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### **'Botched Performances': Rising to the Challenge of Teaching Our Underprepared Students**

Cheryl Hogue Smith

*CUNY Kingsborough Community College*

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## *“Botched Performances”: Rising to the Challenge of Teaching Our Underprepared Students*

CHERYL HOGUE SMITH  
*Kingsborough Community College,  
City University of New York*

In spring 1997, Barry Munitz of the California State University (CSU) chancellor’s office issued to all CSU presidents Executive Order 665 (EO 665), which, in part, detailed the prerequisites for entry-level math and English classes. One clause in EO 665 (II.B.5) led to the CSU trustees’ decision that, by fall 2007, each university in the system must reduce remedial course offerings to just 10 percent of regularly admitted students. The universities could still, however, offer remedial classes for all students who qualified as “special admit” students—students who do not academically meet the conventional university admissions guidelines but who are conditionally admitted to the university because they have special needs or because they are from underrepresented or underprivileged backgrounds. In preparation for the reduction of remedial courses, between fall 1998 and fall 2007, students who entered a CSU needing remediation were to complete that remediation by the end of their first academic year or they would be dismissed from the university and readmitted only when they reached junior status at another academic institution. Because the demographics (and therefore special-admit populations) are different at each university in the system, EO 665 affected each of the twenty-three state universities differently. And, as a basic writing instructor for ten years at CSU Bakersfield (I’m now at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY), I can attest only to how this order affected CSU Bakersfield (CSUB).

Bakersfield is situated at the base of the San Joaquin Valley, where farming plays a large role in the community. Hence, CSUB has a large number of students from the migrant-farm population attending the university. It's not surprising, then, that many of the students are from first-generation, low-income, minority families, a large number of whom test into basic writing classes, which are officially regarded as "remedial" courses. Athletes, former gang members from Los Angeles, and students from middle-class homes in the area also are among those who tested into basic writing classes. Regardless of their backgrounds, most of my basic writing students entered CSU Bakersfield because they qualified as special-admit students—not because they met the standard university requirement in academics. The special-admit population at CSUB hovers around 36 percent, so EO 665 does not greatly affect the course offerings; they are, for the most part, able to offer basic writing classes to the numerous students who need them. They still lose some students to the one-year-success rule, but CSUB is at least able to place those who cross their threshold into the appropriate classes.

With the very act of setting the mandates restricting remedial writing, the CSU trustees answered the question of what they feel constitutes college-level writing—a question so complex and multifaceted that NCTE is publishing this second volume of *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* to explore its nuances and implications. For, if EO 665 leads to the mandate that remedial writing must be reduced at all the California State Universities, the CSU trustees established that basic writing classes do not belong at the university and, consequently, that students who need such classes do not write at the "college-level." My first response to these trustees was admittedly flippant: "If students are in my college classes, then the writing that goes on in my classes must, by definition, be at the college level." But my second response was more considered: In spite of such an official declaration by the CSU trustees of what college writing is or isn't, I wanted to demonstrate that these basic writing students *are* characteristically writing at what must be considered the "college-level"—not because they occupy a seat in my class but because they produce the kind of writing that is evidence of the kind of thinking most college instructors would identify as college-level thinking.

CSUB offers sequence courses for first-year students: The students who enroll in a sequence-course section move with their class and instructor from one quarter to the next. The first class of the sequence is, obviously, the lowest level of the first-year composition series, and students do not receive baccalaureate credit for taking this credit/no credit class, but they do receive units toward financial aid. Because this class does not receive baccalaureate credit, the State of California defines it as a “precollege” course, which, again, might make the argument that such basic writing classes do not belong in college because the students who take these courses are not writing at the “college level”: If the universities are unwilling to give students credit for taking these courses, then why should the writing that students do in them classify as college level? The answer is thus: Those who say that students in basic writing classes aren’t performing at the college level have probably never taught a basic writing course and consequently have no notion of the levels of thinking basic writing students must do. Basic writing classes—and, by extension, the writing done in these classes—should not be deemed “precollege,” but, instead, the students who take these classes—some of the hardest-working students on any college campus—should get credit for doing so. Let me tell you why.

I was fortunate that, because of the sequence courses at CSUB, I was able to keep my students for an entire academic year (three quarters). My students may have been a little rough in their first composition course, but they usually met the demands of each writing course in the sequence. To demonstrate why I believed my students were writing at the college level, I provide excerpts from two students who were in my classes for three consecutive quarters. These students were two of my least effective writers when they entered college, but their stories, shown through excerpts of their writing over the span of one academic year, might give readers of this chapter a glimpse into the levels at which my students are capable of thinking.

## **Firme**

“Firme” was a quiet student during group discussions but quite vocal in small groups. By the end of the first quarter, he began to

open up to the whole group, and, by the end of the second quarter, he was an active member of the class. Here is an excerpt of Firme's first attempt at college writing:

(Written in September. From "Misconceived," in response to Brent Staples's "Just Walk on By")

Staples is viewed in many different ways. For example people may think staples is a thug. They see that his race is African American and without knowing him they automatically think thug. People get scared and when they see him they do not want to get near him because they are afraid he might do something. The people are so afraid that whenever something bad occurs they automatically think of staples and blame him for something he did not do. Other people believe staples is a bad person because of the way he dresses. They look at his style and think bad person. Appearance is no reason for people to start judging you the wrong way. People view staples as a criminal and it is not fair because they do not know him. They should talk to him first and find out what a good person he is before they start talking all this things about him.

People perceive me as the opposite person that I am, which is a gangster, drug user, and a criminal. . . . I get a lot of people that believe I am a gangster that goes around looking for problems, gets into fights and in shootings.

Aside from the ambiguous statement that makes him sound like the very "gangster, drug user, and a criminal" that he is not, Firme completed the assignment at a satisfactory level. He closely read and evaluated Staples's "Just Walk on By" and was able to effectively discuss how he encountered some of the same problems. He moved beyond mere summary and was able to analyze Staples's essay and make connections from Staples's life to his own, which is evidence of his critical thinking ability.

At this point in my discussion about Firme's progress as a writer, I must step back from Firme and address the general question of how writers who lack a command of sentence mechanics and who exhibit awkwardness with sentence phrasing can possibly be considered college-level writers. The question of what constitutes college-level writing in relation to surface-level errors made by basic writers needs to be addressed, especially since my

discussion here about my students’ writing will undoubtedly raise that issue.

To begin this conversation, I first consult the work of Mina Shaughnessy, who is often credited with establishing basic writing as a field of academic study. In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy describes how basic writers tend to make certain characteristic errors, and they make those types of errors often, which can deceive an instructor who equates number of errors with skill level. For example, nine incorrect uses of “there” for “their” wouldn’t actually count as nine errors but one—because the student is repeating the same error. So papers filled with numerous correction marks don’t necessarily mean students are overwhelmingly grammatically deficient; usually, students just need to learn one or two rules and apply them to their writing.

Shaughnessy does not address issues of style, but her discussions of marking grammar can lead instructors to the conclusion that they need to be wary of marking stylistic preferences as grammatical incorrectness. In the first excerpt, Firme makes relatively few mistakes: He confuses a “this” for “these,” fails to capitalize “Staples,” uses “you” (a cardinal sin in most college writing), and uses “that” instead of “who” when referring to a person (a rule many sophisticated and published writers break). The other “errors” are stylistic. The excerpt is fluent; it’s just stylistically unsophisticated. When we talk about “college-level” writing, we have to remember that there is entry-level college writing and exit-level college writing, the latter of which should be stylistically advanced. Yet we often grade our students on stylistic choices as though they have written something incorrectly. At CSUB, the first-year composition courses focus on content and fluency. Not until the upper-division composition class, where instructors assume sentence-level proficiency, does style become a primary focus of the class. Certainly, composition instructors, including basic writing instructors, tackle style in all levels of their composition classes, but instructors must be careful not to overwhelm students by pointing out “errors” that are not mistakes at all.

Shaughnessy tells us that “so absolute is the importance of error in the minds of many writers that ‘good writing’ to them means ‘correct writing,’ nothing more” (*Errors* 8). And, since

many basic writers care a great deal about “correct writing,” premature editing and the focus on “incorrectness” gets in the way of their ability to use writing as a means of exploring ideas. Basic writers struggle to learn the generative value of writing in large part because their focus on surface errors continually interrupts their ability to think productively about what they want to say. John Dewey believed that “insistence upon avoiding error . . . tends also to [the] interruption of continuous discourse and thought” and stated that privileging error can only lead to self-consciousness based upon a “negative ideal” (186), an “ideal” with which some basic writers are all too familiar. As compositionist Sondra Perl has argued, “Editing [early in the composing process] intrudes so often and to such a degree that it breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing” (333). Both Dewey and Perl recognized the danger of premature editing, which, for those basic writers who focus on error, compounds their difficulty in expressing ideas.

This is not to say that surface-level errors or awkward sentenc-ing is something basic writing teachers should ignore. Instead, we should recognize that sentence fluency cannot be mastered in the single term or year that students spend in our composition classes. They need more time and much more practice to build their sentence-level skills (which is just one reason why writing in other classes and disciplines is so important). Sentence fluency isn’t valued any less by a basic writing instructor than an instructor who teaches rhetorically and stylistically advanced students, but experienced and knowledgeable teachers of basic writers know that, for our students to succeed in college, they must learn to use writing to generate thought, explore ideas, and advance their thinking—tasks that at first should take priority over mastering surface-level errors and infelicities.

The irony with teaching writing is that we have historically focused on surface-level correctness with basic writers when what they desperately need to learn is how to generate and access their thoughts through writing. We recognize that high-level students can benefit from critical thinking instruction, while we overlook that basic writers need it even more. It’s also ironic that some instructors often “forgive” surface-level errors in papers

that demonstrate sophisticated thinking because the errors seem inconsequential to the writing, while the same instructors will denigrate basic writers for similar errors. In fact, many instructors feel basic writers need to master surface-level errors before any thinking instruction can begin. Thus, the students most in need of writing-as-thinking instruction are instead in danger of learning more about fragments and run-ons.

Yes, the first writing sample of Firme’s is simple and has errors, but, with sustained effort, readers can see in Firme’s writing that he understands the Staples’s essay and is able to effectively discuss how events in Staples’s life mirror his own. Because Firme is providing some analysis of Staples’s text, he is clearly demonstrating his ability to think. And *that* is what makes Firme’s excerpt, completed in the third week of classes during the first academic quarter, an example of entry-level college writing. Of course, his writing wouldn’t pass an exit exam at any institution of higher learning, but Firme isn’t at the end of his academic career; he is at the beginning, and the excerpt qualifies as beginning-level college writing.

Subsequent work done by Firme shows him making significant progress as a writer, as this excerpt suggests:

(Written in November. From “*The Fools Run/Bravery*”)

*The Fools Run* also shows a moral type of bravery. There are two types of morals presented in this story. A positive moral is revealed when Kidd, LuEllen, and Dace take a risk and write to the cops for the child pornography they found in one of the houses they broke into. They were brave enough to come forward and write to the cops no matter what the consequences may have been. “After the operation is running, we’ll write to the cops. Tell them the truth. That we broke in, what we found. I got a copy of their whole subscription list, print it out and include that, say we found it with the magazines” (Sanford 172). They called the cops because the lives of innocent children were being destroyed with child pornography and did not care if they ended up in jail; they knew that was the right thing to do. The negative moral of the story is that Kidd, LuEllen, forgot about their morals and values because they did whatever it took to get the money, even breaking into houses and stealing.



Firme demonstrates in this excerpt that he is able to better control his language than in his September essay and is able to write effectively about a full-length text. He again moves beyond summary and incorporates analysis into his essay. Up to this point in class, we had not discussed incorporating quotes or explaining a writer's use of quotes, but Firme does both in this excerpt. The writing still contains some errors, but readers can see Firme is beginning to be comfortable with his own writing.

The following excerpt was written three weeks into Firme's second quarter at CSUB:

(Written in January. From "Bad News")

For the first few weeks after my grandfather past away I would have flashbacks of all the fun things my grandfather and I would do. My grandfather and I would go to the park and play and do all kinds of fun things. My grandfather was the one that thought me how to ride a bike, how to fly a kite, and how to play baseball, and much more. I loved my grandfather. My grandfather was like a second father to me. My grandfather would take care of me when my parents would be working and we would have a lot of fun together. I remember that before my grandfather left to Mexico he promised me that he was going to teach me how to ride a horse and take care of all kinds of farm animals at that time I was very excited and could not wait until that day came. Unfortunately, I did not know that was the last time I was going to talk to him and that what he promised me was never going to happen.

The prompt that I assigned for this essay is odd because I removed all the rules, save one: Students had only to evoke an emotion from their reader. I removed all elements of form and structure and pretty much said "all's fair." I wanted students to shed their typical notions of what a "college essay" looks like (à la David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University"), and, by revoking all the traditional rules, I am able to let students focus on their thinking and avoid what Ken Macrorie calls *Engfish* (11) or Shaughnessy calls *written Anguish* ("Diving In" 235). This is the only assignment in all three quarters for which students are not required to write about something they've read. (Note: While my focus here is entirely on the question of what constitutes

college-level writing, I also recognize how reading skills critically affect students’ ability to write. I believe that students can never outwrite their reading abilities, but the constraints of this chapter do not allow me to discuss this aspect of college writing. See Patrick Sullivan’s discussion of the importance of reading in a college writing classroom in this collection (233–253).

Through this assignment, students are concentrating on their thinking, and they are writing without the fear of doing something “wrong.” Most students have great success with this essay (a victory instead of the usual defeat), and that success opens them to greater risk-taking in writing for future essays. The January piece shows Firme’s comfort level with a personal narrative, and, while his essay is not as sophisticated as some others I received, it shows that Firme does have a command of the language. His next excerpt is from the end of the same quarter, seven weeks later:

(Written in March. From “Technology”)

Even though technology has brought positive things to the lives of humans there are still those people who believe technology has only brought negative things to the world. Some people believe that technology has not been used for peaceful purposes, but for negative purposes. “The development of weapons of ever-increasing destructive power has progressed throughout history, from clubs to nuclear weapons” (Technology par 1). Many people find this to be a major problem with technology, and believe technology is only affecting us. . . .

Technology has also brought a series of negative thoughts to people because technology is very expensive; therefore, with newer technology our nation will be in some kind of debt. “Because technology is very expensive only people with money have more opportunity to acquire technology which enables them to acquire even more wealth” (The Social Impact of Technology par 3). Advancements in technology may be occurring each and every day, but because it is so expensive the majority of people do not have access to it. This becomes a problem because that advancement in technology the people cannot afford may change their lives.

While this example shows a backslide in Firme’s command of the language (a phenomenon I will discuss later in this chapter), readers can still see a progression in sophistication of sentence

structure: Firme moves beyond the simple sentence structures (e.g., incorporating the conjunctive adverb “therefore” and using more subordinating and coordinating conjunctions) and begins to control his punctuation. His writing is still clumsy and may suffer from some logical gaps in the argument, but attentive readers can still manage to understand his ideas.

Firme’s last excerpt was written one full quarter later, at the end of the academic year:

(Written in June. From “Gay Marriage”)

The topic of gay marriage has most of the nation’s votes against gay marriage, but not all. For decades people have come up with many reasonable arguments that have helped them ban gay marriage in almost all of the United States. One common argument that is used against same-sex marriage is simply the definition of marriage. According to Rauch, a correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly* and writer for *National Journal*, “Marriage is defined as the formal union of a man and a woman typically recognized by law, by which they become husband and wife” (Rauch, 2004, p. 13). This argument uses the definition of marriage to help them show that marriage is and could only be the union of a man and a woman and not two males or females. One of the most popular arguments against gay marriage is morality and God’s will. People opposing same-sex marriage argue that marriage is sacred; and is a violation of biblical beliefs and allowing same-sex marriage would be a sin. Should Gay Marriage be Legal (1996) declares that “marriage is already threatened by divorce, and that if gay couples were allowed to marry would set a bad example for children and could spell the downfall of our society” (Should Gay Marriage be Legal, 1996, p. 2). This argument tries to convince people that allowing same-sex marriage will be a disaster for everyone. Another major argument against same-sex marriage is that marriage benefits cost money; therefore, if gay marriage became legal gay couples will be entitled for tax breaks and federal benefits. In Should Gay Marriage be Legal (1996), “It declares that this will eventually place an additional burden on an already strained federal treasury and taxpayers will end up subsidizing a lifestyle that many disapprove” (Should Gay Marriage be Legal, p. 2). . . .

I believe that any person that is in love should have the right to marry who they are in love even if it is from the same gender. Rauch mentions, “marriage is for love and we love

each other; therefore, we should marry . . . the commitment to care for another for life is the love which exceeds all others, the love of another even oneself” (Rauch, 2004, p. 13–27). This is explaining that everybody that is in love should have the right to marry even if it’s from the same sex. Why are people making this so difficult? All gay people are asking for is for a different and better kind of life. Rauch (2004) “A life with all the goods that marriage brings to a couple all they are asking really for a better kind of love” (Rauch, 2004, p. 59) and not to bring harm to society as everybody believes. Allowing people from the same sex to marry is simply equality, pure and simple. Nobody should be able to deny adults the power to marry who they love.

This excerpt comes from an essay at the end of the academic year in a class that fulfills the general education requirement. It begins with Firme’s discussion of what the opposing side believes about his argument. He starts his essay by defining the word *marriage*, demonstrates that he understands the complexities of the term, and provides sources that help him explain these complexities. He also provides three very smart points against gay marriage, which shows he understands this issue well because he couldn’t have provided compelling counterarguments had he not understood the overall dispute surrounding the issue of gay marriage. In his second paragraph, he shows evidence that he is thinking critically about the issue when he asks the question “Why are people making this so difficult?” and answers with, “All gay people are asking for is for a different and better kind of life.” Regardless of what readers believe about this issue, they can’t deny that Firme really does ask the best question of all—“pure and simple.” Granted, he does still have difficulty incorporating his sources, and readers have to do some of the work to completely see where Firme is going with his argument, but with a little effort on readers’ parts, they can surely see what Firme is trying to say.

David Bartholomae believes that basic writing “is not evidence of arrested cognitive development, arrested language development, or unruly or unpredictable language use” if we give basic writers “credit for the sentence [they] intended to write” (“The Study of Error” 254). In other words, we can often tell what basic writers are *trying* to say, as we can see in the June excerpt. Firme has shown that he can write thoughtfully about a difficult topic, even

if he still makes errors, struggles with conveying his thoughts, and lacks sophistication in style. Even so, this excerpt shows Firme has improved vastly from the first quarter, when he was writing mostly simple sentences and was writing only about a familiar issue. Any first-year instructor would be delighted with such progress. Nevertheless, the last excerpt also demonstrates that Firme's writing skills have still not caught up with the sophistication of his thinking skills, which may interfere with his ability to write clearly in more academically rigorous classes. Firme passed this course with the lowest passable grade, which is more a testament to Firme's mental acuity than his ability to write up to the level of his thinking. But pass first-year composition Firme did, and, with consistent practice and by continuing to frequent the writing center, Firme should be able to continue to improve his writing skills as he moves on to more taxing thinking and writing challenges in other classes.

## Mari

"Mari" was a quiet student who grew up in a very small migrant-farm community. She was a quick learner and was always willing to take risks in her writing. This first excerpt was written three weeks into her first academic quarter:

(Written in September. From "Example Essay," in response to Brent Staples's "Just Walk on By")

"Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically over represented among the perpetrators of that violence." (Staples, para. 6). Here he tries to understand why people specially women are treated him as a mugger. He just tried to ask them a question and they ran or cross the street just so they don't passed him. Women always tried to cross the street when ever they are walking at night and they see a man or men in the street. They don't do it uninintencially they do it to protect them self. I as a woman admit that whenever I am walking alone and I see a man that is coming toward my way I cross the street because I feel unsafe.

When I first read Mari's essay, I was worried about her sentence-level skills, but I could easily see that her thinking was well-

reasoned and persuasive. Like Firme, Mari also moves beyond summary and, in fact, demonstrates her critical thinking ability when she takes a position that challenges the author’s own argument about the racism of white women. That is, Mari moves beyond a conventional racial-profiling reading of this text and instead tackles the problem of the vulnerability of women, arguing that women walking alone on the streets at night should be afraid of *any* man they encounter on the streets. Since this was the first essay of the quarter and since Mari took a challengingly critical stance on Staples’s essay, I believed that Mari’s writing skills would improve greatly over the next two quarters because her thinking here was so strong.

Below is an excerpt of Mari’s last essay of the same quarter, written seven weeks later:

(Written in November. From “Friendship, in response to *The Fool’s Run*”)

True friends are the people that can be trusted, and the ones that are always there for each other. LuEllen is considered to be a true friend of Kidd because she was a person that was there, helping him with his job. Kidd saw her as a true friend because he did everything he could to save her life when they were both in danger of getting killed. Dace was also a good friend of Kidd because he was also there helping him on his assignment; however, died at the end. This incident made Kidd feel angry and sad because he lost his close friend. One day Kidd had the doubt that probably either LuEllen or Dace would betrayed him, but then he thought clearly and came to the conclusion that they would never do that. LuEllen might be a thief, but she could never betray him. Kidd stated “I’d never think that LuEllen was the problem. I trust her” (Sanford 115). This quote demonstrates that Kidd did trust LuEllen, and that he knows that she would never betray him. We can see that they were always together; in good and bad moments, just like true friends are.

Even though Mari is still struggling with verb tenses here (something I fear she may always struggle with), her writing ability has clearly improved. Like Firme’s, her syntactic structures have become more complicated and varied, and she provides fairly precise cohesive markers in and between sentences. She has more to

say about her topic, and, through well-formed, more elaborated sentences, she develops her ideas more fully. Mari has certainly improved over the span of seven weeks since the first paper.

Mari's next paper was written three weeks into the second quarter of her academic career:

(Written in January. From "American Dream," the creative writing assignment)

When I decided to reach the American dream with my two kids I never thought how hard it would be to survive in a place where you get pointed, laughed at, and some times spit at. Sometimes I have to eat my pride because I do not have a voice and I could be reported back. Working in the hot sun or in the cold weather in poor condition is hard, but I think of my kids and I do not get tired. Sometimes we do not have time to eat because we are told that people depended in that food. I know that people depend on our work, but we also eat these crops as well we buy it too but we are not animals. Why are we treated as animals? I even think that animals are treated better than me.

I love my four-wall house because it's better than where I come from. I have a curtain that separates the side where our mattress is laying. The kitchen is small but has enough food for a two times meal that my kids and I live. The house does not have a lot of decorations, but it has the necessities that we as people have. The bathroom is not inside of the room but it's just outside. The water when taking a shower is cold but every day we are clean.

When I received this essay from Mari, who, like Firme, was among those students who struggled the most at the beginning of the previous quarter, I immediately recognized that she had learned from the styles of two essayists she had analyzed the previous quarter: She took on the same matter-of-fact, nonapologetic tone and process analysis format of coyote Tomás Robles in "Ferrying Dreamers to the Other Side," and she mimicked the repetitive, unforgiving, and highly descriptive style of Jo Goodwin Parker in "What Is Poverty?" She took ownership of others' approaches and created a style all her own. Whereas Firme chose to write about something personal, Mari, who was only nineteen and had no children, chose to combine factual elements of her

family’s history with imaginative aspects she invented. In this excerpt, readers can see that Mari has an astonishing awareness of her audience, as is shown by her control over the pathos of her essay. She could have written a scathing commentary about the poor conditions immigrants face in the United States, but, instead, through her vivid yet depressing descriptions (e.g., “how hard it would be to survive in a place where you get pointed, laughed at, and some times spit at” or “I even think that animals are treated better than me”), her ultimate appreciation of the opportunities she has in the United States comes through. The descriptions and emotional appeals work, regardless of the incorrect punctuation and syntax. The risks that Mari took in this essay were enormous, yet her willingness to take such risks—whether she had succeeded or not—embodies how we want our students to perform in college. Incidentally, I asked Mari to revise her entire “American Dream” essay and submit it to the William Saroyan Essay Contest sponsored by the Fresno Public Library. She won third place in the college division.

The next excerpt is from a paper written at the end of the same quarter, seven weeks later:

(Written in March. From “Do You Feel Replace by Technology?”)

Toffler also argues that “No one—not even the most brilliant scientist alive today really knows where science is taking us” (Toffler 382). This makes sense with this because every day the new technologies grow, and we never know what to expect next. People do not just say that we need the technology, but every day we also ask for more. Everyday devices do work that normally humans can do themselves, as well as resolving some of the problems that we humans have.

People, when using technology, do not think of the harm it causes to humanity and the environment. This is because technology is all over the place from earth to space. The technology is getting better, but the problem is that we are affecting the place that we are living in. Toffler explains the problem that earth faces with all of the technology when he says “This psychic pollution is matched by the industrial vomit that fills our skies and seas” (Toffler 380). New technologies involving gas, oil, food, etc. are affecting the air and the place that we need.



As with Firme, Mari's language becomes strained when she is discussing topics she knows little about. Her arguments are sound, and she uses her research effectively, but the voice is stilted. She understands what Toffler is saying in his essay, and she tries to take his point further by showing that although we have technology, we always ask for more, even if we don't know what we are asking for. She tries to make the distinction between technology that is created for the sake of convenience and technology that is created to help solve problems. She gets all of this from Toffler, but she has difficulty developing her ideas and showing her readers that she really did understand Toffler.

In the second paragraph, if readers take out the word *psychic* from Toffler's quote, Mari's paragraph makes more sense. She wanted to discuss the dangers of technology to "humanity and the environment," and she wanted to use the Toffler quote as evidence. She clearly did not understand how *psychic* fit into the quote, so she ignored the word completely. The paragraph does show that she is considering the dangers of technology compared to the conveniences of technology, but she has trouble making her point. But her point, if readers look at what she is trying to say, shows evidence that she is able, nevertheless, to argue her position and substantiate her thesis.

Finally, the passage below is from Mari's last essay of her first year at CSUB:

(Written in June. From "Death Penalty: Execution Is Needed for the Worst of the Worst):

Innocent people sometimes are in the row of executions, this is why the punishment needs to end. Even though that the punishment is killing many innocent people it is also a cruel and unusual punishment. Henry J. Reske article talks about the punishment been cruel an unusual for Robert Alton Harris "he was executed for kidnapping and murdering two 16-year-old boys so that he and his brother could use their car for a robbery" (Reske, 1992, p. 26). When he was notify that his sentence was to died in a gas chamber, his lawyer argued that the execution was one of the cruelest punishment.

In the other hand Bennett Capers in his article argues that the electric chair is a cruel punishment as "Warhol's use of this particular execution as a referent in his Electric Chair paintings

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thus asks the viewer to contemplate who is sentenced to death in this country” (Capers, 2006, p. 249). Here the author wants to point to the chair that gave death to Julius Rosenberg and Ethel Rosenberg were his painting of Andy express the torture of the sentence people to the chair.

In addition the Australian Nursing journal comments the lethal injection that takes place in the city of California, according to *The Lancet*, which argued the cruelty of the punishment and how it violates the eighth amendment because the action is cruel and unusual. Like in the case of Harris that was killed in a gas chamber the *Fierro v. Gomez*, which argued that the punishment is cruel and unusual. In the *American Journal of Law and Medicine* mentions the case of *Fierro v. Gomez* which argues that the eighth amendment is violated when this punishment is applied to a prisoner. Now the court decision says, “this decision clearly states that California may no longer use the gas chamber to execute inmates sentenced to death” (1994, p. 344). This is because doctors proved that the process took long and the pain was severe. In the same way that Harris died and suffered the two boys when they were kidnapped and murdered.

I chose these paragraphs because they were among of the most troubled in Mari’s essay. She struggles with the language in her essay, and this excerpt certainly exemplifies that. Some who read her prose will undoubtedly say that the paragraphs are a jumbled mess and clearly can’t be the work of a student who is ready for college. Yet Mari is the same student who, ten weeks before, won third place in a countywide, college-level essay contest. The ideas in the paragraph make sense, if we give Mari “credit for what [she] intended to write.” She is identifying three methods of execution that some critics have described as “cruel and unusual”: the gas chamber, the electric chair, and lethal injection. She is trying to say that the manner in which we kill people fits the definition of cruel and unusual. She uses sources to help support her claims that these three methods are cruel and unusual, but she does so ineffectively. The excerpt is unified in its objective, but it falls apart when she tries to incorporate so many sources into one argument.

I do think that I should point out that the class in which this essay was written was a class designed around one large research paper at the end of the quarter. Therefore, much of the class

focused exclusively on research and incorporating that research into an argument, including how not to plagiarize. This paper is 35 percent of the students' final grade, and only 10 percent of the paper could use direct quotations; the remainder of the sources had to be paraphrased. Part of the problem that both Mari and Firme had with their final papers seems to stem from not wanting to plagiarize. Students have difficulty paraphrasing others, and this is especially so when they have to incorporate those paraphrases into their own argument. So not only is this the first essay Mari has written in which she had to use multiple sources in order to provide evidence supporting her argument, but it's also the first essay in which she had to do so mostly in her own words, *and*, like Firme's excerpt, this writing represents the opposing side's arguments. The complexity of this assignment increased significantly, probably too much so in one quarter for Mari. She clearly struggles here as the academic demands become more rigorous and as she confronts new and difficult rhetorical situations. This struggle becomes visible in the incoherence of her prose. Ultimately, she may not quite understand some of the direct quotations she used and therefore cannot write about them effectively (see Patrick Sullivan's chapter in this book for a discussion of students writing about readings they don't wholly understand), but there is a clear attempt to explain three modes of killing a prisoner and to establish them as cruel and unusual. So, whereas the writing seems to show a backward slide instead of progress, the thinking still comes through. She is grappling, but she is still thinking.

The writing in both Mari's and Firme's final essays clearly appears to undergo a syntactical setback, but, when discussing this very phenomenon of students' writing getting "worse," Mike Rose explains that

as writers move further away from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up. Before we shake our heads at these errors, we should also consider the possibility that many such linguistic bumbles are signs of growth, a stretching beyond what college freshman can comfortably do with written language. In fact, we should *welcome* certain kinds of errors, make allowance for them in the curricula

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we develop, analyze rather than simply criticize them. Error marks the place where education begins. (188–89)

Basic writers enter classes deficient in grammar and mechanics, and, of course, we must address these surface-level weaknesses. But if we want our students to progress beyond “correct” but simplistic writing, we must help students understand (and remind ourselves) that sometimes writing that appears “worse” is actually a sign of growth. Ultimately, students must be willing to take risks and accept some syntactical setbacks as they struggle to convey increasingly difficult ideas.

The last paragraph in Mari’s essay on the death penalty is difficult to understand, and many who read it will say that Mari does not write at the college level. I would argue, however, that Mari’s first attempt at an extended research paper that incorporated several sources and that had to include paraphrasing did, in fact, show that she was thinking critically about the cruel and unusual aspect of the death penalty, and her thinking is an indication of progress. The next time she writes a research paper, she will undoubtedly improve her ability to effectively communicate her ideas as she develops her skills with paraphrasing and incorporating texts into her own arguments. Surface correctness and fluency will develop as she gets more practice and experience. There is no reason to prevent a writer like this from tackling more rigorous college-level work because of a lack of surface fluency.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, then, it’s unfair to punish students with lower grades when they turn in writing that looks inferior to prior work when that inferiority derives from their attempt to meet the demands of a more challenging task than they’ve ever tried to meet before. This is especially true if we give assignments—as we should—that tax the thinking of our students to the point that their writing becomes muddled. The answer isn’t to “dumb down” the tasks but to set and keep the bar high and allow students to struggle along the way. Lynn Quitman Troyka believes that “what basic writers need more than anything . . . is experience with intellectual

endeavors of the mind” (196), which suggests that we have to provide challenging writing assignments for our students, and we have to let their sentence fluency develop at a different rate. As Ann Berthoff has argued, “What is good for the best and the brightest is essential for students who have difficulties. Those we used to call slow learners need the freedom and the opportunities we trouble to offer our prize students” (73). Our basic writers need the freedom to explore their ideas, and we must be patient enough to let their sentence-level skills improve along the way.

Just as it’s unfair to judge student writing on sentence-level fluency, it’s equally unfair to judge whether students write at a college level based on their entry-level writing. Over the span of one ten-week quarter, these students have proven that they can rapidly learn what is required of them in college and can successfully rise to meet the intellectual challenges of writing in college, even if in some moments the progress with their writing at the surface level seems to move backward. Almost all students will struggle with writing when they are challenged with new and complex ideas, yet that struggle does not automatically indicate a deficiency that should disqualify them from more advanced college courses. The point is that writing in college is about the thinking, and, as such, writing at the college level is precisely what my students are doing, even if they are doing it crudely and in a style that marks them as “underprepared.”

In terms of reading, many elementary teachers have told me that students begin to dislike reading in fourth grade. When I ask why, every single teacher says it is because in fourth grade students stop learning to read and instead begin to read to learn. Students begin to find inadequacies in themselves (whether perceived or real), and many young students begin to dislike reading (and learn to minimally engage in the reading process). I tell this story because it mirrors a shift in how students engage with writing. In K–12, students are often taught to write—research papers, comparison and contrast papers, process analysis papers, problem/solution papers, literary papers, and so forth. They are constantly presented with new genres to tackle, often in preparation for college. However, once they enter college, a second paradigm shift of their academic careers takes place: The focus shifts from learning to write to writing to learn.

In a longitudinal study that focused on how writing in the first year in college can have an impact on students, Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz conclude that “the story of the freshman year is not one of dramatic changes on paper; it is the story of changes within the writers themselves” (124). Sommers and Saltz discuss how many students were able to take the focus off the product—the writing task or grade—and put the focus on the process. In doing so, students “began to see a larger purpose for their writing” (139). They add that “students who continue to see writing as a matter of mechanics or as a series of isolated exercises tend never to see the ways writing can serve them as a medium in which to explore their own interests. They continue to rely on their high school idea that academic success is reflected in good grades” (140). In other words, what separates high school writing from college writing isn’t what the product *is* or *looks like*, but what the process *does* for the writer: The process helps students discover ideas and make sense of thinking that becomes increasingly more complex as they move deeper into their major fields of study. And it’s this generative and explorative type of writing that happens in college that can be classified as “college level.” College-level writing is writing that shows students are thinking. The evidence of that thinking—the product—reflects a process that will probably be different for each student and with each situation.

This is not to suggest that no writing-to-learn happens in high school (just look at any National Writing Project teacher’s class, for example) or that composition classes aren’t geared toward teaching students how to write correctly. But a fundamental change happens in college, and at its core are students who are able to “discover themselves as subjects of inquiry” and who are therefore “free to set their own intellectual agendas” (Sommers and Saltz 140–41). Professors first and foremost want students to master the complexities of the discipline through their writing—not just master the writing itself—and, to do this, college professors assign “real intellectual tasks that allow students to bring their interests into a course” (141). First-year composition classes are often the first step in the academic process that helps college students make this paradigm shift.

For those of us who teach the underprepared, it is especially important that we help students make the transition from

learning-to-write to writing-to-learn—a difficult task for us because our students are still learning to write. As long as students “continue to rely on their high school methods and see writing as a mere assignment” (Sommers and Saltz 140), they will be unable to effectively write for college. Therefore, basic writers must simultaneously develop their sentence-level skills while they learn to use writing as a thinking tool, and we have to acknowledge that sometimes students struggle to understand that we are trying to teach them both. As Mike Rose explains,

Appropriating a style and making it your own is difficult, and you'll miss the mark a thousand times along the way. The botched performances, though, are part of it all, and developing writers will grow through them if they are able to write for people who care about language, people who are willing to sit with them and help them as they struggle to write about difficult things. (54)

While both learning-to-write for college and embracing writing-to-learn, basic writers can learn to accept “botched performances” as paths toward greater understanding. Of course, having supportive instructors “who are willing to sit with them and help them as they struggle” is vital for basic writers to grow, and we must make sure we create assignments that intellectually challenge our students and grade these assignments most heavily on the thinking. Quite simply, it is our job to help this population succeed; we must balance all that we must teach them while at the same time not overwhelm them.

For me, the important question isn't whether our students are ready to be college-level writers, but whether we are ready, as teachers, for those labeled “underprepared.” We must also remember that error is easy to recognize and grade, but teaching thinking is much more difficult and takes much more concentration, patience, and attention to detail. It is my belief that teaching thinking is precisely what we need to do. So the issue isn't whether “underprepared students” have the tenacity or desire to learn necessary skills to survive in college—but whether we have the tenacity and desire to teach them.

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