"Diving In Deeper": Bringing Basic Writers' Thinking to the Surface

When basic writing students are encouraged to value their thinking as they revise their prose, they are likely to become more constructive critical thinkers and less fearful performers of academic tasks.

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Since I first began teaching basic writing at California State University, Bakersfield, 11 years ago, I have had in my class athletes, musicians, returning students, struggling parents, cheerleaders, and gang members on trial. My students have been as diverse a group as any described by composition scholars (Bartholomae, 1985; Carter, 2006; Goen & Gillotte-Tropp, 2003; Horner, 1992; Lu, 1991, 2004; Porter, 2001; Rose, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1977). Regardless of the circumstances that may have landed these students in my class, they have been seen by many administrators and many of my colleagues across the campus as something akin to gate crashers, that is, students who are woefully underprepared for college-level reading and writing tasks and, therefore, don't belong among those regarded as "college ready"—whatever college ready means (Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006; Sullivan, Tinberg, & Blau, in press).

The most frequent description I hear of their unreadiness is that these underprepared students "just can't think." What I would say to these academic gatekeepers is that my basic writing students aren't the only ones who have difficulty thinking about the complex tasks required at a university. Students across all levels and disciplines struggle with the kind of thinking demanded of them in their college courses. Basic writers just stand out in the sea of students whose thinking seems challenged by college-level work. Eble (1988) claimed that "if there is one common aim for most college teaching, it is to get students to think" (p. 28). What he probably meant by this generalization was that college instructors want their students to think *critically*. But what does it mean to think critically, and is the challenge to do so more daunting for a basic writer than for a more prepared student?

The problem with trying to define what it means to think critically is that literature on the subject demonstrates little agreement about what critical thinking might be. Nevertheless, seminal theorists on critical thinking seem to agree that the development or deployment of critical thinking skills is far less important for the academic success of students than the development of students who seem disposed to think critically (Bloom, 1956; Dewey, 1991;

Moffett, 1968; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). As McPeck (1981) explained, many instructors fail "to recognize that training in particular critical thinking skills is not sufficient to produce a critical thinker. One must develop the *disposition* [italics added] to use those skills" (p. 19).

I take this to mean that, in my basic writing classes, my efforts to help students master the rhetorical, logical, and interpretive skills that will enable them to read more thoughtfully and to elaborate on ideas more forcefully will not amount to much if I cannot develop in them at the same time the motivation to do the hard and careful thinking that all these skills entail. That is to say, my students need to become thinkers who employ skills and strategies in the course of their thinking, not mere practitioners of the thinking skills themselves. Dewey (1969) hinted at the same problem when he noted that "we speak, legitimately enough, about the method of thinking, but the important thing to bear in mind about method is that thinking is [the] method" (p. 24).

The questions, then, are as follows:

- What kinds of thinking are our students doing that seem to represent an insufficiency in thought?

- What kinds of thinking are we trying to foster in them that are different from the kinds they are already doing?

- What sorts of learning must our students experience to become persons who exhibit the forms of thinking that are rewarded by the academic community?

A promising place to begin such an inquiry is in the body of theory elaborated by Moffett (1968) on the relationship among discourse competence, curricular content, and the intellectual development of students.

Hierarchies of Thought

Moffett (1968) defined what amounts to hierarchies of thought in terms of levels of abstraction, measured by the degree to which our thinking attends to knowledge removed from our immediate experience in the here and now. Thus, he claimed, we employ higher levels of abstraction in our discourse as our audience becomes more removed from us in time and space and relationship and as our thinking about a topic becomes more removed from our immediate present experience. When we think about what is concretely present to our sensory experience, our thinking is a matter of mere perception. But as the subject of our discourse becomes more removed from our immediate experience to a past event, for example, or to generalizations or principles that represent not events but ideas about events, or to theories or arguments that support other abstract ideas, then we are moving up a ladder of mental operations that require increasingly higher forms of abstract thinking.

Thus for Moffett (1968), thought is hierarchical—yet his hierarchical account of the various levels of thought does not translate into a description of how thinking itself might progress in a linear direction toward the higher levels. Such an account would misrepresent how we use our thinking in addressing intellectual or practical problems. Instead, Moffett argued that we all have in us the ability to think at all levels and that each person and each circumstance determine the kind or degree of thought that is called for according to the demands of the situation and the prior knowledge of the thinker. In fact, the situation and the situational knowledge are key to understanding the levels at which we think, and to better explain this concept, I offer a riddle: A scuba diver drowns in 125 ft of water with an air tank still half filled with air. Why does he drown?

Nonscuba divers usually answer in the following ways: He was attacked by a shark; the air tank malfunctioned; he hit his head on something; he became stuck in something. And those are pretty good guesses. But an experienced diver will know that a more probable answer is that the scuba diver became infused with nitrogen and developed nitrogen narcosis (a condition known as "narced"), which, at depths of around 100 ft and below, can cause a scuba diver to feel drunk and make a dangerous mistake like removing the air regulator from his mouth and trying to give it to a fish. Scuba divers would automatically assume that the diver became narced and probably made a fatal error, but nonscuba divers would not know *why* the diver died, even if they closely guessed at a possible *how*.

Lewis and Smith (1993) helped explain how we all use different levels of thinking for the same problem: "Since individuals differ in the kinds of problems they find challenging, higher order thinking is relative—a task requiring higher order thinking by one individual may require only lower order thinking by someone else" (p. 134). Individuals attempting to determine how a scuba diver drowns at 125 ft with a tank half filled with air exemplify this relativity. Some will need higher order thinking or thinking at higher levels of abstraction to theorize about the problem, while others can probably engage in inference and use intermediary thinking or mid-levels of abstraction to solve the problem.

There is even a circumstance in which concrete thinking can be used to solve the mystery of the diver's death: If a coroner performs an autopsy, he or she will discover the excess nitrogen built up in the diver's tissue, which means the diver was narced. Because the definition of being narced is to have excess nitrogen built up in a body's tissue, the coroner in this case would need to engage in no inferential or theoretical thinking to solve the problem.

This example demonstrates that circumstance, person, situation, problem, and prior knowledge all determine the level of thinking required by any individual about any particular problem. Even when we are all trying to solve the same problem, we may employ different levels of abstraction to work out a solution. The surface of the problem is the same—in this case the riddle of the drowned diver—but the problem will be different for those who try to solve it.

The coroner need only look at the body's tissue, and the experienced diver can directly infer the nitrogen in the tissues knowing the dangers of deep diving. But the nondiver—the one who knows the least about the problem, the least expert investigator—faces a more challenging problem than the two most expert participants. The nondiver, by virtue of his lack of prior knowledge, must develop a theory, hypothetically filling in elements of the problem of which others have direct knowledge. In other words, the nondiver must fill in gaps with only limited knowledge to do so. In this case, the nondiver is abstracting more than the coroner and the diver because the nondiver must use more inferential reasoning and

theorizing to solve the puzzle. *The least knowledgeable person attempting to solve the mystery is the one abstracting the most, a paradox that has immense implications for our basic writing classes.*

So, as basic writing teachers, how can knowing about this paradox help us better teach those students whose writing seems to represent the absence of thought? To answer this, we must first look beyond the riddle and examine why the high-level thinking of basic writers often unravels—even before they attempt to write those thoughts down.

Basic Writers and Cultural Literacy

Writing assignments in college are typically based on reading. This becomes a problem for basic writers since much of their difficulty with academic work derives from their difficulty in interpreting texts (Lunsford, 1987; Sternglass, 1976; Troyka, 1984). Since basic writers struggle with reading, they are sometimes classified as basic writers because their writing betrays their misunderstanding or misinterpretation of texts they are writing about. At the same time, their weakness in reading translates into difficulty in reading their own texts (Lunsford, 1987; Sternglass, 1976; Troyka, 1984). That they are poor readers of their own work should not be surprising. After all, students can never outwrite their reading ability.

Largely, basic writers write ineffectively because when they read and try to interpret academic texts, they are missing much of the cultural knowledge and academic information possessed by better prepared students. This lack of cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987) can leave gaps in their thinking that they sometimes don't even recognize (Blau, 2003; Iser, 1974; Rosenblatt, 1994). All texts have gaps within them (Iser, 1974), and successful readers have learned to fill in these gaps when they try to make sense of texts; however, unsuccessful readers don't differentiate between gaps in texts and gaps in their own cultural literacy, so they become frustrated with trying to make sense of texts (Blau, 2003; Iser, 1974; Salvatori, 1983; Sternglass, 1976).

Unfortunately, whether they are missing necessary background knowledge or the text is just particularly difficult, basic writers regard this struggle not

as a part of the reading process but as a deficiency in themselves (Blau, 2003). The truth is that all students will occasionally find themselves in academic situations where they don't know much (or anything) about the topic they are reading about or discussing; it's the nature, if not the ideology, of a liberal arts education to stretch and challenge students' thinking throughout a multitude of disciplines.

All students will at times find themselves as "non-divers" when confronting certain academic problems—whether with reading or writing—but more prepared students don't equate the difficulty of a text with a deficiency in themselves. In fact, better prepared students have a fundamental faith built on a history of successful experiences that if they just work through their confusion and frustration, they will emerge with a better understanding of the text they are either reading or writing. Better prepared students recognize that working through frustration and confusion is an inevitable part of the process of learning any difficult or new idea (Blau, 2003). However, students who think that confusion and frustration represent some defect in their capacity to learn usually give up on a text or an assignment that they feel is just too difficult (Blau, 2003).

Unfortunately, many of our basic writers fall into the latter category, because they attribute every instance of frustration and confusion they experience to evidence that they are not sufficient as learners and somehow lack the skills needed to work through the academic task; thus, they give up before they can ever make use of the tools or strategies we try to provide them (Rose, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1977; Vacca & Padak, 1990). Vacca and Padak (1990) suggested that basic writers develop a "learned helplessness," which refers to the way students who anticipate a predetermined, negative outcome quit at the first sign of difficulty.

Learning Versus Performance Goals

The insecurity of the basic writer is certainly well documented (e.g., Bartholomae, 1985; Horner, 1992; Lu, 1991, 2004; Lunsford, 1987; Rose, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1977; Troyka, 1984). Shaughnessy (1977) told us that "by the time he reaches college, the B[asic] W[riting] student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves

a trail of errors behind him when he writes" (p. 7). Many basic writers become so worried about error that they become obsessed with fragments or run-ons or commas and focus so intently on sounding right and avoiding errors that they render themselves incapable of developing any extended idea or thinking about the shape and direction of a whole essay.

McLeod (1997) offered an insightful perspective on this problem when she identified two types of goals students can potentially adopt: learning and performance goals. She showed that students who adopt learning goals focus on the process, think errors are "natural" and "useful," consider the teacher a "resource," and regard goals as "intrinsic" (p. 59). Students who cling to performance goals, on the other hand, focus on the product, think errors represent "failure," consider the teacher a "rewarder" or "punisher," and regard goals as "extrinsic" (p. 59). For basic writing students who already struggle with attitudinal barriers, performance goals can represent yet another obstacle to academic success, because when basic writers focus on error, they think of little more than their past and inevitable future failures, which can shut down their learning processes altogether (Horner, 1992; Porter, 2001; Rose, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1977).

In fact, McLeod's (1997) performance goals are consistent with 40 years of research on the writing and thinking processes of basic writers. That research showed that basic writers who focus heavily on the product expect failure, or they do not yet know that learning comes from within (Bartholomae, 1985; Carter, 2006; Goen & Gillotte-Tropp, 2003; Horner, 1992; Porter, 2001; Rose, 1989; Salvatori, 1983; Shaughnessy, 1977). Unfortunately, basic writers often focus much of their thinking worrying about failure rather than the task at hand, and by reducing their available attention to the intellectual task, they produce infelicitous prose that might suggest that they just can't think. The problem with their thinking isn't that they aren't thinking at the highest levels but that they have trouble controlling their thinking

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in constructive ways, which then contributes to the muddled prose they tend to produce. And it's precisely this muddled product that then "proves" their notions of themselves as insufficient learners.

In sum, to help students learn to develop a more constructive disposition—to help students learn to control their thinking in more constructive ways—we must recognize the paradox of basic writers: They are frequently thinking at high levels of abstraction precisely because they are missing some of the needed cultural knowledge and background information. And when they are thinking at high levels of abstraction while simultaneously keeping performance goals in mind, they are in danger of yielding to their own expectations of defeat. So what we need is a way to help students better understand their own thinking while keeping learning goals in mind. The best way to help our underprepared students take constructive control of their thinking is to teach them about metacognition.

Revision and Metacognition

Yarbrough (2006) stated that "if communicative success depends upon 'getting it right' the first time at bat, then seldom would anyone achieve communicative success" (p. 32). And it's this notion that drives composition instructors to focus so heavily on revision; in fact, what I most hope my students learn from me is that revision is key in successful writing.

It is during the revision process that students can analyze their writing, think about their thinking, and reflect on how that thinking is communicated. In the process of making their thinking clear to others, they need to first learn that they can think about their thinking in very conscious ways and that they should think about their thinking if they ever want to make their thoughts clear through their writing. In other words, students must learn how to be metacognitive, which is to say they must learn to think about their thinking (Flavell, 1979; Flower, 1994; Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1994).

If we, as instructors, can help our students think about their choices after the first draft is out of their heads—but before their final draft is due—we can help them learn to think about their writing in ways they probably haven't thought of before and in ways

that define metacognition (see Flower, 1994). For our students to start thinking about their thinking, they must first be actively (and aggressively) participating in their reading and revision processes (Flavell, 1979; Flower, 1994; Paris et al., 1994).

In teaching our students how to monitor their reading and writing, we are also helping them shift their focus from the product to the process, from performance goals to learning goals (see Vrugt & Oort, 2008). By helping students put their focus on the process, we are also helping them learn for themselves when they need to revisit a text for possible gaps or references they may have missed.

Thus, the best place to teach metacognition is during revision (either in reading or in writing), because that is the time at which students reshape raw interpretations or drafts. For me, metacognitive revision is key to taming chaotic thought.

Steven and Charlotte: Evidence of Metacognitive Revision

To demonstrate how we can begin to help our students focus their thinking in more productive ways, I've included here writing samples from two students (both names are pseudonyms) in a basic writing class at Kingsborough Community College–City University of New York, where I now teach.

The excerpts are from two students' in-class midterm essays. For this particular basic writing class, I was a member of a cohort system where the members read, evaluated, and graded both midterm and final essays for each other. Thus, I neither provided feedback nor graded my students on these two essays, a member of my cohort did. For the revision of their midterm, in order for me to see the changes they were making from their midterm draft to the final draft, students were required to turn on the track changes feature of Word, whereby additions would be underlined and deletions would be marked by strikethrough. (If students did not have this program, they were allowed to highlight the areas they added and mark on their midterm draft the areas they deleted.)

In addition to tracking their changes, students were also required to explain in footnotes the reason they made the changes from their midterm draft to their next draft in relation to the comments they

received. In other words, students were asked to show their metacognitive thinking as part of the assignment itself. Figures 1 and 2 provide excerpts from essays by two students, who responded to this prompt:

> Consider the article "Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex" by Julia Sudbury. In this article, Sudbury claims that the imprisonment of women is *not* an effective way of dealing with crime. Identify the reasons Sudbury uses to support her claim, and analyze those reasons to see if you think she logically supports her claim. Write a well-developed essay that explains whether Sudbury logically supports her claim and why that support leads you to agree or disagree with her overall claim. (Remember that it's possible to have a sound claim with unsound support or vice versa.)

The first excerpt (see Figure 1) is from Steven's revised midterm. Steven was a returning student who thought this English class would be "very hard and boring" and assumed the class would teach him "nothing more than just writing correctly." Nevertheless, he entered the class eager to learn and proved to be one of my most diligent students. Here, Steven is responding to the advice from his cohort reader, who wrote, "Your first body paragraph doesn't seem to relate to your thesis—so expand your thesis. In your presentation of Sudbury's thesis, add her views on the prison system as an industry."

If we examine the changes Steven made and his explanations of those changes, we can see that Steven has begun to see the way his thinking was perceived and what he could do to have his thoughts read the way he intended. I chose to include Steven here because his first impulse was always to write a summary that included superfluous details, though in class, he seemed capable of orally providing thoughtful analysis. The metacognitive element of this assignment helped him think about (a) how his audience read his writing and (b) how he could address his reader's concerns in relation to what he was actually thinking. When asked if being forced to think about his thinking changed his writing process, he shared, "Heck yeah!...But the best part was my writing skills improved so fast I was amazed at myself, and I was having so much fun writing because I was learning at the same time about everyday life."

The second excerpted essay (see Figure 2) is from Charlotte. In her previous English classes, Charlotte always felt confident in her writing because she typically "did good" in it. She felt her grammar skills held her back, but she always just wrote and did what seemed right to her. In her words, she thought she could "bang out a decent essay if the topic made me think enough." Here, Charlotte is responding to the advice from the cohort reader, who wrote, "I'm impressed by the way you analyze Sudbury's point regarding how abuse can lead to jail time. Be careful, however, in some of your absolutes. Is murder, for example, *never* a solution? And make sure your pronouns always refer to something."

Clearly, Charlotte had a good sense of her audience and was able to articulate in detail what she was doing and why. She enjoyed this exercise and was able to look at subtle errors in her writing (e.g., ambiguous

Figure 1   Steven's Sample Revision

In "Global Lockdown" Julia Sudbury wrote about how <u>poverty leads</u> women ~~who are going through poverty will lead hem to~~ into imprisonment.[1] She focuse~~sd~~[2] on women and claims that most inmates are low class, trying to survive the everyday life of poverty. <u>She feels most women in jail have a very difficult past life of sexual and physical abuse. This is why she believes there is no mystery why women use drugs.[3] She also explains why the women prison system, especially the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) is overcrowded. In 1990 the CCWF opened with the maximum capacity of 2,000 inmates, by May 1995 CCWF had 3,596 prisoners. That's well over 79.8% of capacity.</u> I agree, ~~having a hard life~~ <u>being surrounded by drugs and violence</u> with little help will lead to imprisonment.[4]

[1] She asked me to proofread my paper. To me, #1 was too long and could be shorter.
[2] I used the wrong word. The word focused states she wrote this in the past.
[3] I wrote more about how Sudbury view how women go to jail and their lifestyle.
[4] She wanted me to connect my thesis to my 1st body because my thesis wasn't matching my body. Plus, nothing was writing about the prison population in the thesis, so I wrote some to connect it to my body.

Figure 2   Charlotte's Sample Revision

Sudbury says that one of the reasons so many young women are in jail is due to the fact that most of them share an abused life (Sudbury 1). If women had the determination and will to get out of that kind of life and do something about their situation, there is no reason why they should be in jail. Everyone has a choice but these women chose to do drugs and commit crimes because they thought that ~~it was~~ <u>these were</u> the only choices they had.[1] The justice system should sort out who committed what crimes and whether they definitely had to ~~or chose to~~ <u>kill someone because they feared for their life or chose to because the woman decided that she couldn't continue to live with the abuse anymore</u>.[2] If a troubled women gets a murder charge for what she claims is really self-defense, it wouldn't be fair to her <u>because</u>. ~~W~~<u>w</u>hen a woman with an abused past gets attacked, she'd be willing to do anything to protect herself.[3] Therefore, a court psychologist should talk to the woman <u>and</u>~~;~~ get a sense of why she did it and if that can link to how her past has made her commit such a crime. <u>The abuse or situation shouldn't reach to the point where the woman needs to commit murder in order to get away from the abuse but sometimes it's killed or be killed</u>.[4]

[1] "It" was speaking about one subject when I was referring to two or multiple things, and I needed to change it to be clearer.

[2] That part of the sentence was not clear and did not explain thoroughly about what the person had to do or chose to do. In giving more details, readers can now clearly see why the woman made the choice she did and under what probable circumstances.

[3] When I joined the two sentences together, it provides a more clear thought as to why it wouldn't be fair to the woman and why she would claim self-defense.

[4] In the original sentence, it didn't make sense because I said murder wasn't the best solution, but when it comes to being abused continuously, a woman might not have a choice, and murder might turn out to be the best solution after all. I think the sentiment sort of contradicts itself, so I changed the sentence to show that a woman shouldn't have to endure the abuse to the breaking point where she would commit murder.

pronouns) and consider how they would affect a reader's understanding of her thoughts about the topic. I chose to include the excerpt from Charlotte's paper because she was one of the more sophisticated writers in the class. However, as Charlotte points out, thinking about her thinking helped improve her writing: "I think recording changes and revising my essays made me think more about how to pull an essay together better."

With this kind of metacognitive revision process—where students had to comment on why they made the changes they made in relation to the feedback they received—these students came to better understand when their thinking broke down for their reader. Regardless of who their grader might be, they need an evaluator other than themselves because students at this level rarely have the ability to identify their own writing problems or how those problems relate to their audience. This Vygotskian principle that students must first learn effectively through guidance and modeling (of their reader) before they can themselves learn to read from a reader's perspective certainly applies well to this metacognitive revision system, where with expert assistance, students learn to start focusing their attention on what precisely their words convey to an actual audience and begin the intellectual work of correcting any communicative obstacles (cf. Paris et al., 1994).

Teaching Metacognitive Revision

Shaughnessy (1976) memorably urged that those of us who teach basic writing need to "dive in" to the task of learning how to help our students by listening to them and letting them teach us how to teach them as we struggle to understand and value their thinking—even as it is exhibited in surface errors. I trust that I am advancing Shaughnessy's pedagogical agenda in trying to uncover how basic writing students may be thinking more deeply than the surface confusion of their prose might suggest and how they may, in fact, be thinking more critically than the better prepared students whose lucid prose may represent less of an intellectual effort. That paradox must not go unnoticed. It is a paradox that must ground our teaching as we help our students learn to use their capacity for thinking to dive in to their own texts and think about their own writing and thinking as they learn

to read their own texts as strong readers would read them.

In other words, we need to teach students to become "others" for their own texts. To start, we can create peer-review assignments that guide responders to make specific comments about how they read the writer's essay. We can also extend the dialogue process between student and teacher whereby instructors reply to the metacognitive responses of their students; this round of revisions can help students understand the kinds of metacognitive responses teachers are looking for. For example, a teacher might respond to a student's remark that she simply "added more detail" by asking, "Why did you add this detail here? What do you think it adds? How does it help your reader understand your point?" These questions can push students to analyze more deeply why they make the changes they make.

And finally we might also use the technology at our disposal to create online discussion forums to allow students to upload portions of their papers so that their peers can help them see where their writing breaks down for the reader. Students usually prefer this type of peer review because they are comfortable in the electronic setting, whereas the face-to-face review may cause them to be less detailed about the way they feel. Online discussion forums have typically been places where my students reach out for help from one another.

Gatekeepers and Shallow Thinking

If we can get our basic writing students to value thinking about their thinking as they revise their prose, they are likely in their own practice to become more constructive critical thinkers and less fearful performers of academic tasks that may otherwise overwhelm them. And as students become better able to articulate why they are doing what they are doing, they will begin to explore their thinking, even if that thinking is still muddled. *That* is the mark of a critical thinker.

Students may always struggle with shedding performance goals or with lack of background knowledge, but we can help them realize (a) that their good and intelligent thinking can and sometimes does break down on the page, (b) why it breaks down on the page, and (c) how it is necessary to endure the intellectually demanding struggle of trying to discover their thoughts with as much clarity as possible for themselves and their readers.

Through these realizations, basic writers will produce more academically serviceable prose and will prove to the academic gatekeepers who question the students' legitimacy in the academy that they rightfully belong among the critical thinkers of any university. The real paradox here is that those academically powerful gatekeepers who say my students "just can't think" are perhaps the ones not thinking critically.

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