

Review Essay

What Is Real College Writing? Let the Disagreement Never End

Peter Elbow

Sullivan, Patrick, and Howard Tinberg. *What Is “College-Level” Writing?* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2006. 418 pages.

Sullivan, Patrick, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. *What Is “College-Level” Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2010. 329 pages.

Suppose I reviewed a book about breast cancer by saying, “They shouldn’t have written about breast cancer. Their prestige will add to the neglect of some other form of cancer that badly needs attention.” Surely people get to write books about topics they want to write about. If I write a review that complains about their neglect, *I’m* neglecting the traditional job of a review: “How well do they do the task they set out to do?” Yet if I think my complaint is important, I can resort to the baggy genre of “review essay” and try to complain as respectfully as I can. Thus the review essay that follows.

The task chosen by the editors and authors of these two NCTE volumes is a valid and complex one. They write to figure out what goes on and should go on in first-year composition courses and how that relates to what goes on in the teaching of writing in high school. One obviously useful goal of the enterprise is to help high school teachers know better how to prepare their students for college. In fact the first volume grew out of a conference that brought high school and college teachers of writing together. In a sense these essays are a kind of macro-version of that perennial conversation where a couple of high school English teachers ask a couple of college composition teachers over dinner: “Now tell us concretely: what *are* you really

looking for in your first-year students? And what are you trying to achieve in your teaching? Help us prepare our high school students better.” A virtue of the volumes is the mixture of high school teachers and college teachers (and students!) as authors.

I hasten to say that I found the writers doing a good and useful job with this task. They represent a huge variety of different minds going to work at it—richly, interestingly, intelligently, lucidly—and often in admirable detail. (For example, in *Volume 2* Tom Thompson and Andrea Gallagher team up to write “When a College Professor and a High School Teacher Read the Same Papers.”) Ed White and Sheridan Blau have essays in both volumes—which might seem unfair—but they were central in producing the whole enterprise and I found their four essays remarkably interesting and useful—at times brilliant.

* * *

But frustration grew in me and I reflected back on it (thus demonstrating a meta-cognitive move that some authors called essential to college level writing).¹ My simpler and more obvious frustration is at the narrowness of the realm the volumes chose to investigate. I felt in the title a promise of breadth: “college writing.” There’s so *much* college writing—in all the different courses and different colleges. What a jungle. How nice it would be to get a bit of an understanding through an overview. But no. The two volumes focus on a very small slice of college writing—what goes on in first-year comp. Virtually none of the authors are from disciplines other than English.

I’m troubled at a decision to investigate what goes on or ought to go on in first-year composition without looking at all the rest of the writing that students will have to do in their continuing college courses. Surely one of the goals of our first-year course (not the only goal, I’d insist—see my “Reflections”) is to prepare students for writing tasks in other disciplines. Plenty of faculty across the curriculum don’t even consider writing in first-year composition courses as real writing.

But I had a larger and more complicated frustration. That little word “level” in the title (*What is College-Level Writing?*) was a signal that I missed at first. But it *preoccupied* most of the writers and led them to assume that their job was to figure out *levels* or *standards*. In other words, the impulse that informs both volumes is mostly *normative*. They investigate not so much what college writing *is* but what it *should be*. In a final section reflecting back on the essays in the two volumes, Ed White argues explicitly that college level writing is a certain *kind* of writing that might occur anywhere—not necessarily in college. “College writing goes on in many sec-

ondary schools, while much writing that takes place in a first-year college course would be unlikely to be called college level” (Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau 295).

He makes explicit what most of the writers seemed merely to assume: that the goal is a search for a Platonic essence or small constellation of essences. “In order for readers to respond to this book, we need to seek for certain essences: What characteristics clearly must be present in writing for us to call it *college level*?” (Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau 296). Jeanne Gunner provides a notable exception. She speaks eloquently against the pretense even of trying to *define* college writing:

Writing . . . happens among real people in real places over time for a vast range of purposes. When people writing in college environments write, we see embodied instances of college writing. To attempt to define college writing outside this human social context is to invite its commodification (Sullivan and Tinberg 119)

Behind this normative emphasis I sense a fear of chaos. Life continually threatens to overwhelm us with chaos; the world around us is chaotic; and as teachers we continually feel the classroom threatening to fall apart. Many of the writers start out by almost throwing up their hands at the dizzying variety of writing that goes on in even in the small world of first-year composition courses. If you set out to write an essay for this volume, you would doubtless feel your nose being rubbed in the total nonagreement about standards in first-year composition courses around the land. One of the few references to writing in the other disciplines came when Muriel Harris remarked that an A paper for composition might well get an F in engineering (Sullivan and Tinberg 121–22).

How should we respond to this chaos of standardless writing? Perhaps it was natural that the writers—and the editors in planning the enterprise—decided to search for a “level,” a *measure*. What writing *ought* to be called college level writing?—what writing deserves the name?—where is the line that will show how lots of this welter of writing isn’t real college level writing—even though some teachers give it a passing or even good grade? What makes writing *good enough* to be called college work? If we can find a standard or essence there won’t be so much chaos. And as Blau points out, there’s a huge bureaucratic and financial force at work here: many state governments are refusing to *pay* for any course that is not “college work” (or perhaps pay for it only at the two-year college level).

This is one way to deal with chaos. But there’s a different way that I began to yearn for more and more as I read: a more empirical approach—a methodological impulse that drives much science. Scientists don’t try to

reduce the chaos of nature by trying to show that some parts don't belong; rather they try to *map* and *understand* the chaos. Yes, they rule, for instance, that tomatoes don't deserve the name *fruit*, but there is nothing normative in this decision, nothing unworthy about tomatoes. They are looking for any potential logic hiding behind what looks like chaos. (I think of Mina Shaughnessy looking for the logic in all the chaos of punctuation she found in the hurried essays written on timed open-admission placement exams.)

Humans are so prone to *judge*. "Judge not lest ye be judged" said someone—but he didn't have tenure. "Most people are obviously far more anxious to express their approval and disapproval of things than to describe them" (Lewis 7). I've long sought relief from the normative addiction that drives education. Starting with my *Writing Without Teachers*, I began to advocate for what I called "movies of the reader's mind." Instead of asking readers—teachers or peers—to say what they think is good or bad about a text, let's hear them tell as accurate a story as they can of what actually went on in their minds as they were reading. Normative judgments of quality are deeply untrustworthy; stories of what went on in mind have the virtue of being *facts* even if they tell only about one reader. I was hungry for more *facts* and *maps* of college writing. The pretense of agreement about what is good and bad in a text is always undermined by the root fact that human readers differ: what succeeds with one may fail with another.

What if these two volumes succeed and leading figures in the profession actually come to agreement about what *real* college level writing is? (More likely it will be a committee set up by some arm of the government.) There were so many good definitions suggested: for example abstraction and complexity; response to a text based on genuinely understanding it; doing justice to points of view other than your own; questioning self and culture; audience awareness and reader-based prose; rhetorical self-consciousness; meta awareness of your thinking or writing process or of the goals you are shooting for. What if one definition or set of criteria wins? What about all the good kinds of writing that this agreement excludes? (I sense that the WPA Outcomes Statement and Common Core Standards are a bit less vulnerable to this charge.)

There was a moment in the first volume that showed the problem that comes from trying for a single standard or essence of college level writing. Sheridan Blau tells the story:

. . . the college composition teachers were initially shocked but then wildly amused to hear an elementary school teacher modestly and hesitantly observe that the standard for college-level competency in writing as defined in the new intersegmental document described what she required of student writers in her 6th-grade class. . . . This

observation was then seconded by a number of upper elementary and middle school teachers . . . who claimed that they too expected students in their classes to learn and exhibit all of the same competencies apparently expected of entering college students . . . (Sullivan and Tinberg 362)

This anecdote echoes the careful scientific work by Margaret Donaldson showing that Piaget was wrong in his single sequence stage-model of cognitive development. She showed that children at “lower levels” can do the “higher level thinking” if only the questions or tasks are set in a way that they can understand. Bruner was probably the most authoritative voice arguing that cognitive or intellectual development doesn’t follow a linear path, as in Piaget, but rather move in an ascending spiral:

We begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development. (33)

And:

A curriculum as it develops should revisit basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them. (13)

But after telling that story of how college level criteria refuse to distinguish college students from much younger less experienced children, Blau can’t resist going on in the second volume to suggest yet another essence of true college writing (centering on the ability to enter and take part in an intellectual or academic community). His definition is elegant, but do we really want to force everyone to agree on one? Every definition of true college writing will *exclude* some other kinds of excellent writing. And it might exclude some teachers. I question whether we want to be better at excluding or failing students because they don’t meet a single standard—students who don’t fit *one model* of what counts as good writing.

I understand the impulse behind the search for a level or standards. Some teachers do a poor job; some schools don’t give a real education. The desire for standards drives “No Child Left Behind” exams. We don’t want to leave children behind—especially if they are poor or victims of racist structures in our society. But surely the problems caused by NCLB (which I won’t try to lay out) should alert us to problems with this way of dealing with chaos.

I can be clearest if I am blunt. I feel the need here to stick up for non-standards—for chaos. But note that this is *not* an argument against excellence. I’m fighting the unthinking assumption that says we don’t get excel-

lence without standards or the imposition of a level. A focus on standards leads too often to a sad kind of “excellence” that consists of “meeting all the criteria” and “not having any faults.” How good, really, is all the writing that gets the highest score or the grade of A? How much of it would we actually read by choice?

My goal is *real* excellence (not an “essence,” however). We seldom get it unless some standards or criteria are *not* met. Really excellent writing often has some genuine faults or problems. Insofar as these volumes are successful as a large scale symposium bent on figuring out what writing deserves the name college writing, it will function as a machine for saying to *more* students: “You are not doing college level work. You are remedial.” I ask the question in all seriousness: How useful is that machine? What are the effects of succeeding? Will that lead us to more excellence? I think not.

* * *

At this point I want to stand back and look at this issue from a larger perspective—as it applies to higher education. Insofar as these essays might succeed in figuring out what real college level writing actually is—the essence—they would move US higher education closer to what we find in France and Britain (among other places). Those countries have clearer standards and more unified exams; more uniform barriers; a better mechanism for excluding students who don’t meet the standard. In contrast, I want to argue for the deep tradition of permeability or even chaotic nonstandards across US higher education.

What I love about higher education here is that almost anyone can go to college somewhere—all because we lack unified agreed-upon standards. What is “basic writing” at one place is good writing somewhere else. Students who look marginal or worse as they find some college to go to often end up doing good work—sometimes during college but often only afterwards. We have a kind of tradition here of people doing important work even though they went to a “lousy” college. US higher education has a good record of leading to brilliance and innovation; and often not from folks who went to Harvard or Stanford. I’m not usually a chauvinist about my country, but I think that I see less of this innovative grassroots brilliance in England and France where they do a better job of telling more students that they aren’t smart or good enough. (Note too, in those countries, how it seems harder to do work that’s recognized if you’re not in the central city, London or Paris. Single intellectual centers like these are a feature of tightly coupled systems; see below.)

When we set unified standards and invite only the “qualified” into higher education, we starve the system. Even though Ed White proposes

a kind of single, Platonic definition of college writing, he also praises US higher education for its messiness: “The standardization implied by a single term *college level* is not only foreign to the diversity of US universities and colleges but actually runs counter to the great strength offered by this diversity” (Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau 295).

Consider what kinds of people fail or drop out because of a unified standard:

- Many are simply refuseniks: kids or people who don't like to obey orders or do what some teacher tells them to do. The way schools function tends to make them all about obedience. Not everyone is good at obedience—and some of our smartest and most independent entrepreneurial young are not.
- Some people don't meet standards for a class or for college entrance because they don't like the standard. In the case of writing, they want to write poetry, personal venting, comic books, science fiction, computer games or some such thing. Sometimes these students are pursuing a good kind of writing, but a kind that got left out when folks agreed on a standard.
- And sometimes they insist on writing something that is clearly “inferior” or “worse”—a kind of writing that few would praise. Yet sometimes “bad” or “naive” or “uncritical” writing is enabling. By doing *that* writing, the writer is led eventually to sophistication and brilliance. When teachers emphasize working on the approved kind of writing, they tend to close off different pathways to good writing.
- Some are simply “slow.” (Note that the word is used to mean “stupid.”) It takes them longer. One more reason why it's good to have marginal colleges for students who are “behind.” (As long, that is, as *they* want to go to college. It's a sadder story if they are in some college only because their parents or the culture makes them feel no choice.)

When was it that people started saying that we should run higher education like a business? I certainly never heard it in the early days of my career. I'm not sure US business has been a great success story, but surely US higher education long has been a huge success. As long as I can remember, people from all over the world have struggled to come here for higher education—even from countries where “standards are much higher.” The presence of marginal colleges does nothing to impede the flourishing of elite colleges and outstanding universities.

At a recent conference I heard Suzie Null give a talk about loosely coupled and tightly coupled systems. Businesses tend to push for tightly

coupled systems—systems that work through rules and conformity. But even in business, people are beginning to look at the advantages of loosely coupled systems. They are noticing that such systems are often more nimble and adaptable when conditions change (think GM). They allow for more creativity and innovation; they are more permeable; less hierarchical and thus “flatter” and more “grassroots” in bureaucratic structures. Loosely coupled systems work not by rules but by networks and culture and influence; instead of frowning on variation and nonconformity, they see it as a plus.

Schools and colleges tend to be loosely coupled systems. The contrast between US and British and French higher education is a contrast between loosely and tightly coupled systems. Loosely coupled systems are good at fostering creativity and diversity, and I sense the British and French systems less good at it. NCLB and all the testing have made US secondary education more tightly coupled than it used to be. We can all see the pressures on US higher education to push it in that direction.

Yes, I know the dangers in what I’m saying—the critique. I fear my line of thinking sounds merely elitist: I just want to get rid of standards so smart kooky kids from privileged families can be brilliantly creative. What about all the terrible schools, terrible teachers, and poor students and students of color not getting the advantages of a solid education?

But nonagreement on a single standard for good writing doesn’t have to mean leaving children behind. The two volumes of essays I would like to see written would investigate how to make schooling less unfair with some *other* mechanism than system-wide exams and universal standards. There must be other ways. We might try paying teachers well and making the job of teaching attractive—so half of them don’t quit after five years.

So my fear is that these two rich and interesting volumes are implicitly serving the interests of standardization: the business model of tightly coupled systems that will do a better job of excluding people who don’t fit the system. I see secondary schools being undermined by the bulldozer pressure for testing, standards, shared criteria, and testing—and some of the essays give evidence for this. I fear that these two skilled volumes are trying to push higher education in the same direction.

NOTE

1. One more methodological reflection. In various essays, I have enthusiastically analyzed and celebrated what I call the “believing game.” Many readers have read my enthusiasm as hostility to critical thinking or the doubting game—despite my repeated insistence that I value *it* just as deeply and all it accomplishes. But the doubting game doesn’t lack support; indeed it enjoys a kind of cultural monopoly on our conception of good thinking itself. My goal has been simply

to show that the doubting game is not *sufficient* as a complete picture of human intelligence or intellectual work. I've been insisting that we need an additional and contrasting intellectual, cognitive, and psychological method in the form of the believing game.

I'm hoping that this review essay might help demonstrate that I am not so one-sided. For I'm insisting here on viewing these two volumes mostly through a doubting lens. I have full trust that they'll get plenty of believing by all the high school and college teachers who will read them and find them full of useful insights.

WORKS CITED

- Bruner, Jerome. *The Process of Education*. New York: Vintage, 1960.
Donaldson, Margaret. *Children's Minds*. New York: Norton, 1978.
Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English* 53.2 (1991): 135–55.
Lewis, C. S. *Studies in Words*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967.
Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

