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Breakout Session 3

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Pathway to Composition Competency

Performance on a standardized test determines initial student placement in the developmental writing course at the University of Oklahoma — English 0113, with the “Zero” standing implicitly for “zero credit.” Fortunately, the office of First Year Composition realized that an actual writing sample, composed with the benefit of writing instruction in a classroom setting would be a better indicator of student writing skills than a standardized test. And so the first week of ENGLISH 0113 is dedicated to teaching students how write an academic essay, which can result in their placement in English 1113, the full-credit first semester composition class at OU.

This presentation will take you through the methods I have used that resulted in fully one third of my students in the last two semesters being able to place out of the class. Moreover, I have every reason to believe that this same approach can be used to achieve the ALP goal of integrating developmental students in full credit classes – a pathway, if you will, to composition competency.

1. **THE INITIAL PROBLEM—*TIMOR ALBUM SPATIUM***

The first problem faced by developmental writers, as I believe it to be with all other writers, is that putting words on a page, not to mention putting them together in a cogent, coherent, and unified essay, is a monumental task. What these developmental students (and by my reckoning all students, and indeed all writers) find so godawful difficult is simply finding any words at all to put on the page. Sometimes known as writer’s block, or “fear of white space,” this daunting question looms over every assignment: What words do I put on the page?

It seems to me that the profession has done a poor job providing students with an answer to that question. The much-vaunted “writing process” seems to offer little in the way of an answer. Eschewing product and embracing process typically does not produce deathless prose. One would have hoped that progress could have been made to resolve these difficulties, but the next attempt to develop a theory of writing instruction beyond process theory has resulted in the absence of theory altogether, as expressed in anti-foundational post-process literature that raises significant doubts about the ability to teach writing at all. The result is the less than useful conclusion that “writing can be learned but not taught.”

However, a recent evolution (and some might say revolution) in writing pedagogy is the Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein text *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. Indeed, the academic world was apparently “ready and waiting” for this book. As G/B put it, “(It) has been more successful that we ever imagined,” as evidenced by its use in “over 1,500 schools” (xiv). And I would argue that its success is based on the simple fact that it does what neither process or post-process pedagogies have been able to do—enable students to put reasonably cogent, coherent, and even persuasive words, sentences, and paragraphs on the page by providing them with a practical and efficient means of invention and drafting, the ability to fill up the white space with writing that actually gets read.

At first glance, then, there should be no better text that *TSIS* to help my developmental writers write their way out of the “Zero” class because the first-week assignment seems tailor made for the templates. Students must first read an essay, then summarize it, and finally respond to it—an apparently perfect fit for the G/B They Say/I Say templates, using “they say” templates to summarize and “I say” templates to respond. But as promising at the text first appeared, there were two major drawbacks.

First, there is far too much material to condense into what amounts to a one-week “boot camp”—three 50-minute class periods to teach the skills of summary (“They say”) and response (“I say) before the final draft is due at the FYC office by noon Friday. Simply trying to get across G/B’s points about effective summaries seem impossible to accomplish in just a week, let alone the one class period allotted for it. The solution to the problem seems to be a simplified version of the G/B templates.

1. **REVISING TS/IS TEMPLATES FOR DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING**
2. **The “They say” Summary Simplified—One Template Instead of Several**

My 0113 students need templates to help them summarize the assigned essay, and to do it after just one class period of instruction. Unfortunately, the two G/B chapters on summarizing don’t really help students produce what the prompt requires: “a condensed and objective account of the main idea” of the assigned essay. A more advanced class might be able to distinguish the subtleties that characterize the various templates designed to help students answer that prompt, but mine need to be able to generate words on paper almost immediately. Therefore, I ask them to begin with a template that every student can use immediately:

“In the essay \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ argues that\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,”

which becomes a sterling start to the essay:

*In the essay “Past Experiences and Future Attitudes in Literacy,” Erika Petersen argues that…*

This template drastically simplifies the task at hand and permits the class to focuse on filling in the last part of the template—the first point of her argument, which is clearly stated in the initial paragraph: “praise and discouragement lead us to certain attitudes” about literacy. Further into the essay, students need to notice how she comes down firmly on the side of praise as a determining factor in achieving literacy, which she clearly states at the end: “Praise and encouragement should be taken into more consideration when teaching literacy.”

Therefore, by about halfway through the first class, students are able to generate a version of the following introduction to their summary using a modified version of the TS/IS templates:

*In the essay “Past Experiences and Future Attitudes in Literacy,” Erika Petersen argues that “praise and discouragement lead us to certain attitudes about literacy,” with praise a positive factor and discouragement negative. Put another way, “Praise and encouragement should be taken into more consideration when teaching literacy.”*

Now, the students need to support this claim, and they are asked to find examples of the claim that they have just made about Petersen’s argument.

Again, the template for generating these supporting examples is a simple one: “For example, …” Generating these examples is fodder for group work—six groups of three students to generate one example each. Finally, before class ends, I introduce a few transitional words—or, template—for listing the examples that support the claim: “Furthermore, …”; “In addition,…”; and “What’s more…” get the idea across. The homework is to complete a minimum one-page summary.

1. **The “I say” Response Simplified**

The G/B “I say” templates for responding have the same drawbacks as the “They say” chapters for summarizing—too much, too soon, and too fast for a job that has to get done in just one class period. These students have to learn how to respond to a text—and get it down on paper—in less than fifty minutes, a task that would challenge any first year composition student, not just basic writers. So for right now, students need to be able to learn a template that will have the generative power to respond to a text.

The template that seems to be able to produce the most understanding and the best response is what I call the “first glance, closer look” move, which is at once less complex but at the same time equal in rhetorical power to the G/B templates in that it enables a writer to acknowledge the credibility of what might be called a “commonplace,” cite significant anomalies that the commonplace doesn’t explain, and then explore other ways that might deal with the anomalies (the closer look).

So in the current case of responding to the “praise produces performance” essay, students can agree that Petersen’s thesis sounds plausible (praising students might actually enhance their literacy skills). In fact, they typically have examples from their own literacy narratives to support the positive effects of praise or the negative impact of discouragement. After they have discovered personal examples to support Petersen’s claim, the groups then look to the essay itself for the author’s own examples. This discussion, then, creates the ability to complete the first response template:

*At first glance, Petersen’s argument makes a lot of sense. My own experience supports Petersen’s claims. For example, (REPORT PERSONAL EXPERIENCES). In addition, she reports that (USE HER EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS WHO WERE EITHER ENCOURAGED OR DISCOURAGED BY THEIR TEACHERS).*

At this point, students have been able to generate an initial response that agrees with the basic premise of the essay, but with a rhetorical promise of complicating their position.

The next job is to fulfill the rhetorical promise they made to disagree with Petersen’s views. The easiest example for the students to relate to is the conditional nature of praise that they themselves have received—almost without exception, the praise has been for desired performance that they have demonstrated, not for the lack of such performance. This allows them to see that one way to critically read Petersen’s essay is to argue that she puts the cart before the horse—it seems as if she’s suggesting unconditional praise. With this observation, students can then complete the second template, which presents the “closer look”:

*A closer look reveals that Petersen’s argument does not take into account problems with her “praise produces performance” formula—namely, that it is in reverse order. Instead of praise producing literacy skills, it is the skills that produce the praise.*

This is the time to drill in a major point—namely, that claims require support. And in just the same way that the students supported their summaries and first glance claims with references to both personal experience and the text, so too can the groups produce support for the closer look claim that it is “performance produces praise,” not the other way around.

Athletes relate to this premise particularly well, with personal examples of coaches yelling at them when they performed poorly and praising them when they did well. Student groups can also find evidence in Petersen’s own essay to support their claim noting that she includes the negative impact of insincerity. All of these examples allow students to complete their response by providing examples that support their “closer look” claims.

1. **The Conclusion—“So What, Who Cares?” Simplified**

Not to belabor the point, but the TS/IS section of “So what, who cares?” is also well beyond the scope of my one week boot camp, although this is not to say that a conclusion isn’t necessary. But rather than exploring the issue with multiple templates to generate a response, it seems to me that the important lesson to be learned in this brief encounter with templates is to realize when it’s time to reach a conclusion and then how to accomplish that goal and the best way to do that is to simply recognize what they have accomplished:

*In conclusion, this essay recognizes the value of Petersen’s claim about how praise helps achieve literacy but at the same time challenges her view that praise comes as a result of performance rather than the other way around. Therefore, Petersen’s most important point may be about the value of sincerity rather than praise.*

If students can reach this point in just two days of instruction (the last class is devoted to editing as the papers are due by noon on Friday), they are truly ready to move on to the full-credit course.

1. **INCORPORATING TS/IS REVISIONS INTO ALP—AN ALL-IN-ONE COMP CLASS**

If revisions to TS/IS can help a few students place into the full-credit comp class in just one week, it stands to reason that it can also help a vast majority of developmental students handle the full-credit class. In other words, this re-imagining of the They Say/I Say templates might be one way to achieve the ALP goal of incorporating developmental students into full-credit classes, even promising the possibility of lessening the load of developmental students having to attend supplemental writing workshops.

**The Rhetorical Power of “Commonplace/First Glance/Anomalies/Closer Look”**

I believe that a strong argument can be made that these revised templates possess as much if not more rhetorical power than those set forth in the TS/IS program. For example, an article in the February, 2016 issue of *College Composition and Communication* asked the question of the *They Say/I Say* text: “Do Academics Really Write This Way?” Unfortunately, the article addressed only those templates that “Entertain Objections” and “Make Concessions” and not what G/B call the “uber template,” the eponymous “They say/I say” itself. My belief is that the same “corpus analyses” would yield very few actual uses of the They Say/I Say template because in my own admittedly limited review of academic and popular writing, the “first glance/closer look” template is used much more widely for the basic reason that provides rhetorical power equal to or even greater than the TS/IS template.

Not only does it create the basis for an argument like the TS/IS template, it automatically answers the call for the first requirement of an essay, rhetorical invention. If the “commonplace” is a statement of what “most (or many) people believe (whether about gun control or the Paleo diet or an esoteric point in critical theory) and the “first glance” provides support for that belief, then using this template of claim and support automatically establishes the necessity for some sort of argument—the reader requires a “closer look,” motivated by at least one significant anomaly that the commonplace can’t explain.

The point is simply this: the same template that many developmental writers learn in just one week of instruction can become the basis for an entire course in composition because it places the focus on what many scholars have claimed to be the primary element missing in composition classes—the presence of rhetorical invention.

**STUDENT ESSAYS ATTACHED.**

Michael Francis

English 0113-01

Mr. Layton

January 21, 2016

***Past Experiences and Future Attitudes in Literacy***

**Placement Essay Summary**

In Erica Petersen’s essay “Past Experiences and Future Attitudes in Literacy*”*, she argues that giving students praise and encouragement improves literacy. For example, Petersen says, “It’s apparent that past experiences with learning literacy appeared to play a role in these people’s future attitudes toward reading and writing and that praise continues to change your attitudes throughout your entire learning experience.” Petersen analyzes studies conducted by Rick Evans and Alisa Belzer in order to gain further insight and reasoning behind people’s negative and positive feelings about literacy. Although Petersen finds these studies helpful, she still feels that by only surveying college students and African American woman, Belzer and Evan’s study lacked a wide enough variety participants. She addressed this problem in her own study by using participants of different education levels and ranging from eleven to forty-four.

Petersen claims that one’s early experiences with literacy play a large roll in their current success. For example, Petersen suggests that when a student receives a teacher’s praise for reading/writing, it creates higher levels of confidence ultimately resulting in better literary skills. On the other hand, when students receive negative feedback from a teacher, it results in future insecurities with their reading/writing proficiency. Petersen provides the following evidence for her claims: “after reviewing the interviews that following a discouraging event when learning to read or write, most students felt incompetent or felt like something was wrong until an encouraging teacher or event came along.” These experiences with writing would either spark a lifelong interest in literacy or result in an unenjoyable relationship with writing.

At the end of this essay, there’s no doubt that Petersen believes that praise and encouragement play a huge role in helping a child develop confidence in writing and develop a higher rate of literacy.

**Placement Essay Response**

At first glance, I strongly agree with Petersen’s argument that praise and encouragement improves literacy. Petersen made a convincing argument using scientific evidence and personal testimonials to back her claims. She provides an in depth explanation of the bodies physiological response to praise or discouragement with the release of dopamine. Another convincing factor was that almost all the subjects of her study gave similar responses. This made it clear that her study was providing accurate results. Lastly, she used past studies conducted by Evans and Belzer, and expanded them to a wider pool of subjects. This insured the validity of the results on a larger and more diverse population. In short, Petersen provided ample evidence that made her theory almost irrefutable.

A closer look, however, reveals that Petersen’s argument may not be as strong as first thought. Although, she did expand the study to include a larger and more diverse population than Belzer and Evans, she still only surveyed 12 people. This creates a large margin for error in her study. In order to improve the accuracy of her results, it is imperative that she expands study to include a larger group of subjects from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels. Another flaw in her theory, stems from the argument that the sole way to achieve success is through a constant stream of praise. Although this may be the most obvious motivator, it can also lead to overconfidence and a lack of motivation to stretch yourself. If someone is always being told how great a writer they are, then what is the motivation for them to push themselves? Praise works best when used in combination with critique. Many coaches use this tactic when leading their team to success. They point out what players are doing wrong and right. Additionally, they aren’t afraid to point out flaws that are inhibiting players from performing to their full potential. Overall, Person’s essay made great arguments for the importance of praise. However, its lack of subject diversity and focus on praise as the only road to success in literacy, made it fall short. Her argument wasn’t invalid, just incomplete.

Robert Cox

ENG 0113-01

Mr. Layton

January 19, 2016

Placement Essay – Summary

In her essay “Past experiences and future attitudes in literacy,” Erika Petersen suggests that praise and encouragement influence literacy abilities in all stages of life. She claims that she is the only one to conduct a study in this specific area. For example, Peterson states, “…none seem to focus on people’s actual physical experience of praise versus discouragement.” In her individual study, she interviewed twelve people of different ages ranging from eleven to forty-four whereas Even’s and Belzer’s interviews focused on groups of people who attended college around the age of eighteen years and middle-aged African American women. Therefore, Petersen felt as though Even and Belzer’s studies were biased and did not have enough diversity in the subjects. She also states both of their articles didn’t examine in depth what happens to the body, chemically, during praise. She then reviews the effects of dopamine released in the brain herself and discovers that levels are higher when subjects receives praise. She proposes that the positive effects of praise are due to the effects of dopamine on the body. This is supported by the fact that the interviewees recalled positive experiences of former teachers, therefore affecting their future literacy. For example, she noticed everyone’s good experiences of past literacy could be remembered with great amounts of detail. There was also a recurring pattern as to when students with good literacy skills received praise, it led to positive literacy growth. All of her findings from her study support her original hypothesis in that praise has a positive effect on literacy growth, whereas discouragement had a negative effect. She concludes with the statement “Praise and encouragement should be taken into more consideration when teaching literacy.”

RESPONSE

At first glance, I strongly agree with Petersen’s argument that praise and encouragement improve literacy because the effects of praise to me indicates doing something good. Therefore, why would anyone not want to repeat the action that brought forth the encouragement? When she makes a point to conduct a broad study across all age groups verses other studies she felt were biased, I believe she stated the differences between the other studies and her own and in doing so, further supports her argument. When she talks about her subjects remembering a specific instance where they were praise or discouraged I could relate because I remember the first time I was assigned to write a paper for a class, and I received compliments from the teacher. This made me feel confident in my writing and my performance within the class. A closer look, however, reveals that her argument may not be as solid as first thought. For example, her subjects had only positive experiences, but that is not the case for everyone. I would like to explore the effects of discouragements on literacy because I believe, in some cases discouragement can lead to positive performance. For instance, in the military most people improve their mistakes after being criticized on their performance. Additionally, I believe her cause and effect is reversed. In other word, instead of praise resulting in good performance, it was the good performance that resulted in the praise. As I recall, none of her subjects were actually weak in the area of literacy. Another point is that in her observation she only used 12 people, whereas I feel as though this makes for too small of a test group to confirm her argument. In conclusion, I feel as through to properly validate and support her argument, that praise improves literacy, more research would need to be done.