

## ONE

# The Way Literacy Tests

---

---

Without testing, reform is a journey without a compass. Without testing, teachers and administrators cannot adjust their methods to meet high goals. Without testing, standards are little more than scraps of paper. Without testing, true competition is impossible. Without testing, parents are left in the dark. . . .

Testing is the cornerstone of reform. You know how I know? Because it's the cornerstone of reform in the state of Texas. (George W. Bush in the first of the presidential debates of 2000, qtd. in Hillocks 11)

In education reform circles these days, Texas is everywhere. If Governor George W. Bush is elected president, the Texas school reforms—and particularly the state's whips-and-chains accountability system—are likely to become a model for national education policy, as they already are in a large number of states. (Schrag 2000)

*THE WAY LITERACY LIVES* offers a curricular response to the political, material, social, and ideological constraints placed on literacy education, particularly basic writing, via the ubiquity of what Brian V. Street calls the “autonomous model of literacy” and instead treats literacy as a social practice. According to Street, the autonomous model

disguise[s] the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have the . . . benign effect of . . . enhancing the . . . cognitive skills [of those marked “illiterate,]” . . . improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their “illiteracy” in the first place. (“Autonomous and Ideological Models” 1)

Rather than perpetuating this problematic treatment of literacy—through which “testing” can be easily accepted as the “cornerstone of reform” (Bush)—Street urges us to embrace “the alternative, ideological model.” An ideological model of literacy

posits . . . that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. It is also embedded in social practice, such as those of a particular job market or particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always “ideological,” they are always rooted in a particular worldview and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Gee 1990; Besnier and Street 1994). (“Autonomous Model” 2)

Thus, according to Street’s ideological model, standardized tests of literacy must be understood as not only inappropriate but largely unethical in that they privilege particular contexts, identities, and knowledge while marginalizing all others.

Accepting that a curricular solution to the institutionalized oppression implicit in much literacy learning is necessarily partial and temporary, I argue that fostering in our students an awareness of the ways in which an autonomous model deconstructs itself when applied to real-life literacy contexts can empower them to work against this system in ways critical theorists advocate. The primary objective of the current study is to offer a model for basic writing instruction that is responsive to multiple agents limiting and shaping the means and goals of literacy education, agents with goals that are quite often in opposition. Doing so requires that I not offer a curricular solution in isolation as any responsible pedagogical decisions must take into account the layers of agents influencing any and all social, political, material, and ideological conditions for learning. Thus, I will situate this new model for basic writing by drawing attention to the local context from which this program emerged; it is a context with national implications because, as Peter Schrag has pointed out, “in education circles these days, Texas is everywhere.”

## TEACHING TO THE TEST

It is not valid to suggest that literacy can be ‘given’ neutrally and then its ‘social’ effects only experienced afterwards. (Street 2)

I came of age in Texas during the 1980s, an era of major educational reform in response to the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s con-

roversial report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Laced throughout with the Cold War rhetoric that was so much a part of our culture at the time, its analysis of the state of American education was scathing:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

Following this report, politicians throughout the nation made education a “top priority,” and Texas was no exception. Then-Governor Mark White enlisted the help of Dallas billionaire Ross Perot and the result was House Bill 72 (in 1984) that mandated, among other things, “a new statewide curriculum and minimum skills test” (Watson). Thus began the culture of testing from which the much more recent *No Child Left Behind Act* would eventually emerge.

For the most part, that means my public school experiences were largely dominated by “standards” shaped and measured by state-mandated testing as “[c]entral to the Texas accountability system has been the use of a standardized test to assess student achievement” (Toenjes et al. 3–4). Each incarnation of that test (first the “Texas Assessment of Basic Skills” [TABS], then the “Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills” [TEAMS], next the “Texas Assessment of Academic Skills” [TAAS], and—most recently—the “Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills” [TAKS]) has measured “literacy” via student responses to a generic writing prompt and multiple-choice questions about grammar and usage. Each incarnation of that test has violated the principles of good writing assessment, stated most emphatically and clearly by the Conference on College Composition and Communication Position Statement on Assessment (1995): “no one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can ever serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions” (“Writing Assessment”). Each incarnation has placed students of color and, especially, those from poorer neighborhoods at an even greater disadvantage (see Haney; Valenzuela, Schrag).<sup>1</sup>

My junior class (1987–1988) was among the first the state would require to pass a standardized test before being approved for graduation. I began college the year the TASP Law (Texas Academic Skills Program) was enacted (September 1989), a test—again via multiple-choice questions and a single writing sample generated under “standardized” conditions—that, for the next fourteen years, would be used to determine college-readiness and—for those deemed “not ready”—state-mandated remediation.<sup>2</sup> With the implementation of each standardized test and the increasingly high stakes associated with

them, the campus climate began to shift. Students and faculty alike were scared and angry. We discussed little else. We did little else.<sup>3</sup> Our “compass”—to invoke George W. Bush’s metaphor—was always “the Test,” and this compass took us right back to the test yet again, a circular journey that defined literacy for us as singular, autonomous, and devoid of any context or purpose beyond separating the “good” students from those who must be, ironically enough, “left behind.” Even as teenagers, many of us understood what George Hillocks Jr. would assert nearly fifteen years later: “If assessments limit the kinds of writing taught or the ways they are taught, or the thinking that good writing requires, then the assessments may be of questionable value” (17). As one basic writer<sup>4</sup> in our program put it, “[a] person is more likely to write better about something they know or are passionate about, not about stupid subjects like, why there should be uniforms in public school. To more creative people like myself, it’s like a road block . . . a vacuum sucking all inventive thought, [making writers more likely] . . . to stick with the softer ideas than anything radical” (Holly, WA2, 3–4).

After college, I decided to teach English at the secondary level, again in Texas and both times at schools marked as “low performing” or “at risk” by their overall performance on TAAS (the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills), designations that, as I would soon learn, indicated little more than the darker color of our students’ skin and the lower socioeconomic status of their caretakers. Rather than spending our time developing innovative curricula that required our students to think critically and “write to learn,” we wasted hour after hour of our planning period sitting at the dining room table of the home economics department and poring over charts that we were to shape into “proof” that our curriculum was aligned with the requisite TAAS objectives—or suffer the wrath of the upper administration who were no less victims of these same standardized tests and the state laws that held them “accountable” for the results. “The only way to survive,” said my wise colleague who’d experienced fifteen years of award-winning, creative teaching before the rise of standardized testing, “is to ‘fit in’” any and all “real” teaching (those activities that may actually engage and challenge students) “after March”—often the month when TAAS-testing officially ended for the year. Until that time, she said, “simplify, simplify, simplify!”<sup>5</sup>

My third and final year as a Texas public school teacher I had the opportunity to build a visual arts program. I soon found myself shackled by TAAS once again, however, despite the fact that TAAS measures “math,” “reading,” and “writing,” and the testing culture rarely allowed any overlap among or beyond these “skill-sets.” Late in the spring semester in preparation for adding a second class to our newly implemented art program, the upper administration asked me to “frontload” TAAS objectives there too. Frustrated and disillusioned, I quit—beginning a PhD program with the certainty that college teachers did not have to struggle under such oppressively stan-

standardized conditions. In fact, my first tenure-track position was directing a writing center and a basic writing program at a public university in Texas. I should have known better.

### TESTING STANDARDS

From the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in 1985:

It is obvious that the first step in solving the basic skills problem is to identify those students who need help.

The only way to do this is to test them. (*A Generation of Failure* 8)

Susanmarie Harrington and Linda Adler-Kassner's review of basic writing scholarship (1998) reveals two distinct trends within the field: a "focus on the writers themselves and what happens in the act of composing" (9) and a "focus . . . on a sense of institutional or social culture" (12). As you may have already guessed, the current study is most concerned with the "institutional" and "social culture" surrounding the activity system that is basic writing. I am interested in helping to change the way literacy education functions and the way "basic writers" are defined, but I understand the limits of my own power to effect change, as Richard Miller insists I must. As he explains in *As If Learning Mattered*, "educational systems . . . have assumed a historically produced character that manifests itself in our time as an immensely complex bureaucracy with an inherent resistance to structural change" (23). Our situation is not altogether depressing, however, even in Texas, despite our regular diet of poisonous fare like standardized testing and "accountability" rhetoric. Teaching in the academy is fundamentally an activity shaped by and constrained by bureaucracy, particularly in basic writing programs, as we shall see.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in order to affect change within this context, "students, teachers, and administrators must develop a sufficiently nuanced understanding of how power is disseminated in bureaucracy to see that *constraining* conditions are not *paralyzing* conditions" (Miller 211, emphasis in original). That's what I will attempt to do here.

Educational reform is a complex activity from any perspective, but it is a particularly complex one for those of us teaching in and otherwise responsible for basic writing programs. According to Keith Rhodes,

Bound up in curricular processes normally designed to retard changes, basic writing usually suffers further from being one of the few subjects in which nearly everyone has a stake, so that several layers of administrators often feel empowered to make decisions about it. As a site of complicated struggle, basic writing can be unusually difficult to change in small increments, and unusually subject to large-scale makeovers. It is highly likely that the current basic writing program at your school was put in place as part of a

revolution of some kind, retaining in part the detritus of earlier revolutions. It can seem at times that no method can align all the stars and planets in such a way that any gradual improvement is possible. Further, writing professionals can't always integrate the revolutions they want, nor guide the results once things get going. (86)

Worse still, the mere existence of basic writing may signify changes the university culture and the general public may find difficult to accept, as Mina Shaughnessy and rest of the SEEK Program at City College discovered more than forty years ago. Adrienne Rich describes the program's precarious position thus:

When I first went to teach at SEEK in the late sixties, conditions were better, less crowded: there was more money for SEEK itself. After Open Admissions, the overcrowding was acute. In the fall of 1970 we taught in open plywood cubicles set up in Great Hall; you could hear the noise from the other cubicles; concentration was difficult for students. I also remember teaching in basement rooms, overheated in winter to a soporific degree. My feeling was that the message was being sent that the new students were being no more than tolerated at CCNY; but also, of course, I could only respect their tenacity, working part time, with families, traveling for hours on the subway, and with barely any place to sit and talk or read between classes, none of the trappings of an "intellectual life" such as the Columbia students enjoyed a few miles downtown. (qtd. in Maher 109)

In fact, "Mina fought for space in every way she could" (qtd. in Maher 109). She fought for everything related to this program and continued access for writers denied admittance under the previous system. Despite her tremendous abilities as a persuasive writer and public speaker, despite her charm and unbelievably rigorous work ethic, despite the fact that she, as Mary Soliday explains, "lavishly documented student need in terms of error . . . Shaughnessy's program was radically downsized" (*The Politics of Remediation* 143). By 1976—in the wake of major budget cuts that led administrators to, among other things, fire nearly sixty faculty members (the majority of whom taught in Shaughnessy's SEEK program) and end the 125-year tradition of free tuition—SEEK was all but gone. As Janet Emig put it in her poignant obituary that appeared in the February 1979 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, "Mina lived long enough to watch [at] CUNY, her university, what many of us are watching at our own—the quite systematic dismantlement of what she had so laboriously built, to which she may have quite literally given her life. She was even asked to participate in the demise and destruction; for the Savage Seventies are nothing if not thorough in trying to divest us of our most hard-won beliefs and actions" (38).

Nearly twenty years later, City University's "remedial" population again gained national (and negative) attention, this time with James Traub's hugely popular *City on a Hill* (1994). As he explains, "City . . . has set itself the task of raising standards up to the level required for a college education [but] the promise not only to admit but to transform woefully undereducated students presses City to kneel down rather than to lift up" (191). From his study, he concludes that "City shouldn't be admitting these students because the experience isn't helping *them* [the students] enough. Perhaps City hasn't figured out how to help them, or perhaps, as I thought, their problems are too profound to be addressed in a college setting" (343). More recently, we have begun to hear echoes of the same rhetoric of exclusion, most clearly in response to the Secretary of Education's "Commission on the Future of Education" (2005). In the first "Issue Paper . . . released at the request of Chairman Charles Miller to inform the work of the Commission," Charles Miller and Cheryl Oldham "set the context" for this "National Dialogue" by declaring the very existence of basic writing as a major reason for American post-secondary education's "diminished capacity" (2006). As they explain, "[s]everal institutions of higher education are admitting students who lack adequate preparation for college-level work, thus expending precious resources in remediation." As our own institution struggles with the retention rates of our first-year students, faculty and administrators have begun to ask whether they should even be here. They are not, after all, "college material." In this climate, I fear that Secretary Spellings's "Commission" may soon force us to exclude an even greater number of minority and poor students in order to raise retention rates, in much the same way that Texas public schools raised test scores and graduation rates by dubious means: retaining students, moving at-risk students to special education, or perhaps even "suggesting" they attain General Education Diplomas (GED) instead. As Walt Haney, Linda McNeil, and others have revealed, such moves have not been uncommon as students in special education programs are not required to take and pass TAAS and those who drop out but obtain GEDs within a year will not be counted as "dropouts" on the school's performance record.

As Deborah Mutnick has argued, "To sanction 'low standards' is not the same as advocating for students located at the margins of society" (189). Neither is admitting and supporting students "located at the margins of society" the same thing as lowering standards. But still the debate between standards and access rages on. According to Mary Soliday, that persistent debate and its irreconcilability may be key reasons for the very existence of basic writing as an institution. In keeping with Miller's assertion that the institution itself is a sociohistorical construct that must be taken into consideration when advocating change, Soliday suggests that it is necessary for us to "understand the relationship between the politics of representation and access" and to recognize that "our courses have to perform a delicate balancing act . . . remaining

mindful of the historically constricting role that skills instruction plays while also responding to a course's gatekeeping function within an institution" (*The Politics of Remediation* 144, 145).<sup>7</sup>

William Mayo founded the university where I teach on the promise that, as David Gold explains in his recent archival history of our early years (1889–1997), “any student [shall be] allowed to enter, despite his or her previous lack of training or ability to pay,” and though we are not currently “Open Admissions,” many of our students are first-generation college students from similar backgrounds. Thus, understandably, my colleagues often look to the basic writing program and the writing center I direct to “fix” those writers they understand to be “appallingly underprepared,” and we feel compelled to do so. Our very existence grew from a philosophical framework most basic writing scholars cannot endorse, yet we leave ourselves vulnerable if we don’t focus on “changing the writer” to meet the standards and codes of the academy.

Basic writing teachers and tutors in similar circumstances abound in community colleges and universities across the nation and are similarly charged with fixing the basic writing students’ tendency to, as Mina Shaughnessy puts it, “leave a trail of errors behind him when he writes”—to teach them to perform in ways that take the shape their accusers assume literate ability should mimic. Even so, we understand that real writing instruction is not about repair work anymore than real writing is about rules. In her autoethnography “Writing on the Bias,” Linda Brodkey makes a fascinating distinction between “school writing” and actual “writing”:

[S]chool writing is to writing as catsup is to tomatoes: as junk food is to food. What is nutritious has been eliminated (or nearly so) in processing. What remains is not just empty but poisonous fare because some people so crave junk food that they prefer it to food, and their preference is then used by those who, since they profit by selling us catsup as a vegetable and rules as writing, lobby to keep both on the school menu. (31)

*The Way Literacy Lives* explicitly challenges any sale of “rules as writing” by drawing attention to “the way literacy lives” in real-life contexts that extend far beyond the artificial ones often promoted in our schools and in political constructions of educational “reform.”

#### TESTING THE TEACHER

Like so many writing program administrators (WPAs), I often find my quest to subvert problematic representations of literacy disrupted by the reality of my daily work and the fact that such representations far outnumber the ones composition scholars might endorse. While this experience may be a common one among WPAs in general, however, the distance between these perceptions seems all the more significant for those of us who direct basic writing pro-



grams, writing centers, and similar learning spaces. Despite the multiple and persuasive arguments against the validity of doing so, many “basic writers” continue to be identified by standards-based assessments of their reading and writing “skills,” and basic writing classrooms continue to be dominated by skills-based instruction (Del Principe). Unfortunately—and, in my case, even by state mandate—those of us who know better are often no less constrained by the ubiquity of current-traditionalism in public representations of literacy learning. From 1989 to 2003, all Texas public colleges and universities were required to assess (via a “state-approved” test) every incoming first-year student in reading, writing, and math; writers failing the reading and/or writing sections were subsequently labeled “not ready for college-level literacy” and those of us directing basic writing programs at these institutions were required—again, by state law—to “remediate” them accordingly.<sup>8</sup>

Scores on these standardized tests are, in fact, improving (“The Texas Miracle”)—even among minority populations in the state; however, critics like Stephen Klein (et al.), Angela V Valenzuela, and Linda McNeil insist that such “improvements” mask the material realities of student learning and achievement. According to McNeil and Valenzuela,

TAAS is widening the gap between the education of children in Texas’ poorest (historically low-performing) schools and that available to more privileged ones. . . . Our analysis reveals that behind the rhetoric of rising test scores are a growing set of classroom practices in which test-prep activities are usurping a substantive curriculum. These practices are more widespread in those schools where administrator pay is tied to test scores and where test scores have been historically low. These are the schools that are typically attended by children who are poor and African American or Latino, many are non-English-language dominant. These are the schools that have historically been underresourced. In these schools, the pressure to raise test scores “by any means necessary” has frequently meant that a regular education has been supplanted by activities whose sole purpose is to raise test scores on this particular test. Because teachers’ and administrators’ job rewards under the TAAS system of testing are aligned to children’s test scores, the TAAS system fosters an artificial curriculum. It is a curriculum aimed primarily at creating higher test scores, not a curriculum that will educate these children for productive futures. The testing system distances the content of curriculum from the knowledge base of teachers and from the cultures and intellectual capacities of the children. It is creating an even wider gap between the curriculum offered to children in traditionally high-scoring schools (white, middle and upper-middle class) and those in typically minority and typically poor [schools]. . . . In the name of “alignment” between course curricula and test, *TAAS drills are becoming the curriculum in our poorest schools.* (5, emphasis mine)

And they are widening the gap between high school and college for those graduating from our poorest schools. Since Texas law requires only those students who do not score high enough on the TAAS<sup>9</sup> test to even take the TASP<sup>10</sup> exam and since TASP is very similar to TAAS, it seems only reasonable that much of the “damage” of the TAAS system of testing among college-bound students would show up in our basic writing classrooms as well. The same conditions that hijacked student opportunities for learning in high school are placing basic writers at an even greater disadvantage when they come to college.

Even though the TASP law was repealed in 2003, the logic that placed these writers via this system remains.<sup>11</sup> According to Deborah Mutnick (1995, 2000), making major changes in placement procedures seems unwise in an environment in which raising admission standards might be a more popular and likely choice than any placement procedure I might advocate. Recently, many colleges and universities across the nation have experienced such threats more directly—even those housing some of the most important programs in the history of basic writing (like City University of New York and the University of Minnesota-General College of Minnesota). These difficulties are likely to continue, making literacy instruction all the more complicated. As Richard Miller explains, nothing we do in the academy ever takes place “under conditions of complete freedom,” as much as we’d like to believe otherwise. In fact, there are many “material, cultural, and institutional constraints that both define and confine all learning spaces” (7). It is in this environment that I continue to find myself asking how one can possibly effect change in a system so profoundly shaped by and dependent upon maintaining the status quo.

In *Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations about Writing and Literacies* (2002), Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington examine just this question in their attempt to make sense of the very real “tensions between making basic writing a political act and doing so within institutional and social constraints that essentially work against politicizing the act of literacy development” (8). In their exploration of (1) how basic writers are portrayed in key scholarship, (2) how basic writers perceive themselves and their position as “basic” writers,” (3) how they are portrayed in mainstream media, and (4) how their teachers represent them in their syllabi and other course materials, the authors reveal the complex ways in which the confusing “problem” of basic writers is generated and perpetuated by multiple artificial and conflicting narratives with narrators who seem largely unaware of one another. They contend that a more practical and at once more politicized solution is to bring all these conflicting narratives into conversation with one another, reminding ourselves “that basic writing, no matter how theorized or studied, is fundamentally a classroom-based enterprise” (97). I argue that this conversation must begin in the classrooms and other learning spaces over

which we have some control, even when we may feel ourselves without the power to determine who should populate those spaces. Thus, at the levels of curriculum, tutor training, and teacher training, the basic writing program at Texas A&M-Commerce attempts to circumvent problematic representations of literacy in ways that “politicize” basic writing without making it unnecessarily vulnerable<sup>12</sup> to the arbitrary systems of institutionalized oppression that claim to “identify” those “not ready for college-level literacy.”

### PLACING BASIC WRITERS

High-stakes testing has been an integral part of Texas education for some time, so many accept it as a given (and unchangeable) part of the power landscape. As explained above, at A&M-Commerce, not unlike most Texas state colleges and universities, “basic writers” are those who have failed either the “reading” or the “writing” portions of the state-mandated, “objective” test *Texas Higher Education Assessment* (THEA), formerly the *Texas Academic Skills Program* (TASP).<sup>13</sup> As I’ve already pointed out, the test that places students in basic writing works from a very different set of assumptions than the courses that make up the program itself.<sup>14</sup> As explained on the *THEA Test Home Page*, “The purpose of the test . . . is to assess the reading, mathematics, and writing skills first year students should have if they are to perform effectively in undergraduate certificate or degree programs in Texas public colleges and universities.” The literacy skills deemed necessary to function in college include the following: (1) “determine the meaning of words and phrases,” (2) “understand the main idea and supporting details in written material,” (3) “identify a writer’s purpose, point of view, and intended meaning,” (4) “recognize effective organization in writing,” (5) “recognize effective sentences,” and (6) “recognize edited American English usage.” These skills (among others) are determined by multiple-choice, “objective” questions participants are expected to answer in a timed environment (five hours for all three sections), despite the fact that, as the CCCC Position Statement on Assessment reminds us, “choosing a correct response from a set of possible answers is not composing” (“Writing Assessment”). In addition to these multiple-choice questions, students are expected to develop a “writing sample” that must exhibit high levels of “competency” in the following areas: (1) appropriateness, (2) unity and focus, (3) development, (4) organization, (5) sentence structure, (6) usage, and (7) mechanical conventions (“Section II: TASP Skills”).

Each of the items listed here represents literacy as what Lauren B. Resnick calls “a bundle of skills.” Of course, motivations for assessing writers according to their ability to “recognize effective sentences” and “identify a writer’s purpose, point of view, and intended meaning” are based on an understanding

that those who fail to do so on a “standardized” assessment in decidedly sterile conditions will not be able to do so in a college classroom, where circumstances are much more variable and problematic. Logically, then, these writers and readers should be marked “basic writer” and “remediated” until they are able to “recognize edited American English usage” and the rest. As Resnick explains,

If literacy is viewed as a bundle of skills, then education for literacy is most naturally seen as a matter of organizing effective lessons: that is, diagnosing skills, strengths, and deficits, providing appropriate exercises in developing felicitous sequences, motivating students to engage in these exercises, giving clear explanations and directions. (3)

Before I arrived on our campus in 2001 to direct the writing center and the basic writing program, a rather progressive curriculum was already in place—one deeply informed by border pedagogy and the basic writing program model at the University of Pittsburgh as portrayed by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* (1986). Students were required to work with complex texts like Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* and Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and to produce sophisticated essays in response to these texts via sequenced assignments organized around a course theme like “identity” or “growth.”

In almost every way, the basic writing program worked directly against the problematic representations of literacy I have attempted to challenge in the previous pages. However, despite the fact that the curriculum itself was rooted in a pedagogy of liberation, standardized testing remained an integral part of outcomes assessment. Students were required to pass a TASP-like examination in reading and writing before they would be allowed to “pass” English 100. Much like the TAAS system in the public schools, students who failed to pass the exit test would “fail” basic writing and be required to repeat it, even if their scores on everything else were excellent. They had many chances to retake the test, both at midterm and again near the end of the term, but that flexibility, though admirable, meant that in the meantime these students lost about three weeks of “real” instruction. Those responsible for implementing this exit criteria argued that because these students’ scores on TASP placed them in basic writing in the first place, it only seemed appropriate—and, it turns out, the previous directors assumed it to be state law (as did I)—that such writers be assessed again at the end of the course to ensure their work in the course was worthwhile. And that their experiences in basic writing were, in the words of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, of “added value.” It was also assumed that since the course itself was much more intellectually demanding than the TASP test could ever hope to be, those students doing well with the rest of the course activities should easily pass TASP. The problem with this logic is, as Dennis Baron points out in his response to the Commission on the Future of Higher Education,

standardized testing presumes a standard body of skills and knowledge that's being tested. In writing, this is certainly not the case. It's not in reading either. By all assessments, literacy practices are those which are situated in actual school and out-of-school contexts, not those gleaned from asking students to pick out the grammatical errors or to reorder the sentences in paragraphs that only exist on standardized tests or in study guides for taking standardized tests.

Applying a national "standard" as exit criteria for a specific course is inappropriate, but I can certainly see why my predecessors felt they had no other choice. In fact, our reading of the TASP law presumed the very same thing and thus required that all students "retake" TASP until they passed it, regardless of their performance in the classroom.

The year before I arrived, I'm happy to say, the State of Texas had already begun to offer public universities a little more freedom than previous administrators had experienced. In 2000, TASP law was supplemented with the "B or better rule." That meant that students earning a "B or better" in a handful of preapproved, college-level, writing-intensive courses would *not* be required to retake and pass TASP. I took that opportunity (after only one semester under the old system) to remove the TASP-like exit exam from our basic writing program and implement instead an exit portfolio graded by a panel of readers, thus preserving the credibility of true standards offered under the previous system but regaining some levels of pedagogical consistency between curriculum and assessment measures.<sup>15</sup> Thus today, even as these students were placed in our basic writing program according to assessment measures representing literacy as a "bundle of skills," the program itself deliberately circumvents the validity of such representations.

### THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION

It is from within this politically and ideologically charged space that the curriculum driving our basic writing program at A&M-Commerce emerged. Over the past few years, my teaching and administrative work have become increasingly affected by regular attempts to circumvent current-traditional representations of literacy and my growing appreciation of vernacular literacies—video game literacies, Star Trek literacies, and comic book literacies, among others—as represented not only by our students but also in, among other things, Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher's *Literate Lives in an Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States* (2004) and *Gaming Lives* (2007), Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2005), and, especially, work in the New Literacy Studies (like James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Literacy and*

*Learning* [2003] and *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling* [2004]). According to these and similar studies in multiple literacies, even the most conservative readings of literacy have to accept that literacy itself has changed and, as the world moves from a print-based culture to a digital one, it will only continue to change. All this makes teaching writing much more complicated than ever before, but knowing this better enables me to make deliberate use of the literacies my students already possess, even those students populating our basic writing classes. The trick is helping these writers figure out how to use what they already know to learn what they don't yet know: often the language of the academy. That's the primary objective of the current study and the basic writing program on which it is based.

As I continue to take vernacular literacies seriously, I have been amazed to find the intellectual rigor and rhetorical sophistication embedded in rhetorical spaces that extend beyond the academy, especially those spaces rarely understood to have anything to do with the kinds of writing students are expected to do at school. This growing knowledge and the conservative political climate in which those of us committed to representing literacy differently often find ourselves have led me to develop what I call a "pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity"—that is, a pedagogical approach that develops in students the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one.

#### CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE

What's original about a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity is not the basic assumption that, as Katherine Schultz and Glenda Hull put it, "literacy is not literacy is not literacy" (19), or that academic literacies (standard edited English) have much more academic and social currency than vernacular ones (Street; Gee; Purves and Purves; Lu "Redefining"). I'm not the first to assert that basic writers have their own expertise and should be encouraged to draw from them (Soliday, "Toward a Consciousness"; Eleanor and Zamel; Mahiri; Marinara), nor am I the only scholar to argue that basic writers are only "basic writers" within the system that identified them as such (Fox; Horner; Soliday, *The Politics of Remediation*; Lu and Horner; Hindman; Hilgers; by implication, Huot; Bartholomae, "The Tidy House").

The innovation of this approach is in the ways I propose to teach those writers labeled "basic" to value their expertise, abilities Eleanor and Zamel have called "competencies" but that I will call here "literacies." In doing so, we pay particular attention to our students' experiences with more vernacular literacies like those associated with work (waiting tables, styling hair, building homes, designing webpages) and leisure (quilting, painting, hunting).<sup>16</sup> A pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity thus enables us to represent literacy

differently—to basic writers, to tutors, to basic writing teachers, and, through them, to those representing literacy beyond our learning spaces. Via a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity, I have chosen to shape “instruction that enables students to understand how definitions of literacy are shaped by communities, how literacy, power, and language are linked, and how their myriad experiences with language (in and out of school) are connected to writing” (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 98).

External, state-mandated measures mark these writers as “basic” writers, and our basic writing program accepts this designation—not because we agree with it but because Texas law demands it. Not unlike many composition teacher-scholars, rather than quietly submitting to such arbitrary standards, we make the political dimensions visible by treating literacy differently, not as a “bundle of skills” but as a situated, people-oriented activity governed by “rules” established and maintained by insiders—members of the target community of practice. In doing so, we treat literacy not as an abstract set of rigid “standards” and “rules” but rather as a blend of mutable, social forces that are deeply situated in time and place.

#### GOALS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In training tutors and teachers to work with basic writing students and in speaking with colleagues about what these writers need, I have found myself frustrated time and again with the ways in which this culture of testing seems to have contributed to what activity theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger call “the commoditization of learning,” a phenomenon they argue

engenders a fundamental contradiction between the use and exchange values of the outcome of learning, which manifests itself in conflicts between learning to know and learning to display knowledge for evaluations. . . . Test taking then becomes a new parasitic practice, the goal of which is to increase the exchange value of learning independently of its [real] value. (112)

According to Brian V. Street, literacy itself has been treated in much the same way, a phenomenon he calls the “pedagogization of literacy.” By this he draws attention to the ways in which “literacy has become associated with educational notions of Teaching and Learning and with what teachers and pupils do in schools, at the expense of the many other uses and meanings of literacy evident from comparative ethnographic literature.” In this sense, “pedagogy . . . has taken on the character of an ideological force controlling social relations in general and conceptions of reading and writing in particular” (*Social Literacies* 106, 107). Adler-Kassner and Harrington discovered something similar in their survey of public attitudes of literacy, something they call the “school-success narrative.”

At its heart is a familiar theme: A college education is the stepping-off point for entrance into middle-class society, and obtaining this education will ensure that students will participate in the perpetuation of that society and its values. A central requirement of getting this education is amassing and reproducing objective literacy skills, which help to ensure that students are learning the appropriate material to facilitate participation in middle-class life. (62)

Working against this “school-success narrative” perpetuated by the “pedagogization of literacy,” this book has been quite deliberately influenced by my attempts to circumvent the literacy myths that lead to so many misconceptions about what basic writing students can do and what they need, especially inasmuch as the writing center and the basic writing program I direct are charged with “fixing” these problem writers, just as nearly every other writing center and basic writing program across the country is similarly charged.

This is a book, then, that attempts to force to the surface the intellectual viability of alternative literacies. *The Way Literacy Lives* works consciously against standards-based assessments of literate practices dominating most commonsense approaches to literacy learning while recognizing that such assessments and perspectives are always already a major part of any attempt to teach and learn school literacies. By recognizing and making explicit to students the ubiquity of autonomous models of literacy, the current study promotes a more context-based understanding of the multiple literacies available to writers—a more realistic picture of the way literacy lives.

In other words, if “literate ability” is something that’s context-dependent (as many argue it is), then what’s it take to be literate in contexts that may be more familiar to our students than they are to us? For example, what’s it take to be *video game literate*? There are certainly some “skills” that most gamers possess, including, at the very least, the ability to punch the right buttons at the right times in order to achieve the appropriate and desired response (to jump, perhaps), “read” and comprehend the primary objectives of the game as scripted by the designer, and transfer (and often adjust) these literate practices to new video games with new objectives and new responses triggered by the same buttons used before (shooting rather than jumping, for example).

*The Way Literacy Lives* is based in part on our basic writing program, which is designed to help learners (1) recognize “other,” “vernacular,” or “marginalized” literacies as valid so they can begin to (2) draw from them as they learn what it means to write for college audiences—audiences far less unified or predictable than the literacy-as-universal-standard model allows.

The theoretical framework for this book relies on three, overlapping theoretical traditions: the New Literacy Studies (NLS), activity theory, and critical literacy. As Brian V. Street defines it,



What has come to be termed the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1996) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power. NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking “whose literacies” are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. (Street, “What’s ‘New’ in New Literacy Studies?” 1)

In other words, NLS is primarily concerned with the way literacy manifests itself in various out-of-school contexts. To a great extent, the New London Group—especially as represented by James Paul Gee and Brian V. Street—is primarily concerned with exposing the artificiality of school literacies. According to New Literacy Studies scholars Cope and Kalanowitz,

Language discourse and register differences are markers of lifeworld differences (work, interest and affiliation, ethnicity, sexual identity). As lifeworlds become more divergent and their boundaries more blurred, the central fact of language becomes the multiplicity of meanings and their continual intersection. Just as there are multiple layers to everyone’s identity, there are multiple discourses of identity and multiple discourses of recognition to be negotiated. We have to be proficient as we negotiate the many lifeworlds each of us inhabits, and the many lifeworlds we encounter in our everyday lives. This creates a new challenge for literacy pedagogy. (17)

The NLS redefines literacy education as a matter of reading and negotiating various contextualized forces that are deeply embedded in identity formation, political affiliations, material and social conditions, and ideological frameworks. In doing so, it necessarily flattens hierarchies among literacies—where one literacy is inherently more significant or valuable than another—as the value of one literacy over another can only be determined by its appropriateness to context.

Relationships among those marked “illiterate” in one context and literate in another become increasingly important—as do those between agents marked “basic writer” in school contexts—when we understand that these same individuals are likely considered highly literate in one or more contexts *beyond* school. As NLS scholar Alan Rogers points out,

In the NLS, the relationships between the literate and illiterate become important. . . . It is a relationship of power; the “literate” have excluded the “illiterate” from their society and will only include them on the condition

that the “illiterate” acquire the same literacy as the so-called “literate” possess—attitudes which many of the non-literate members of society have internalized, so that they see themselves as deficient and excluded. (208)

The real problem, according to the NLS perspective, lies not in the basic writer’s inability to conform to standards or even their inability to develop discourse academic communities recognize as appropriate, but rather in our very definitions of what it means to be literate—how literacy functions in society and how it comes to mean. The focus of rhetorical dexterity is not fixing deficits in these basic writers (as none are recognized as “deficit”) or pushing forward a new world order (though I certainly wouldn’t mind). Instead, rhetorical dexterity attempts to develop in writers the ability to negotiate the school literacies celebrated in the current social order in ways that are as ethical and meta-aware as possible. We begin this process by articulating the ways in which what they already know well may help them learn what is, as of yet, less familiar to them.

Building on Shirley Brice Heath’s notion of “literacy events” as useful foci in ethnographic studies of the social function of reading and writing, Brian V. Street (2001) rearticulates the concept in ways I think new literacy learners will find quite useful.

If you were to observe this literacy event as a non-participant who was not trained in its conventions and rules, you would have difficulty following what is going on, such as how to work with the text and to talk around it. There are clearly underlying conventions and assumptions around the literacy event that make it work. (11)

However, he encourages us to consider these “underlying conventions and assumptions” in terms of “literacy *practices*” rather than literacy “events”: “The concept of literacy practices attempts both to handle the events and the patterns around literacy and to link them to something broader of a cultural and social kind. . . . Literacy practices, then, refer to this broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing” (11). As mentioned previously, it is important for us to expand the term “literacies” to encompass those social functions that extend beyond reading and writing. In *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education* (1995), however, Street warns us about stretching the usefulness of this term “literacy” too thin as it may lead researchers “to the reification of an autonomous model of literacy” (135). In terms of a research model, Street may not like the way I am using “literacy” to determine “competence” or “skill” in a particular community, but I am focusing on these “skills” and “competencies” as they are labeled and validated by other *members* of the community; thus, I believe that this conceptualization of literate practice does not separate the language from the situation in which it is

used, which is Street's primary objection to this conceptualization.<sup>17</sup> I agree that such a use of the term "literate" may lead to the reification of an autonomous model of literacy if we are talking about a researcher (as an outsider or an insider) investigating a community in order to determine the terms of literacy in that community of practice when the "community" is drawn together by a particular activity (like chess, Star Trek, or composition studies) rather than broader and deeper social and political connections such as "home" or "family." However I don't think this would be so for a student acquiring new literacies. One may argue that the process of rhetorical dexterity is without immediate scholarly value but it does have immediate *pedagogical* value to new literacy learners.

Thus, the primary objective of rhetorical dexterity is to enable writers to make use of an ideological model of literacy as they negotiate ever-changing rhetorical situations rather than continue to force different rhetorical situations to conform to the autonomous model of traditional literacy education has trained them to accept. Doing so requires that we not only challenge the artificial binary between the "literate" and the "illiterate" but begin to understand literacy itself as an activity system.

Activity theory has its roots in Vygotskian psychology and is largely concerned with human practice as an "activity system." David Russell was the first to bring activity theory to composition studies, making clear the ways in which this theoretical framework may enable us to "create . . . a longer and wider network of disciplinary influence (power), [but] . . . only if we know more about . . . writing processes in many social practices, many systems of activity, many genres" ("Activity Theory and Process Approaches" 87). As Russell explains it in his earlier article, "Activity Theory and Writing Instruction" (1995),

Activity theory analyzes human behavior and consciousness in terms of *activity systems*: goal-directed, historically situated, cooperative human interactions, such as a child's attempt to reach an out-of-reach toy, a job interview, a "date," a social club, a classroom, a discipline, a profession, an institution, a political movement, and so on. The activity system is the basic unit of analysis for both cultures' and individuals' psychological and social processes. . . . Activity systems are historically developed, mediated by tools, dialectically structured, analyzed as the relationship of participants and tools, and changed through *zones of proximal development*. (54–55, emphasis in original)

Whereas NLS focuses mostly on the *social* nature of literacy, activity theory emphasizes the goal-oriented behaviors that make up the activity system we call "literacy." When literacy is understood as a social practice, however, activity theory requires us to examine the social contexts in which these activities are mediated and reproduced. Thus, the current study examines the ways in

which literacy is a social practice and, therefore, deeply situated and context dependent. Chapter 5, “The Way Literacy (Re)produces,” offers a much more detailed discussion of activity theory and its implications for basic writing.

The third theoretical framework shaping the current study is critical literacy, which, like NLS and activity theory, emphasizes the social nature of literacy as “learning to read and write is part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson and Irvine 82). “When we are critically literate,” Ira Shor explains, “we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it.” As C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon describe it in *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy* (1993), the primary concern of critical literacy education is “the issue of representation, the practices by which people name and rename the world, negotiate the substance of social reality, and contest prior naming in favor of new or different ones.” In chapter 3, “The Way Literacy Liberates,” I will offer a much more extensive discussion of critical literacy and its implications for basic writing

#### DEFINING LITERACY

The primary objective of this book and, in fact, the program on which it is based is this: to help our students develop the flexibility and skill necessary to negotiate multiple, always changing literacies, learning to hone and apply rhetorical dexterity to increasingly complex rhetorical situations. In doing so, we are clearly expanding the definition of literacy to include those activities not typically considered to be “reading” or “writing” in any traditionally “valuable” sense. “She is always reading,” I recently heard a parent say of her daughter, “but never anything *worthwhile*. Those damn teen magazines all the time! Ask her anything about Britney Spears, and she’s a virtual encyclopedia. Ask her about the Civil War, and she comes up empty! Ask her history teacher; he’ll tell you. Her head is *filled* with useless facts!” The NLS scholar James Paul Gee calls this attitude the “content fetish.”

The idea behind it is this: Important knowledge (now usually gained in school) is content in the sense of information rooted in, or, at least, related to, intellectual domains or academic disciplines like physics, history, art, or literature. Work that does not involve such learning is ‘meaningless.’ . . .

The problem with the content view is that an academic discipline or any other semiotic domain, for that matter, is not primarily content, in the sense of facts and principles. *It is rather primarily a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices*. It is in these social practices that “content” is generated, debated, and transformed via certain distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, acting, and often, writing and reading. (*What Video Games* 21, emphasis mine)

To understand the parameters of this more social conceptualization of literacy, David Barton and Mary Hamilton suggest we consider “literate” behavior in terms of “discourse communities” rather than universal standards, which they define as “groups of people held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting, and using written language.” For our purposes, “communities of practice” seem more appropriate than “discourse communities” because the former stresses literacy as an *activity* rather than a state of being (via membership or ability to meet universal standards).

“Communities of practice” are relations of people who have in common a “shared competence and mutual interest in a given practice” (Choi 143), whether repairing Xerox machines (see Orr 1996 and Brown and Duguid 1991), recovering from alcoholism (see Lave and Wenger, 1990), teaching writing, or countless other activities in which a person may be involved. The concept first emerged in Lave and Wenger’s study of the ways in which various communities of practice teach newcomers the practices valued and reproduced in those communities (midwives, meat cutters, tailors, and recovering alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous).<sup>18</sup> According to Lave and Wenger, a “community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” The term “impl[ies] participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (98). Embedded in activity theory are two, complementary assumptions: (1) language, literacy, and learning are embedded in communities of practice rather than entirely within the minds of individuals; and (2) communities reproduce themselves through social practices. When these social practices become routinized and interrelated (“just the way things are done”) within a community of practice, they may be understood as part of an activity *system*.

In any given community of practice—be it factory work or fishing, Xerox repair or midwifery, evangelism or a particular basic writing program or classroom—some activities will be understood as “appropriate” and others largely inappropriate, and the majority of these activities cannot be understood apart from the activity *system* in which these actions are perpetuated. That is, actions considered “typical” or otherwise valuable in a given community of practice become a part of the activity system representing that community. These systems are social and cultural rather than individual and objective in that any activity system is made up of groups of individuals who sanction and endorse particular ways of doing things and particular results, identifying some results and processes as innovative and valuable and condemning others as ineffective, inappropriate, or even unacceptable. Thus, Cindy may not be “literate” in terms recognizable to her history teacher and the relevant communities of practice with which he is associated, but she is highly literate in this aspect of preteen culture and the associated communities (those

overlapping communities that may be affiliated with *Seventeen* magazine and television shows aimed at this viewing audience like *Degrassi* and other such shows on cable channels like *Noggin*).

*Literate practices*, at least the way I am using the term here, refer to those sanctioned and endorsed by others recognized as literate members of a particular community of practice. Like any community, the “literate practices” of preteen popular culture are “sanctioned and endorsed” by other literate members. Those of us who are not literate members of this particular community of practice are less likely to be able to tell the difference between someone who knows quite a lot about Britney Spears and her music and someone who is just pretending to know it.

Unless we are comparing very similar communities, however, the *points of contact* will likely be limited at first. *Points of dissonance* refers to those points of *difference* between two different communities of practice—points that confuse or disorient literacy learners. In learning new literacies, for example, Cindy is likely to find many characteristics of the new community that are at odds with those of her more familiar literacies. Specifically, as seems likely, the “ideologies” informing *Seventeen* are unlikely to mimic those of academic discourse—at least not at first glance, as we will discuss in later chapters.

Helping our students develop *rhetorical dexterity* is the primary objective of our basic writing program and the current project. I am not necessarily expecting these writers to develop full-blown, “objective” ethnographic studies of their familiar communities of practice, but I argue that we must routinely and explicitly validate the complex systems in which these students are already considered literate by taking them seriously and asking our students to do the same.

## BASIC STRUCTURE

I began with a deep description of the local conditions in which our basic writing program functions and, in doing so, make the claim that such conditions must be understood when undertaking any new programmatic or curricular approach. Building on projects like Adler-Kassner and Harrington’s *Basic Writing as a Political Act* that urge researchers and teachers to “reorient the work of the basic writing class toward collaborative action with teacher and student,” the current study describes and analyzes a curriculum designed to “help . . . students understand how to determine the literacy demands of new contexts (in and out of school),” a function that, they argue “should be the primary goal of any writing course, especially basic writing.” They continue,

Asking students to consider what counts as “good” literacy practices in a given context is the key to traveling literacy skills. Students who can move

into a new classroom—or any new setting—and suss out what are the favored forms for writing, what are the favored forms for investigation, and what are the key conventions for discourse are well on their way to writerly success. (Adler-Kassner and Harrington 102)

Given that much of the current project rests on an assumption that this autonomous model is pervasive and extremely problematic for basic writers in particular, I will spend the next chapter (“The Way Literacy Oppresses”) exploring the ways in which the autonomous model of literacy shapes both public discourse about literacy education and the basic writer’s perception of her own needs as a writer. In doing so, chapter 2 will attempt to illustrate the reasons why this perspective is both politically/ideologically oppressive and pedagogically unsound.

Chapter 3, “The Way Literacy Liberates,” explores the various ways in which basic writing scholars have revised basic writing curricula in response to critical theories, a philosophical perspective that has become quite common among teacher-researchers in basic writing. According to Deborah Mutnick, “the point of composition instruction, including basic writing, is to equip students with literacy skills along with a critical-historical perspective on reading and writing in school, work, and everyday life” (xii) by teaching them to, in the words of Paulo Friere, “read the word and the world.” I conclude chapter 3 with a description of a basic writing curriculum designed and executed via an explicitly critical framework, where the goal was to develop critical consciousness among those writers I believed to be constructed as “oppressed” and thus in need of liberation through critically aware literacy education. Student responses to the curriculum are included, especially as represented through the experiences of Ana, a blind student immigrant from Mexico—experiences that have led me to question the viability of critical literacy as a primary framework for basic writing.

In chapters 4–6, I articulate a new pedagogy and basic writing curriculum in which the primary goal is not “liberation” in any general sense but replacing the autonomous model of literacy with an ideological one—socially situated, people oriented, contextually bound. Here I offer illustrations of a variety of communities of practice seemingly unrelated to academic discourse and its practices. By articulating the anatomy of literacies associated with video games like *Halo 2* and jobs like bagging groceries, especially as they are described by students in our basic writing program, I hope to redefine expertise in ways students and teachers alike might find relevant to the academy.

More specifically, chapter 4, “The Way Literacy Stratifies,” focuses on the unequal value of various literacies as the dominant, autonomous model reconstructs them, as well as the inequity of access to those literate strategies perpetuated by this autonomous model. The next chapter, “The Way Literacy (Re)produces” further establishes the theoretical framework of rhetorical

dexterity by articulating the ways in which various communities of practice (re)produce themselves through literate actions. Chapter 6, “The Way Literacy Lives,” describes a basic writing curriculum shaped by rhetorical dexterity, as well as various student responses to this curriculum.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I will examine again our tendency to separate orality from literacy, often privileging the latter over the former, the “literate” over the “illiterate.” Such separations are perpetuated by assumptions that a “Great Divide” exists between the literate and everyone else, and this myth places new literacy learners, like our basic writing students, at an unfair disadvantage. According to Brian V. Street, this myth is perpetuated by anthropologists like Goody (1968, 1977) who have “replace[d] the theory of a ‘great divide’ between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ culture . . . with the distinction between ‘literate’ and ‘non-literate’” (“Autonomous Model” 3). When we close that Great Divide between the literate and the nonliterate—between the basic writers and everyone else—we can begin to understand how to readjust literacy education in ways that are much more equitable to all learners.