THE CANISIUS PROJECT:
FROM FIELD-WORK TO CLASSROOM

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In the Canisius Project for Writing Across the Curriculum, we have studied the writing worlds of business, social services, science and technology, and "public life" (the media, public relations, law, fund raising, and the like). For all these fields, our research has followed the same basic pattern. We begin with an initial interview, using a questionnaire which asks about the range of tasks, the problems, the methods, and the significance of the person's work world writing. Then we collect a portfolio of the person's writings. As an ideal, we request at least one sample of each kind of writing, with several samples of the most frequent and important kinds. After studying the portfolio, we return for a taped interview which focuses on specific features of selected pieces of writing. At the end of each research sequence, we hold a workshop which brings together researchers, faculty from the relevant departments, and as many as possible of our work world writers. Near the end of the workshop, the group defines some of the goals and methods most important for an upper level writing course which is to be aimed at, but not restricted to, business majors, or social science majors, or science majors, or humanities majors. (The groups of majors correspond to our research sequences: business, social services, science and technology, and, for want of a better term, public life.)

From all of this activity, we have amassed a wonderfully rich hoard. The professors who are to design and teach the upper level writing courses have at their disposal an embarrassment of riches: the questionnaires of the initial interviews, numerous and various portfolios of work world writing, the taped analytical interviews (which have been typed for easier reference), and the taped and written documents for each concluding workshop. Here is great plenty for study and meditation—a hoard of writing and ideas about the worlds in which that writing has been done.

The value of the research is enormous. But the research activity itself is also of great value. For one thing, we are experiencing new and growing support from faculty and administrators at the college. They are learning more and more about our research and the courses that grow from it. One example of this support: the first time we offered our new business
writing course, we filled two sections with thirty students each, and had to turn other students away. We know that such unprecedented enrollment was due in large part to the business faculty and administrators publicizing and recommending the course. The confidence of our colleagues is caused, we believe, by their participation in the research process. They have helped us to locate and choose people and places for our research in the work world. Many of them have participated in the concluding workshops, where they have had the opportunity both to see the procedures and results of our research and to tell us about the goals and methods they consider important for upper level writing courses aimed at their respective specialties.

In addition to enriching relationships within the college, the research activity is building bridges outward. We enjoy new relationships with the people of the professional writing worlds. Those people have been very generous with their time and energy and they have proved very interested in our research. Many of them have expressed interest in further activities, such as more of the same research by which we will be able to reinforce and refresh our hoard, research in some new and special directions, workshops and seminars through which we might work with their writers on the job, and visits by work world writers to our classes in writing. The college and the work world are connecting where they haven’t before. The situation is healthy and of considerable possibility.

The research hoard itself serves primarily as a source for designing the general features of upper level writing courses and some of the specific assignments. But the hoard is also a wonderful world for meditation and exploration. It instructs, yes; but it delights as well. For one thing, the hoard gives new life to old wisdom. For example, professionals, in discussing their writing, reaffirm again and again in their own ways and words Aristotle’s ideas about the importance of the realities of audience and writer and subject. Further, the hoard gives new life to old rules and procedures for courses in college. That students should meet deadlines is pretty much a given; but it is a given that can go stale. We see that we must help our students face all kinds of deadlines, from the generous and distant to the precipitous and immediate. We see that we must teach them to adapt to the problems and pressures created by deadlines.

Another traditional given which the hoard enlivens is that participation in class is important for learning. We see that we must teach our students to write in connection with group activity. We must find ways to
help them glean the sweets and endure the sorrows of group work. We see that they must learn to write in collaboration with subordinates and peers and superiors, just as they must learn to write to subordinates and peers and superiors. Every semester, the conscientious teacher reviews many old questions about courses and classroom. Is late work allowed or not? Why or why not? Are unexcused cuts allowed or not? Why or why not? Is class participation to be mandatory and major or voluntary and minor? The hoard does not often offer new answers to such old questions. It does, however, bring new life to old answers.

The wisdom available in the research hoard often relates to current, published thinking about the nature of writing and the teaching of writing. For example, from studying the hoard, one decides that students should read their work aloud, perhaps as a method for composing and certainly in class to their peers and teacher. In *Teaching Expository Writing*, William Irmscher also voices a belief in the value of reading aloud. Or, one designs a variety of writing assignments and related activities, among them, interviews, peer evaluations, reading aloud, and group work. In *A Short Course in Writing*, Kenneth Bruffee exhibits his belief in such activities: as “Four Practical Models” for “Collaborative Learning” he offers “Paired Interviews,” “Reading Aloud,” “Collaborative Group Work,” and “Peer Criticism.” Or, one designs from the research a writing assignment with distinct stages of exploration and composing and a set of audiences and deadlines. The assignment will give the students what Don Murray calls “four pressures that move them (writers) forward towards a first draft”: “increasing information,” “increasing concern for the subject,” “a waiting audience,” and “the approaching deadline.” It is likewise heartening to finish designing all the assignments and the general features of a new business writing course so that the course will serve Murray’s belief:

The important thing is that students write upon demand, that they write of what they know, that they are placed under enough pressure so they write what they did not expect to write, that the cards are small enough and frequent enough so they have a new chance if one doesn’t go well, that the teacher shares his or her own writing with them, that they listen to the voices which are coming from the members of the writing community of which they are a part, that they discover that writing is a process of discovery.

Again, from the research, one designs a writing assignment, one which severely limits the kind of thinking and presenting suitable for the
situation. The assignment is one of which Lee Odell would approve, given his ideas in "Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing." One begins inside the research hoard and ends up reaching out to the ideas and ideals of others and it is very satisfying to join with those others.

Of course, a primary and predominant activity in our project is designing writing assignments from the samples of the research hoard, and then discovering what happens as students do those assignments. Even an apparently simple scenario can generate a fascinating range of issues. Let's consider one such assignment from our new upper level course in "Writing for Human Services."

"Writing for Human Services" resulted from the interviews, the collected writing samples and the ideas generated at the workshop concluding the second of six phrases in the Canisius Project. Our research took us to social service offices, health care facilities, and government agencies. The course which evolved from our work required a wide range of daily writing tasks both inside and outside of class. Students were responsible for completing all the assignments on time, but only a few (a mid-term and final examination and a research paper) were graded. Assignments included case studies of social services clients, speeches composed by government "ghost-writers," time-limited editorials for television, and innumerable letters and memos to a wide range of audiences. Very often the class proceeded by first having students read and discuss each others' assignments and then examining the research source of the assignment, the original, real-world worker's response to the same task. The original document was not to function as the ideal model, but as a supplement to the student writing and a point of comparison. Therefore, it was important to examine the worker's writing, in this case, only after students had discussed their own. Using such work-world writing samples last usually led to a better understanding of the demands of the specific writing task at hand without suggesting that there was a single "correct way" of responding to the assignment.

One example of using such research writing samples as non-models involved a letter written by a social worker on behalf of an unwed mother to the putative father of her unborn child. The letter was the second step of a two-part assignment. The first part asked the students to use information from an actual case study as the material for a letter requesting a county agency to assume financial responsibility for "Hetty Sorel," an unmarried
pregnant woman seeking financial aid from a private social service agency. Part two of the assignment, "Hetty's Request," asked for a second letter:

Write a second letter for Hetty Sorel, this time to the father of Hetty's child. Assume that Hetty wants him to be aware of what she will experience during her pregnancy and wants him to know about the child's birth even though he has asked not to be involved. As her social worker, you have been asked by Hetty to intercede on her behalf with the father in an attempt to change or at least mollify his current attitude. The father's name is Arthur Donnithorne.

The following five letters are the student responses to the second letter assignment. The letters appear exactly as they were written.

**Student Letter #1**

Dear Mr. Donnithorne,

I am writing to you on behalf of my client, Miss Hetty Sorel. I have been meeting with her on a regular basis in attempts to help her through this difficult time of having a child out of wedlock. Hetty has asked me to contact you in hopes that you may want to contact her to discuss the pregnancy.

Hetty is considering the possibility of putting the baby up for adoption and wants very much to talk with you about it. At this time she seems very distressed and a comforting word from you may ease the situation for her.

If you would like to speak with me regarding this matter please contact me at 716-878-0000, ext. 1234 during the day.

Sincerely,

Counselor

**Student Letter #2**

Dear Arthur,

I am, Susan Smith, a social worker for Hetty. I know at the time, when Hetty had told you she was pregnant, you must have had many mixed emotions and your first reaction was to get away and leave Hetty. Maybe you can forget about it, but Hetty can't. I'm writing to you to let you know she is alright, and she is in a maternity home because her parents could not support her financially at the time. She is feeling quite alone these past few days and I'm sure it's going to get worse. I know you are a young man and being a father is out of your range, so I'm asking you to give Hetty a little emotional support, not
financial support, but to comfort her. She really needs someone who cares and I feel you do. She is strongly thinking of putting the baby up for adoption, so there is going to be no ties between the two of you. Do you think you can write her or call her and maybe explain to her how you feel and what's on your mind right now. I wish you would give her a chance instead of forgetting her and acting like nothing ever happened. Please think about what I wrote, Hetty does need someone and I know you're the person.

Sincerely,
Social Worker

Student Letter #3

Dear Mr. Donnithorne,

I am writing to you on the behalf of my client, Hetty Sorel. I have been Hetty's caseworker from the Social Services Department in Buffalo. For the short time, I have worked with Hetty, I have come to know her as a concerned and caring person. I am sure that you have realized the same about her from your close and meaningful relationship.

It is quite important that I mention the present situation of her pregnancy. Hetty is very conscious of the importance of what is involved here. And she was hoping you would be, too. It would mean a great deal to her to have your moral support to help her through the stress and anxiety of the situation. Your presence at the time, when the pregnancy took place was greatly felt. Just like your presence now, would be as important.

Hetty is moving into a Maternity Home for various Services and most importantly the confidentiality of the situation. The financial assistance is being provided by the Child Welfare Services for the Maternity Home. So financial assistance is not a problem.

She has felt very rejected, and quite upset by your avoidance of the situation. Right now, she is in need of your assistance and support, physical, emotional, and psychological. With her moving out of her parent's home; Her parents will not be a problem. She will need to feel the closeness and comfort from someone. Working so close to Hetty, I have realized, you are the person in which Hetty needs.

I hope you take some serious thought on this which is Hetty's belief. You know where you can reach Hetty.

Sincerely,
Caseworker

Student Letter #4

D. Mr. D.

I have been asked by your former fiancé, Hetty Sorel, to inform you
of what has taken place since the engagement between her and yourself was broken. Since you are the father of the child, she’s carrying Hetty believes that you should be kept up to date as to the progress of her pregnancy and what has happened to her since you went to Idaho.

Since January, Hetty has been at the ABC Maternity Home. She felt this move would make it easier on all parties concerned, since the situation of her pregnancy had caused some tension within her family, and has caused her a fair amount of distress. She has been undergoing prenatal care with the doctors here at ABC, and has undergone counseling to prepare her for the baby’s birth in July.

Although she has been able to deal fairly successfully with her pregnancy, Hetty is nonetheless very unhappy and disturbed over the circumstances surrounding your broken engagement. Her feelings toward you have not changed, and it is her hope that your feelings toward her are still present. I feel that correspondence from you would be very beneficial to Hetty. It is my considering her feelings toward you, and I hope to receive a letter from you soon informing her of your present situation. She can be reached at the ABC Home, ________, ________ Zip_______.

Thank you Statement?

Sincerely yours,
Caseworker
ABC Maternity Home

Student Letter #5

W. N. Y. Social Services
355 Manila Drive
Buffalo, N.Y. 14200
855-7111
Oct. 2, 1980

Dear Arthur,

I am writing to you at the request of Hetty Sorel. For the past two months I have been counseling her concerning her pregnancy. She has moved out of her parents home and into the ABC Home. With financial assistance from Erie Co. Social Services, Hetty has been able to obtain good medical care and has been provided with the confidentiality she desires. Hetty would very much like you to contact her so that she could share her feelings with you about this important part of her life. She feels certain that you are as concerned about her as she is about you. You could provide a great deal of emotional support for Hetty if you would contact her by letter or by phone. Her address is:

ABC Maternity Home, 135 Ocean Dr., Buffalo, N.Y. 14000,
phone 855-1234. If I can help you with further information, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,
W.N.Y. Social Services
Caseworker

In the class discussion which followed the exchange of student letters, the students discovered two major questions which the assignment raised: 1) How do I gain the father's cooperation through my letter? 2) What information should be included in the letter?

Answers to the first question involved as basic a decision as whether to begin the letter with "Dear Arthur" or "Dear Mr. Donnithorne." Two students (#2 and #5) chose the former because they wished to be "more personal," even though they had never met Arthur Donnithorne. The question of a more or less personal salutation raised the more complex issue of the degree to which a student decided to be subjective or objective in the letter's content and raised speculation about the effect of relative degrees of familiarity or distance on the father's decision to cooperate. Student #2 was most subjective, identifying herself by name in the first sentence, using first person constructions nine more times in the letter, and scolding her reader: "Maybe you can forget about it, but Hetty can't. . . . I wish you would give her a chance instead of forgetting her and acting like nothing ever happened." Student #3's statement, "Your presence at the time, when the pregnancy took place was greatly felt," may be either a slip of the pen or a very sarcastic censure. Students #1 and #5 were most objective, but there is a self-restraining tone in their letters which does not allow the objectivity to conceal the sympathy the writers have for Hetty. In general, the students discovered the difficulty of maintaining objective distance in an emotion-charged human situation. Their discovery reflected the concern we found among social workers who spoke of the need in their writing for "detail from a distance" but, paradoxically, an equal need to be objective by being personal, not cold or distant.

Answers to the second major question (what information should be included in the letter?) mentioned items as basic as the address and phone number of both the caseworker and Hetty. Only one student (#5) gave both the agency address and phone number and that of the maternity home where Hetty was staying; one student (#4) gives the home address only; one (#1) gives only the agency phone number; and two students (#2 and


#3) give no such information. Writers #1-#4 agreed that the thoroughness of the information in letter #5 might make a response from Donnithorne more likely. The most sensitive informational decision that had to be made, however, involved the details of Hetty's case, her history since her fiancee had left her, and her current condition. All students saw the need to mention the major facts of Hetty's dilemma. To this point the research materials had suggested an assignment which had moved the class to a lively and fruitful discussion of the demands of the task and to some new discoveries about it. The students were pleased with their work, but curious about the actual caseworker's letter: what issues did she see? what information did she include? How did it all work out?

Keeping the original letter for last had avoided prejudicing the students in their own writing, but more than this, it added an enjoyable suspense to the assignment. They were involved with Hetty and concerned about how she fared. The caseworker's letter, which follows, was a genuine surprise to the class:

*Caseworker’s Letter*

June 7, 1980

Dear Mr.

There is an important matter concerning Hetty Sorel that I must discuss with you as soon as possible. This does not concern finances at all, however, it is extremely urgent.

Would you please contact me as soon as possible. The address and telephone number are:

W.N.Y. Social Services
355 Manila Drive
Buffalo, N.Y. 14200

Telephone: (716) 855-7111, ext. 300

It is extremely urgent that I hear from you soon.

Thank You.

Sincerely,

W.N.Y. Social Services
Caseworker

The class felt the letter was too cold. They disliked its brevity, its lack of detailed information (only Hetty's name and the address and phone number of the caseworker are given). They were pleased to see, however, that the caseworker assured Donnithorne of his financial immunity, as they had, and noted the repetition of the vaguely serious phrase "extremely urgent."
In the research interview, the caseworker-author of the original letter had explained the issues that concerned her when she wrote it: 1) she needed to gain the father's cooperation; 2) she needed to assure him that no financial payment was required of him; and 3) she could not say anything specific about the case because the father had a right to privacy and she could not be certain that he alone would read the letter. The students were very pleased to see that their concerns had been the caseworker's as well, despite the great differences that existed between her letter and theirs. Learning about the caseworker's concern for Donnthorne's right to privacy made them aware of a rhetorical problem which they hadn't considered earlier and revealed the effect such a matter would have on the letter's content. Overall, the student reaction to the caseworker's letter was more that of the pleasant surprise of new knowledge than a confirmed belief in their own ignorance.

"Hetty's Request" enabled students to learn through their own writing the special audience demands faced by a real human-services worker whose daily writing forms a large part of her job. The assignment reinforced the premise that to write well on the job is to do the job well. The caseworker's letter did not intimidate the student writers since it was not offered as a model to be imitated. Nor were students expected merely to guess at the original letter's content in the hope that theirs would approximate it. On the contrary, the assignment engaged the students in a task that took them beyond perfunctory writing to discovery through involvement. As one student wrote later in the course evaluation, "It was quite touching to see and almost like being part of this experience. When you get involved in a real life incident like this, it is hard not to get in the middle. . . ."

A final note about Hetty's request adds a further touch of realism to the assignment. Despite the caseworker's tact and sensitivity in writing her letter, the letter ultimately failed in its purpose. It had been sent registered mail three times; the last two times it was refused by the addressee. The real-life Hetty took the father's rejection very hard, though she eventually came through her pregnancy very well on her own. An assignment like "Hetty's Request" is thus the more valuable because it illustrates the patience that successful writers must have in conveying human care in their written words, even when those fragile efforts to bridge sensitive gaps fail. The students in "Writing for Human Services" learned in this case that writing on the job is not the perfunctory imitation of models or reliance on form letters, but an on-going humanistic enterprise with real responsi-
Students have a hunger for perfect formulae for writing. During the spring 1981 semester of our new business writing course, one student ended a journal entry about the great variety of ways in which the class had done a particular assignment with the cry: "There must be an ideal memo somewhere!" Our research has strengthened our belief that successful work world writing demands that the individual know the rules and models, but that the individual must also know how to follow or change or even ignore the rules and models according to the realities of each writing situation. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ira Grushow wrote of "...the writer's accomplishment as the attainment of a hazardous quest rather than the assembly of a printed circuit." Against the understandable hunger for perfect formulae, against excessive hope for the comfort of that "ideal memo somewhere," against the idea that writing on the job is the perfunctory imitation of models, our research has encouraged us to see to it that our new upper level writing courses help our students become not the servants of assembled, printed circuits, but able, brave and perhaps even joyous human questers.

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NOTES


3"Write Before Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, XXIX, no. 4 (December 1978), 376.


6March 12, 1979, p. 56.

7This paper is based upon a presentation at the March 1981 meeting of the College Conference on Composition and Communication. The authors are members of the Canisius Project for Writing Across the Curriculum which is headed by Dr. David A. Lauerman of Canisius. The project, in operation since January 1980, has enjoyed the guidance of Professors Dixie Goswami (American Institute for Research, Washington, D.C.) and Lee Odell (S.U.N.Y., Albany)