

Dawn Skorczewski

## **"Everybody Has Their Own Ideas": Responding to Cliché in Student Writing**

---

Writing instructors often identify clichés as the weakest spots in student writing, but looking at students' uses of cliché in context can teach us about their struggles to fashion new knowledge from what they already believe to be true. Most importantly, writing instructors who examine their responses to cliché (or any other "undesirable" aspect of student writing) can learn about the ways in which their pedagogical practices can deafen them to what students are trying to say.

---

*[Literacy transmission] is not . . . a simple choice between "freezing" traditional values on the one hand or of crude 'modernism' on the other . . . The reality, in such situations, is of pragmatic adaptation, particularly on the part of the less powerful party, to the new skills, conventions, and ideologies being introduced . . . The outcome is most often a mix of new and old convention . . . people frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes. (44)*

—Brian Street

*Things always change . . . however, the more things change, the more they stay the same.*

—Student writer, Fall 1997

CCC 52:2 / DECEMBER 2000

**E**verybody has their own ideas." "If we try hard enough, we will succeed." "It depends on the person." After twelve years of teaching composition in four different universities, these clichés continue to plague me when I respond to student writing. Papers that explore the limitations on individual opportunity in the United States assert the possibility of beating the odds; arguments about multiple identities urge us to find our true selves; discussions of socially constructed knowledge conclude that we each invent our own ideas every day. How can it be that students write for pages about the complexities of institutional power, multiple identities, and situated knowledges and then refute what they have discussed in a trite or overused phrase?

David Bartholomae argues that clichés<sup>1</sup> represent a world that makes sense to our students, while the language of the university can seem unfamiliar and strange ("Inventing" 138). He explains that students move away from clichés when they begin to find a voice in the conversations of the university, forsaking their acquired common sense to embrace the critical language of their instructors. The first-year composition course, according to Bartholomae, should teach students *not* to make common sense ("A Reply" 130). Many of our theorists and textbook authors agree (see esp. Ong, Harris, Lu, and Spellmeyer).<sup>2</sup> In the preface of *Rereading America*, the textbook I sometimes use for my introductory courses, the authors encourage students to become active readers who question assumptions, for example, that all individuals have equal opportunity or equal access to education and property. They urge students to challenge what "everybody knows" about the American Dream or to read narratives that offer testimony to the power of institutions to subvert individual freedom (1-2). As a teacher, I take note of a developing critical consciousness when a student uses an author's language to talk about his/her life experiences or analyzes those life experiences to take exception to an author's way of understanding the world. But too often that same student cannot sustain a critical voice for very long in an essay and ends up in a final paragraph that asserts the truth of statements such as "everybody can do it if they try," or "if we ask too many questions, society as we know it will fall apart." My written responses to these overused expressions tend to reflect my disappointment, frustration, or even (as I am loath to admit here), anger. What is wrong with them, I ask myself, as I grade yet another concluding paragraph riddled with clichés? What is wrong with me?

**How can it be that students write for pages about the complexities of institutional power, multiple identities, and situated knowledges and then refute what they have discussed in a trite or overused phrase?**

What is wrong, I will argue, is that my own teaching practices, and the theoretical tradition that informs them, have influenced me as much as notions of "common sense" influence my students' writing.<sup>3</sup> For if my students have a tendency to write clichés, I have a tendency to respond to them in fairly predictable

**Rather than speaking as outsiders or as insiders to university discourse, students "frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes."**

ways: I identify a cliché, ask a question that leads back to the text, or point out contradictions in the argument. And although it may seem that students write in critical voices for pages to please me and then in the concluding

paragraph say what they really think, this pattern bears important similarities to the hybrid discourse Brian Street describes in his discussion of literacy acquisition that I have cited in the epigraph of this essay. Rather than speaking as outsiders or as insiders to university discourse, students "frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes" (44).

In the pages that follow, I will closely examine a few of my students' most frequently used clichés to illustrate that when we interpret clichés as merely unfortunate intrusions or weak spots in their writing, we miss opportunities to learn more about what we can teach our students and what they might be able to teach us. In the process, I will discuss a few of my own clichés, acquired in seven years of professional training and over a decade of teaching composition and articulated in my comments on student papers. In each case, I will suggest that when we listen carefully to clichés, we will find not complacency, naiveté, or unproductive resistance, but instead, "pragmatic adaptation . . . to the new skills, conventions, and ideologies being introduced" (Street 44). I will also suggest that teachers, like students, gesture in at least two directions when we write comments on student papers. We move forward, armed with our best efforts to try to hear what our students are saying. But we also move backward, in often unconscious reflections of our own educational training, to times when we, very much like our students, played the role of the less powerful party in the dance of power that is the academic institution.



Generally speaking, my assignments ask students to work with difficult texts as well as their own experiences as they explore relationships between identity and culture in late twentieth-century America. They read Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, who describes her mestiza consciousness: a mixture of Na-

tive American, Chicana, female, lesbian, and academic identities. They encounter Richard Rodriguez's conflict between the world of his Mexican American parents and that of his Anglo teachers. They examine these authors in the context of Mary Louise Pratt's theory of the classroom as a contact zone, "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 584). Looking for examples of contact zones in the texts and in their environment, they write about the soccer field as a contact zone, or the cafeteria, or the dorm room, or McDonald's. They discuss contact zones as places of conflict that are inevitable in a world where people can feel powerful and powerless in the space of a few hours or even minutes. But they also identify what Pratt calls "safe houses . . . places for healing and mutual recognition . . . [places] in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone" (595). In contact zones, writers identify many competing cultural voices. In safe houses, marginalized groups come to identify which of those voices they might truly call their own.

I first began to think seriously about uses of cliché in student writing when students in a developmental writing class at Rutgers University seemed to enter both contact zones and safe houses in the same pieces of writing. The students were mostly working class, around eighteen years old, and about half spoke a language other than English in their homes. When we discussed the course readings in class, we debated whether the authors had any relevance to their lives. Before we could debate, we struggled to understand what the essays said, to hear the authors' words and then talk back. We broke the essays down and found the pieces that made sense to us. Soon, students began to discuss the value of terms such as "mestiza consciousness" when they wanted to talk about themselves as students and workers and daughters and sons. But they always worked with and against Anzaldúa's term, often agreeing that they had a mestiza consciousness but that it was not as contradictory as Anzaldúa describes. They also described the interplay of race, ethnicity, home, and school in the formation of identity in the second assignment, which was to examine Richard Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire" through the frame of Anzaldúa's text. What did Anzaldúa help us to see in his essay? How did his essay teach us to read Anzaldúa differently? Many argued that Rodriguez was far less comfortable with a mixing of the academic and familial self than was Anzaldúa, or that Anzaldúa's understanding of the mixed consciousness was actually closer to Rodriguez's than we might suspect.

By the time the students had written the third assignment of five, I noticed a familiar pattern in their responses. First, they would use the concepts

offered in the text to interpret other texts and their lived experiences, and then they would conclude their interpretation with a clichéd final paragraph that contradicted everything that they had said. The third assignment asked students to begin to develop a theory of the role of gender in identity formation as they drew from their own experiences and two texts: Alice Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl." Many students struggled between theories of an autonomous self that exists outside of culture and a self that is influenced by gendered cultural codes. But the essays unanimously concluded with statements such as "we are all equal," "we can be whoever we want to be," and "we have to admit we have made progress." When I first read these essays, I believed they contained moments of critical thinking and moments of complete acquiescence to the commonplaces of our culture, moments when

**If these paragraphs were places for "their own ideas," perhaps my students were, without entirely realizing it, making a political move, going as far as possible into the realm of critical thinking without finally and completely selling out by asserting themselves in the most privileged space of the essay—the ending.**

the students struggled with Walker's and Kincaid's stories about gender discrimination and moments when they refused to listen to them. In keeping with what I had learned from "Inventing the University," I attributed these contradictions to what I assumed about developmental writers; they were initiates into the university community who needed far more

experience before they could write convincing and coherent critical arguments. This theory appeared to be confirmed when I asked the students why they wrote these clichés; most were unable to talk about how their conclusions differed from anything else they had written. One student, however, asked, "Isn't the conclusion the place for *our* ideas?"

My student's reply to my question made me realize that my faith in Bartholomae's model of the classroom produced a deficit model of their writing. I believed that their critical thinking stopped when they reached their concluding paragraphs, which echoed with cliché. My student's comment about "her own ideas" suggested a different way of understanding a cliché-ridden final paragraph, however—as a way of honoring prior lessons in "good writing" and as an opportunity to resist the new ideas of "good writing" espoused by their college composition instructor. If these paragraphs were places for "their own ideas," perhaps my students were, without entirely realizing it, making a political move, going as far as possible into the realm of critical thinking without finally and completely selling out by asserting themselves in the most privileged space of the essay—the ending. Perhaps they said what they believed I wanted

to hear, and then, with the implied permission of their previous instructors, reserved a small space for what they truly wanted to say at the end of their essays. If so, they were not simply inexperienced in "my" language, but instead wrestling to make sense of what they read in terms of what they knew and believed.<sup>4</sup>

A contact zone always exists between a teacher and his/her students, a zone in which they can be graded and the teacher can grade, in which they represent student culture and the teacher, academic culture.<sup>5</sup> Student papers, written in this zone, reflect this imbalance of power. But in a classroom where students are also readers of one another's work, a student essay might also offer a "safe house" for students to attest to the power of what they have always known. If student writers insisted on the notion of the unique individual after having explored Walker's description of masked and distorted identities, for example, perhaps they were reluctant to forsake the commonplace that every human is unique and uninfluenced by other voices. Or, if they wrote that "everybody has their own ideas" after discussing Jamaica Kincaid's description of her entrapment in the opposing worldviews of her mother and father, it could be that they wanted to assert their own power to be themselves, apart from their parents and teachers.<sup>6</sup> From a formal perspective, if students wrote clichés against the inclinations of their present teacher's model of good writing, they might attest to definitions of good writing that preceded those they were learning in college. If these final paragraphs resisted the powerful voices of their teacher and the writers in their textbooks, in other words, the same paragraphs expressed solidarity with fellow students in the class, fellow writers who have felt the judging eyes of professional readers on their work, and even other teachers who have taught them ways of thinking that conflicted with the readings in their college textbooks.<sup>7</sup>

One student, Andrea, discussed Walker's and Kincaid's depictions of relationships between race, gender, and identity, reaching the conclusion that "everyone has a different way in finding out who they are, but at the end we all have a way of realizing it, and hopefully are content with the results." Initially, I dismissed Andrea's conclusion as a retreat into the false certainty of one who has stopped asking questions of herself and the text. I attributed this retreat to the fact that Andrea had reached the bottom of page 4 of her essay and, having met the requirements for the assignment, could stop writing about conflicts between women's desires and the standards for self-realization in a patriarchal culture. In the margin, I asked her how Kincaid and Walker expressed their contentment and where, if ever, they expressed discontent. My other comments directed her to moments when she was questioning relationships between

identity and cultural codes, when, earlier in her essay, for example, she noted that Kincaid's speaker in "Girl" could not separate her mother's voice from her own. I encouraged her to spend more time investigating what she said there about women confronting difficulties in becoming somebody other than the type of person the cultural stereotypes prescribe, as when she discussed how mothers speak those cultural codes when they demand polite behavior and sweet talk from their daughters.

Turning my attention away from what I saw as a clichéd and therefore "safe" conclusion, I could not see that Andrea gestures in two equally important directions in her final lines, that her conclusion actually enters a contact zone even as it rests in a safe house. On the one hand, she contests the formulation of identity as totally determined by culture by insisting on individuality: "Everybody has a different way of realizing who they are." With this statement she carves out a space for each woman to realize, differently, her place in the world. On the other hand, she expresses solidarity with other women, the "they" of "everybody has their own," speaking to the experiences of multiple women who have struggled to find a place in a sexist world. Perhaps Andrea did not contradict herself when she celebrated individual freedom at the same time that she discussed restrictions on it, but, instead, worked out an "I" who is also part of a "we": as Adrienne Rich says, "We who are many and do not want to be the same" (225).

If Andrea wrote clichés despite my own resistance to them, it is not because she did not understand the questions I encouraged her to ask but because of the complexities inherent in the fact that, by the time she reached the age of eighteen, she already contained and confronted a multitude of contact zones and safe houses that needed to be negotiated in any assertion of self. If one zone is that between teacher and student, another is certainly between

**Simultaneously testifying to her experience of the world (and that of her peers) while contesting her parent's or teacher's potential to devalue these experiences, a student such as Andrea performs a kind of critique of the culture of the classroom in her use of a cliché.**

mother and daughter. A young woman who writes that "hopefully are content with the results" might very well address her mother, who she hopes will be content with a daughter who chooses not to conform to certain gender stereotypes, or even her teacher, who she hopes will be content with the results of several drafts in this final

essay. If so, Andrea uses a cultural commonplace to say something about women her age, about how her identity might exist separately from her mother's, from that of the daughter in the Kincaid essay, and from her teacher's. The commonplace expression can alert us to the ways in which mothers exer-

cise the power of cultural stereotypes when they raise daughters and the ways that teachers can stereotype students (or their clichés) when they respond to papers. It can also reach out to women Andrea's age, who, like Andrea, yearn for places to claim as their own.

Simultaneously testifying to her experience of the world (and that of her peers) while contesting her parent's or teacher's potential to devalue these experiences, a student such as Andrea performs a kind of critique of the culture of the classroom in her use of a cliché. In that contact zone, a teacher's voice can be heard much more loudly than that of a student. Mae Henderson, a critic of black women's texts, explains how relationships between speakers and listeners can produce resistance and solidarity simultaneously. She describes the rhetorical situations of black women who struggle to speak in a world that has historically oppressed them in terms of both gender and race. They witness solidarity with those who have been similarly oppressed, even as they must contest a historical legacy of abuse. Black women writers contest a history of gender oppression when they speak to black men, for example, even as they testify to a shared history of racial oppression. When speaking to white women, they articulate solidarity in terms of patriarchal domination of women and resist a history of racial oppression. Henderson notes: "Through their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses—discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns" (24).

Henderson does not write about a multicultural classroom, but her theory enabled me to hear even more of a range of possible meanings in the texts of my students who typically describe the American educational system as a system without their interests in mind. Students address competing external and internal audiences in the struggle to articulate what it means to have an identity in contemporary America. The student who asserts the possibility of an independently determined self, for example, but then argues that no individual can completely abandon his/her family in forming an identity, expresses solidarity with his family even as he resists ideas that families influence children's identities. Or the student who insists on the inherent value of context even as he contends that every viewer perceives the world in his/her own unique way testifies to a world based on fact even as he resists the limitations of such a world. And although Henderson's theory might explain it in far more sophisticated language than any of the students I have quoted thus far, I have

**Students address competing external and internal audiences in the struggle to articulate what it means to have an identity in contemporary America.**

no doubt that student writers attest to the reality of a world in which they are both silent witnesses to powerful others as well as powerful theorists and spokespeople in their own right.

Simultaneously witnessing and resisting, giving testimony and taking exception to the way people say things are, Andrea's classmates also challenged theories of identity that had become familiar to me. Jabari responded to the third assignment with a call to arms:

From these passages one can conclude that the reason people allow the dominant culture to shape their identity is because whites have better chances in society. While environment, personal, and dominant cultures are three factors that can contribute to identity-formation, one should value the specific culture of their family, and prevent the dominant culture from forming their identity.

Jabari's presentation of the power of the family to resist the dominant culture echoed the plea for family values in any number of campaign slogans in recent years. In the margin, I asked him to consider how Walker and Kincaid represent parent-child relationships, to compare that to the mother's perception of her daughter in the Kincaid essay, and to consider his own experiences as a son of "very strict parents." Although my comments did not overtly say so, I suspected that Jabari needed to consider the ways in which he had become the property of conservative ideology when he wrote that cliché. I wanted him to question his blithe assertions of the importance of family as mimicry of a party line. But as I thought more about it as Henderson might, I wondered if he attempted to contest the dominant culture and to testify to his solidarity with the culture of his family in these lines. Read this way, a family is a site of resistance, even if its call for family values is a conservative trope. Perhaps Jabari wanted his audience to value the specific cultures of their families and to resist the dominant culture's emphasis on particular kinds of families on television, for example, and the racism that those representations evoke.

Jabari's final paragraph raises interesting questions about how a student locates himself in discourse. He acknowledges that neither the relationship of one person to culture nor the relationship of one student to academic discourse is an inside/outside situation. Instead he suggests that one simultaneously joins and resists multiple communities in an effort to establish identity. His reference to dominant cultures, for example, resists implications that family values are the same, regardless of one's race or ethnicity. Resisting the dominant culture while acknowledging its power, witnessing his participation in it while retreating into another identification (with his family), he reminds us that he is

not just a student negotiating a space for himself in academic discourse. He is a person with a history, he is an active social agent in a field of competing claims on him as an individual and a member of a culture.

Brian Street's research on literacy acquisition suggests that "people frequently maintain a number of different literacies side by side, using them for different purposes" (44). His analysis explains the persistence of one of the clichés I have always found most confusing in a course that asks students to think about central myths of American identity: the assertion that the American Dream continues to be attainable for anyone who tries hard enough. This cliché appears at the end of essays in which students write about the power of social forces to hold people back from realizing their dreams or to prevent those dreams from being conceived of in the first place. Leo, a third student in Andrea and Jabari's class, warned that "when you are starting to question who you think you are, take a step back and see the whole picture. Realize that the key to your happiness is your identity. Discover your own American Dream." I believed that his final lines evaded a complicated issue, that he did not have a voice of his own but instead was echoing one of the primary myths of American culture, the myth of the possibility of individual success despite the limitations of material circumstances.

My comments on Leo's essay, like my comments on many of his classmates' essays, advised a return to the text for further complication and clarification. I asked him to return to Walker's text and question the extent to which Walker's speaker was able to do whatever she wanted and then to Kincaid's essay and think about the limitations the mother places on the girl's possibilities for worldly success. I asked him to reconsider his final lines from this perspective. Since then, I have considered other possible readings of Leo's final lines. For example, it is conceivable that Leo's suggestion that we "take a step back" testifies to the positions of immigrants, like himself, who have formed ideas of the American Dream from afar. Perhaps his statement contests the formulation of individual opportunity even as it appears to mimic it; it locates him in a safe house of communal experience even as it enters him into a contact zone of those who do not have equal access to this experience. If we equate Leo's assertion of the American Dream with those of his classmates, who often say the same thing, we foreclose his negotiation between his position in the world and that of others. I believe it is more likely that he would step back towards the complications that he introduces in the possibilities for individual achievement in this culture if he investigated his connection to others who are "one step back" from the American Dream. This question allows him to return to the safe

house of communal experience to gather material for entry into a contact zone. Later he might analyze the American culture's discourses of opportunity and success, but first he needs to find spaces in which to explore the common assumptions of communities from which he does not feel excluded.

I am suggesting that we imagine multiple audiences for students' seemingly simplistic formulations because I want to draw your attention to what I

**I am suggesting that we imagine multiple audiences for students' seemingly simplistic formulations because I want to draw your attention to what I was prepared to hear and compelled to ignore in student writing.**

was prepared to hear and compelled to ignore in student writing. In an article about Latin American testimonial, Doris Sommer offers some insight into what my students may have been working at in their essays when she questions the ways that testimonial has been equated with autobiography.

She argues that the "I" of a testimonial is very different from an autobiographical "I." Instead of referring only to herself when she uses the first person pronoun, the woman who writes a testimonial refers to a collective self:

It would be a mistake uncritically to attribute intimacy and individuation with the first person singular pronoun in testimonials. . . . When the narrator talks about herself to you, she implies both the existing relationship to other representative selves in the community and potential relationships that extend her community through the text. (118)

Sommer's definition of an "I who is also a We," like Rich's "We who are many but do not want to be the same," can apply in reverse to the clichés I cited previously. Sometimes, I think, a student uses a cliché to refer to a "we" who can also be an "I." In other words, I am not convinced that a student who says "everybody has their own ideas," for example, has entirely absented herself, hiding her voice, as Linda Peterson has found, "within the clichés . . . of a subculture" (180). Instead, I suspect that the cliché can signal testimony to a different kind of power for a student: testimony to her participation in the multiple communities against and within which she defines herself.

Ironically, the simultaneity of an "I" who is also a "we" resounds in the error in the pronoun agreement in the cliché "everybody has their own ideas," or "everyone is beautiful in their own way." How many times have you changed these phrases to say everyone has his or her own ideas, or everyone is beautiful in his or her own way?<sup>8</sup> Although it is not standard English, "everybody has their own ideas" suggests that the individual and the community are continuous. When we correct the phrase to say that everyone has his or her own ideas

(our own cliché?), we assert the autonomy of the individual subject that contemporary pedagogical theories work hard to resist. Perhaps this error in pronoun agreement reminds us that our students speak a language that bears important similarity to Latin American testimonial, what Sommer calls "a colonized language that does not equate identity with individuality," while our own language can, despite our best intentions, bear a striking resemblance to a colonizing force (111).

I want to make it clear that I do not think we should celebrate errors in pronoun agreement and clichés as if they were our students' most brilliant utterances. But I would like us to consider that the places in our students' essays that most annoy us because they seem so uncritical are also places where individual students (much like their teachers, as I will argue in the next section) are working hard to make sense of a world in which they are always both insiders and outsiders, both individuals and members of conflicting communities. As Kurt Spellmeyer says, "the speaking 'I' does not exist, then, as a fully defined set of roles. . . . Instead, the writer must actively create a role in the breaks and spaces afforded by the game at any particular time" (71).



*The subject judged knows a part of the world of reality  
which the judging spectator fails to see, knows more  
while the spectator knows less. . . . (6)*

—William James

As William James reminds us, our capacity to see depends largely on position. When we take the position of a judge, as when, for example, we grade our students' essays, we can see only what is possible from that position.<sup>9</sup> As authors of work to be judged, our students necessarily (and often very quietly) see things we cannot. Many writers in our field discuss how we should encourage students to reflect upon their cultural positions and to reposition themselves in relation to what they read and write. These writers describe classrooms as places of conflict and struggle and routinely examine the competing voices students encounter when reading and discussing texts. Although increasing attention has been focused on teachers' negotiations of the conflicts in their classrooms, with few exceptions (most notably Richard Miller), these articles do not refer to student texts and teachers' specific comments on those texts as voices from "the contact zone." Produced in institutions that demand numerous sacrifices and

risks of the self from the moment one enters college and in a culture that pulls on professionals no less than students, teachers' comments and students' papers can come to assume comfortable forms. We produce these forms—the commonplaces of our own particular classrooms—no matter how vigilantly we attempt to pose meaningful questions, encourage multiple responses, and listen very carefully to what students are saying.

Richard E. Miller suggests that teachers might be predisposed to misread student writing because institutions do not train us to think about our own po-

**Produced in institutions that demand numerous sacrifices and risks of the self from the moment one enters college and in a culture that pulls on professionals no less than students, teachers' comments and students' papers can come to assume comfortable forms.**

sitions as teachers, and so student essays become sites “where error exercises its full reign or . . . where some untutored evil shows its face” (395). Teachers respond this way, argues Miller, because they consider students as makers of error who need to be corrected, or as believers in immoral or improper ideology. Unlike the teachers

Miller describes, I learned (first as a graduate student and then as an administrator in the writing program at Rutgers University) to respect students as equal, although less experienced, colleagues in the critical conversations of the university. The graduate course in teaching composition and the program directors encouraged me to think of “error” as a breach of etiquette, or as a way of speaking that differed from my own. Likewise, I learned to identify the places in student papers where they began to make sense of the relationships between their lived experiences and the textual worlds they encountered in their writing class, or where they used the language and concepts from one text to understand another. Nonetheless, as this essay attests, I still found things to despise in student writing. Mary Louise Pratt explains why this may happen despite the most careful and intellectually sound training:

When linguistic (or literate) interaction is described in terms of orderliness, games, moves, or scripts, usually only legitimate moves are actually named as part of the system, where legitimacy is defined from the point of view of the person in authority—regardless of what other parties might see themselves as doing. (592)

The student essays I read were legitimate when they corresponded to what I knew about good writing: that it makes connections between texts, and between text and world; that it raises questions and problems and complicates the received ideas that come to us through the media and elsewhere. When

those essays did not do these things, my students needed, I thought, to be gently nudged into critical thought.

I remember my relief at seeing the classroom described as a place I recognized when I read Min-Zhan Lu's description of trying "to help students recover the latent conflict and struggle in their lives which the dominant conservative ideology of the 1990s seeks to contain" (910). My relief revealed my entrenchment in another ideology, an institutional ideology that had become so natural to me that I perceived it as "common sense." Rereading Lu's statement and my students' clichés through Pratt's eyes makes me aware that I produce my own clichéd responses to students' essays about identity: either a student mimics the ideology of the

**Rereading Lu's statement and my students' clichés through Pratt's eyes makes me aware that I produce my own clichéd responses to students' essays about identity: either a student mimics the ideology of the dominant culture or she questions it.**

dominant culture or she questions it. When she questions it, she is thinking critically. When she mimics it, she is a puppet of her culture. Because my way of reading has become so natural to me, many of my students, as Miller predicts, become emblems rather than individuals, purveyors of a conservative ideology that I find simplistic and reductive.

Although I know very well that my students' experiences of the world are not mine and my theories of identity construction do not now and cannot ever account for or readily explain their experiences, I nonetheless suggest that they can when I comment in the same basic direction on every cliché I read.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Coles and Susan Wall's astute analysis of the essays of working class writers suggests that students may have compelling reasons for holding onto clichés such as the American Dream or the myth of individual opportunity: These students need to believe that education will help them to become successful in a world of dwindling economic opportunity. Thomas Newkirk similarly discusses cultural commonplaces in personal writing as tools of personal agency in the culture at large—tools that students have used successfully throughout their lives. Although these writers do not discuss teachers' own clichés, their articulations of students' purposes in writing clichés might apply to our own habits of responding to student writing. Newkirk argues that "a student who writes a cliché is expressing a belief in a code of conduct that has paid off handsomely" (46). Like these students, we instructors learn codes of conduct in our graduate training and in every interaction we have with those who judge our work. Our fluency in these codes can "pay off handsomely," as our degrees, publications, and awards attest. But just as students' clichés gesture in at

least two directions, I wonder if our preference for multiple meanings and critical thought over cliché reflects our resistance to authority figures who have urged us towards the same clichés that our students have benefited from. How

**Critical thought is a kind of safe house for us in the same way that cliché can be for our students.**

many of us, for example, have felt belittled by gendered codes of behavior? How often do we speak of having been bound by silence to painful “family values”? If so, critical thought is a kind of safe house for us in the same way that cliché can be for our students.

Lester Faigley argues that “students will be judged by the teacher’s unstated cultural definitions of the self” (410). He is responding to “expressivist and rationalist traditions of teaching writing that deny the role of language in constructing selves” and recommending a pedagogy that analyzes cultural definitions of the self rather than promoting individualism (410). It is interesting to me that now that many of us devote most of our classroom time to discussing exactly what Faigley recommends—the “role of language in constructing selves”—our students are no less “judged by [our] unstated cultural definitions of the self.” In this case, the culture is the institutional culture in which we have learned and taught for most of our adult lives, and the self that many of us define for students in our comments is a poststructuralist self (much like the selves I imagine for them in my above analyses of their writing). I do not celebrate “authentic voices” in student essays, as do the teachers Faigley critiques. I frown on binary thinking, embrace oppositions, and celebrate multiple selves and voices. I am much more likely to praise a paper that describes or, preferably, deconstructs oppositions, a paper in which meanings are multiple and proliferating rather than simplistic, a paper in which a student asserts conflicted, constructed, or multiple identities rather than unified ones. And yet I am no less guilty of what Faigley identifies—judging my students by my relatively unstated definitions of the self.

If my revisions of my previous interpretations of students clichés have taught me any specific lessons about teaching writing, these lessons relate most to my understanding of what it is I have to teach my students. What are the unstated “rules” of my pedagogy, and how do they influence my ability to recognize what my students are trying to say? Put another way, my revisions have brought me to new understandings of what my training prepares me to hear and compels me to ignore in my students’ writing. My strong preference for Pratt’s theory of the contact zone, for example, cautions me to question what kinds of writing it values over others and why. What do these strengths

and limitations imply about the utility of the theory? Did contact zones hold more interpretive power before they appeared in nearly every third article I read? In my responses to a recent batch of student papers, for example, I forced myself to pay more attention to the moments when, it seemed to me, the students entered neither contact zones nor safe houses in their papers. What I found were more possibilities for revision and also more questions—I found myself on very shaky ground, and yet I wonder if this isn't where my students find themselves much of the time as readers and writers.

If my graduate training had been different, I believe that I would now plead with you to try a new way of responding to student writing, one in which we simply ask our students what they are thinking about as they write the phrases that most offend us. Invoking the students' experiences as an alternative to the teacher's theories, I would perform a common interpretive move in our field. "We could know so much more about them if we asked and listened carefully," I might tell you. Although I think that heeding this advice will certainly result in useful data for future responses, I also believe that there are

**What are the unstated "rules" of my pedagogy, and how do they influence my ability to recognize what my students are trying to say?**

two major problems with doing *only* this. First the practical: who of us has the time to consult our students about every word they write in a paper, given our teaching loads, the late hours in which we often read our students' essays, and the reality that each stack presents not one but many moments of frustration for us? Second, and more important, I believe, is that this gap between our students and ourselves, like the gap between every writer and reader, can never fully be bridged. This is the nature of human communication—the fact that language writes us as much as we write it. What can always (with every paper we read) be addressed, however, is the reactions our students' writing elicit in us, and what those reactions reveal about our most fervent beliefs as to what is possible and desirable for them to say. Having discovered this, we might decide if this knowledge is adequate or if there is some opening for a revision of our own interpretive processes.

Human social interactions, which include those between students and teachers, are never either conflict-ridden or entirely safe and nurturing. Instead, they are always both. If our students testify to their solidarity with others even as they struggle to position themselves against what seems unfamiliar or frightening, then our comments must address these contradictions without foreclosing the possibility of transformation. Unni Wikan, an anthropologist

who records her study of the Balinese in *Managing Turbulent Hearts*, gives us a richer perspective on this issue when she states that "everyone's sitting room is feared by someone":

this space which is protected and private to me is another's threatening and exacting "public": the guest fearing for her life is vulnerable and must exercise as much caution as anybody "on display" in public. . . . [the] sitting room has multiple connotations: of safety and danger, protected space and exposed arena, intimacy and warmth but *also* of caution and restraint. Which ones will be foremost depends on situational and biographical factors. (55)

One of our goals as we respond to student essays is to pay very close attention to what students have written, keeping in mind that we cannot (and perhaps should not) know everything about students' "situational and biographical factors" when we read their work. But we can attempt to know ourselves (and our interpretive frames) better in order to help them imagine the shapes their essays might take in the revision process. Our own situations and histories can tell us a lot about how we respond and why we say the things we do on student papers, and they can help us understand the reasons for what we perceive as our students' limited vision as well.

Our challenge is to learn to recognize our own clichés, the marginal comments, and the habits of thought embedded in them that have become so familiar to us that we think of them as common sense. We need to look no further

**Our own situations and histories can tell us a lot about how we respond and why we say the things we do on student papers, and they can help us understand the reasons for what we perceive as our students' limited vision as well.**

than the places that most offend, frustrate, or annoy us in student writing to find clues for how to read our own ideology as it presents itself in response to our students' work. Any interpretation of what they say reflects a delicate negotiation between what our training

and experiences have prepared us to hear in student writing and what a student is actually trying to, about to, or in the process of learning to say. If we imagine that the textual relationship between the student writer and his/her teacher proceeds in the same way as a human conversation, the teacher who acknowledges the beliefs she brings to the conversation is equipped to listen to her students more carefully than the teacher who holds her beliefs so closely that she can no longer see them as beliefs. And the best indicators of these beliefs, if we can bear to examine them, exist in our responses to students' most irksome utterances.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Ellen Cushman, Christy Jespersen, T. R. Johnson, Linda Adler Kassner, Lisa Marcus, Richard E. Miller, Susan Murray, Matthew Parfitt, Nancy Sommers, Kurt Spellmeyer, Paul Thur, Kerry Walk, and Susan Welsh for generous readings of this article.

## Notes

1. Bartholomae uses the term "commonplace" for these overused expressions or ideas.
2. Walter Ong argues that cliché is characteristic of oralist culture—that those who do not have the basic technology of writing available to store and secure their knowledge necessarily communicate in terms of simple platitudes, stock phrases and epithets, little rhymes, proverbs, and commonplaces. According to Ong, no matter how literate we become, much of our consciousness is still imbued with at least a residual oralism.
3. Joseph Williams argues that the sudden fierce blast of anger that characterizes so many of our responses to student writing suggests that we see ourselves as civilization's gatekeepers, and thus error makes us want to sound the alarm and exile the perpetrator. When errors are committed by people we consider to be "insiders," we usually don't even see them.
4. Kurt Spellmeyer's *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition* argues for a hermeneutic understanding of knowledge acquisition. Students acquire knowledge in a dialogical process, moving from what they know to what is unfamiliar and then back to a new version of their previous knowledge.
5. Laura Gray Rosendale offers a compelling argument about how the popularity of the contact zone model of teaching writing produces its own limitations of vision for contemporary writing instructors.
6. Coles and Wall's astute analysis of the essays of working class writers suggests that students may have very complicated and compelling reasons for holding onto clichés such as the American Dream or the myth of individual opportunity; these students need to believe that education will help them to become successful in a world of dwindling economic opportunity.
7. I thank Nancy Welch for drawing my attention to the relationships between what students are often taught about the academic essay prior to college and the clichés in their concluding paragraphs.
8. In correspondence, Richard E. Miller points out that his students do not say "everybody has their own ideas," but instead, "everybody has a right to their own ideas." Although they do not mean the same thing, each of these phrases expresses

a student's desire to preserve something of him/herself in the process of writing a college essay.

9. We might say that multiple drafts, portfolio reviews, and ungraded writings do not fall into this category. I would contend, however, that my point holds in any class in which students receive a final grade for the course.

10. In addition to my training in graduate school, my experiences of theories of identity can be traced to my history as a child of Irish and Ukrainian/Polish working class parents, as a woman born in the 1960s who went to Catholic schools through college, and as a woman who has learned which parts of herself to conceal, and which to accentuate, if she hopes to succeed in late twentieth-century American academic culture. I learned in my home, for example, to pursue conflict as often as possible, and with gusto, while in school it became clear that remaining neutral would make it easier to fit in with my peers.

### Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "La Conciencia de la Mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness." *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, 3rd ed. Ed. Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle. Boston: Bedford, 1995. 434-43.
- Bartholomae, David. "A Reply To Stephen North." *PRE/TEXT* 11.1-2 (1990): 122-30.
- . "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guildford, 1985. 134-65.
- Coles, Nicholas, and Susan V. Wall. "Conflict and Power in the Reader-Responses of Adult Basic Writers." *College English* 49 (1987): 298-314.
- Colombo, Gary, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, eds. *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*. Boston: Bedford, 1995.
- Faigley, Lester. "Judging Writing, Judging Selves." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 395-412.
- Harris, Joseph. "After Dartmouth: Growth and Conflict in English." *College English* 53 (1991): 631-46.
- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Ed. Cheryl Wall. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989. 16-37.
- James, William. "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings: What Makes a Life Significant." *On Some of Life's Ideals*. New York: Holt, 1973. 5-10.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. "Girl." *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, 3rd ed. Ed. Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle. Boston: Bedford, 1995. 241-43.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" *College English* 54 (1992): 887-913.
- Miller, Richard E. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." *College English* 56 (1994): 389-408.
- Newkirk, Thomas. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1997.
- Ong, Walter J. "Literacy and Orality in Our Times." *ADE Bulletin* 58 (1978): 1-7.

- Peterson, Linda. "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay: Research Perspectives, Pedagogical Practices." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (1981): 171-83.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 5th ed. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: St. Martin's, 1999. 581-600.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. 210-31.
- Rodriguez, Richard. "The Achievement of Desire." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 5th ed. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: St. Martin's, 1999. 621-42.
- Rosendale, Laura Gray. "Cracks in the Contact Zone." *Questioning Authority: Stories Told in School*. Ed. Linda Adler Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, Forthcoming.
- Sommer, Doris. "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's Testimonios and the Plural Self." *Writing Women's Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Narratives by Twentieth Century Women Writers*. Ed. Susan Cahill. New York: Harper, 1994. 107-30.
- Spellmeyer, Kurt. *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.
- Street, Brian. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education*. London: Longman, 1995.
- Walker, Alice. "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self." *Fields of Writing: Readings Across the Disciplines*, 4th ed. Ed. Nancy Comley et al. New York: St Martin's, 1994. 46-53.
- Wikan, Unni. *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.
- Williams, Joseph M. "The Phenomenology of Error." *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981): 152-68.

### Dawn Skorczewski

Dawn Skorczewski is Director of Freshman Writing at Emerson College (Dawn\_Skorczewski@Emerson.edu). She is the author of "What Prison Is This?: Literary Critics Cover Incest in Anne Sexton's 'Briar Rose,'" and the forthcoming "How to Tell a True Story about First Year College Writing Programs?" (in *Questioning Authority*, ed. Linda Adler Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington). With Matthew Parfitt, she is co-editing *Learning as We Teach: Writing Instructors Discuss Difficult Situations in the Composition Classroom*. She's also working on a book manuscript entitled *Teaching Writing a Moment at a Time*.