WRITING OUTSIDE THE LINES

Stories of Literacy

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Why we wrote this book, a sort of Preface

You must keep your promises to us!

—Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*

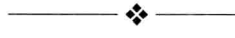
We wrote this book because we wanted to share our stories about being nontraditional students. We both raised children and worked full-time while squeezing classes, studying, reading, and writing in to every spare minute. Juggling and balancing on a tightrope became the metaphors for our everyday routines. We both often wondered how many parents make their own school lunch at the same time they make their children's; how many parents give up a night out in order to have money to buy books. We both reached a moment of self-enlightenment when we realized that browsing in bookstores had become a leisure time activity. Slowly, our lives changed, our families changed, we changed. We developed different aesthetic and social values, became more politically active, and more tolerant of different cultures and people. Like all nontraditional students, there are similarities to our stories, although the details—what makes us individuals—make our stories very different.

A few years ago, before beginning my early morning composition class, I listened to several of my students discussing "naked beer slides." When I asked what they were, the students were incredulous at my ignorance. "Oh, come on," one of them said. "You were a freshman once."

Well, yes, I was, but when I was a freshman for the second time around I was twenty-seven, had two demanding daughters, worked

full-time in a small grocery store, and was never invited to a naked beer slide. I had spent a total of thirteen years working on my undergraduate degree in English and then, because stacking apples, pears, and tomatoes in those appealing perfect pyramids is more mind numbing than it looks, I threw bank account and caution to the winds, quit my job, began teaching creative writing at a small university (I was qualified because I had published two poems and one short story and the department was desperate), and began work on my masters degree. I finished that degree when I was thirty-four, moved to Pennsylvania, and started work on a doctorate in composition, rhetoric and critical theory, where my students were horrified to learn that they were being taught by someone who had been a cashier and a waitress, someone who had done something rather than read books in the library. When I took my first full-time teaching position, degree still tightly rolled in its long mailing tube, I was acutely aware that if I had stayed at the grocery store I would probably be produce manager and making lots more money than I was teaching writing. But I still wouldn't be invited to a naked beer slide.

What does it mean to be an adult learner? A nontraditional student? Graduate studies did teach me to look critically at any word with "*non*" in front of it because it sets up the root word as a standard, something to be measured against. Traditional becomes the preferred choice; any other choice is secondary. Being a nontraditional student means carrying a constant load of anxiety, just waiting for some professor to look at you sadly and say, "Really, you should have gone to Technical College and studied welding." It means constantly wondering (especially while studying algebra) why you aren't welding by day so you can relax at night, play with your dog, watch *Ally McBeal* and *The X-Files*, eat nachos, finish off a six-pack of Rolling Rock. It means juggling priorities: dropping out one quarter because you need the tuition money to buy a new refrigerator, skipping English class to attend your daughter's piano recital, studying instead of sleeping, forcing yourself to actually smell your morning coffee before you gulp it down, cooking dinner while reading *Othello*, missing all the blockbuster summer movies. It means that somewhere along the way you've decided that education is more important than new clothes, a vacation, a sane life. (My oldest daughter said to me after I had finished the final corrections on my thesis, "Can we have something for dinner now besides hotdogs?") It means always looking towards the future, putting away your books for an evening, and hugging your daughter and making her linguini with clam sauce because the present is already part of that future.



Six years ago, I became a tutor for a thirty-one-year-old nonreader who had just finished serving yet another stint in one of Georgia's in-

stitutions of correction. More than anything else, Donald wanted to read. And he worked harder at the learning than anyone I had ever known. After two years, I decided it was time for him to find out how well he was doing. I arranged for him to speak to a group of local high school students. At that time, I attended their class once a week and offered writing and reading workshops outside of their typical skill and drill setting. But after two months, I was again noticing signs that the initial restlessness was resurfacing. So I thought perhaps another point of view would reenergize our group.

What Donald did that day was more than reenergizing. And it all began with an empty journal. Thirty eyes stared up at the blank journal pages, and fifteen accompanying mouths dropped open as Donald said, "This is what life is like when you're a nonreader in a reading world." From that point, my student held my fifteen high school seniors captivated. They listened to his story, asked questions, and began to understand the gift that reading gave to each of them.

After the fifty-five minutes were over, Donald raced outside for a cigarette and some air. He began to unwind and talked nonstop while I drove him back to his job. "I was so scared, but I did it. I think they liked what I said, don't you?" He rushed on without waiting for an answer. "I tried the journal idea on my mom last night, and she thought it was dumb, but the kids got it, didn't they? I could do this again. Maybe this is a new career for me. Do you think they noticed my shaking? Do you think they know how hard this was? Do you think I made a difference for them?"

What could I answer to my student and my friend? He had just walked into a southwest Georgia high school English class and, as he put it, "knocked the socks off fifteen cocky seniors." As a teacher, I knew just how hard that was to do. I didn't answer, just smiled and bobbed my head while I silently planned next week's reading lesson. During that lesson time, I knew we would relive his experience in front of that class. We would relive the questions about how he measured and cut carpet, laid Formica and tile, remodeled kitchens and baths without knowing how to read. And it was then that I would help him see that being literate did not just mean that he could go into a library, pick up any book, and read it. Being literate meant working within his own world, doing what needed to be done. It meant using a variety of experiences to gain competency. And Donald was competent. In fact, when it came to remodeling, he was more competent than I had ever been. But he valued what I was able to do, not what he was. My job, at that point, was to help him recognize the value of what he could do that I, and many others, could not.

Donald felt as I had many years before when I came back to college thirteen years, four children, and one pending divorce after I had started. I was ill prepared, I thought, to compete with the other stu-

dents in the classroom, students who were much younger than I, much quicker, much smarter. These students did not work eight hours before they came to class; they probably didn't get up at 3 A.M. to find quiet time to study and write; they certainly didn't have children almost their age to take care of and support in more than monetary ways. I shudder now to think of the time I spent feeling "less than." And it wasn't until several years had passed and I was in graduate school that I began to appreciate my own literacy and life knowledge when I overheard two professors talking. Part of their conversation surprised me:

"I'm excited, several of my students are older. And you know that always makes for a more interesting discussion."

"To say nothing of the papers you'll get to read. Man, you lucked out."

I could not believe what I had heard. Professors valued returning students because of the experiences and the literacies that they brought with them to the classroom. That was the beginning of my commitment to returning students, and perhaps, although I did not know it then, it was the beginning of my commitment to this textbook as well.

We both teach adult learners to write within an academic setting. Sometimes referred to as *nontraditional students* and more often now as *return to college students*, adult learners bring a wealth of life learning and knowledge to our classrooms. Unfortunately, their knowledge and experience does not easily correlate with college subjects such as biology, algebra, Western civilization, and first-year composition. This disaffection with their own knowledge partly results from the way college curriculums are structured. General education requirements contain knowledge and skills that every student needs to learn in the same way to succeed in their major courses and to reach their goal of being college educated. First-year composition, most often part of the general education requirements, usually introduces academic writing: what it is, what it looks and sounds like. Students are expected to assimilate new knowledge rather than make connections with past experiences.

Another reason for this disaffection, and the reason we have written this book, is that many adult learners are not provided the opportunity to reflect on, claim, and rename their own learning. Adult learners are quite used to articulating what they know about writing in terms of their lack of formal preparation. They readily perceive the different arenas in which their histories as learners are played—school, work, and home. Within these three constructs of themselves as learners, the "school self" is usually the deficit model that falls short of

some ideal knower, writer, and learner. But the language of "school literacy" is not the only language we have to talk about writers and writing. The language of adult learners resonates with cultural and social dynamics, but they are not always asked to look at and to write about the richness of their lives and themselves as literate in those areas that formal education has yet to claim. When given opportunities to connect different knowledge and literacies, adult students can reintegrate themselves as learners and knowers, building on what they already know and do best to both critique and gain control over the learning conditions in their universities.

One of our friends, Irene, recently received a master's degree from a large research university in the northeast. While attending classes and writing her thesis, she called us frequently for emotional and academic support. At one point she was told that her thesis topic—relationships of power within the management structures of long-term care facilities—wasn't academic enough. For the past six years, my sister has been a nursing supervisor at a long-term care facility. One of the problems she encounters at work concerns the attitudes of RNs toward health aides (who have considerably less formal education and make considerably less money), which in turn causes increased tension between the staff and the clients they serve. Irene initiated a series of workshops aimed at increasing the health aides' knowledge of caregiving and thereby enhancing their sense of professionalism. She hoped to raise the health aides' self-respect and help them achieve the respect of the RNs. At the same time Irene was initiating these workshops, her political consciousness was raised by the texts she was reading in her graduate classes. For her thesis, she proposed to study these power inequities in depth and propose a solution. Irene was guided toward another topic and eventually received her degree, but she still feels that one of the most important things she learned in graduate school is that what she does every day for a living is not intellectually valuable. Unfortunately, Irene's story isn't unique.

Our students' stories—about their schooling, their work, and their homes and families—inspire this book. We wanted to create a vehicle that places value on and works with the knowledge and experience that students bring to our classrooms. Because our students' stories are often the site of conflict and tension, integrating their narratives with texts that are labeled *academic* helps students negotiate the borders between work and school, past and present, self and other. Our purpose in writing this text was to place students' vast knowledge and academic knowledge into the same space so that student writers could question not only what they are learning, but why and how.

Connecting the classroom with "real life" means teaching students to take uncomfortable risks, to develop a critical perspective toward their education, and to recognize the power relations that allow them to speak in particular ways. Most important, it means encouraging them to develop public and private voices by reflecting on their lives and negotiating their connections to the lives of others.

How to use this book, a note to students

Writing Outside the Lines: Stories of Literacy asks you to make connections between your classroom experiences and home experiences, between your work lives and your school lives, between your past and present. Rather than chapters, the readings are divided into categories that mirror the situations in your lives, those that provide learning opportunities—school, work, home, and everywhere else. The readings included within the specific sections combine various writing strategies intended to encourage you to write about a particular author's unique perspective on his or her world and, in the process, write about the world through your own unique perspective. We want you to interpret these readings by retrieving similar memories of events, people, or places as those you are reading about. When these connections happen, you can begin to compare your experiences, reactions, or understandings (the known) with those of the author (the unknown). With these comparisons come a greater understanding and awareness of our world and the people in it along with the opportunity to critique the world through writing. Every selection provides opportunities prior to the reading, within the reading, and after the reading that prompt these comparisons.

Prior to each reading, we provide a "Prereading Reflection" prompt to help you construct a framework for what you are about to read. In Harold Rosen's *Comrade Rosie Rosen*, for example, the author recalls a time when his mother left her comfortable world to enter a

world less familiar to her—his school. She does this to ensure that her son has the educational opportunities that he is entitled to. Prior to reading, you are asked to remember a time when a parent or adult figure fought for your rights.

After the initial "Prereading Reflection," each piece of writing incorporates several opportunities for you to compare your own experiences to those presented by the author. There is also room in the margins for you to write your own questions or comments on sections that inspire, worry, annoy, confuse, or interest you as you read. Returning to the Rosen work, the first reflective prompt asks you to think back to a time when you found yourself somewhere you weren't wanted and then asks you to remember where you found the courage to remain in that place.

After each reading, you are asked to reflect on the reading one final time. In the Rosen essay, the author shares his pride in his mother because she is different from other mothers he knows, while you are asked to speculate on whether his mother's difference might also have caused him to feel an emotion other than pride.

After the reading, small group or whole class discussion questions are provided to allow opportunities for you to share and expand your reflections with your class and to examine the particular piece of writing from other perspectives. For example, Harold Rosen begins his piece with an experience that occurs when he is eleven; he next recalls two experiences, one that occurs when he is eight, and the other when he is only seven. You and the other students in your class are asked to consider how his presentation might confuse readers who are comfortable with a standard chronological approach to a narrative.

After you have had the opportunity to reflect, to respond, and to engage in conversations with other readers, some suggestions for writing are provided. These suggestions at times call for a traditional essay format, such as writing about a time when you were proud of a family member. Or the prompts may suggest another type of writing, such as a prospective student's profile based on evaluation of marketing plans for institutions in your areas or a revision of the ending of an essay, scene, or story that allows a writer to explore "what might have happened if . . . ." In each case, the suggestions serve as springboards that provide another way for you to approach the writing.

As writers, we've attempted to include opportunities to experience various forms of writing, each of which has the potential for life beyond mere completion of an assignment for a grade. We suggest writing letters to editors, managers, or board members seeking changes in policies or positions or praising efforts for a job well done. Some suggestions are designed to tap into your creativity, such as creating character sketches, writing poems, or constructing collages of photographs that share a common theme and incorporate short, vivid descriptions. Other sugges-

tions include opportunities that combine research strategies and creativity by asking you to seek information from outside sources and share the information through panel discussions, debates, and pamphlets.

Finally, at the end of the text, are "Suggestions for Group Literacy Work." These list collaborative activities that invite students to join with others of similar interests to continue the connections each has made individually. Ideas include considering each member's cultural history as handed down through some activity or hobby that involves members of the family (for example, cooking, woodworking, participating in sports). Then individually or as a group, you are asked to trace the roots of this involvement and share the information with the entire class in a poster presentation format. Or group members might visit a local nursing or assisted care home several times. While there, they would collect stories from the residents. Then using the stories, they might focus on a consistent theme within the stories (for example, going to war, dating, jobs, or education) and share both the theme and versions of the stories with other class members in writing or orally.

From the beginning through the end of each section, the connections made by readers and writers are emphasized. The connections help you conceptualize what you bring to the reading, to your classes, to other class members, and to the world in which you live. Connections and comparisons of what you already know to what you are learning provide the basis for critical thinking about a book, a course, a field of study, or a life. We invite you to share your connections with others so that all learners in your classes benefit from the knowing that has gone on around and beyond their worlds.

Contents

School Literacy

People who go to college are incredible. We go to classes. We read and absorb and are comprehensively tested on heavy amounts of various materials. We sleep very little. We often think of the past and want to go back. We know we cannot, and soon we won't want to. We all had separate lives, families, backgrounds, pasts. We live totally different from how we used to live. We are frustrated and sometimes want to give up, but we never stop trying, and our friends won't let us. We keep going, because above all else, we never stop learning, growing, changing, and, most important, dreaming.

—Stacy E. Dare

LEARNING TO USE LANGUAGE

It's fun to have fun, but you have to know how.

—Dr. Seuss

Sometimes after I've taught a particularly lively class, one in which everyone talked with each other and sometimes even laughed, I hear a voice from my childhood. The voice is from Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*, but it is not the voice of the cat who only wants the children to enjoy themselves. I hear the voice of "the fish in the pot," who acts as a powerless parent substitute or possibly Sally and her brother's conscience, telling me "NO, no, no." My uneasiness comes in part from my own story of schooling, a story where learning was a serious business (even recess had rules and was carefully monitored), and in part from that strong, cultural voice that tells me how teachers are supposed to behave. Unfortunately, I learned how teachers are supposed to behave from some of my teachers; I'm still unlearning those behaviors.

My own story of schooling begins in kindergarten where I was confronted with a totally alien culture. I come from a large family, and anyone who has many siblings knows that extra friends are nice but unnecessary; your playmates are already built into your life. And no matter how badly I might have treated my brothers and sisters, they couldn't take their toys and go home. So not only did I actually have to learn to get along with others when I reached school, I also was confronted with social activities I had never seen before. The first time one of my classmates received birthday spankings, I was horrified. I vowed never to let my teachers know when my birthday came around.

I experienced my first crush in kindergarten. Madeline had long red hair and was the most fascinating person I had ever met. Madeline could speak and write in French. As someone who was just learning to form neat letters with a large pencil and read in English, I found her bilingual abilities enormously appealing. I managed to sit next to her every day (before I learned to get along with others I was very skilled at pushing other children out of my way), and I constantly asked her questions about herself and her life. She remained my friend until the early spring when the class was tasked with making Easter cards for our mothers. I asked Madeline to help me write "the Easter bunny will bring you candy and a kiss" in French because I had not been too well behaved that week and wanted to impress my mother. Madeline told me how to