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Toward a Comprehensive Language Curriculum

Karen I. Spear

One of the virtues of the writing center is its flexibility. Small classes, individualized teaching, newness in the academic community, and, perhaps most important, its status as the final line of defense in the war against poor writing give the writing center, at least in theory, carte blanche to find new ways of solving old problems. However, powerful historical forces, stemming from narrow institutional perceptions of the center's function, along with the virtual isolation of one center from another have tended to confine writing center programs within very narrow bounds.

The history of writing centers raises more questions than it provides answers about basic writers. It also confirms some longstanding opinions about what doesn't work. Current developments are yielding some concrete evidence about what does work, although we still don't fully know why. Together, past and present models indicate that the center's potential as basic writers' springboard into literacy has not nearly been realized. Too frequently, indignant basic writing graduates confront embarrassed writing center directors with unacceptable freshman English themes and referrals for still more tutoring.

To reach their full potential, writing centers must use their flexibility to perceive more clearly what is and anticipate more imaginatively what is possible. Foremost is the need to move out of the business of putting bandaids on students' basic skills problems and to assume a greater role in their overall language development. By overcoming the obstacles of the past and by rigorously testing and practices of the present, the writing center can confidently advance a comprehensive language curriculum for basic writers.

Historical: The Writing Center and the Grammar Tests

Flooded with open admissions students and mandated to improve their language skills quickly, organizers of writing centers had to devise



some quick-fix approaches that would produce tangible results. Hence, the basic model of the first generation of writing centers was conceived—the self-paced, tutor-assisted, competency-based review of grammar. A battery of mastery tests measured each student's progress; comprehensive pre- and post-tests often bookended the program, neatly validating the whole package.

That the students' writing improved, or indeed that their gains in grammar and usage lasted beyond the post-test is unlikely. That grammatical competence is the least consequential part of writing has been publicized (at least within the profession) since the early 1900's when the NCTE chastised English educators for their myopic view of writing.¹ More recently, abundant research has successfully documented the weak correlation between writing improvement and grammar instruction.² More important, research into the composing process, especially of basic writers, indicates that an over-concern with correctness may be an additional hindrance to their already reluctant approach to writing.³ Nevertheless, in the early 1970's, as writing centers popped up on campuses across the country, their founders apparently succumbed to what Stephen and Susan Judy call "a misplaced nostalgia for teaching methods that never worked in the first place."⁴

Despite these liabilities, this model had an important asset. Clearly, the package sold. The improvement shown in post-tests on apostrophes or sentence fragments made a convincing case for the need and success of the writing center. The public demand for basic skills was satisfied, and funding officials' skepticism over new programs was laid to rest. Consequently, the first generation successfully transformed the idea of a writing center into a reality. However, as its legacy, the first generation bequeathed the many problems of going beyond the center's original bounds to arrive at an effective, integrated approach to the language needs of basic writers. The first problem is political—how to expand the center's province beyond its original domain. The second is curricular—how to offer services to basic writers that meet their needs without duplicating what is already offered in other writing courses.

The typesetting of the center has made experimentation risky. In addition to building a case for the center's effectiveness, the first generation gave it a genuine identity. A student having difficulties with grammar and mechanics came to the writing center; everyone else enrolled in freshman comp. The entrenchment of this view, even within the profession, was recently borne out in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay in which the author called for an upgrading of writing courses in the humanities while "for basic grammar and mechanics, writing clinics or tutoring centers should be available."

Without the competency test model, the center faces some tough political problems. The tests generated seemingly reliable data about the nature and degree of students' improvement. Lacking the distinguishing feature of the tests, the writing center risks losing the data base so important to its self-justification. In its place, funding officials begin to look for other criteria, often criteria over which the center has no control. One familiar question is whether more "high risk" students graduate from college after taking basic English than those who go through the regular curriculum. Another question is whether their GPA improves. What's worse, sometimes writing center staff actually try to find out. Yet the questions are inevitable when a vulnerable and expensive program does not devise reliable internal measures of assessment—like whether the students write better and how much better.

Without the tests, too, the center's basic writing curriculum begins to look suspiciously like that of freshman English. Many texts for basic writing are simply watered down versions of the rhetorics for 101 with the obligatory rhetorical modes followed by lots of residual, supplementary work on verb tenses, sentence fragments, and the like. But how many students *really* don't understand the differences among past, present, and future, or will be regularly called upon to write description, narration, or comparison/contrast themes? With materials such as these, the curriculum can't help but reflect the worst of both worlds.

If the texts are often similar so, too, are the students. In our center, and I suspect elsewhere, some students seem indistinguishable from those in 101. ESL students enter one program. Students with ACT scores below 16 come to the writing center for two quarters of English 100. Despite the test scores, new teachers are typically surprised (and relieved) to find little difference between the writing skills of many "basic" writers and their peers in 101. Their surprise is justified. Five percent of those who enroll in English 100 do so voluntarily and have scores adequate for admission to 101, while about a third hover in the gray area just below the cut-off score (12-15).⁶ Moreover, since the ACT, like the first generation writing center, equates writing ability with grammatical competence, the admission instrument is not entirely valid. So, some good writers with weak skills turn up in 100 while some poor writers with stronger skills remain in 101. Overall, some basic writers may be mildly deficient in specific areas of grammar, but most are identifiable as basic writers by their flat, unimaginative, underdeveloped prose and the difficulties they have in producing it. No more than 15% of our students regularly produce the blurred and garbled syntax usually associated with basic writing.

Despite these similarities, merging the two composition programs is not the answer. The thrust of recent research in basic writing has been to claim the entire domain of the composing process yet to insist that basic writers demonstrate not just more severe but *different* writing problems. These differences are clearly not restricted to deficiencies in "skills," but seem to have more to do with the complete range of language activities from writing to reading to thinking. Additionally, various social and psychological factors concerning self-confidence and experience in writing situations further hinder their performance. Perhaps the most important contribution of *Errors and Expectations* is Shaughnessey's comprehensive analysis of the problems of basic writers and her insistence that reductive, atomistic curricula will not suffice.

Nor should we refuse to enroll more capable students. These students use the basic writing program to build self-confidence or to obtain more detailed instruction than they might receive (or in some cases already have received) in English 101, and they can be amply challenged by the center's smaller classes and individualized teaching. By their self-definition as basic writers, they are telling us that there is more to the field than our current diagnostic measures indicate.

Developmental: The Writing Center and the Composing Process

The solution to the center's political and curricular problems lies in the teachers' taking advantage of the same features that attract many students—smaller classes, individualized teaching, and a reputation for effectiveness—to become innovators in diagnosing, measuring, and correcting language problems. Unlike the larger and more cumbersome freshman English programs, writing centers can use their inherent flexibility to experiment if they resist the typesetting they have inherited. The difference between the first generation and the second is that the first began with a restrictive set of assumptions about basic writers which generated a restrictive and unsatisfactory view of their problems. Mastery tests, for example, show improvement on the tests while the writing problems remain much the same. If the second generation can adopt a more comprehensive attitude toward basic writing, it will have developed a valuable heuristic for a more complete understanding of students' linguistic and psychological problems in using language. Given the complexity of the subject, along with the significant differences among populations in centers nationwide, we can perhaps never hope to achieve The Method, yet we can transcend the initial bounds of the writing center to generate valid and respectable measures of our work.

The Writing Center at the University of Utah is in the process of implementing and assessing a comprehensive language arts curriculum. Having outgrown both a competency-based and a rhetoric-based curriculum, we are developing a program to integrate skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Students enroll in a two-quarter sequence (100A and 100B) that meets four days a week for a class hour each day and grants four credits for the sequence. The first, 100A, is structured around sentence combining, supplemented with vocabulary development, tutorials to correct individual problems, and independent writing assignments. The second, 100B, thematically concerned with language awareness, is structured around a sequence of hierarchically organized writing assignments combined with a reading program that focuses on critical reading and analytic thinking. Both courses include work on the composing process by teaching such pre-writing activities as brainstorming and questioning and by requiring drafts and multiple revisions, critiqued in student workshops. The center's research efforts have been directed toward assessing first, the effectiveness of sentence combining in 100A and second, the program's overall success in terms of students' gains in writing and improved attitudes toward it.

Although the effectiveness of sentence combining for freshman writers has been thoroughly documented, much research focuses on writers who are already reasonably fluent users of the language, as indicated by an initial number of words per T-unit of 15.0 in the Miami experiment.⁷ Our basic writers, on the other hand, begin with an average of 12.8 words/T-unit, a figure that places them at around the 9th or 10th grade level. (See Table 1.) Despite these differences, little attention has been given to the effectiveness of sentence combining for basic writers.⁸ However, we are finding that the reasons for success and the nature of improvement differ from what happens among writers in the regular freshman class. With basic writers, sentence combining seems to accelerate and refine language skills beyond the writing process. Yet students require more time than their counterparts in 101 to internalize what they learn and to show real improvement in their independent writing. While the curriculum is still not *The Method*, it seems to contribute both qualitatively and quantitatively to the students' writing.

Assessing the writing samples involved some relatively simple procedures—T-unit analysis, frequencies of specific syntactic structures, holistic and forced choice scoring. Although the study was not as rigidly controlled as, for example, the Miami experiment, the reliability of the measures and the consistency of the results in other studies help cor-

Table 1
Comparison of Developmental Levels*

	Grade Level 8	Utah Diagnostics	12	College Freshmen	Post
Words/T-unit	11.34 (Hunt)	12.8	14.40 (Hunt)	15.00 15.31	14.95 16.05 15.4 16.6
					(Miami control) (Miami experimental) (Utah control) (Utah experimental)

*Adapted from Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg, "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study"

roborate findings at Utah. Since writing centers are, sometimes literally, in the basement of writing instruction, fast and simple measures are needed to compensate for shortages in staff.

By the end of their first quarter, students were showing clear gains in syntax and content. Syntactically, writing improved in comparison with students' diagnostic essays and with papers written at the same stage of the former curriculum, one that combined mastery tests of skills with instruction in description and narration. Using the Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg text, *The Writer's Options*, students study, among others, four sentence patterns: relative clauses, appositives, participles, and subordinate clauses.⁹ Although their syntax improved somewhat under the former curriculum, the frequency of these patterns in the sentence combining curriculum demonstrates more dramatic gains—a high of 237% increase in the use of appositives to a low of 5% in subordinate clauses. (See Table 2.) With the T-unit length showing an increase comparable to that found in the Miami experiment, the conclusion that the sentence combiners are writing denser, more sophisticated sentences seems justified.

Ostensibly, the least impressive gain appears in the use of subordinate clauses, with the two groups producing about the same amount. Even in the diagnostic papers, subordination occurred most frequently of the patterns studied. However, subordination encompasses two qualitatively different kinds of sentence: the simpler, subordination of time or place; the more complex, subordination of cause, condition, or contrast. Writers seem to use the former quite naturally perhaps because temporal and spatial relations of the subordinate and main clause inevitably occur in the descriptive and narrative writing that both groups were doing. On the other hand, subordination involving cause, condition, or contrast probably requires more complex, integrative thinking skills. It's one task to perceive that one thing follows another in time or space, but quite a higher level of abstraction to perceive that one causes another, depends upon another, or contrasts with another. An analysis of the writers' use of subordination supports this hypothesis: the sentence combiners decreased their use of the simpler form of subordination by 20% while increasing the more complex form by 67%. (See Table 3.) Although the rate of subordination remained fairly constant, its quality improved. The shift to more sophisticated forms of subordination suggests that some development in abstract thinking results from this approach to sentence combining.

The improvements in syntax coincide with improvements in content. Here, making comparisons is somewhat more difficult because of dif-

Table 2
Syntactic Development

	Diagnostic Essays N = 30	Old Curriculum N = 49 (Control)	% Increase over Diagnostics	Experimental Sentence Combining Curriculum	% Increase over Diagnostics	% Increase over Control
T-units/sentence	1.18	1.27		1.21		N = 50
Words/T-unit Mean	12.8	15.4		16.6		
Relative Clauses Total in sample	47	96		205		
Mean/paper	1.6	2.0	25%	4.1	156%	105%
Appositives Total in sample	6	20		69		
Mean/paper	.20	.41	105%	1.38	590%	237%
Participles & Participle phrases Total in sample	32	118		204		
Mean/paper	1.06	2.41	127%	4.08	285%	69%
Subordinate Clauses Total in sample	70	252		270		
Mean/paper	2.33	5.14	121%	5.40	132%	5%
Paper length		290 words		413 words		

Table 3
Development in Subordination*

Subordinate Clauses	Control N = 49	Experimental N = 50	% Change
Time, Place (when, where, after, etc.)	172	138	-20%
Cause, Condition, Contrast (because, if, although, etc.)	60	100	+67%

*Note: Some highly idiosyncratic subordinate clauses were not included in these tallies.

ferences between the old curriculum and the new. Formerly, students imitated structured models to produce highly derivative, single paragraph themes. So prescriptive were the models that two years after they were abandoned, a student in my methods course brought in a sample paragraph from a 10th grader which I immediately—and correctly—identified as a product of the same materials. In addition, under the old system, students' paragraphs were revised until they passed—sometimes with the teacher inevitably contributing as much as the student. Currently, assignments are less structured, with the main emphases on collecting information, arriving at an original insight, and organizing ideas. At most, students have two chances for revision. With the excellent content of exercises in the text available as models along with increased attention to pre-writing in class, students seem to be writing richer, more creative papers.

Interestingly, while students are still assigned to write only a 250-word paragraph, their papers are 42% longer than those in the control group, suggesting that sentence combining helps students write more freely. The papers are also divided into an average of three paragraphs. The paragraphing is logical and effective, though little specific instruction about paragraphing is given. By imitating the form rather than the content of the essay-length exercises that constitute the meat of the text, students seem to be developing needed skills in inference-making and applying these skills to their writing. These findings gain additional support from Andrea Lunsford's conclusion that "as students' ability to manipulate syntactic structures improved, so did their ability to draw inferences and make logical connections."¹⁰

Despite what we consider improvements in the overall quality of ideas in students' final 100A papers, comprehensive evaluations point toward some significant distinctions about sentence combining and basic writers. Holistic ratings of the two groups gave the edge to papers

from the control group—3.4 compared to 4.0 on a 5 point scale. Papers were rated on ideas, syntax, organization, coherence, diction, mechanics, and style. The latitude allowed in the sentence combiners' first quarter assignments, their cognitive rather than rhetorical goals, the teacher's reduced intervention in revising, and the longer lengths probably account for some of the differences.

However, by the end of the second quarter, the trend reverses itself. Ten "A" papers from the control group were paired with ten "A" papers from the experimental group in a forced choice evaluation. The papers represented the best performance of each group after the same amount of writing instruction. The experimental papers were selected in 70% of the choices, the controls in 30%. Both sets of papers were drawn from a variety of teachers over several terms to eliminate idiosyncracies of graders and standards. The preference for the experimental group's writing suggests that basic writers in this sort of curriculum need more than a single term to digest the sentence patterns they study and learn to apply them naturally in their own writing while attending simultaneously to other rhetorical concerns. By delaying instruction in these concerns until a second term, teachers, too, avoid the pedagogical overkill that confuses weak writers and can necessitate resorting to the alternative of a prescriptive imitation of models. A second term, in which students develop meaningful topics for writing, provides a natural extension for their initial ventures into syntax and rhetoric.

Regardless of the concrete evidence showing improvement in students' writing, these facts may mean very little if negative attitudes toward writing persist. Old habits are hard to break, and without an awareness of one's progress and a commitment to develop further, strides made in writing under this curriculum may well go the way of grammatical improvement on the old mastery tests. Nevertheless, students' evaluations are encouraging. Some 69.3% report an increased interest in writing since taking the program, with many declaring an increase from very low to very high. Only 2.6% felt their interest decline. 54% ended the program with "high" interest, 44% with "medium" interest, 2% with "low" interest. Finally, they rate their instructors highly, 5.9 on a 7 point scale, compared with a university mean of around 5.3.

Two comments from the evaluations help put these figures in perspective:

I feel I have learned more English this quarter than I have learned in my previous English courses since I was born!!

and

At first I didn't want this course because I didn't like English. But now that I have taken it, I really enjoy it.

Both comments testify to basic writers' well known self-consciousness and their resistance to writing. Sentence combining, with its emphasis on syntactic options, activates students' native fluency with the language and helps release them from their paralyzing concern over error. The workshop approach helps them experience writing more realistically while the emphasis on the composing process lets them understand revision as more than the elimination of error. Classes come closer to the ideal "community of writers" as students learn to give substantive advice to each other and to make cogent criticisms about their own work. With improvements in attitudes such as these, students seem more likely to continue developing their writing abilities. Having discovered writing as a means of both communication and self-expression, students seem to have overcome the resistances, fears, and self-doubts that may, after all, be the underlying characteristics of a "basic writer."

Potential: The Writing Center and the Language Process

As the writing center evolves from the reductionism of a skills model to embrace the larger domains of the composing process, the source of its full potential now seems visible. It must continue moving toward more comprehensive visions of its students' relationship with language. The writing center needs to assume a new identity as a Language Center; the composing process needs to expand into the language process. In other words, to justify itself to the students who need it, and to satisfy the academy's demand for genuine literacy, basic English must involve students in an array of language experiences among which an intelligent, literate, and polished essay is the result. Beginning with the awareness of how language helps to structure thought, these experiences should allow students to become full participants in their language environment rather than passive recipients.

If this sounds like students will be eating dessert before their vegetables, consider the extent to which our own linguistic decisions, demonstrated in such terms as "writing skills," "remedial writing," or "writing clinic," have predisposed us to a limited view of writing problems. It may be that students' deficiencies are less for lack of knowledge than for lack of attention paid to the conventions of the language. Similarly, shortcomings in substance in students' writing may be less for lack of anything to say than for lack of conviction that concern over saying it precisely in writing is valid.

William Irmscher argued that basic writers “cannot develop what they do not first possess.”¹¹ In this case, they do not seem to possess any but the most naive understanding of how language affects them and how they can use it to affect others. Problems of diction and syntax are, to basic writers, issues of “flowery writing;” difficulties in exposition and development mean insufficient padding (usually referred to as BS). Without a practical awareness of the subtleties of the medium, basic writers will likely nurture the contradictory view of writing as an impediment to thought, something they do “in school” but with little relevance to important matters in “real life.”

The “cosmetic approach” to teaching the relevance of writing—through appeals to consider the future (GPA’s, employment, promotions, earning power, and the like)—offers little intrinsic reward and only reinforces students’ convictions of their limitations. On the other hand, by investigating and discovering how language constantly intervenes in thought, perception, and behavior, students can evaluate for themselves the importance of language, seeing writing as its most complex but significant extension. Investigations of the language of advertising, of sports, of politics and government, of popular culture, of academic disciplines can deepen and broaden students’ awareness of themselves and the environment in their inextricable relation to spoken and written words. Traditional students, who are more academically sophisticated, probably have some understanding of these issues already, at least subliminally. But so alienated are basic writers from the language environment that they perceive it as an endless succession of more or less hostile English teachers brandishing Warriner’s grammar in one hand, a red pen in the other.

A curriculum in the new Language Center would serve to develop the cognitive abilities that both reflect and promote refinements in language—observation, reportage, analysis, abstraction, synthesis, theorizing, inference-making, and evaluation—through an integrated reading and writing program. The writing component would emphasize the composing process, subordinating specific skills to larger rhetorical concerns. The reading component would likewise teach the processes of comprehension and critical analysis, subordinating the activities of a traditional skills course (speed, word recognition, decoding). Rather than offering teachers the all-too-familiar escape routes from really teaching writing, such a curriculum would provide a legitimate context in which writing could occur. By conducting their own inquiries into the workings of language, and by recording their observations and conclusions, basic writers would gain access, probably for the first time, to

language as both the vehicle and the road of thought. Edward Sapir expressed it this way:

Human beings . . . are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication and reflections. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.¹²

Even in the primitive form of such a program in our center, students' sensitivity to language seems to improve their use of it in writing. Language becomes not just a subject of study but a vital process of inquiry and reflection. Conceivably, however, their improved writing merely parallels their developing cognitive abilities. Discovering the relationships among reading, writing, and thinking would thus become the foremost research goal of the Language Center. Yet, more immediately, in following the evolutionary path beyond the writing center, the Language Center may finally fulfill its original mandate: to cultivate the language abilities of its students so they may become successful and productive learners.

Footnotes

¹J.N. Hook, *A Long Way Together: A Personal View of NCTE's First Sixty-Seven Years* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1979), pp. 20-21, 44-45.

²See, for example, Stephen Sherwin, *Four Problems in Teaching English: A Critique of Research* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1969); Richard Braddock, et al., *Research in Written Composition* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1963).

³Awareness of the need to suspend one's concern with correctness to get on with the business of articulating ideas was made popular by Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing* and by Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*. Subsequent research indicates that basic writers are especially blocked by their more or less conscious assumption that good writing is, from the beginning, correct writing. See, for example, Mina Shaughnessy's discussion of error in the introduction of *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) as well as Chapter 3, "Syntax" and Chapter 4, "Common Errors." For a broader view of inexperienced writers' problems with composing and revising, see the December 1980 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, particularly Sondra Perl's "Understanding Composing" (363-369) and Nancy Sommer's "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" (378-388).

⁴Stephen and Susan Judy, *English Teacher's Handbook* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979), p. 191.

⁵Kristin Woolever, "Is Writing a Technical Skill or a Means of Humanistic Inquiry?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 20 July, 1981, p. 40.

⁶Prior to the 1981-82 school year, the cut off score was 12 on the ACT, and 36% of the students enrolled in English 100 scored above this level.

⁷Max Morenberg, et al., "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study," *Research in the Teaching of English* 12 (1978), pp. 245-256.

⁸One exception is William Stull's work in sentence combining described in "The Hartford Sentence Combining Laboratory," *The Writing Center Journal* 1 (Fall/Winter, 1980), pp. 20-33.

⁹Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg, *The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining* (New York: Harper Row, 1979).

¹⁰Andrea Lunsford, "What We Know—and Don't Know—About Remedial Writers," *College Composition and Communication*, 29 (Feb. 1978), p. 51.

¹¹William Irmscher, "Writing as a Way of Learning and Developing," *College Composition and Communication* 30 (October 1979), p. 242.

¹²Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language, and Personality* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1966), p. 69.