The Lessons of LINKs

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Introduction: Linking Up

A form of writing course, generally called a LINK, may be found in colleges and universities throughout the country. At different institutions it may serve different purposes or different student clientele. At San Diego State University, a LINKS arrangement, featuring the integration of a General Education course, a writing course, and a study section, has been for some time an integral part of their Academic Skills Program. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a LINKS arrangement is reserved for Honors students. Whatever their differing purposes, however, a LINK may be best defined as an institutional arrangement requiring all students enrolled in a particular writing course to co-enroll in a content or discipline specific course, one usually satisfying a General Education requirement or a lower division requirement preparatory for a major.

We, in our Writing Program at the University of California at Santa Barbara, approach the end of our first year with a LINKS arrangement. For us this meant linking two writing courses required of Freshmen (English 1 and 2) to General Education courses in such disciplines as Political Science, Sociology, History, and Black Studies. Further, instructors were required to attend all lectures and do all readings assigned in the General Education class with which their writing course was linked. We also required, in conformity with traditional standards for our freestanding four unit Freshman writing course, that instructors assign substantial readings and writings for the writing course, designed, in the case of a LINK, to resonate with and elaborate upon the materials of the General Education course.

Administrative support for the very idea of a LINKS arrangement was strong; we were allowed, during the worst budget crunch in UC history, to carry several under-enrolled sections in our first quarter for the sake of the experiment. Administrative support has continued strong throughout the year and culminated in having LINKS announced and clearly designated in the Schedule of Classes for the Fall of next year. This support for the very conception of a LINK arises, I believe, from a perception shared by administration and faculty that the quality of undergraduate education—whatever the reasons—has sunk to a nearly abysmal level. The mood at meetings, held to assess the situation and boost morale for faculty who regularly teach large lecture General Education courses, ranges, according to one reliable source, from desperation to suicidal despair. Another faculty member told me he would no longer teach an introductory General Education course in Political Science because he could not in good conscience “dumb it down any further.” LINKs recommended themselves as one way of acknowledging and beginning minimally to address this problem.

After a year of experiment, support for the LINKs from instructors—six seasoned teachers of writing—remains very strong. All felt, with varying degrees of intensity, that running a LINK had proved an eye-opener. The Director of our Program of Intensive English, designed to address the needs of under-represented students, is “sold” on LINKs; if she could manage it administratively, all PIE writing sections would be LINKs. All responses, however, were not as unequivocally affirmative. Debate still continues on issues of how much or little reading and writing to require in the writing course given the not inconsiderable demands of the General Education course. This issue is tied to the question of how best to preserve the autonomy of the writing course, which is, after all, a four unit course in its own right. Moreover, we continue to worry that LINKs might add further to the perception that writing courses are service courses and that writing instructors lack any particular or definable academic expertise.

Some of these questions, such as how much writing or reading exactly to assign in a LINK, may prove incapable of formal policy resolution. General Education courses vary considerably in their requirements, and these variations will have considerable impact on shaping the writing and reading assignments for a particular LINK. One of our LINKs was connected to a course in Sociology, which required no examinations but did require five papers. “It’s almost as if,” the LINK instructor reported, “the guy is running a LINK himself.” Other courses may require only essay midterms and finals, in which case the LINK instructor may feel far more free to assign substantial writings designed to supplement the materials of the GE. The resolution of these more technical questions, I believe, ought to be left to the discretion and judgment of the individual LINK instructor.

But this “solution” does not begin to address the related and more substantive issue of the effect of a LINKs program on the writing instructor’s perception of him- or herself as a professional and academic working in a distinct disciplinary area or of administrative or academic perceptions of a Writing Program or Department. Does instruction in a LINK require a significantly different conception of the place and purposes of writing than that governing a freestanding composition course? If so, does this difference require a significant reformulation of one’s role as writing instructor and of one’s conception of the writing process?

I believe the answer to both questions is “yes.” All my colleagues reported reactions running from surprise to shock at the learning condi-
ations encountered both in the General Education courses and in their related LINK. All went further to say that the experience with the LINKs would have significant effects on how they conceived and taught their freestanding English courses. The lessons learned differed from person to person. Some said they would spend more time on the issue of timed writings. Others indicated a change in attitude toward the place and importance of revision. Others felt that we all needed to pay more attention to how writing is judged in other disciplines. Almost all agreed that they would assign more complex readings in their freestanding courses and attempt to deal more directly with reading related issues.

In the following I will argue for the value of LINKs as significant alternatives to traditional freestanding writing courses on the basis of three broad pedagogical and educational concerns. First I will concentrate on the area that I call—for lack of a better term—cognitive remediation. Many entering students simply are not familiar with the sorts of preparatory tasks and activities required for success in the university setting. Second, many entering students seem unable to comprehend materials presented both through texts and lectures. Finally and, I believe, most importantly, many students are estranged or alienated from the university and the learning process. A writing course, with its small class format, linked to a general education course seems to me a pre-eminently practical place for beginning to address these issues.

Cognitive Remediation

Remediation, at some colleges and universities, appears a dirty word, especially in a time of strained resources and down-sizing. In fact, a significant portion even of those entering students who failed the UC system-wide entry level writing exam and are required, consequently, to take a course (in our case English 1) officially designated as remedial, do not require remediation, if one means by that the traditional bone-head English class. But the need for remediation of another kind, no less vital, still goes on and is covered at some institutions under the heading of Academic Skills.

Until I taught a LINK I do not think I fully appreciated the assertion of many students that they had done nothing in high school. Working with a LINK, I soon saw that a significant minority had only the faintest inkling of the sorts of preliminary tasks required for success at the university. Books were read apparently; but when I looked, I could find no underlining or marking in the margins. What this seemed to indicate was that many students did not understand they might, in preparation for midterm or final, have to reread their texts and that annotating them would prove a considerable labor saving device.

They did not seem to understand the importance of repetition or what was once called "rote" learning for the purposes of memorization. One student in his evaluation of one of my LINKs wrote, in effect, that he found my class at first rather boring because we would repeat or go over again the materials just discussed in lecture. But, at the midterm, he indicated he better understood why we had done so. He had done fairly well on his midterm, unlike a number of his colleagues who apparently had repeated the materials for the first time in the very act of writing their midterms.

The failure of students to engage in such simple tasks does not indicate any deficiency in their grey matter. Rather, as far as I am able to tell, may have not been asked or have not felt the necessity, in relation to the examinations they were given in high school, to begin to develop the kinds of academic skills required for success in college. One may, in a LINK, begin to address these issues by integrating into one’s syllabus as a requirement for the course such things as daily or weekly lecture summaries. Reading questions, too, may be devised and handed out on a regular basis as a way of encouraging students to stay reasonably abreast of the readings and to come to grips with more complicated conceptual or theoretical issues. If study questions for midterms and finals are distributed, outlines and sample first paragraphs for each question may be required. Mock midterms, designed to help students deal with time constraints, may be devised and administered. Any and all of the sorts of short or long informal writings which pass under the rubric of writing to learn may prove useful in helping students to habituate themselves to the sorts of tasks required for success in the university.

Standards for success in high school, at least in California, have apparently fallen. The average elementary school class has 30 or more students; the average high school class around 30. Students report being housed in buildings whose walls are covered with graffiti and whose roofs leak. The rather sensible 1984 Carnegie report, College, asks that colleges and universities begin to deal with the deficiencies of their entering students. As it is, however, perhaps because of the dirty smell of the word "remediation," institutions have responded not by helping students to acquire the necessary skills but by progressively dumbing down courses. No one’s best interests—neither those of the students nor the faculty asked to teach GE education courses—are served by this tactic.

In the social-darwinistic ethos of the Reagan era, the sink or swim ethic acquired an air of plausibility. If they didn’t have it, well, that was just too bad. The school of hard knocks, a failed test or class here or there, would, in any case, force students to bone up on their academic skills. Such an ethic may also encourage students, in their relative sense of helplessness, to bone up on their cheating skills. And for those who didn’t seek such short cuts, the school of hard knocks has a way of doing...
Comprehension

Teachers of freestanding composition courses, I believe, tend to select their readings toward the ends of writing. I know in my own case that, while I assign difficult readings, I also spend up to a week on a given essay, allowing students through a variety of writing assignments to tackle the essay from every-which-way. Perhaps because of such practices in the freestanding composition class, all of us were startled in our work with LINKs at students' difficulties with their readings. These difficulties extended also to lecture materials and to making connections between lecture materials and readings.

Perhaps the best way to begin to suggest the nature of this difficulty is to say that students frequently seemed to miss the significance of what they had read. In my first paper for a LINK, attached to a course on American Government, I asked my students to write on some aspect of the Constitution or its construction in order to illustrate the tensions embodied in that document or represented in its construction between the larger notions of liberty, equality, and social order. Only one student, in a discussion of the "Three-fifths" compromise, which allowed the Southern states to count slaves as part of their population based on the formula of five slaves equaling three persons, began to address the question as I had framed it. While the others could, for example, go into great detail about the actual process by which an Amendment to the Constitution is adopted, they did not seem able, in relation to the tension between liberty and social order, to comprehend why the founding fathers had seen fit to adopt such a process.

The students apparently could read and they could repeat with relative degrees of faithfulness what they had read, but they could not begin to indicate why the particular concatenation of facts they had decided to write about was worth writing about in the first place. This problem I call a problem in comprehension. Hegel makes a distinction between understanding and reason. The students, we might say, could understand the materials, but they seemed unable to reason about them. Reasoning, as Hegel defines it, seems to involve breaking up the aspects of understanding under the power of reason and reassembling these aspects through reason under the heading of some "higher" notion.

For example, in the course on American Government, the primary guiding notion for the first half of the course, presented in both text and lecture, was the concept of Federalism. Federalism functioned as the higher notion of the course, the means by which the various issues—specific course cases, the 14th Amendment, and civil rights—were broken down and reassembled. Roughly, Federalism did not refer so much to a concept as to a kind of tension between state rights and the claims of national government in relation most particularly to the issue of civil rights. The notion of Federalism served as the guiding principle of an historical narrative in which we could detect a movement from the beginning of our nation to the present in which states' rights had become progressively overshadowed by the claims of national government as seen especially in its attempts to guarantee personal and civil rights.

The midterm consisted of some single-paragraph identifications and the following question:

Since the U.S. constitution's ratification there have been numerous disagreements between the state governments and the national government. Write an essay in which you trace the major contours of these federal-state conflicts starting with McCulloch v. Maryland (1819). Be sure to discuss major events and Supreme Court cases (for example, those about civil rights) that have helped shape contemporary federal-state relationships.

Becoming overly embroiled in the repetition of "irrelevant" details, most students could not answer this question adequately. One, for example, spent nearly half his essay time going into gnarly and sometimes inaccurate detail about the historical events surrounding the case of McCulloch v. Maryland without managing finally to suggest the significance of that case for the issue of Federalism.

One student did receive a 98% for his response to the question: the first paragraph of his essay reads as follows:

National government is the Supreme Law of the land. This is clearly stated in Article 6 of the constitution. However, the states...
and the national government have been continually fighting over who has more power and what are state and national rights. In the first century of the United States, the National government was slowly proven supreme though court cases and a large civil war, however the notion of dual citizenship still remained. On the other hand, in the second century, the National government slowly did away with dual citizenship and started cooperative federalism which enabled the government to help provide civil liberties and civil rights for both the national government and the states.

This student had clearly grasped the concept of Federalism as the guiding notion of the course; he understood it as a tension or source of conflict and was able to label the diverse forms of this conflict—dual citizenship and cooperative federalism—and use them as an outline for a historical narrative (from first to second century).

The question remains why the bulk of students were not able to answer this relatively simple question. I believe many students on their midterms were doing what they had done in high school; they tried to repeat facts as a demonstration of their knowledge. Unfortunately, as one teaching assistant for the course accurately remarked, the course on American Government itself much resembled, on the level of its intellectual engagement, a very good high school civics course. We may see here once again the paradoxes in dumbing down to meet the level of the students. Introductory GE courses become themselves more and more fact or background courses intended to supply students with the sorts of basic information they will need before they can begin to approach the more intellectually demanding issues ostensibly afforded by the university.

The overall tone of the General Education course was largely positivistic or “fact” oriented. The guiding “notion” of Federalism was not presented as a “notion” by which one might attempt to make sense out of American Government. It was rather presented absolutely as the guiding framework or pattern of order both for the course and in the textbook. Or, to use Hegel’s vocabulary, the course, strictly speaking, was not presented as an act of reason but as an act of understanding. This pattern of ordering was not put into conflict or contestation with any other guiding or ordering notion. The notion was not itself rendered “problematic” and made fluid. Rather the concept of Federalism acted as the packaging of the information of the course without any attention being called to the importance of the packaging for the shaping of the information.

In such a situation, how is a student to begin to engage his or her reasoning faculties toward personal comprehension. The very act of reasoning would mean rendering fluid or problematic the materials of the course that had been presented positivistically as an act of understanding. Such a situation places students in the position of trying, not to reason through the material, but to figure out what the professor wants. They know the professor wants something, and they would be happy to repeat it back if they could understand it. But because the guiding notion of the course—what the professor “wants”—is not itself problematized or placed in true contestation with another guiding notion, students are unable to see the notion itself. Or if they do see it, they do so at a more or less unconscious level as a tension or conflict between their own relatively commonsensical ways of making sense of American government and the more abstruse way presented by the professor.

One of the most valuable functions a LINK may serve is to help students begin to express their own relatively unconscious hunches, misgivings, vague doubts, and political leanings in order to problematize the guiding notions of a course. One may take a small step in the direction by encouraging students to debate or ask questions about matters of fact or simple organizing principles. In one LINK, for example, we were confronted with the issue of what leads up to or may cause a Revolution. As our discussion went on, however, we became aware that it was extremely difficult to determine the reasons when we had difficulty determining when a revolution might be said to begin or end. How could we analyze the causes of such an event without being able to distinguish the parameters of the event?

The professor for the course said the Russian Revolution began with a march by women asking for bread; the text for the course, however, did not mention this event. Things were even more difficult with the Chinese Revolution; did it begin with the fall of the old Imperial Regime and the momentary rise to power of the government of Sun Yat-sen; was the time of troubles, which followed, and the prolonged contestation between the communists and the nationalist nothing but aftermath? Or did the Revolution end when the communists seized power in 1949?

We could not in our relative ignorance begin to resolve our questions concerning the Russian or Chinese Revolutions in any significant way. But such discussions did serve to “problematize” the information of the course and to suggest the extent to which certain facts—when for example a Revolution began or ended—were theory-dependent or were based, in other words, on the professor’s overall notion of Revolution. The professor had laid stress, we reasoned, on the bread strike because overall he seemed to wish to argue that the Russian Revolution was largely an urban Revolution. The text, however, had not mentioned this event because its author had laid great emphasis on the tradition in Russian history of rural and peasant unrest.
Such discussions may, I believe, begin to revise students' conception of the writing task and what is to be accomplished by it. An examination is not the opportunity to demonstrate one's knowledge of the "facts"—since what is or isn't a fact or which facts are important and which aren't is a matter of considerable dispute—but a way of demonstrating, most especially through the organization of one's writing, the significance of those facts in relation to the guiding principle of the course.

Most college professors really do mean it, and most college students, really don't believe it, when a professor says there are no right and wrong answers to the examination questions, only ones that are relatively complex or relatively simple. Professors mean what they say because throughout their educations they have come to grips with contesting theories concerning a given phenomenon. The very contestation between these theories produces the complexity, the central body of questions and realms of inquiry, that defines his or her particular discipline. Helping students understand the ways in which facts are theory dependent helps them understand that professors mean what they say, "There are no right or wrong answers," because there are no absolute facts by which the rightness or wrongness may be determined.

A fact, I like to say, is like a tune. Everyone may sing the same one, but each sings it a bit differently. Remember, I hint cryptically, borrowing from Shelley, when you write, you write on water. Nothing is fixed or fast. It is up to you to fix and fasten it. For some students this means turning topsy turvy their understanding of the purpose of writing. One can no longer lean, for example, on the pre-fab five paragraph essay as the transparent medium for the demonstration of one's knowledge of facts. Writing, for better or worse, is not a medium but an action requiring, especially at the undergraduate level, special attention to principles of organization and order as these arise from the discipline-specific materials under consideration.

To return for a moment to the student's response to the question on Federalism, we may see that the student had grasped the guiding notion of the course—its principle of organization—and this notion, along with its secondary principles, furnished the organization of his first paragraph. General principles for paragraph organization—either as moving from the general to the specific or the other way around—are beside the point in a LINK. The principles of organization for writing are supplied by the guiding notions and principles of the course; there is no separating the form from the content or the understanding of the content from the principles of organization.

Estrangement and Alienation

Some estimate that the attrition rate for college and university students ranges nation-wide around fifty percent. The students come, they start, but they do not finish. This is costly socially, politically, and economically. One reason, I believe, that students fail to complete their educations has to do, especially at teaching-assistant-driven research universities, with a sense of alienation or estrangement. Lacking adequate study skills, unable to master the intellectual tasks of the university, in part because the university provides no means by which to do so, entering students may feel completely out of control. As one student said of her first quarter at the university, "I was totally lost."

Unless this sense of estrangement is in some way acknowledged and dealt with, I am inclined to think that students will not find in themselves the energies necessary to form better study habits or to learn to deal with the more complex intellectual tasks demanded by the act of comprehension. LINKs recommend themselves as one way to begin addressing this problem, not because they may serve as a haven in a heartless world or a respite from the storm, but, on the contrary, because they are so much embedded in students' ongoing daily and practical difficulties with the associated General Education course.

Running a LINK, if doing so also requires attending lectures and doing assigned reading, is a sure-fire way of helping the instructor remember and feel what it is like to be a student. Sitting through what feel like interminable lectures punctuated by incessant hacking and coughing from the audience, especially at quarter's end, one finds oneself, with the students, taking covert glances at one's watch or attempting to stifle one's yawns, especially if one is sitting where the professor might see. With the students, one finds oneself, almost from the get-go, falling behind in the readings and wondering, as one does plow through the dull textbooks, what exactly they have to do with the lectures. One feels, with the students, the sudden panicky urge to "bone up" when study questions for the midterm or final are distributed, sometimes less than a week before the test is to be given. With the students, one struggles with the questions themselves, some of which seem poorly worded, or with material not yet covered either in the text or in lecture. One, mercifully, does not take the exam oneself, but one does wait with the students as the papers come back in drips and drabs from various teaching assistants over a two-week period. And with the students one struggles to understand, from the teaching assistants' sometimes one-sentence response, what was wrong with the student's response, what had the student failed to do.

In this light, a LINK may become a pre-eminently practical place in which to allow students to voice their confusions and complaints and to begin to find ways to deal with them. The role of the instructor, in such
a situation, is not to provide the students with answers; one is not, for example, an expert in political science. Until I attended lectures for a political science course, which dealt in part with theories of revolution, I had never in any academic way given serious consideration to the problems students faced. But, through LINK, I shared in the students’ confusion and voiced it when I saw the first study question for the final examination. It read:

According to the book *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements* [an assigned text] revolutions are caused by five critical factors. In class lectures, you are also told that a revolution is essentially a reconstruction of the political system which is graphically represented here:

![Funnel Diagram](image)

Can you explain the occurrence of the five critical factors in terms of the process of the political system?

First, the diagram, presenting roughly a social systems theory of revolution, had been mentioned only once briefly in lecture as one of several ways of understanding the functioning of social systems generally. Second, while it was easy enough to locate in the assigned text the five critical factors mentioned in the question (roughly: mass frustration, dissident elite movements, unifying motivations, severe state crisis, and permissive world context), this theory of revolution had been discussed only once in lecture and, while not exactly dismissed, certainly significantly criticized by the professor as too general and lacking in sufficient explanatory power. In fact, throughout his lectures, the professor had consistently analyzed the various revolutions using a theory developed by Neil Smelser, whose speculations could be represented through a “funnel” diagram, drawn repeatedly by the Professor on the overhead projector, which included six, not five, critical factors: conducive conditions, stresses/strains, alternative ideology, precipitant (trigger), mobilization, and collapse of social control.

I did not blame the students for feeling that they were being thrown off a curve. We had consistently, in our own discussions, utilized the funnel diagram as a way of understanding the factors contributing to revolution, and I had assigned a paper, using aspects of the funnel diagram, on the factors leading up the Russian Revolution. In subsequent classes, we found that we were not the only persons confused. At least three teaching assistants had offered significantly different interpretations of the question and the answer that was to be generated by it. And one of these interpretations, especially of the diagram, seemed to all of us flatly wrong.

I do not wish to belabor this example. I offer it merely as instance and illustration—and not an extreme one—of the sorts of practical problems, dilemmas and confusions faced by students in General Education courses and willy-nilly by the instructor of a LINK. The question confronting the LINK instructor and the student is simple enough: what is to be done? One may bitch, gripe, whine and complain until doomsday about the unfairness of the question and/or pray that it does not appear on the final (not likely, we concluded, since it was the central “theory” question in the list of study questions). Or one may say, well, this is it, and get down to the business of figuring out the question and how one might answer it.

This is one of the most valuable services that the small class format of a LINK may provide. It allows students to voice their questions, concerns, and complaints and, through that expression, to come to a group or collective sense that something is wrong or out of whack and to ask what, once they have acknowledged and confronted the problem, can be done about it. In a LINK, at least, students are not left alone in their rooms to wonder if their perception of something amiss is a sign of a personal failure, the result of having skipped a lecture on a particularly sunny day, or the consequence of some inadequacy in one’s grey matter. Given the group perception of something amiss, students are free to profess their ignorance. “I don’t get the diagram!” “What’s this feedback stuff?” “Where in the textbook are the five critical factors?” And with the sense of personal inadequacy out of the way, they may quickly, as a group, begin to gather the information necessary for answering the question and to formulate, on the basis of that information, the questions they will need to ask their teaching assistants.

The role of the instructor in such a situation is relatively simple. All he or she has to do is let students know that one of the functions of the LINK is to address practical issues, that asking whether an examination question makes sense or is “fair” is not ruled out of bounds, that conversations about what teaching assistant A or B thinks are not wasted time, that attempting to “psyche out” the professor, in the sense of attempting to understand his or her take on the material, is an essential part of what one must, as a student, do.
In this way, a LINK becomes a place of practical information gathering and testing. One student reported that one of the teaching assistants suffered from severe arthritis in her hands. "It must hurt her," someone said, "just to mark the papers." One student reported that in the Honor’s Section the professor said "question 2" would not appear on the midterm because some of the teaching assistants did not understand the concepts involved in it. "Do you think he means it?" another student asked skeptically. As I wandered the classroom monitoring the progress of small groups, students would give me handouts prepared by their teaching assistants to explain some problem or issue. "Here," they would say, "other people may want to see this." I would run off the handout and distribute them in the next class session.

Such mundane matters as teaching assistant A being a "good Joe" or teaching Assistant B suffering from arthritis in the hands may seemed far removed from the business of higher education. I would argue, however, that such information may prove vital in helping students overcome their sense of estrangement and alienation. If the information that teaching assistant A is a "good Joe" led even one student to pay him an office visit then something has been achieved. If even one student's sympathy for teaching assistant B's suffering hands causes him or her to listen to the teaching assistant, less as a figure of distant authority and more as a fellow human being, then something as been achieved.

Gossip—even if based on hearsay, rumor, innuendo or an obvious creation of wild fabulation—is to be welcomed in a LINK as a sign that the students are beginning to come to a sense of a shared social reality. And, in effect, through the sharing of gossip and information, students begin also to recapture some sense of control in the not infrequently estranging and isolating environs of a large research university. For the student who lacks adequate study skills and who is unprepared for the types of intellectual challenges found in the college or university, coming to some sense of control through a growing knowledge of the social and organizational reality of the university may prove just the thing that tips the scales. Supported by a collective or consensual perception of the problems confronted in a given General Education class, students may better come to see what problems, difficulties, and confusions, are inherent in the social situation and on this basis begin to achieve a more realistic and manageable sense of the problems and limitations that are their problems and limitations.

A shared perception of the problems inherent in the situation may, for some students, begin to suggest actions that may in minimal ways alter the situation both for themselves and other students. One student, having gotten back her midterm, appeared perturbed, not so much at the grade, a B+, as at the explanation for it. "He says," she said, "it's too organized." I had to laugh and admit that in all my years of teaching I had never heard a teacher mark down a student's paper for being too organized. "Did he say anything else?" I asked, "like 'sketchy' or 'not enough examples'?" "No," she said, "just 'too organized.'" "Well," I admitted, "I don't know what it means. Maybe you should ask him." "I intend to," she said. At the next class session, she did not seem too happy. "He couldn't explain himself at all," she said, "he just babbled on." "Well," I said, "sometimes people can't explain themselves. You didn't get angry did you?" "No," she said, "I listened." "Good." At quarter's end, she received an A+ for the course.

Conclusion: The Place of Writing

I have spent the most time discussing LINKs as places where students may begin to form what a colleague likes to call "learning communities" because I believe this is the most vital and educatively significant role that LINKs may serve. Such communities, by affording students collective support, may help them stay in school. I believe it arguable, though probably unprovable, that LINKs and its small-group format, by providing what another colleague calls a highly contextualized learning environment, may help some students decide more quickly on their majors, another significant step toward retention.

Such arguments for a LINK may appear a long way from the traditional argument for a writing class and writing instructors with a particular expertise in Composition Studies. This argument roughly runs as follows: entering students do not know how to write well; they should consequently be required to take courses staffed by experts in the teaching of writing. I do not deny in the least that there is and continues to be a growing area of study and research called "Composition." I have benefited immeasurably from my study in the area. But the study of writing and how it is done, I believe, is one thing, while the teaching of it is entirely another. I cannot shake out of my head Dewey's claim that reading and writing are not part of the curriculum; they are rather the very medium of the curriculum, the water in which the fish swim.

What I feel and continue to believe is that the value of writing, English, or composition classes arises not so much from their ostensible subject matter as from their institutional situation and arrangement. First, we should not ignore the fact that most writing classes are granted a full four units of graduation credit. Teaching-assistant-run sections for large lecture courses are attached, of course, to four unit classes; but these sections are usually held only once a week. Further, student attendance and participation in sections frequently account for no more than 10% of the student's overall grade for the course. Teaching assistants lack the leverage to require constant in- and out-of-class writings. In addition,
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Such mundane matters as teaching assistant A being a "good Joe" or teaching Assistant B suffering from arthritis in the hands may seemed far removed from the business of higher education. I would argue, however, that such information may prove vital in helping students overcome their sense of estrangement and alienation. If the information that teaching assistant A is a "good Joe" led even one student to pay him an office visit then something has been achieved. If even one student's sympathy for teaching assistant B's suffering hands causes him or her to listen to the teaching assistant, less as a figure of distant authority and more as a fellow human being, then something as been achieved.

Gossip—even if based on hearsay, rumor, innuendo or an obvious creation of wild fabulation—is to be welcomed in a LINK as a sign that the students are beginning to come to a sense of a shared social reality. And, in effect, through the sharing of gossip and information, students begin also to recapture some sense of control in the not infrequently estranging and isolating environs of a large research university. For the student who lacks adequate study skills and who is unprepared for the types of intellectual challenges found in the college or university, coming to some sense of control through a growing knowledge of the social and organizational reality of the university may prove just the thing that tips the scales. Supported by a collective or consensual perception of the problems confronted in a given General Education class, students may better come to see what problems, difficulties, and confusions, are inherent in the social situation and on this basis begin to achieve a more realistic and manageable sense of the problems and limitations that are their problems and limitations.

A shared perception of the problems inherent in the situation may, for some students, begin to suggest actions that may in minimal ways alter the situation both for themselves and other students. One student, having gotten back her midterm, appeared perturbed, not so much at the grade, a B+, as at the explanation for it. "He says," she said, "it's too organized." I had to laugh and admit that in all my years of teaching I had never heard a teacher mark down a student's paper for being too organized. "Did he say anything else," I asked, "like 'sketchy' or not enough examples?" "No," she said, "just, 'too organized.'" "Well," I admitted, "I don't know what it means. Maybe you should ask him." "I intend to," she said. At the next class session, she did not seem too happy. "He couldn't explain himself at all," she said, "he just babbled on." "Well," I said, "sometimes people can't explain themselves. You didn't get angry did you?" "No," she said, "I listened." "Good." At quarter's end, she received an A+ for the course.

Conclusion: The Place of Writing

I have spent the most time discussing LINKs as places where students may begin to form what a colleague likes to call "learning communities" because I believe this is the most vital and educatively significant role that LINKs may serve. Such communities, by affording students collective support, may help them stay in school. I believe it arguable, though probably unprovable, that LINKs and its small-group format, by providing what another colleague calls a highly contextualized learning environment, may help some students decide more quickly on their majors, another significant step toward retention.

Such arguments for a LINK may appear a long way from the traditional argument for a writing class and writing instructors with a particular expertise in Composition Studies. This argument roughly runs as follows: entering students do not know how to write well; they should consequently be required to take courses staffed by experts in the teaching of writing. I do not deny in the least that there is and continues to be a growing area of study and research called "Composition." I have benefited immeasurably from my study in the area. But the study of writing and how it is done, I believe, is one thing, while the teaching of it is entirely another. I cannot shake out of my head Dewey's claim that reading and writing are not part of the curriculum; they are rather the very medium of the curriculum, the water in which the fish swim.

What I feel and continue to believe is that the value of writing, English, or composition classes arises not so much from their ostensible subject matter as from their institutional situation and arrangement. First, we should not ignore the fact that most writing classes are granted a full four units of graduation credit. Teaching-assistant-run sections for large lecture courses are attached, of course, to four unit classes; but these sections are usually held only once a week. Further, student attendance and participation in sections frequently account for no more than 10% of the student's overall grade for the course. Teaching assistants lack the leverage to require constant in- and out-of-class writings. In addition,
teaching assistants who are, after all, pre-professors in training, tend to model their behavior in small sections upon the behavior of their professors in large lecture. They see it as their duty to offer technical or expert knowledge on matters of fact or on complex conceptual issues.

Given the four-unit status of their classes, teachers of writing courses have the leverage to require significant amounts of in-class and out-of-class writing, both formal and informal. The small-class format further allows writing teachers to employ pedagogies, such as small-group work designed to promote interaction between students. Second, writing classes are not discipline specific; one does not have an area of specialization or body of knowledge that must be covered. What one has instead is a series of strategies or activities designed to engage students in a particular learning process of, say, the “research process” or “critical thinking” or “academic writing” or “discourse conventions.”

A LINK does not differ in any significant institutional way from a tradition freestanding composition class. How it does differ is in the use it makes of that institutional situation. Employing the same forms of pedagogy that might be found in any composition class, it aims not at mastery of the research process or academic writing but, most fundamentally, at helping students better understand the social and organizational setting in which their acts of writing—their research papers and their examinations—will occur. Writing occurs all the time in a LINK as a means of information mastery and exchange and as a means of mastering the guiding principles of the GE course, which, in turn, will supply the organizational structures of in-class exams and out-of class research papers.

Teachers of writing, I believe, have long known that their first-year classes most especially serve multiple and valuable functions. Perhaps because the best way to establish one’s credibility in a research university is to become “expert” in a specific disciplinary area (i.e., rhetoric and/or composition studies), teachers of writing have not talked enough about the other functions that their classes may serve. A simple computer check will show that for most students at research institutions the only small class they will take in their Freshman year is the writing class. This small class may serve, in ways large lectures simply cannot, as a “threshold” course, a tiny toehold where students, in an atmosphere of discussion, of give and take, of question and answer, may begin to better understand and negotiate the realities of their social and organizational situation.

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Shaping, Sharpening, and Other Theories of Meaning-Making in First-Year College Writers

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A student walks into the writing center and asks for help with a paper for her composition class. She describes a resistance to revising that is familiar to many composition instructors. “Why does my teacher want me to revise this paper?” the student says. “She keeps saying she wants ‘significant revision,’ like, make a lot of changes, not just a few. But I think revising it is a waste of time. It’ll take the ‘flow’ out of my paper.” This student believes that any kind of changes she might make will result in over-shaping and will sap the strength of her point. The “magic” or “juice” in her writing comes once only, the inspiration linked to a specific time and place. Her trouble isn’t with how to make changes, but how to effect revision within the theoretical system of meaning-making that involves “flow” and the practical use of time.

I imagine how students arrive at the idea that a text is the result of an ephemeral or conjured state of mind and environment, making any later shaping of text a fruitless and dangerous enterprise. Some students are one-draft writers who draft and redraft their papers in their heads and find themselves often successful with the first draft. Other students have had papers revised for them or been forced to revise according to artificial rules, which changed their intent and their sense of control over their writing. Or they find that the more they revise at the sentence and paragraph levels, the less focused their papers become overall. All of these experiences can lead students to conclude that the less revising, the better; at some point, then, they develop a notion about the “magic” of the moment and the first draft.

In similar ways, all of my students seem to have partially articulated notions about writing and meaning that are caused by their previous experiences and that cause them to write in certain ways in my classroom. They also feel that they are given impossible assignments, because what I ask of them—to freewrite, to revise, to collaborate—doesn’t make sense or seem worthwhile according to their own personal theories of meaning and composition. Studies such as Nancy Sommers’ “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers” and Muriel Harris’ “Composing Behaviors of One- and Multi-Draft Writers” suggest that student writers operate with ideas about writing and meaning, as a result of past experience and present circumstances, which greatly affect how