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The Politics of Remediation

The students are taking their seats in the large auditorium, moving in two streams down the main aisles, entering from a side exit to capture seats in the front. You're a few minutes late and find a seat somewhere in the middle. There are a couple of hundred students around you and in front of you, a hundred or so behind. A youngish man walks onto the stage and lays a folder and a book on the podium. There are track lights above him, and in back of him there's a system of huge blackboards that rise and descend on rollers in the wall. The man begins talking. He raises his voice and taps the podium and sweeps his hand through the air. Occasionally, he'll turn to the moving boards and write out a phrase or someone's name or a reference to a section of the textbook. You begin writing these things down. He has a beard and smiles now and then and seems wrapped up in what he's talking about.

This is Introductory Sociology. It's one of the courses students can elect to fulfill their general education requirements. The catalogue said that Introductory Sociology would deal with "the characteristics of social life" and "the processes of social interaction." It also said that the course would cover the "tools of sociological investigation," but that came last and was kind of general and didn't seem too important. You're curious about what it is that makes people tick and curious, as well, about the causes of social problems, so a course on social interaction sounded interesting. You filled Sociology 1 in on some cards and sent them out and eventually got other cards back that told you you were enrolled.

"These are the social facts that are reflected in the interpretations we make of them," says the man on the stage and then extends his open hand toward the audience. "Now, this is not the place to rehearse the arguments between Kantian idealists and Lockean realists, but . . ." You're still writing down, ". . . reflected in the interpretations we make of them . . . ," and he continues: "But let us stop for a moment and consider what it means to say 'social fact.' What is a fact? And in considering this question, we are drawn into hermeneutics." He turns to write that last word on the board, and as he writes you copy it down in your notes. He refers the class to the textbook, to a "controlling metaphor" and to "microanalyses"—and as you're writing this down, you hear him stressing "constructivist interpretations" and reading a quotation from somebody and concluding that "in the ambiguity lies the richness."

People are taking notes and you are taking notes. You are taking notes on a lecture you don't understand. You get a phrase, a sentence, then the next loses you. It's as though you're hearing a conversation in a crowd or from another room—out of phase, muted. The man on the stage concludes his lecture and everyone rustles and you close your notebook and prepare to leave. You feel a little strange. Maybe tomorrow this stuff will clear up. Maybe by tomorrow this will be easier. But by the time you're in the hallway, you don't think it will be easier at all.

The work space of the Tutorial Center was parceled out over three floors of Campbell Hall, a building located on the northern end of UCLA's campus, about fifty yards from the English Department where I had received graduate training nine years before. Two of the rooms were fairly large and, from the remaining pipes and sinks, looked to be defunct laboratories. One of these rooms was used to tutor mathematics, physics, and chemistry: It was called the Math Lab and was on the first floor. Humanities, social science, fine arts, and the remaining sciences were crammed into the larger second story room, but you could also find tutoring all

up and down the hallway, for the rooms got crowded and, at that time, had no partitions or rugs to absorb the sound. In the basement, we had two small rooms, and those were used for group tutorials and, quite often, for English. When UCLA was still a precocious local school on the west side of town, Campbell Hall used to be the site of Home Economics, but as the university grew, that program was discarded. Now Campbell houses Linguistics, all four Ethnic Studies Centers and their libraries—Afro-American, Chicano, Asian-American, American Indian—and all the offices of UCLA's Educational Opportunity Program, whose biggest unit is the Tutorial Center.

The thing that most struck me during my first months in Campbell Hall was the level and variety of activity, the vibrancy of the place. The walls were covered with posters, flyers, and articles clipped from the newspaper: a multicolored collage of announcements from the Ethnic Studies Centers, the EOP staff, and politically active students and faculty. There were notices about American Indian dancers and Japanese watercolors and forums on labor history—one poster with a photograph of Filipino cannery workers, another with black women bent before machines in a textile mill. There were calls for legal defense funds and vigils for justice. There was news about military atrocities in Chile, CIA murders in Africa, the uprooting of the American Indian. A slow walk down the hall provided an education in culture and politics disconnected from the lives of most Americans, a reminder of culture denied, of the brazenness of power.

It was exciting to walk down the east hallways of the first or second floor, for students were everywhere, lined up for counseling appointments or scattered in groups of twos and threes working with tutors. Some images: A young woman drawing with her finger on the wall, explaining to two students the way the phases of Hegel's dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—evolve in and out of each other. A tutor listens and nods while a fellow in a sweatshirt that says "Property of UCLA Athletic Department" reads something in French. An older man is walking a girl with a pony tail through a pattern that forms a large triangle. Just as she is about to arrive at the point from which she began, she looks up and knocks her head with her knuckles and says, "Hey, I see it!" Such animation made things noisy and crowded, and it was

not uncommon to find a tutor and a student in one of Campbell's stairwells or out on the lawn, seeking quiet. But for all the irritations of noise and crowding, there was an excitement in Campbell, the buzz of intellect caught on the fly, in a hallway, in old school desks jammed together.

I had reentered the bustling university, but this time with some responsibility for making it work. I was lucky in that the Tutorial Center already had a core of graduate students who were skillful teachers, and together we developed a better understanding of how we could make tutoring more effective. I had a small, makeshift office in one of the rooms on Campbell's busy first floor. We called it the fishbowl, for it was built of partitions, and the front of it was three-quarters glass. I would meet there with the tutors, listening as they described the difficulties their students were having, talking through with them ways to discover the reasoning behind poor performance. Essentially what we were trying to do was see beyond failure, develop the perception of the counselor who must look for causes of behavior rather then simply recording the behavior itself. Here's part of a tutoring session I taped and used for training.

Suzette was enrolled in a basic English class, and for her first assignment had written a personality profile of a classmate. Her teacher had placed brackets around two sentence fragments—one of the big offenses in remedial English—noted some other problems, and recommended that she come to the center. I began by asking to see the worrisome section of the personality profile:

> She was the leader who organized the class meetings and planned the class graduation program, and class events. Bringing them together as one which takes a lot of work. Also, worked at her sister's catering service.

"Okay," I said, "let's talk about fragments. Once your teacher put brackets around these two sentences, could you see that something was wrong?" "I see that something's wrong now," said Suzette, tapping her pencil against the table, "but I didn't see anything wrong when I was writing them."

"That's alright," I continued, "tell me more about what you see when the brackets make you focus on those two sentences."

"Well, see this sentence here?" (She pointed to "She was the

leader who organized . . . ," the sentence that comes before the two fragments.) "I didn't want to start talking about the same thing in another sentence . . . putting . . . you know, keep repeating myself."

"Repeating yourself? That's interesting. Say some more. Tell me more about that."

"What, this?" she said, pointing back to that first sentence. "I didn't want to keep putting 'She was, she was, she was.'"

"You were trying to avoid that kind of repetition?"

"Yeah."

"Why? How did it sound to you?"

"Well, it's just not the way people write essays in college. You just don't like to see your paper with 'She . . . she . . . she . . .' You know, 'I . . . I . . . I . . .' It doesn't sound very intelligent."

"That makes sense."

I started talking to Suzette about some syntactic maneuvers that would enable her to avoid repetition. Going back over rules about sentences needing subjects and verbs would probably not do much good, for my questions revealed that Suzette's fragments were rooted in other causes. She didn't want to keep repeating the subject *she*. We worked together for about fifteen minutes, with me suggesting some general patterns and Suzette trying them out. And these were the sentences she produced:

> Ronnie, having skills of organizing, brought her class together as one. She organized the class meetings, and planned the class graduation program and the class events.
>
> She brought the class together with her great organizing skills and leadership, for she prepared the class meetings, and planned the class graduation program and the class events.

What was interesting to me and the tutors about Suzette's fragments was that they originated from a desire to reach beyond what she considered simple, beyond the high school way. She had an idea about how college writing should sound, and she was trying to approximate her assumptions. Mina Shaughnessy, an inspired teacher, used to point out that we won't understand the logic of error unless we also understand the institutional expectations that students face and the way they interpret and in-

ternalize them. Many people respond to sentence fragments of the kind Suzette was making as though the writer had some little hole in that part of her brain where sentences are generated. They repeat a rule: "A sentence has to have a subject and a verb and express a complete thought." No matter that the rule is problematic, if they can just graft it into the fissures of the writer's gray matter, she'll start writing good sentences. But, Suzette didn't have a damaged sentence generator. What Suzette didn't have was command of some of the stylistic maneuvers that would enable her to produce the sophisticated sentences she was reaching for. The more skilled the tutors got at listening and waiting, the better they got at catching the clue that would reveal what Shaughnessy was fond of calling the intelligence of the student's mistake.

I spent most of my first year in the center creating with Chip Anderson a comprehensive training program and a large procedural manual that included everything from sample time sheets to hints on working with angry students. We improved the ways the center kept track of its payroll and the services it rendered. I learned about budgets, was exposed, without sunscreen, to academic politics. I conducted workshops and supervised tutors and counseled distressed students and did some tutoring. And I came to better understand what I had once only felt: the uncertainty and misdirection of a university freshman's life.

Some of the students I worked with were admitted to college, as I had been, under a special policy, or they had transferred in from a community college. But many, actually most, of the freshmen who visited the Tutorial Center had high school records that were different from mine; they were not somnambulant and did not have spotty transcripts. They were the kids who held class offices and saw their names on the honor roll; they went out for sports and were involved in drama and music and a variety of civic and religious clubs. If they had trouble with mathematics or English or science, they could depend on the fairness of a system that rewarded effort and involvement: They participated in class discussions, got their work in on time, helped the teacher out, did extra-credit projects. In short, they were good academic citizens, and in some high schools—especially beleaguered ones—that was enough to assure them a B. So though some of them

came to UCLA aware that math or English or science was hard for them, they figured they'd do okay if they put in the time, if they read the textbook carefully and did all their homework. They saw themselves as academic successes.

These were the first students I'd worked with who did not have histories of failure. Their placement in a course designated "remedial" or the receipt of a D or an F on a midterm examination—even being encouraged by counselors to sign up for tutorial support—was strange and unsettling. They simply had little experience of being on the academic fringe. Thus it was not uncommon for visitors to the Tutorial Center at first to deny what was happening to them. People whose placement tests had indicated a need for English-as-a-second-language courses would often ask us to try to get that judgment reversed. They considered themselves to be assimilated, achieving Americans. Their names had shifted from Keiko to Kay, from Cheung to Chuck. They did not want to be marked as different. Students who were placed in Remedial English would ask us to go look at their tests, hoping there had been a mistake. Tutors often had to spend their first session working through the various emotions this labeling produced. You knew when that student walked through the door; you could sense the feeling of injustice he brought with him as he sat down alongside you. "Something's wrong," Tony blurted out soon after he introduced himself. "This class is way below my level." The tutor assured him that the class was a tough one and would soon get harder. "Well, I hope so," he said, "'cause I took Advanced English in high school. I feel kind of silly doing this stuff."

But others among these young people knew or had long suspected that their math or English needed improvement. Their placement in a remedial course confirmed their suspicions. The danger here was that they might not be able to separate out their particular problems with calculus or critical writing from their own image of themselves as thinkers, from their intellectual self-worth. The ugly truth was exposed. The remedial designation or the botched essay or the disastrous midterm ripped through their protective medals. "I'm just no good at this," said one young woman, holding her smudged essay. "I'm so stupid." Imagine, then, how they felt as they found themselves in a four-hundred-acre aggregation of libraries and institutes and lecture halls,

where they could circle the campus and not be greeted by anyone who knew anything about them, where a professor who had no idea who they were used a microphone to inform them that social facts are reflected in the interpretations we make of them.

"It was so weird," said Kathy. "I was walking down the hall in the Engineering Building and suddenly I felt really strange. I felt I was completely alone here. Do you know what I mean? Like I go for days and don't see anybody I know." The huge lecture halls, the distance from the professor, the streams of students you don't know. One of the tasks facing all freshmen is to figure out ways to counter this loneliness. Some will eventually feel the loneliness as passage, as the rending of the familiar that is part of coming of age. The solitude of vast libraries and unfamiliar corridors will transform into college folklore, the bittersweet tales told about leaving home, about the crises of becoming adult. But a much deeper sense of isolation comes if the loneliness you feel is rooted in the books and lectures that surround you, in the very language of the place. You are finally sitting in the lecture hall you have been preparing to sit in for years. You have been the good student, perhaps even the star—you are to be the engineer, the lawyer, the doctor. Your parents have knocked themselves out for you. And you can't get what some man is saying in an *introductory* course. You're not what you thought you were. The alien voice of the lecturer is telling you that something central to your being is, after all, a wish spun in the night, a ruse, the mist and vapor of sleep.

I had seen Andrea before, but this time she was limping. Her backpack was stretched with books. Her collar and pleats were pressed, and there was a perfect white ribbon in her hair. She had been secretary of her high school and a gymnast, belonged to the Biology Club, and worked on the annual. Her father was a bell captain at a hotel in Beverly Hills; her mother a seamstress. They immigrated when Andrea was five, and when they were alone at home, they spoke Japanese. Andrea was fluently bilingual. She graduated fifteenth in a class of five hundred. She came to UCLA with good grades, strong letters, and an interest in science. She had not been eating well since she'd been here. The doctors told her she was making herself anemic. A week before, she had passed out while she was driving and hit a tree on a sidewalk near her home. Her backpack must have weighed twenty pounds.

All colleges have their killer courses, courses meant to screen students from science or engineering or those departments in arts and humanities that aren't desperate for enrollments. At UCLA the most infamous killer course is Chemistry 11-A, General Chemistry. The course is difficult for lots of reasons, but the primary one is that it requires students not just to understand and remember individual facts, formulas, and operations but to use them to solve problems, to recognize what kind of problem a particular teaser is and to combine and recombine facts, formulas, and operations to solve it. Andrea failed the midterm. Her tutor explained that she didn't seem to have much experience solving chemistry problems. Andrea would sit before her book for hours evening after evening, highlighting long stretches of text with a yellow marker, sketching the structure of benzene and butadiene, writing down Avogadro's law and Dalton's law, repeating to herself the differences between ionic and covalent bonds. The midterm exam hit her like a blind punch. It didn't require her to dump her memory. It gave her a short list of problems and asked her to solve them.

Andrea felt tremendous pressure to succeed, to continue to be all things to all people. She was speaking so softly I had to lean toward her. She said she was scared. Her cheek was still bruised from the accident. She missed a week of school then, and as she spoke, I had the sudden, chilling recognition that further injuries could save her, that deliverance could come in the form of another crash. I began talking to her about counseling, how helpful it can be to have someone to talk to, how I'd done it myself, how hard the sciences are for so many of us, how we all need someone to lean on. She looked up at me, and said in a voice drifting back somewhere toward childhood, "You know, I wish you had known me in high school."

James had a different reaction to failure.

He sat in my office and repeated that he was doing okay, that he'd been studying hard and would pull his grades up on his finals. "I've got my study skills perfected, and I am punctual about visiting the library." He paused and looked at his legs, placed his two hands palms down on his thighs, and then he pressed. "I will make it. My confidence was down before." James was on academic probation; he needed to pass all his courses or he would be what they called STD: subject to dismissal. "I've got the right attitude now. I took a motivation course over the break,

and that helped me improve my study skills and get my priorities straight." He was looking right at me as he said all this: handsome, muscular, preppy. Dressed for success. Mechanical successfulness. I'm okay, you're okay. Jay Gatsby would have noted his poise and elocution. I sat there quietly listening, trying to decide what to do with his forced jock talk. I drifted a little, trying to conjure up the leader of James' "motivation seminar," the person delivering to him a few techniques and big promises: a way to skim a page or manage his time. James listened desperately and paid his money and went off with a positive attitude and his study skills perfected, emboldened with a set of gimmicks, holding a dream together with gum and string.

James's tutor suggested that he come see me because he was getting somewhere between a C and a D in his composition course and seemed increasingly unable to concentrate. His responses to the tutor's questions were getting vague and distracted. I asked James for his paper and could quickly see that he had spent time on it; it was typed and had been proofread. I read further and understood the C−; his essay missed the mark of the assignment, which required James to critically analyze a passage from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. What he did instead was summarize. This was something I had seen with students who lacked experience writing papers that required them to take an idea carefully apart. They approach the task in terms they can handle, retell the material to you, summarize it, demonstrate that, yes, they can understand the stuff, and here it is. Sometimes it is very hard to get them to see that summary is not adequate, for it had been adequate so many times before. What you have to do, then, is model step by step the kind of critical approach the paper requires. And that was what I started to do with James.

I asked him what he thought Berger's reason was for writing *Ways of Seeing*, and he gave me a pretty good answer. I asked another question, and for a brief while it seemed that he was with me. But then he stopped and said, "I should have gotten better than a C−. I think I deserve way higher than that." There it was. A brand. I said that I knew the grade was a disappointment, but if he'd stick with me he'd do better. He didn't say much more. He looked away. I had tacitly agreed with his teacher, so we were past discussing the paper: We were discussing his identity and his future. I work hard, he's really saying to me. I go to class. I read the book. I write the paper. Can't you see. I'm not a C−. Don't tell me I'm a C−. He was looking straight ahead past me at the wall. His hands were still on his legs.

When I was in the Teacher Corps, I saw daily the effects of background on schooling. Kids came into the schools with hand-me-down skirts and pants, they didn't have lunch money, they were failing. The connections between neighborhood and classroom were striking. This was true, though in different ways, with the veterans. The Tutorial Center also served low-income white and low- and middle-income minority students, but because the kind of students who make it to a place like UCLA enter with a long history of success and, to varying degrees, have removed superficial indicators of their lineage, it's harder, at first glance, to see how profoundly a single assignment or a whole academic career can be affected by background and social circumstance—by interactions of class, race, and gender. But as I settled into Campbell Hall, I saw illustrations continually, ones that complicated easy judgment and expectation.

Sometimes issues of economics and race were brought up by the students themselves. Such issues were also raised by the existence of the Ethnic Studies Centers, the perennial posters in the hallways, or the lobbying of older, politically active students, and they emerged in some of the students' classes. There was wide variation in the students' responses. Some had grown up watching their parents deal with insult, had heard slurs in their schools about skin color and family and language. A young woman writes in her placement exam for Freshman English:

> I could not go into the restroom, the cafeteria, or any place of the high school area alone, without having some girl following me and calling me names or pushing me around. Some of their favorite names for me were "wetback," "beaner," or "illegal alien." I did not pay much attention to the name calling, but when they started pulling my hair, pushing me, or throwing beans at me, I reacted.

Students like her were drawn to issues of race, read the walls of Campbell with understanding, saw connections between the

messages on green paper and the hurt in their own past. They had been sensitized to exclusion as they were growing up.

But there were those who came to Campbell Hall with a different past and a different outlook. Some of those who grew up with the protections of middle-class life knew of the wrongs done to their people, but slavery and Nisei internment and agricultural camps seemed distant to them, something heard in their grandmothers' stories—a hazy film playing in an incomprehensible past. Their own coming of age had been shaped by their parents' hard-won assimilation, the irony of that achievement being an erasure of history for the children of the assimilated. These students had passed through a variety of social and religious clubs and organizations in which they saw people of their race exercise power. They felt at the center of things themselves, optimistic, forward-looking, the force of their own personal history leading them to expect an uncomplicated blending into campus life. I think that many of them were ambivalent about Campbell Hall—it was good to have the services, but they felt strange about being marked as different.

"Why are we reading this junk? This is just junk!" Denise was tapping the page and looking at me, then off across the room, then back at me. Underneath the light strikes of her finger was a passage her history professor had excerpted from the Lincoln-Douglas debates:

> . . . there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

"Yeah," I said, "Abraham Lincoln. Pretty upsetting, isn't it? Why do you think the professor gave it to the class?" "Well," she said, still angry, "that's not the point. The point is, why do we have to read stuff like this?" The week before, Denise and I had the following exchange. She had to write a paper for her composition class. It was built on an excerpt from Henry Roth's immigrant novel, *Call It Sleep*, and the assignment required her

to write about the hardships current immigrants face. Our discussion worked its way around to attitudes, so I suggested to Denise that she write on the things she'd heard said about Hispanic immigrants in Southern California. She looked at me as though I'd whispered something obscene in her ear. "No!" she said emphatically, pulling back her head, "that's rude." "Rude," I said. "Explain to me what's—" She cut in. "You don't want to put that in a paper. That doesn't belong." Some things were better left unsaid. Decent people, Denise had learned, just don't say them. There is a life to lead, and it will be a good life. Put the stuff your grandmother lived and your father saw behind you. It belongs in the past. It need not be dredged up if we're to move on. And, in fact, Denise could not dredge it up—the flow of her writing stopped cold by an ugly historical text that was both confusing and painful for her to see.

The counselor's office was always dusky, the sun blocked by thick trees outside the windows. There was an oversize easy chair by his desk. In it sat Marita, thin, head down, hands in her lap, her shiny hair covering her face. The counselor spoke her name, and she looked up, her eyes red in the half-light. The counselor explained that the graduate student who taught her English had accused Marita of plagiarism and had turned her paper over to the director of Freshman English. He asked her to continue, to tell me the story herself.

Marita had been at UCLA for about three weeks. This was her first writing assignment. The class had read a discussion of creativity by Jacob Bronowski and were supposed to write papers agreeing or disagreeing with his discussion. What, Marita wondered, would she say? "What is the insight with which the scientist tries to see into nature?" asked Bronowski. Marita wasn't a scientist, and she didn't consider herself to be a particularly creative person, like an artist or an actress. Her father had always been absolute about the expression of opinion, especially with his daughters: "Don't talk unless you know." "All science is the search for unity in hidden likenesses," asserted Bronowski. "The world is full of fools who speak in ignorance," Marita's father would say, and Marita grew up cautious and reticent. Her thoughts on creativity seemed obvious or, worse yet, silly next to

this man Bronowski. What did it mean anyway when he said: "We remake nature by the act of discovery, in the poem or in the theorem"? She wanted to do well on the assignment, so she went to the little library by her house and looked in the encyclopedia. She found an entry on creativity and used some selections from it that had to do with mathematicians and scientists. On the bottom of the last page of her paper, she listed the encyclopedia and her English composition textbook as her references. What had she done wrong? "They're saying I cheated. I didn't cheat." She paused and thought. "You're supposed to use other people, and I did, and I put the name of the book I used on the back of my paper."

The counselor handed me the paper. It was clear by the third sentence that the writing was not all hers. She had incorporated stretches of old encyclopedia prose into her paper and had quoted only some of it. I couldn't know if she had lifted directly or paraphrased the rest, but it was formal and dated and sprinkled with high-cultural references, just not what you'd find in freshman writing. I imagined that it had pleased her previous teachers that she cared enough about her work to go find sources, to rely on experts. Marita had come from a tough school in Compton—an area to the southeast of where I'd grown up—and her conscientiousness and diligence, her commitment to the academic way, must have been a great joy to those who taught her. She shifted, hoisting herself back up from the recesses of the counselor's chair. "Are they going to dismiss me? Are they going to kick me out of school?"

Marita was adrift in a set of conventions she didn't fully understand; she offended without knowing why. Virtually all the writing academics do is built on the writing of others. Every argument procedes from the texts of others. Marita was only partially initiated to how this works: She was still unsure as to how to weave quotations in with her own prose, how to mark the difference, how to cite whom she used, how to strike the proper balance between her writing and someone else's—how, in short, to position herself in an academic discussion.

I told Marita that I would talk with her teacher and that I was sure we could work something out, maybe another chance to write the paper. I excused myself and walked slowly back to my office, half lost in thought, reading here and there in the Bronowski excerpt. It was typical fare for Freshman English anthologies, the sort of essay you'd originally find in places like *The New Yorker*. Bronowski, the eminent scientist, looking back on his career, weaving poetry in with cybernetics, quoting *Faust* in German, allusive, learned, reflective.

The people who put together those freshman anthologies are drawn to this sort of thing: It's in the tradition of the English essay and reflects rich learning and polished style. But it's easy to forget how difficult these essays can be and how developed a taste they require. When I was at Loyola, someone recommended I buy Jacques Barzun's *The Energies of Art*, a collection of "fifteen striking essays on art and culture." I remember starting one essay and stopping, adrift, two or three pages later. Then another, but no go. The words arose from a depth of knowledge and a developed perception and a wealth of received ways to talk about art and a seemingly endless reserve of allusions. I felt like a janitor at a gallery opening, silent, intimidated, little flecks of knowledge—Bagehot, Stendhal, baroque ideology—sticking to the fiber of my broom.

Marita's assignment assumed a number of things: an ability to slip into Bronowski's discussion, a reserve of personal experiences that the writer herself would perceive as creative, a knowledge of and facility with—confidence with, really—the kinds of stylistic moves you'd find in those *New Yorker* essays. And it did *not* assume that someone, by family culture, by gender, would be reluctant to engage the reading on its own terms. Marita was being asked to write in a cognitive and social vacuum. I'm sure the other students in her class had a rough time of it as well. Many competent adult writers would too. But the solution Marita used marked her as an outsider and almost tripped the legal switches of the university.

At twenty-eight, Lucia was beginning her second quarter at UCLA. There weren't many people here like her. She was older, had a family, had transferred in from a community college. She represented a population that historically hadn't gained much entrance to places like this: the returning student, the single, working mother. She had a network of neighbors and relatives that provided child care. On this day, though, the cousin on tap had an appointment at Immigration, so Lucia brought her baby with

her to her psychology tutorial. Her tutor had taken ill that morning, so rather than turn her away, the receptionist brought her in to me, for I had spoken with her before. Lucia held her baby through most of our session, the baby facing her, Lucia's leg moving rhythmically, continually—a soothing movement that rocked him into sleep.

Upon entrance to UCLA, Lucia declared a psychology major. She had completed all her preliminary requirements at her community college and now faced that same series of upper-division courses that I took when I abandoned graduate study in English some years before: Physiological Psychology, Learning, Perception . . . all that. She was currently enrolled in Abnormal Psychology, "the study of the dynamics and prevention of abnormal behavior." Her professor had begun the course with an intellectual curve ball. He required the class to read excerpts from Thomas Szasz's controversial *The Myth of Mental Illness*, a book that debunks the very notions underlying the traditional psychological study of abnormal behavior, a book that was proving very difficult for Lucia.

My previous encounter with Lucia had convinced me that she was an able student. She was conscientious about her studies—recopied notes, visited professors—and she enjoyed writing: she wrote poems in an old copy book and read popular novels, both in Spanish and English. But Szasz—Szasz was throwing her. She couldn't get through the twelve-and-a-half pages of introduction. I asked her to read some passages out loud and explain them to me as best she could. And as Lucia read and talked, it became clear to me that while she could, with some doing, pick her way through Szasz's sophisticated prose, certain elements of his argument, particular assumptions and allusions, were foreign to her—or, more precisely, a frame of mind or tradition or set of assumptions that was represented by a single word, phrase, or allusion was either unknown to her or clashed dramatically with frames of mind and traditions of her own.

Here are the first few lines of Szasz's introduction:

> Psychiatry is conventionally defined as a medical specialty concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of mental diseases. I submit that this definition, which is still widely accepted, places psychiatry in the company of alchemy and astrology and commits it to the category of pseudoscience. The reason for this is that there is no such thing as "mental illness."

One powerful reason Lucia had decided to major in psychology was that she wanted to help people like her brother, who had a psychotic break in his teens and had been in and out of hospitals since. She had lived with mental illness, had seen that look in her brother's eyes, felt drawn to help people whose mind had betrayed them. The assertion that there was no such thing as mental illness, that it was a myth, seemed incomprehensible to her. She had trouble even entertaining it as a hypothesis, and thus couldn't play out its resonances and implications in the pages that followed. Szasz's bold claim was a bone sticking in her assumptive craw.

Here's another passage alongside which she had placed a question mark:

> The conceptual scaffolding of medicine, however, rests on the principles of physics and chemistry, as indeed it should, for it has been, and continues to be, the task of medicine to study and if necessary to alter, the physiochemical structure and function of the human body. Yet the fact remains that human sign-using behavior does not lend itself to exploration and understanding in these terms. We thus remain shackled to the wrong conceptual framework and terminology.

To understand this passage, you need to have some orientation to the "semiotic" tenet that every human action potentially carries some kind of message, that everything we do can be read as a sign of more than itself. This has become an accepted notion in high-powered liberal studies, an inclination to see every action and object as a kind of language that requires interpretation. The notion and its implications—the conversation within which the phrase "sign-using" situates you—was foreign to Lucia. So it was difficult for her to see why Szasz was claiming that medicine was the "wrong conceptual framework" with which to study abnormal behavior.

Here's a third passage:

Man thus creates a heavenly father and an imaginary replica of the protected childhood situation to replace the real or longed-for father and family. The differences between traditional religious doctrine, modern political historicism, and psychoanalytic orthodoxy thus lie mainly in the character of the "protectors": they are, respectively, God and the priests, the totalitarian leader and his apologists, and Freud and the psychoanalysts.

While Freud criticized revealed religion for the patent infantilism that it is, he ignored the social characteristics of closed societies and the psychological characteristics of their loyal supporters. He thus failed to see the religious character of the movement he himself was creating.

Lucia's working-class Catholicism made it difficult for her to go along with, to intellectually toy with, the comparison of Freud to God, but there was another problem here too, not unlike the problem she had with the "sign-using" passage. It is a standard move in liberal studies to find religious analogues to nonreligious behaviors, structures, and institutions. Lucia could certainly "decode" and rephrase a sentence like: "He thus failed to see the religious character of the movement he himself was creating," but she didn't have the background to appreciate what happens to Freud and psychoanalysis the moment Szasz makes his comparison, wasn't familiar with the wealth of conclusions that would follow from the analogy.

And so it went with other key passages. Students like Lucia are often thought to be poor readers or to have impoverished vocabularies (though Lucia speaks two languages); I've even heard students like her referred to as culturally illiterate (though she has absorbed two cultural heritages). It's true there were words Lucia didn't know (*alchemy, orthodoxy*) and sentences that took us two or three passes to untangle. But it seemed more fruitful to see Lucia's difficulties in understanding Szasz as having to do with her belief system and with her lack of familiarity with certain ongoing discussions in humanities and social science—with frames of mind, predispositions, and background knowledge. To help Lucia with her reading, then, I explained five or six central discussions that go on in liberal studies: the semiotic discussion, the sacred-profane discussion, the medical vs. social model discussion. While I did this, I was encouraging her to talk through opinions of her own that ran counter to these discussions. That was how she improved her reading of Szasz. The material the professor assigned that followed the introduction built systematically off it, so once Lucia was situated in that introduction, she had a framework to guide her through the long passages that followed, all of which elaborated those first twelve pages.

The baby pulled his face out of his mother's chest, yawned, squirmed, and turned to fix on me, wide-eyed. Lucia started packing up her books with a free hand. I had missed lunch. "Let's go," I said. "'I'll walk out with you." Her movement distressed the baby, so Lucia soothed him with soft coos and clicks, stood up, and shifted him to her hip. We left Campbell Hall and headed southeast, me toward a sandwich, Lucia toward the buses that ran up and down Hilgard on UCLA's east boundary. It was a beautiful California day, and the jacarandas were in full purple bloom. Lucia talked about her baby's little discoveries, about a cousin who worried her, about her growing familiarity with this sprawling campus. "I'm beginning to know where things are," she said, pursing her lips. "You know, the other day some guy stopped me and asked *me* where Murphy Hall was . . . and I could tell him." She looked straight at me: "It felt pretty good!" We walked on like this, her dress hiked up where the baby rode her hip, her books in a bag slung over her shoulder, and I began to think about how many pieces had to fall into place each day in order for her to be a student: The baby couldn't wake up sick, no colic or rashes, the cousin or a neighbor had to be available to watch him, the three buses she took from East L.A. had to be on time—no accidents or breakdowns or strikes—for travel alone took up almost three hours of her school day. Only if all these pieces dropped in smooth alignment could her full attention shift to the complex and allusive prose of Thomas Szasz. "Man thus creates a heavenly father and an imaginary replica of the protected childhood situation to replace the real or longed-for father and family."

During the time I was working with Denise and Lucia and the others, all hell was breaking loose in American education. The literacy crisis that has become part of our current cultural vocabu-

lary was taking shape with a vengeance. It was in December 1975 that *Newsweek* informed America that Johnny couldn't write, and in the fall of 1976 the *Los Angeles Times* declared a "Drop in Student Skills Unequalled in History." California, the *Times* article went on to reveal, had "one of the most pronounced drops in achievement of all." Reports on the enrollment and retention of students are a long-standing tradition in the way education conducts its business, but it seemed that every month now a new document was appearing on my desk: reports from a vice-chancellor or the university president's office or from some analyst in the state legislature. What percentage of people from families below a certain income level were entering college? What were their SAT scores? What were the SAT scores of blacks? Chicanos? Asians? More locally, how many UCLA students were being held for remedial English? Remedial math? Were there differences by race or income?

This was a new way for me to look at education. My focus had been on particular students and their communities, and it tended to be a teacher's focus, rich in anecdote and observation. Increasingly, my work in the Tutorial Center required that I take a different perspective: I had to think like a policy-maker, considering the balance sheet of economics and accountability. Chip would sit with me in the late afternoon, going over the charts and tables, showing me how to use them to argue for our programs, for in an academic bureaucracy admissions statistics and test scores and retention rates are valued terms of debate. All teaching is embedded in a political context, of course, but the kind of work I had done before coming to the Tutorial Center tended to isolate me from the immediate presence of institutions: working with a group of kids in the corner of a cafeteria, teaching veterans in a dingy satellite building. I was learning from Chip and from a shrewd vice-chancellor named Chuck Ries how to work within the policy-maker's arena. And though it was, at times, uncomfortable for me and though I would soon come to question the legitimacy of the vision it fostered, it provided an important set of lessons. Probably the central value of being at the Tutorial Center was that it forced me to examine the broad institutional context of writing instruction and underpreparation.

The work in the center led to other projects, and during my four years in Campbell Hall, I would be invited to participate in

them. One was the Writing Research Project, initiated by Vice-Chancellor Ries, and its purpose was to study the uses of writing and the way it was taught at UCLA. Another was the Freshman Summer Program, six intensive weeks before the freshman year during which students took a writing course linked to an introductory course in political science or psychology or history. There is a lot to tell about these ventures—the politics of evaluating a curriculum at a university, the strains of initiating a curriculum that requires people to cross departmental lines—but the most important thing about both projects was that they led me to do something rarely achieved at a research university. I had to stand on the borders of a number of disciplines and study the way knowledge is structured in the academy and, as well, detail what it means to be unprepared to participate in that disciplinary structure.

Students were coming to college with limited exposure to certain kinds of writing and reading and with conceptions and beliefs that were dissonant with those in the lower-division curriculum they encountered. And that curriculum wasn't doing a lot to address their weaknesses or nurture their strengths. They needed practice writing academic essays; they needed opportunities to talk about their writing—and their reading; they needed people who could quickly determine what necessary background knowledge they lacked and supply it in comprehensible ways. What began troubling me about the policy documents and the crisis reports was that they focused too narrowly on test scores and tallies of error and other such measures. They lacked careful analysis of the students' histories and lacked, as well, analysis of the cognitive and social demands of the academic culture the students now faced. The work I was doing in the Tutorial Center, in the Writing Research Project, and in the Summer Program was guiding me toward a richer understanding of what it meant to be underprepared in the American research university. It seemed to me there were five overlapping problem areas—both cognitive and social—that could be used to explain the difficulties experienced by students like Marita and James and Lucia. These by no means applied equally to all the students whom I came to know, but taken together they represent, better than pie charts and histograms, what it means to be underprepared at a place like UCLA.

Many young people come to the university able to summarize the events in a news story or write a personal response to a play or a movie or give back what a teacher said in a straightforward lecture. But they have considerable trouble with what has come to be called critical literacy: framing an argument or taking someone else's argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue, or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on. The authors of the crisis reports got tremendously distressed about students' difficulty with such tasks, but it's important to remember that, traditionally, such abilities have only been developed in an elite: in priests, scholars, or a leisure class. Ours is the first society in history to expect so many of its people to be able to perform these very sophisticated literacy activities. And we fail to keep in mind how extraordinary it is to ask *all* our schools to conduct this kind of education—not just those schools with lots of money and exceptional teachers and small classes—but massive, sprawling schools, beleaguered schools, inner-city schools, overcrowded schools. It is a charge most of them simply are not equipped to fulfill, for our educational ideals far outstrip our economic and political priorities.

We forget, then, that by most historical—and current—standards, the vast majority of a research university's underprepared students would be considered competently literate. Though they fail to meet the demands made of them in their classes, they fail from a literate base. They are literate people straining at the boundaries of their ability, trying to move into the unfamiliar, to approximate a kind of writing they can't yet command. And as they try, they'll make all the blunders in word choice and sentence structure and discourse strategy that regularly get held up for ridicule, that I made when I was trying to write for my teachers at Loyola. There's a related phenomenon, and we have research evidence of this: As writers move further away from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up. Before we shake our heads at these errors, we should also consider the possibility that many such linguistic bungles are signs of growth, a stretching beyond what college freshmen can comfortably do with written language. In fact, we should *welcome* certain kinds of errors,

make allowance for them in the curricula we develop, analyze rather than simply criticize them. Error marks the place where education begins.

Asked to produce something that is beyond them, writers might also fall back on strategies they already know. Asked to take a passage critically apart, they'll summarize it. We saw this with James, the young man distressed with his C−, but as with so much else in this book, the principle applies to more than just those labeled underprepared. I was personally reminded of it when I was writing my dissertation. My chairman was an educational research methodologist and statistician; my background straddled humanities and social science, but what I knew about writing tended to be shaped by literary models. When it came time to report on the procedures I was using in my study—the methods section of the dissertation—I wrote a detailed chronology of what I did and how I did it. I wanted to relay all the twists and turns of my investigation. About a week later I got it back covered with criticism. My chairman didn't want the vagaries of my investigative life; he wanted a compressed and systematic account. "What do you think this is," he wrote alongside one long, dancing stretch of narrative, "*Travels with Charley?*"

Associated with these difficulties with critical literacy are students' diverse orientations toward inquiry. It is a source of exasperation to many freshmen that the university is so predisposed to question past solutions, to seek counterexplanations—to continually turn something nice and clean and clear into a problem. English professor David Bartholomae recalls a teacher of his suggesting that, when stuck, student writers should try the following "machine": "While most readers of ____ have said ____, a close and careful reading shows that ____." The teacher's machine perfectly expresses the ethos of the university, a fundamental orientation toward inquiry. University professors have for so long been socialized into this critical stance, that they don't realize how unsettling it can be to students who don't share their unusual background.

There is Scott sitting in an Astronomy tutorial, his jaw set, responding to another student's question about a finite versus an infinite universe: "This is the kind of question," he says, "that you'll argue and argue about. It's stupid. No one wins. So why

do it?" And there is Rene who can't get beyond the first few sentences of her essay for Speech. She has to write a critical response to an address of Ronald Reagan's. "You can't criticize the president," she explains. "You've gotta support your president even if you don't agree with him." When students come from other cultures, this discordance can be even more pronounced. Our tutors continually encouraged their students to read actively, to ask why authors say what they say, what their claims are, what assumptions they make, where you, the reader, agree or disagree. Hun's tutor is explaining this to him, then has him try it, has him read aloud so she can guide him. He reads a few lines and stops short. After two more abortive trials, she pulls out of Hun the explanation that what gets written in books is set in tradition, and he is not learned enough to question the authority of the book.

Remember Andrea? She was the distressed young woman who was failing chemistry. Andrea could memorize facts and formulas but not use them to solve problems—and her inability was representative of a whole class of difficulties experienced by freshmen. What young people come to define as intellectual competence—what it means to know things and use them—is shaped by their schooling. And what many students experience year after year is the exchange of one body of facts for another—an inert transmission, the delivery and redelivery of segmented and self-contained dates and formulas—and thus it is no surprise that they develop a restricted sense of how intellectual work is conducted. They are given Ancient History one year and American History the next, and once they've displayed knowledge of the Fertile Crescent and cuneiform and Assyrian military campaigns, there is little need for them to remember the material, little further opportunity to incorporate it, little reason to use these textbook facts to engage historical problems. Next year it will be American History: a new textbook, new dates and documents and campaigns, new tests—but the same rewards, and the same reasons to forget. John Dewey saw the difficulty long ago: "Only in education, never in the life of the farmer, sailor, merchant, physician, or laboratory experimenter, does knowledge mean primarily a store of information aloof from doing."

Students like Andrea are caught in a terrible bind. They come

to the university with limited experience in applying knowledge, puzzling over solutions, solving problems. Many of the lower-division courses they encounter—their "general education" or "breadth" requirements—will involve little writing or speaking or application, will rely on so-called objective tests that, with limited exception, stress the recall of material rather than the reasoned elaboration of it. But the gatekeeper courses—the courses that determine entrance to a major—they up the intellectual ante. Courses like Andrea's bête noire, Chemistry 11-A, are placed like land mines in the uneven terrain of the freshman year. The special nature of their demands is not made the focus of attention that it should be; that is, the courses are not taught explicitly and self-consciously as courses on how to think as a chemist or a psychologist or a literary critic. And there are few opportunities for students to develop such ability before they enroll in those courses. The faculty, for the most part, do not provide freshmen with instruction on how to use knowledge creatively—and then penalize them when they cannot do so.

It is not unusual for students to come to the university with conceptualizations of disciplines that are out of sync with academic reality. Like the note taker in the lecture hall who opened this chapter, a lot of entering freshmen assume that sociology is something akin to social work, an applied study of social problems rather than an attempt to abstract a theory about social interaction and organization. Likewise, some think psychology will be a discussion of human motivation and counseling, what it is that makes people do what they do—and some coverage of ways to change what they do. It comes as a surprise that their textbook has only one chapter on personality and psychotherapy—and a half dozen pages on Freud. The rest is animal studies, computer models of thought, lots of neurophysiology. If they like to read novels, and they elect a literature course, they'll expect to talk about characters and motive and plot, but instead they're asked to situate the novel amid the historical forces that shaped it, to examine rhetorical and stylistic devices and search the prose for things that mean more than they seem to mean. Political science should be politics and government and current events—nuclear treaties, trade sanctions, the Iran-Contra scandal—but instead it's Marx and Weber and political economy and organizational and

decision-making models. And so goes the litany of misdirection. This dissonance between the academy's and the students' definitions of disciplines makes it hard for students to get their bearings with material: to know what's important, to see how the pieces fit together, to follow an argument, to have a sense of what can be passed over lightly. Thus I would see notebooks that were filled—in frantic script—with everything the professor said or that were scant and fragmented, records of information without coherence.

The discourse of academics is marked by terms and expressions that represent an elaborate set of shared concepts and orientations: alienation, authoritarian personality, the social construction of the self, determinism, hegemony, equilibrium, intentionality, recursion, reinforcement, and so on. This language weaves through so many lectures and textbooks, is integral to so many learned discussions, that it's easy to forget what a foreign language it can be. Freshmen are often puzzled by the talk they hear in their classrooms, but what's important to note here is that their problem is not simply one of limited vocabulary. If we see the problem as knowing or not knowing a list or words, as some quick-fix remedies suggest, then we'll force glossaries on students and miss the complexity of the issue. Take, for example, *authoritarian personality*. The average university freshman will know what *personality* means and can figure out *authoritarian*; the difficulty will come from a lack of familiarity with the conceptual resonances that *authoritarian personality* has acquired in the discussions of sociologists and psychologists and political scientists. Discussion . . . you could almost define a university education as an initiation into a variety of powerful ongoing discussions, an initiation that can occur only through the repeated use of a new language in the company of others. More than anything, this was the opportunity people like Father Albertson, my Shakespeare teacher at Loyola, provided to me. The more comfortable and skillful students become with this kind of influential talk, the more they will be included in further conversations and given access to further conceptual tools and resources—the acquisition of which virtually defines them as members of an intellectual community.

All students require such an opportunity. But those coming to

the university with less-than-privileged educations, especially those from the lower classes, are particularly in need. They are less likely to have participated, in any extended way, in such discussions in the past. They won't have the confidence or the moves to enter it, and can begin to feel excluded, out of place, put off by a language they can't command. Their social marginality, then, is reinforced by discourse and, as happened to me during my first year at Loyola, they might well withdraw, retreat to silence.

This sense of linguistic exclusion can be complicated by various cultural differences. When I was growing up, I absorbed an entire belief system—with its own characteristic terms and expressions—from the worried conversations of my parents, from the things I heard and saw on South Vermont, from the priest's fiery tales. I thought that what happened to people was preordained, that ability was a fixed thing, that there was one true religion. I had rigid notions about social roles, about the structure of society, about gender, about politics. There used to be a rickety vending machine at Manchester and Vermont that held a Socialist Workers newspaper. I'd walk by it and feel something alive and injurious: The paper was malevolent and should be destroyed. Imagine, then, the difficulty I had when, at the beginning of my senior year at Mercy High, Jack MacFarland tried to explain Marxism to us. How could I absorb the language of atheistic materialism and class struggle when it seemed so strange and pernicious? It wasn't just that Marxist terms-of-art were unfamiliar; they felt assaultive. What I did was revert to definitions of the social order more familiar to me, and Mr. MacFarland had to draw them out of me and have me talk about them and consider them alongside Marx's vision and terminology, examining points of conflict and points of possible convergence. It was only then that I could appropriate Marx's strange idiom.

Once you start to think about underprepared students in terms of these overlapping problem areas, all sorts of solutions present themselves. Students need more opportunities to write about what they're learning and guidance in the techniques and conventions of that writing—what I got from my mentors at Loyola. They need more opportunities to develop the writing strategies that are an intimate part of academic inquiry and what has come

to be called critical literacy—comparing, synthesizing, analyzing—the sort of thing I gave the veterans. They need opportunities to talk about what they're learning: to test their ideas, reveal their assumptions, talk through the places where new knowledge clashes with ingrained belief. They need a chance, too, to talk about the ways they may have felt excluded from all this in the past and may feel threatened by it in the present. They need the occasion to rise above the fragmented learning the lower-division curriculum encourages, a place within a course or outside it to hear about and reflect on the way a particular discipline conducts its inquiry: Why, for example, *do* so many psychologists who study thinking rely on computer modeling? Why is mathematics so much a part of economics? And they need to be let in on the secret talk, on the shared concepts and catchphrases of Western liberal learning.

There is nothing magical about this list of solutions. In fact, in many ways, it reflects the kind of education a privileged small number of American students have received for some time. The basic question our society must ask, then, is: How many or how few do we want to have this education? If students didn't get it before coming to college—and most have not—then what are we willing to do to give it to them now? Chip and I used to talk about our special programs as attempts to create an Honors College for the underprepared. People would smile as we spoke, but, as our students would have said, we were serious as a heart attack. The remedial programs we knew about did a disservice to their students by thinking of them as *remedial*. We wanted to try out another perspective and see what kind of program it would yield. What would happen if we thought of our students' needs and goals in light of the comprehensive and ambitious program structures more often reserved for the elite?

It was during one of our afternoon meetings that Chip confirmed the rumor. We had heard that some faculty members were questioning the money being spent on our programs. They were lobbying to have it shifted, Chip explained, to what they saw as "the legitimate research mission of the university." I had known for a while, for Chip had sensitized me to it, that our position in the

university was a complicated one. Certain powerful administrators and some faculty were our strong supporters—for political, for pedagogical, for ethical reasons—but others were suspicious of us, even questioned our place at a prestigious university like UCLA. The kind of work we did was suspect. What exactly *did* we do? Were we qualified to do it? Did our students belong here—were we, in fact, keeping unqualified kids in school? We didn't have a faculty advisory board or any other institutional link with academic departments, so we had no systematic way to influence or gain support from the professoriat. Chip began loaning me to English free of charge to teach a few classes, seeking even the most superficial of connections.

As it turned out, Vice-Chancellor Ries applied his cunning and successfully countered this particular offensive against our budget, but the experience remained with me. When I took Chip Anderson up on his offer to come to UCLA, I had assumed that the rigorous intellectual methods of the academy would be focused on problems of student learning. But the truth was that, by and large, the research university focuses its collective intelligence on other matters. And the places designated to deal with such problems—tutorial centers and preparatory programs—are conceived of as marginal to the intellectual community. These conditions had direct effects on the young men and women who we came to know at the center.

One day, a professor of English turned to me in the food line and began telling me about an office meeting he had with one of our students. He thought that the fellow's paper on a Wordsworth poem was such a muddle that he simply wrote "see me" on the bottom of the last page. The student showed up and, in the professor's words, the meeting was a disaster. "It was as though I were talking to someone from another planet!" he exclaimed. "I showed him line by line how the poem should be explicated. I figured he just didn't know, so I'd show him. But when he said back to me what I had said to him, I could see that we were talking completely past each other." He stopped and shrugged his shoulders: "I never felt so hopeless."

Some faculty, I knew from my tutors, were especially good with our students, made attempts to understand the difficulties they were having, and seemed to enjoy working with them. But what

was more striking, and I became increasingly aware of it as time went on, was the gulf that existed between so many professors and the students who frequented the Tutorial Center. A number of faculty were like the man from English: They wanted to help but didn't know how, and they found their inability very frustrating. Others were distant and aloof, didn't particularly care to help, and shunted freshmen off to teaching assistants. Of these, a small percentage had real problems with differences of class or race.

Reflecting on my own first awkward year at Loyola, I tended to explain this gulf between faculty and students in strictly social terms. Most faculty didn't share the backgrounds of our program's students, and, unless they made efforts to the contrary, they had increasingly spent time, as we all do, with people of similar persuasion. But as I became more familiar with the university, I began to see that while there certainly could be an ethnic or cultural dimension to these troubling encounters, there was something else going on as well, and it had to do with the very way people are socialized into academic life.

As young scholars progress through graduate study, they acquire more than knowledge and method: Strong allegiances are formed. It's a time of gradual yet powerful shaping of identity as a scholar, the increasing investment of self-worth in research and publication. Graduate study forces you to give a tremendous amount of thought to the development of your discipline, to its methods, exemplary studies, and central texts. People emerge from graduate study, then, as political scientists or astronomers or botanists—but not necessarily as educators. That is, though professors may like to teach, like to talk about the knowledge they've worked so hard to acquire, it is pretty unlikely that they have been encouraged to think about, say, the cognitive difficulties young people have as they learn how to conduct inquiry in physics or anthropology or linguistics, the way biological or historical knowledge is acquired, the reading or writing difficulties that attend the development of philosophical reasoning. These issues, if addressed at all in the academy, are addressed in schools of education, and most faculty hold schools of education in low regard.

I never heard in those years a professor—an anthropologist, for example—say of a poor exam, "There's a curious failed anthropology here," or "Look at the interesting missteps this person makes in trying to articulate the concept of liminality." Rather, the work is judged as legitimate, accurate, close to the current conversations in the discipline, the received wisdom, the canonical texts, or it is inaccurate, not close, a failure. The thrust of graduate training and the professorial commitment that follows from it are toward the preservation of a discipline, not the intellectual development of young people. That English professor had neither the training nor the inclination to see in his student's vexing Wordsworth paper the wealth of clues about the way literary inquiry develops and goes awry. And he didn't seem able to set things up so the student could reveal the twists and turns in that development. Rather, he saw the student's paper as a failed attempt, alien, as if from another planet. And he saw his job as monitoring the rightness or wrongness of incursions into his discipline.

Every so often at UCLA and other similar institutions, the delicious proposal is made to move lower-division instruction—the entire first two years, all the introductory courses—to the state and community colleges. This would allow the disciplinary focus of the university to emerge full-blown: Faculty would only teach students who have already declared their apprenticeships to mathematics or French or musicology. Fortunately, the proposal never gets very far. What's troubling is that among the counterarguments—which are mostly political and economic—you rarely hear concerns about the astounding inbreeding and narrowness that would result: a faculty already conceptually isolated along disciplinary lines talking in more self-referenced ways to less and less diverse audiences. Babel talk. The final isolation of inquiry.

The homiletic nod toward the interconnection of general education and research is commonplace. Yet a variety of investigations—from Laurence Veysey's standard history, *The Emergence of the American University*, to Gerald Graff's critique of English Studies, *Professing Literature*—all suggest that the American university has yet to figure out, conceptually or institutionally, how to integrate its general education mission with its research mission. An unresolved problem: How to interweave the social dimension of knowledge with the preservation of a discipline, how to make the advancement of a discipline go on in concert with the development of young minds.

This is not to deny that research universities have some passionate teachers. They want to excite young people about their discipline. They volunteer to teach introductory courses. But here they meet a powerful institutional reality. Regardless of what the university publicists say, faculty are promoted and given tenure and further promoted for the research they publish, not for the extent of their involvement in undergraduate, especially introductory-level, teaching. Yes, there are unusual cases. If someone's research record is right on the line, then student evaluations of the person's teaching are consulted: If they're exceptionally high or exceptionally low, then they might sway a decision. If the person made an extraordinary contribution to curriculum development, that might count—a little. Such cases are set forth as proof that undergraduate education counts, but by their paucity, they become the exception that proves the rule. Publish or perish. Like most universities, UCLA gives Distinguished Teaching Awards to its outstanding teachers. One very talented professor I knew had superlative student evaluations and was coming up for tenure; she pleaded with her department *not* to advance her for the Distinguished Teaching Award, for winning it, she thought, might bias her tenure committee, making them conclude that too much of her research time had gone into her teaching.

Consider, in the midst of all this, the Tutorial Center and the students who frequent it. Tutorial centers don't produce research—the coin of the realm—but, rather, provide a service. Most of those working in them are not in the professorial ranks and thus are not perceived as having developed the intellectual rigor that comes from such membership. The work the center does is not considered a contribution to a discipline; in fact, much of what tutors do is considered "remedial," work that isn't even part of disciplinary pursuit but preliminary to it. What emerges in the culture's institution that most touts humane, liberal learning is a rigid intellectual class system. Certain kinds of cognitive work are considered peripheral and tainted; those who perform the work become an intellectual underclass. These class divisions of the mind are so powerful that they can override and even contradict one's stated beliefs about the social order. Several faculty whose work embodied a radical critique of culture were dismissive of the work we did. And I heard remarkable stories of distinguished Marxist academics at other schools who flat out refused to teach undergraduate courses. In their scholarly articles, they pursued a critique of meritocratic capitalism, yet in their dealings with students, they replicated the very elitism they assailed in print. One of the simple indicators of our place in the university was the fact that, at least during my stay, not one professor visited the center. We would get occasional phone calls, some friendly, some quizzical, but no one came by to see how we tutored, to inquire about what we were uncovering as we worked with students, to talk about education. The deep divisions of intellectual work in the university kept all of us moving along different strata.

By not considering the kind of work tutorial centers or other preparatory programs do as being worthy of intellectual attention, the university encouraged a kind of loose, unrigorous talk about underpreparation and a reductive means of assessing it. Rather than questioning the local and national crisis reports that surrounded us—subjecting their claims to close investigation, probing their assumptions—the university marched to their apocalyptic drum. It even piped in. Yet the crisis reports were both reflecting and contributing to a set of misleading perceptions of underpreparation. The reports varied widely but tended to build their case on three sources of evidence: declines in scores on various national and local tests, rising enrollments in remedial classes, and observations from professors. These evidential strands combined in rhetorically powerful ways to spark alarm and anger—in legislators, in academics, in the public.

The reports listed scores from both broad national tests and more local, specific assessments, and inferred all sorts of dire things from them. The most famous national test is the Scholastic Aptitude Test—the bane of the college-bound high schooler, the SAT—and the decline in its scores was cited regularly and with assurance, as though the test were a geiger counter of the mind. But tests like the SAT are much more problematic than the public is led to believe. The fairness of the test, its legitimacy as a measure of literacy and academic potential, its use as a prerequisite for admission to college and as an indicator of the performance of the public schools have all been seriously challenged, at times by Educational Testing Service researchers themselves. And, as a

further complicating irony, more recent studies of SAT and other national test scores suggest that, as one research team put it, "evidence for a massive, consistent skill decline . . . is much more mixed than the school critics have claimed."

Local assessments—studies of math or writing skills conducted by specific campuses or systems—were more specific and, in some ways, more legitimate. By their very proliferation, however, and by the academic community's reliance on them, they generated problems of a different order. The data in all the reports—and the charts and graphs that displayed them—became the vocabulary, the elements of a discourse for conducting the business of underpreparation. A vast and wealthy industry of educational institutes and consultants grew up around them. Things that seemed sensible, and in other contexts would never be challenged, now became questions to be solved by quantitative evaluation. The Tutorial Center was asked to demonstrate, with numbers, that getting individual guidance with material you don't understand is helpful, that having a chance to talk about what you're learning is beneficial. The drive to quantify became very strong, a reality unto itself, and what you couldn't represent with a ratio or a chart—what was messy and social and complex—was simply harder to talk about and much harder to get acknowledged. Patricia Cline Cohen, the historian of numeracy, notes that in America there is the belief that "to measure is to initiate a cure." But a focus on quantification—on errors we can count, on test scores we can rank-order—can divert us from rather than guide us toward solutions. Numbers seduce us into thinking we know more than we do; they give the false assurance of rigor but reveal little about the complex cognitive and emotional processes behind the tally of errors and wrong answers. What goes on behind the mistakes simply escapes the measurer's rule.

The second source of evidence for decline found in the crisis reports was statistics on remedial enrollments. The reports claimed that remedial courses were a new and alarming phenomenon, the flooding of the ivy halls with the intellectually unwashed. If anything sparked fear in the general public, these numbers did. But, in fact, courses and programs that we could call remedial are older than fight songs and cheerleaders. Since the mid-1800s, American colleges have been establishing various kinds of preparatory classes within their halls—it was, and is,

their way of maintaining enrollments while bringing their entering students up to curricular par. (In 1894, for example, over 40 percent of entering freshmen came from the "preparatory divisions" of the institutions that enrolled them.) If the 1970s saw an increase in remedial courses and programs, the increase was measured in terms of very recent history and reflected the fact that universities had grown rapidly in the fifties and sixties and now had to scramble to fill their classrooms. So recruitment began for populations that had not traditionally come to college—working-class whites, blacks, and Hispanics, single parents, older folks—students who had, for the most part, received dreary educations down the line. And, yes, they would need special courses, "low-level" courses, remedial courses, but this was not the first taint of curricular sin on an otherwise pristine American university.

And then there were the faculty testimonials about decline. "These are the truly illiterate among us," said the dean. And in memos and public documents and interviews you'd read the judgments, somber and dramatic: "Simple reading is beyond them." "They have ceased to care about ideas." "What we have here is cultural illiteracy." "They have abandoned the word." This was the human side of the crisis reports, the weary battle cries from the front lines—grave and disconsolate. These pronouncements are still with us; they pepper our newspapers and magazines. No matter that the commentators are rarely on the front lines at all, listening closely as students work through an essay, probing for the logic of a sentence gone awry. Ask yourself if it is accurate to say that Lucia, the older student with the baby, can't read. That she is without culture? I'm not asking for softheartedness here—the accusation so often hurled when these questions are raised. I'm simply trying to force precision. Is it accurate to say that Marita, the girl accused of plagiarism, didn't care about ideas? The teacher who thought she was cheating missed completely the intellectual underpinnings of her action and—in a telling leap—leveled a moral judgment instead. The sad thing is that the somber one-liners are accepted, even encouraged, in the very place in the society that refuses to condone easy judgment. No academic would allow such superficial assessments in his or her own discipline.

The crisis reports conveyed a sense of tough-mindedness, but,

in fact, they really weren't that intellectually rigorous at all. They lacked both historical perspective and sophistication about cognition and culture, and their alarmist tone distracted people from careful study of the students they assailed. Blaming the victim allowed institutional contributions to the crisis of underpreparation to be ignored. Stressing the "deficits," "deficiencies," and "handicaps" of the students, quantitatively displayed, diverted attention from the segmented dispensary that lower-division education has become. In the candid opinion of one university administrator:

> Almost uniformly throughout the lower division in the social sciences, I am convinced that the quality of education cannot at present be described as university-level. . . . Typically, 17- and 18-year-old freshmen, many if not most underprepared for the university, are herded together into large, anonymous lecture classes. . . . [They] take, at most, two machine-scored objective tests, with no homework assignments, no opportunity or necessity to communicate orally, no written work, and no direct contact of any kind with anyone in a teaching role, and all too frequently no human contact of any kind. . . .

Because of the complex mix of cognitive and cultural factors we've seen, the EOP students felt most strongly the effects of this impersonal, fragmented education; they, truly, were the least prepared for it, though not necessarily for the reasons the crisis reports would have us believe. But their difficulties served to illuminate, to throw into relief, the problems a great number of students—not just ours—were having. The struggles of the underprepared were revealing the needs of the many.

Not too long ago I was speaking about curriculum at another university. It was a lunchtime speech, preceded by murmurs and clinking glassware, and I was about to leave my chair for the podium when a young woman walked up to me and asked me if I remembered her. She was vaguely familiar, a little lighter or a little heavier than someone I once knew, hair longer, shorter maybe—something. "I'm Concepción Baca," she said, extending

her hand. "I was in the first summer program. I'm in graduate school here. I'm in Comparative Literature." She paused. "You're surprised, aren't you? I bet I'm the last person you expected to see here." Well, not the last. But I was surprised.

After my talk, Concepción and I sat down together. She had come, it turned out, because the director of Freshman Writing at this school had asked his teaching assistants to attend. He came over and joined us. Concepción, he said, was one of his best writing teachers. She was also doing excellent work in her graduate studies. Comparative Literature is a backbreaking degree—you must be proficient in the literature of three languages—and Concepción was getting close to the dissertation stage. "So, how'd you end up here?," I asked. "Well," she shrugged, "it's a long story. Did you know that I dropped out of UCLA?" I didn't, and as she spoke, I heard an interesting and not unfamiliar story.

Concepción stayed at UCLA for almost two years, taking a range of courses, from history and psychology to English and linguistics. Her record was spotty: some A's, some C's, two incompletes that turned to F's because she failed to make them up. That put her on academic probation. In the middle of her sophomore year, she quit. "I never really got used to living away from home," she explained. "I never felt right about it." She had trouble deciding on a major. Her best grades were in Latin American Studies, American Immigrant History, and English. She had liked English in the summer program and elected three or four other English courses along the way. Her teachers said her writing was okay, told her she should work on it. But what would she do with an English major? Her parents were spending a lot of money on her. She missed them. What would she major in? How could she keep going to school when their money was so tight? She withdrew and went to work. Two years later, she entered a different University of California campus. She had made some money herself and had a lot of time to think about those two years at UCLA. She liked cultural history and English, and those interests led her to comparative literature. She blossomed. She graduated with very good grades and went on to graduate school.

People who work in tutoring centers and preparatory programs get used to spending intense bursts of time with their students. You get closely involved for a few weeks or a few months, and

then you send them off. And you wonder. You know some won't make it. There's too much working against their success. They'll drift in and out of academic probation, their transcripts a listing of C's, C-minuses, a D or two, and then the fatal F that exits them. That was what happened to Andrea, the young woman who was having such a miserable time with chemistry, who I was afraid might hurt herself just to escape. She was longing to be premed when General Chemistry was insurmountable. There are some, though, who do make it. Even those you thought were doomed. There was Vincent, whose summer program teacher commented that his writing was "very poor," who was on academic probation for part of his freshman year, who kept showing up at the Tutorial Center to work on his writing, who finally had to withdraw but came back and cleared his record as a sophomore—and by the time he was a junior was getting B's, who earned an A-minus in Advanced Composition during his senior year. Vincent's parents were migrant workers in South Fresno. Neither had gone to high school. Vincent was now thinking about graduate school in urban planning. It can happen.

As I was driving home, I thought about Concepción. I thought about how long it sometimes takes to achieve a balance, how much of myself I saw in her, how easy it would have been to misperceive her as a freshman: scattershot course selection, incompletes, C's in introductory courses, probation—and finally withdrawal. She was listed, I'm sure, as one of the summer program's failures. An attrition statistic. Concepción eventually found her way; many like her aren't as fortunate. Research universities are awful places for freshmen to be adrift, to be searching, to be in need. Attrition may be a blessing, as many contend, for it naturally purges the university of those who don't belong, those who never should have come. There's a kind of harsh institutional truth to that, I suppose, but to embrace it, you'll have to limit your definition of achievement—blunt your sense of wonder. What you'll have to do, finally, is narrow your vision of the society you want to foster.

8

Crossing Boundaries

Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order. Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision—blind us to the logic of error and the everpresent stirring of language—and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, deficiency. And the longer I stay in education, the clearer it becomes to me that some of our basic orientations toward the teaching and testing of literacy contribute to our inability to see. To truly educate in America, then, to reach the full sweep of our citizenry, we need to question received perception, shift continually from the standard lens. The exploratory stories that bring this book to its close encourage us to sit close by as people use language and consider, as we listen, the orientations that limit our field of vision.

> The humanities presume particular methods of expression and inquiry—language, dialogue, reflection, imagination, and metaphor. . . . [and] remain dedicated to the disciplined development of verbal, perceptual, and imaginative skills needed to understand experience.
>
> —*The Humanities in American Life,* Report of the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities

Two young men have walked in late and are standing around the back of the classroom, halfheartedly looking for seats. One