

Texas State University-San Marcos

Thesis Proposal

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Student's Name: Mary McCulley

Student ID: 439311

Student's Signature: Mary McCulley

Date: 5/5/08

Major: English: Rhetoric and Composition

Style of manual to be used: MLA

Tentative Title: A Reflection of Values: Examining the Creation of Writing Prompts

I submit for approval the following description of my Thesis Project:

Please attach on a separate page(s): the problem; research questions; proposed strategies for data collection and analysis; and source(s) of data. Information should be given in sufficient detail to enable the committee to give your proposed thesis intelligent consideration.

If research involves **human subjects** (including surveys or use of secondary data) attach Texas State IRB exemption or if not exempt provide IRB reference number: _____

If research involves use of **vertebrate animals** provide Texas State IACUC approval code: _____

Committee member signatures (minimum of three; must be approved graduate faculty):

Names and Department

Rebecca Jackson

Committee Chair : Dr. Rebecca Jackson

Department of English

Dr. Deborah B. Morton, Department of English

Dr. Teya Rosenberg, Department of English

Signatures and Date

Rebecca Jackson 5/8/08

Date

Deb Morton 5/8/08

Date

Teya Rosenberg 5/5/08

Date

Graduate Advisor signature (if required by graduate program)

Date

[Signature] 5/8/08

Department Chair signature

Date

Dean of the Graduate College signature

Date

Thesis Proposal for M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition

Name: Mary McCulley

ID Number: 439311

Tentative Title: A Reflection on Values: Examining the Creation of Writing Prompts

Research on Values: In his book *What We Really Value*, Bob Broad argues that teachers need to look beyond their positivistic assumptions about good writing. Positivistic classrooms promote a generalized, superficial, a-contextual understanding of writing, an understanding that does not reflect the complex nature of language and writing in society. He criticizes rubrics, in particular, because they do not serve as adequate assessment guides for teachers who genuinely believe that writing is complex and creates meaning within specific contexts. Rubrics exist as an attempt to rank students according to fixed ultimate standards on writing assessment, but they lack integrity because they do not reflect the multiple and diverse values that teachers draw upon when assessing writing. Instead, he offers an alternative to rubrics in what he calls Dynamic Criteria Mapping, a method of assessment that seeks to answer the guiding question: "What do we really value in our students' writing?"

As I studied the examples of Dynamic Criteria Mapping in his book, I became more intrigued with the idea of reflecting on our diverse values as individual teachers. Many of the instructors involved in Broad's Dynamic Criteria Mapping learned that, despite similar rubrics, they often articulated and weighted values very differently. At the same time, I noticed that while Broad discusses the differences in the assessment of student portfolios, he does not discuss in any detail how the teachers' interpretations of the writing prompts used for the portfolio assignments bring diverse and differently weighted values to the classroom as well. He encourages teachers and researchers to continue to explore these areas that reveal what we value. As Broad says, "One prime opportunity for future research would be for a researcher to study a program's values as I did, but also to formulate interview questions asking participants what they meant when they invoked a particular criterion and why those criteria matter to them" (27).

As an English teacher who constructs her own prompts, I begin my articulation of what I value in the creation of paper prompts. Each prompt reveals specific purposes, audiences, styles, and formats that reflect the stated goals of my writing department, but I interpret those broader goals through my own lens of values. For example, since my graduate studies and interests have led me to be more aware of the value in discussing marginalized voices in the community; I may incorporate readings that invite students to value these voices as well. Sometimes, too, the values I have adopted from theory and from experience will clash. For example, while I may attempt a prompt that reflects a postmodern theory, founded on deconstructing authority, I could require a specific academic format that would conflate the postmodern theory with my personal experience in writing for academia and the values that I personally place on grades and pleasing professors. In a simpler example, I may assign a prompt because I enjoyed writing a similar paper when I was an undergraduate, and I value my personal experience as well as the happiness of my students. After generally reflecting on how my own value system influences my creation of prompts, I believe that every teacher brings a unique background, training, and perspective to the class that will affect the creation of prompts.

For the purpose of this study, I would like to compare specifically how TAs from the various sub-disciplines in English department at Texas State University: Creative Writing, Rhetoric and Composition, and Literature, negotiate the stated goals of English 1310 and the values they bring to the class in the creation of prompts. Reflecting on these different values will help the English department understand what theories, pedagogies, and personal experiences about

writing are providing the current direction for FYE however implicit this direction might be. It will also help writing instructors become more self-aware about how they establish criteria for evaluation and how they create their writing prompts.

Research Question: What do TAs from the various sub-disciplines in English at Texas State University say about how and why they have developed their writing prompts?

How do they articulate the standard, overarching goals of English 1310?

How do they articulate their personal goals for English 1310?

How do they explain their creation of prompts?

In what ways do their prompts reflect the value they place on particular theories, pedagogies, and/or experiences?

Does reflecting on this process change or influence their perspective on their goals, values, or the act of creating prompts?

Additional Benefits of Research: Research with teachers on what they value in the writing classroom is key to reflective practice. Shirley K. Rose and Margaret J. Finders argue in their article, "Thinking Together: Developing a Reciprocal Reflective Model for Approaches to Preparing College Teachers of Writing," that reflective practice or "reciprocal reflection," the practice of personal reflections that "occur between and among members of a teaching community" improves the teaching of writing (75). They say that reciprocal reflection 1) "makes visible the assumptions that an individual teacher takes as 'natural,' 2) invites considerations of the immediate context from which beliefs/assumptions/practices emerged 3) solicits consideration beyond the immediate context of the classroom" (77). In fact, they continue to say that "the process of developing criteria that are always under revision is as important if not more important than the criteria themselves" (81). As teachers think more critically about how their own values influence their writing prompts, they help themselves to become more honest about the values they are passing on to students, and they help colleagues in the writing program to see a fuller picture of what values direct understanding of teaching writing in the present moment.

As Broad mentions when discussing contextual criteria in evaluating texts, the ideas of *Standards/Expectations* are continually in flux. He says that they "should not, in fact, be fixed but should instead move in response to changing pedagogical contexts" (78). Rose and Finders also say that reciprocal reflection "acknowledges the instability, provisionality, and contingent nature of what constitutes good teaching practice" (85). My goal, then, is not an attempt to revise fixed standards and expectations to new fixed standards based on what writing teachers value. Rather, I want to examine how TAs at Texas State develop writing prompts, in order to raise an awareness of how personal values shape what we teach. This dialogue has the potential to provide teachers, as well as writing programs, information by which to examine and question class prompts, training of TAs, and the interpretation of FYE course goals on a continual basis.

Proposed Procedure: For this project, I will interview six TAs from the English department at Texas State, two from the MA Literature program, two from the MFA Creative Writing program, and two from the MA Rhetoric and Composition program. I will send a list of interview questions to the participants through email so that they can answer the questions leisurely and have time to reflect more on their personal strategies in creating writing prompts. After I receive the first set of interview questions, I will send follow up questions based on their responses in order to

engage in the reciprocal reflection that Rose and Finders discuss. I will frame my study with Broad's own research question: What do we really value in writing? In order to organize and evaluate teacher values, I will look at three categories of values reflected in writing prompts: theory, pedagogy, and/or experience. I will also supplement the information I obtain from the interviews with literature on how and why teachers create writing prompts as well as literature on the importance of reflective and adaptive teaching practices. This research study should show how writing prompts reflect what teachers really value and make teachers more aware of their own values in order to better evaluate them and articulate them to students.

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