asked the following question: what types of learning activities do you do in class?   (See Student Survey, Appendix E, question 5.)   Table V (p. 57) gives a list of all activities referenced by the students and how often they were cited.   The class activity most often referenced by students was practice writing to express ideas, mentioned 61 times.   Grammar exercises done from a textbook, handout, or chalkboard were referenced 48 times.   Exercises to generate ideas for writing were cited 42 times, while writing skills and organization exercises were mentioned 29 and 26 times, respectively.   Other activities cited often by students included computer lab exercises, group work, class discussion, and freewriting exercises.

TABLE V

WRITING ACTIVITIES IDENTIFIED
BY STUDENTS ON SURVEY

Activity	Total Number of Times Referenced
Expressing/Practice Writing	61
Grammar Exercises	48
Idea Generation Exercises	42
Writing Skills Exercises	29
Organization Exercises	26
Computer Lab (Grammar)	24
Groups/Peers	22
Class Discussion	21
Freewriting	20
Journals	13
Revisions	11
Clarity/Coherence Exercises	10
Brainstorming	8
Process/Graded Writing	6
Reading	4
Notetaking	2
Clustering	2
Reading Aloud	2
Title Writing	2
Teacher Interview	1
Tutor	1
Quiz	1

In further addressing Objective Two, the six instructors of basic writing surveyed in this study were asked the following questions (See Appendix D.):

1. What is your approach in regard to establishing appropriate context for writing assignments? (Question 3 on survey)

2. Do you try to draw out the students' individual contexts in teaching writing? If not, why? If so, what techniques have you used? (Question 4)

3. Do you encourage students, on their own to explore their personal contexts for writing material? If not, why? If so, what techniques do you use? (Question 5)

Table VI (p. 59) presents the strategies cited by instructors in response to these questions. All instructors allowed students the choice of topics for writing assignments and encouraged personal narrative styles of writing, at least in the beginning of the semester. Freewriting, referenced five times, and peer work, cited four instances, were also considered useful in helping students access personal contexts.

TABLE VI

STRATEGIES TO ACCESS STUDENT CONTEXTS
AS CITED BY INSTRUCTORS ON SURVEY

Strategies	Number of Times Cited
Student Choice of Topics	6
Personal Narratives	6
Freewriting	5
Peer/Group Work	4
Clustering	3
Brainstorming	3
List of Possible Topics	3
Journals	3
Exploring Broader Contexts	3
Individual Student Conferences	2
Instructor Feedback on Papers	2
Real Life Simulation Exercises	1
Current Event Reports	1

Objective Three: Teaching Strategies

Involving Empathic Thinking Skills

In addressing the third objective of this study, instructors were asked the following questions (See Appendix D, question 6.):

Do you try to teach thinking skills? If not, why? If so, what modes of thinking do you teach? How? Are the skills practiced effective in increasing students' writing abilities?

Table VII (p. 61) summarizes the approaches of the instructors toward teaching general thinking skills in basic writing classes. An assumption was made by the researcher that some characteristics of these thinking skills would qualify them as empathic skills as well. Four of the six instructors felt that thinking skills could be taught through the writing process itself, and because they encouraged academic prose, they also promoted analytical thinking over the empathic. Two instructors expressed that any direct emphasis in teaching thinking skills was usually not effective for basic writers. The four instructors who did promote thinking skills reported that they taught more than one thinking "style." Some of these skills qualified as empathic thinking, emphasizing creativity and personal experience.

TABLE VII

INSTRUCTOR APPROACHES TO TEACHING THINKING
SKILLS TO BASIC WRITERS AS CITED ON SURVEY

Approach	Number of Times Cited
Teach analytical thinking through the development of academic prose	4
Teach rudimentary thinking skills through instruction in idea organization and paragraph development	3
Through instruction in critical reading	1
Through instruction in listening skills	1
Teach logical thinking process directly	3
Through instruction in logical fallacies	1
Through instruction in organization and structure of ideas	1
Teach creative thinking process directly *	2
Through instruction in idea development and prewriting exercises *	1
Through self-directed, personal narrastives and descriptive prose of students *	1
Teaching thinking skills directly is not effective	2

* These approaches to the instruction of thinking
  skills have been identified by the researcher
  as promoting empathic thinking abilities.

Objective Four: Strategies Identified by
Students as Beneficial to the Writing Process

In addressing Objective Four, students were asked
the following questions (See Appendix E):

1. Which [learning activities] do you think help
you to learn to write better? (Question 5)

2. What do you think is the most difficult thing
about writing? What is the easiest? (Question 6)

Table VIII (p. 63) presents a summary of responses
to those questions. The process of writing itself was
often given as the activity which best aided them in
learning to write more effectively. The various forms
of writing were referenced a total of 99 times by
students. Table VIII individually lists these writing
forms cited as: practice writing to express ideas,
freewriting, revisions, writing skill exercises,
journals, and process or graded writing. Some of these
forms overlap, depending on the term the individual
student used to label the activity. The practice of
"just writing" was also felt to be the easiest aspect
of the writing process.

TABLE VIII

WRITING ACTIVITIES CITED BY STUDENTS ON SURVEY AS
BENEFICIAL OR DIFFICULT TO THE WRITING PROCESS

Activity	Number of Times Cited as:	
	Beneficial	Difficult
Expressing/Practice Writing	50	5
Grammar Exercises	9	24
Idea Generation Exercises	16	26
Writing Skills Exercises	16	7
Organization Exercises	2	20
Computer Lab (Grammar)	19	
Groups/Peers	11	3
Class Discussion	11	1
Freewriting	15	
Journals	9	1
Revisions	6	3
Clarity/Coherence Exercises	2	8
Brainstorming	3	1
Process/Graded Writing	4	1
Reading		4
Reading Aloud		2
Title Writing	2	

Other activities reported by students as
beneficial in writing development were the various
forms of group or peer exercises, which were listed 11
times, and in-class discussions, also given 11 times.
Computer lab grammar exercises were cited 19 times as
beneficial to writing improvement. Students were
divided about the benefit of exercises in idea
generation. Of the 42 times mentioned, 16 references
were positive, while 26 were negative.

Students discussed grammar exercises as
activities they participated in during class time, but
did not list them as particularly beneficial. Nine
references were positive while 24 references were
negative. Students also listed organization exercises,
outlining, and mapping 20 times as difficult.
Exercises in clarity and coherence (such as revising
sentence structures) were listed 8 instances as
difficult to master.

Objective Five: Strategies Perceived by

Instructors as Effective in Accessing Contexts

In addressing Objective Five, the instructors were asked the following questions (See Appendix D):

1.   Which [techniques in drawing out students' individual contexts] are effective and which are not? (Question 4 on survey)

2.   Do you find this self-directed method of establishing context effective? (Question 5 on survey)

Table IX (p. 66) summarizes the strategies cited by instructors as effective in accessing contexts and improving writing abilities. The researcher found that all instructors participating in this study used teaching techniques that helped elicit personal contexts and also developed empathic thinking abilities. Freewriting was referenced five times as being most effective in this regard. Encouraging personal narratives, at least in the beginning of the semester, was listed by four instructors as effective in fostering writing development. Group and peer work were cited four times as effective in accessing meaningful contexts, and prewriting exercises, such as clustering and brainstorming were also noted, three times each. Other class activities listed were similar to those listed by students, and are also presented in Table IX.

TABLE IX

STRATEGIES CITED BY INSTRUCTORS ON SURVEY
AS EFFECTIVE IN ACCESSING CONTEXTS

Strategies	Number of Times Cited as Effective
Freewriting	5
Personal Narratives	4
Peer/Group Work	4
Clustering	3
Brainstorming	3
Journals	2
Exploring Broader Contexts	1
Individual Student Conferences	1
Instructor Feedback on Papers	1

Additional Findings: A Qualitative Review

of Group and Individual Interviews

During discussions and interviews, most students
expressed fear or confusion with the writing process,
even though some still claimed to enjoy writing.
Discouraging experiences in earlier classrooms,
particularly in regards to rules of grammar, were often
cited as reasons for an aversion to writing.

Basic writers felt overwhelmed with the amount of
information they needed to learn. They often expressed
concern for insufficient time available for writing,
citing responsibilities at home and work as general
interferents with success. Concern for the amount of
time they had been out of school and for the
unfamiliarity of the classroom experience was also
another common anxiety.

In regards to specific fears, basic writers, in
interviews, expressed fear of humiliation, of being
criticized by other students as well as by the
instructor. Some students told stories of how they had
been labeled as "slow" or "stupid" by high school
teachers or parents. Those who did not like writing at
all claimed they lacked talent. Fear of not living up
to expectations blocked their efforts; they did not
want to try. Since they could not get thoughts on

paper, writing was not a means of communication for them. Again and again, grammar was cited as the villain of the writing experience.

A sense of confidence was expressed in discussions for writing about subjects they knew about or on which they considered themselves authorities. They tended not to list philosophies, controversial issues, or current events as subjects they liked to write on, unless the issue affected them personally.

Students who seemed more confident in the writing process also discussed subjects for writing which they were interested in learning about, but were not already expects in. These students didn't mind doing some research to explore new topics, if they had the time to do so. The types of subjects these particular students wanted to explore, however, were still more personal than most formal, academic topics preferred by college professors.

In discussions and interviews, most basic writers expressed a general lack of confidence about writing, and a confusion about skills that could aid their writing development. Not seeing the connection between writing techniques and success emphasized the detachment that students felt toward writing. They could not take ownership of their own learning process. Basic writers spoke more about what they

disliked than what they liked, and were unsure of methods that produced better writing. They tended not to see errors, to understand the corrections instructors made on their papers. They further reported that they didn't feel they had made sufficient progress in improving their writing abilities.

Students did not relate to the exercises in organization or structure. The activities they listed on the surveys and discussed orally as beneficial to their writing development emphasized empathic skills over critical thinking abilities. In fact, organizational skills, outlining, limiting topics, and moving from general points to specific supporting ideas were cited as difficult to master.

Students spoke about how difficult it was to "get started." Their responses demonstrated a gap between their life experiences and what they considered "worth" writing about. In these cases, insecurity in their own contexts further alienated them from the writing process. It was as if these basic writers didn't even know where to begin. The writing process was seen as a mysterious skill which they could not connect with at any level.

Although many felt that grammar exercises were important, they also expressed a fear of grammar, citing it in discussions as being the most difficult

part of writing. Most preferred to work on grammar exercises through computer tutorials instead of textbook practice.

While students demonstrated a desire to stick with personal narratives and writer-based prose, feeling more comfortable with these modes of expression, instructors usually felt the pressures of time constraints to move students along. Teachers felt the goal of Basic Writing was to prepare these students adequately for more advanced expository composition. For this reason, they reported the importance of moving "beyond" the personal, empathic expressions to more critical, academic prose.

Instructors did tend to be aware and sensitive to basic writers' fear of grammar, structure, and other mechanics of writing development. The teaching of these skills, along with rudimentary thinking skills in organization, were considered by instructors as the greatest challenge in their instruction of Basic Writing students. The fundamental difference in attitudes between students and instructors in this area centered around concepts of time: how much time should it take for students to acquire these skills? The issue that emerged was whether writing development should be teacher-directed or student-centered, or a compromise of both, given the requirements of state and institutional course guidelines.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

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Responses from the 102 students given in surveys and discussions, and from the 23 students interviewed indicated common attitudes and experiences with the writing process. Certain patterns of coping were also discernible through these responses. Fifty-five per cent of all students surveyed expressed a detachment or ambivalence toward writing. Forty-five per cent said they enjoyed writing. All six instructors surveyed confirmed the ambivalence expressed by their students as well as the efforts made by the students who held a more positive view of writing.

In regards to Objective One, basic writers cited personal context as very important to their writing. Sixty-three per cent preferred to choose their own subjects to write about. Sixty-four per cent preferred to write about those subjects with which they were already very familiar. At least 83% of the subjects listed concerned home, family, relations, work, school, or other topics of personal interest. Only 17% of listed subjects concerned more social contexts, such as environmental or political controversies.

Instructors also verified that meaningful context was important for students, and they all spent time helping students access those contexts. In addition, the six instructors used teaching techniques that helped elicit personal contexts and developed empathic thinking skills.

In response to the question raised by Objective Two, the class activity most referenced by students was practice writing, mentioned 61 times. Grammar exercises done from a textbook, handout, or chalkboard were cited 48 times. Exercises to generate ideas for writing were referenced 42 times.

All instructors cited personal narrative styles of writing as the activity most often used in accessing personal contexts. Freewriting, referenced five times, and peer work, cited four instances, were also considered useful in helping students access contexts.

In relation to Objective Three, four of the six instructors reported that thinking skills could be taught through the writing process. Two instructors expressed that, although thinking skills emerged through the development of writing abilities, any direct emphasis in teaching thinking skills was not effective.

In answer to the questions suggested by Objective Four, students referenced the process of writing

itself, in the form of writing exercises and journaling, 99 times as the activity which best aided them in learning to write more effectively. The practice of "just writing" was felt to be the easiest aspect of the writing process. On the other hand, although many felt that grammar exercises were important, they also expressed a fear of grammar, citing it 24 times as being difficult to understand. The generation of ideas, finding contexts to write about, was mentioned 26 times as being the most difficult part of writing. Outlining and organization was reported 20 occasions as also being difficult to master.

In regards to Objective Five, the researcher found that all instructors used teaching techniques that helped elicit personal contexts and also developed empathic thinking skills. Freewriting was referenced five times as being most effective in this regard. Encouraging personal narratives, at least in the beginning of the semester, was listed by four instructors as effective in fostering writing progress. Group and peer work was also cited four times as effective in accessing meaningful contexts. Instructors, however, were divided in their opinions concerning how quickly students should be expected to move "away" from personal narratives toward more academic prose.

Conclusions

In analysing both student responses and instructor
comments, the study here shows support for the
literature concerned with the importance of context in
teaching Basic Writing. Those students who did
consider themselves successful writers, citing examples
of improvement, demonstrated a connection to their own
writing development. They felt like their ideas, their
"life" lessons, were important enough to express.
Because they were encouraged by instructors to share
those contexts with others, they were, then, less
uncomfortable with the mechanics of writing than those
majority of students who still felt "inferior" to other
college students.

Students who had come to terms with their personal
contexts, in whatever shape that took, also
demonstrated a more open attitude toward the contexts,
ideas and opinions, of others (in the reading
assignments or class discussions). The other students
who still seemed closed to their own contexts, unable
to voice or write about them adequately, were either
less accepting of new ideas or skills, or less capable
of processing them.

The syndrome that seemed to play out for the
majority of basic writers who were "stuck" along the

writing continuum was easily identified through the
following phases:

1. Fear of the writing process, and lack of
confidence in oneself as a student.

2. Detachment from the writing process and one's
own personal contexts of experience, strengths,
voice, and abilities.

3. Avoidance of or difficulty in assimilating new
ideas or skills.

4. Delay of breakthrough, little if any
improvement in writing ability.

When this scenario is compared with the
developmental model of writing presented in the
literature of this study, a similarity can be seen. If
we, again, outline that model, this comparison will be
more easily demonstrated. For that purpose, the steps
of successful writing development, as discussed in the
literature, are enumerated below:

1. Confidence in and awareness of personal
contexts.

2.   Self-expression through writer-based prose.

3.   Meeting and resolving incongruities between personal contexts and new contexts encountered.

4.   Breakthroughs in writing development characterized by more incidence of reader-based and academic prose.

The difference between successful or struggling writers is not an ability to adapt to a more academic, critical thinking mode of expression, but rather a prevailing attitude of self-knowledge, confidence, and "connectedness" to the writing process. The successful student has learned to work effectively with personal contexts. In the study, the student who expressed an affinity for writing, and who demonstrated breakthroughs, most often cited, as beneficial, teaching techniques that fostered the development of empathic thinking abilities.

The main conclusion reached through this study, then, is that any teaching technique that assists students in getting in touch with their own base of knowledge and skills provides for them a surer footing to proceed on to more advanced forms of writing and expression. In teaching basic writers how to connect

with their own learning process, instructors help
alleviate the fear that cripples these students.
Particularly, by teaching empathic thinking skills in
the primary stages of writing development, instructors
assist students to become more involved and
self-directed in the acquisition of writing skills.

Recommendations

As recommendations, the researcher would like to
offer several specific teaching techniques. These
instructional tools were listed most often by students
and instructors as effective in fostering breakthroughs
in writing development. Although they all involve the
teaching of various types of skills and abilities, they
share a common bond. These techniques tend to be
experiential, student-directed, and all help to develop
empathic thinking skills as defined by this study. In
this regard, they also assist students in accessing
their personal contexts and exploring new ones.

Because of the connection of thinking to the
writing process, any exercise in writing itself fosters
exploration of context. Along with the formal
assignments in writing, freewriting and journaling, in
various modes, are of great benefit to basic writers.
They provide a means of practicing self-expression and

idea formation. The important aspect of freewriting is
that it remains uncritiqued and uncensored. Depending
on the situation, journals can be shared within small
groups or with the instructor. The sharing of ideas in
writing also fosters cognitive development, but
sometimes, for students to feel comfortable in
exploring contexts, private writing should be
encouraged. This writing would go unmonitored, except
by the student individually.

Another technique to encourage context exploration
is in the sharing of writing exercises in small
groups. Group work stimulates and broadens contexts
and helps students overcome feelings of isolation.
Peer interaction can provide positive feedback and
validation on writing assignments without the
authoritarian input of the instructor. Group work is
also beneficial for alleviating the pressure in grammar
exercise work. Working on grammar exercises together
can help students relax more with the mechanics of
writing.

Computer tutorials, if user-friendly and readily
accessible to students, are an excellent way of
addressing grammar and the mechanics of writing. The
private, self-directed correction of errors by the
computer is gentler on students. Also, there is a
sense of discovery that can promote student

self-confidence since tutorials move only at the pace
of the individual.

Since basic writers also have difficulty with
reading assignments, generally speaking, any
instruction in notetaking and basic study skills will
assist them in obtaining greater comprehension of
reading texts. Summary writings can also provide
opportunities to both practice writing and thinking
skills as well as assimilate reading material.

Concluding Recommendation

Finally, as a more general recommendation, the
researcher offers the following observation. Basic
writers respond positively to coursework that is more
self-paced, with less structure. Learning writing
skills within the confines of semester time frames
places untold pressure on non-traditional, basic
writing students. These students, again and again,
expressed concern for the conflicts in personal
responsibilities and duties. They did not have time to
study, to keep up with the pace expected of them. In
an expanded time frame, instructors can take the time
necessary to establish that initial foundation of
writer-based prose before emphasizing more expository
composition based on academic standards of grammar and
structure.

In this respect, educational institutes can genuinely honor these nontraditional students for the real life "contexts" within which they, as students and responsible adults, must work. Arrangements should be made to organize more independent study, while still providing adult students with tutoring assistance and group feedback. Advances in this direction are already being made in institutes of higher learning through various media and instructional models. Much more effort is needed if we truly expect to meet these students on their own home ground.

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Appendixes

APPENDIX B

Oral Solicitation of Basic Writing Students

Students were told the following as introduction to the survey and oral discussion:

1. They will be given a survey to fill out asking them about their writing experiences: what they like and do not like about writing, what they like to write about, and what class activities seem to help them in their writing skills.

2. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. Students will not be required to put their names on the survey form. Some information is asked at the end of the survey regarding age, gender, and educational backgrounds and goals.

3. The information on this survey will be used to help students in the writing process. These surveys may be able to help make a better class for students by identifying more effective activities for teaching writing. Instructors will be able to read the responses on the surveys.

4. The surveys will be used as research data for a Master thesis project.

5. Students should fill out the survey as completely as possible. The more information received, the more effective the survey will be in addressing the needs of the students. If students have any questions, they can ask the researcher. The survey will take about twenty minutes to complete.

6. Students will also be given an opportunity to discuss orally any ideas about writing they would like to share after the survey is completed.

7. A sample of students will be asked to provide more detail about their writing experiences based on survey questions through personal interviews. These oral interviews will be recorded for later reference.

APPENDIX C

Oral Solicitation of Basic Writing Students
for Personal Interview

Students were told the following as introduction to and explanation of the interview schedule:

1. They will be asked questions about their writing experiences: what they like and do not like about writing, what they like to write about, and what class activities seem to help them in their writing skills. They may also share any experience, good or bad, which they have had in regards to writing, in classes or personal.

2. The interview is voluntary and anonymous. A written record will be made of the interview only for reference purposes later. The researcher will be the only one who hears the actual interview.

3. The information gathered will be added to other information gained from surveys and discussions and will be used to help students in the writing process. All this information may be able to help make a better class for students by identifying more effective activities for teaching writing.

4. The interviews will be used as research data for a Master thesis project.

5. Students are free to share as much information as they wish, and no more. However, the more information received, the more effective the research will be in addressing the needs of the students. If students have any questions, they can ask the researcher at any time. The interview should not take more than fifteen minutes.

APPENDIX D

Survey for Instructors of Adult Basic Composition

("Context," in this survey, refers to the body of knowledge, experience, and circumstances (whether personal or not) that students draw on for content material in writing assignments.)

1. Do you find students initially receptive to learning writing skills? What attitudes do you encounter?

2. Is the concern for relevancy or meaningful context ever expressed by the students? If so, how do you try to address this question?

3. What is your approach in regard to establishing appropriate context for writing assignments? Is context important in teaching writing skills? Why or why not?

4. Do you try to draw out the students' individual contexts in teaching writing? If not, why? If so, what techniques have you used? Which are effective and which are not?

5. Do you encourage students, on their own, to explore their personal contexts for writing material? If not, why? If so, what techniques do you use? Do you find this self-directed method of establishing context effective? Why or why not?

6. Do you try to teach thinking skills? If not, why? If so, what modes of thinking do you teach (i.e., logical, creative, etc.)? How? Are the skills practiced effective in increasing students' writing abilities?

APPENDIX E

Survey for Students of Adult Basic Composition

1. Do you enjoy writing? Why or why not?

2. Do you get to choose what you want to write about for class assignments? If so, how do you decide what to write about? Do you prefer that the teacher choose your topics for writing or do you like to choose? Why?

3. What subjects do you like to write about? Why?

4. Do you like to write about subjects that you generally understand or subjects that you need to explore more about? Why?

5. What types of learning activities do you do in class? Which do you enjoy doing and which do you not enjoy? Which ones do you think help you to learn to write better?

6. What do you think is the most difficult thing about writing? What is the easiest?

    Age:_____   Gender:_____

Do you have a H.S. diploma or a GED?_____   OR, still
        studying for a diploma or GED?_____

Will you be continuing your education in college?_____
        OR, VocTech school?_____

VITA

Lynell D Kristan

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Theses: A DESCRIPTION OF MEANINGFUL CONTEXTS,
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OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW

Date: 10-28-94   **IRB#:** ED-95-021

Proposal Title: THE RELATIONSHIP OF EMPATHIC THINKING SKILLS TO CONTEXT IN TEACHING ADULT BASIC WRITING AT ROGERS STATE COLLEGE

Principal Investigator(s): Robert Nolan, Lynell D. Kristan

Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved with Provisions

APPROVAL STATUS SUBJECT TO REVIEW BY FULL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AT NEXT MEETING.
APPROVAL STATUS PERIOD VALID FOR ONE CALENDAR YEAR AFTER WHICH A CONTINUATION OR RENEWAL REQUEST IS REQUIRED TO BE SUBMITTED FOR BOARD APPROVAL.
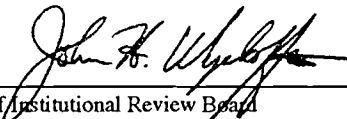ANY MODIFICATIONS TO APPROVED PROJECT MUST ALSO BE SUBMITTED FOR APPROVAL.

Comments, Modifications/Conditions for Approval or Reasons for Deferral or Disapproval are as follows:

PROVISIONS REQUESTED:

The subjects (students) should be told that participation is voluntary and should be given the approximate amount of time required to complete the questionnaire.

Signature: _____   Date: November 16, 1994

Chair of Institutional Review Board