Eric Miraglia

A SELF-DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT IN THE BASIC WRITING COURSE[1]

ABSTRACT: *Self-diagnostic assessment offers basic writing teachers the oppor-tunity to begin their course by engaging students in a dialogue about writing. Unlike traditional diagnostic assessment, self-diagnosis explicitly acknowledges and values the rhetorical expertise of the student writer. In this study, two students' responses to a self-diagnostic prompt are analyzed for their effective-ness both as articulations of the students' concerns and as diagnostic tools for the writing instructor. Through form and content analyses of the students' self-diagnostic writing and through interviews with the students and their teacher, the essays are revealed to be effective in allowing the reader to perform an accurate "diagnosis" and in allowing students the opportunity to articulate their own interests and concerns about their writing.*

The Problem of Where to Begin

"Begin with where they are," advises Ann Berthoff (9).[2]

Wise words, most basic writing teachers would agree. But, as is so often the case with adages and aphorisms, we can ask ourselves a myriad of "where" questions: where our students are as students, where they are as writers, where they are as growing and changing people, where they are within the com-plex matrices of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, where they are (as Berthoff would have us ask) as "language animals" (9). None of these questions is frivolous; if answered with any richness of detail, each would provide valuable infor-

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Eric Miraglia teaches basic writing, freshman composition, and ESL at Wash-ington State University.

mation relevant to a writing teacher's task. In one sense, however, they might all be expected to provide similar answers to the question of "where they are." We would inevitably discover that they are from different places (socially, economically, academically), that they are moving at different speeds and going in different directions, that each has his or her assets, insecurities, goals, and fears. Instead of locating a point at which we can begin, we would discover many points, all in motion, dispersed across a multidimensional space.

A traditional and popular way to begin confronting this complex collage in the basic writing course is with a diagnostic essay, which digests complexity by subordinating all possible first questions to a single overarching one. As Charles Cooper explains, diagnostic assessments are meant to answer that most crucial of all questions: They "tell us *how to help* students" (13-14). More specifically, Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn recommend the diagnostic essay to teachers as a way to "see your students' work immediately, to gauge the level of writing each is capable of as the course begins, and to calculate your own pace in teaching them as individuals and as a class" (32). Whatever the question a diagnostic prompt asks, the ultimate purpose is the same—to locate students as writers, to identify and evaluate important characteristics of their use of written discourse. However, even if diagnostic essays share this comparatively consistent purpose, the means by which they achieve their end are broadly divergent, running the gamut from the hackneyed genre of "tell me how you spent your summer vacation" to prompts which call for sophisticated textual analysis. Any of the "where" questions suggested by Berthoff's maxim can be construed as a diagnostic project; almost any written assignment is in some way diagnostic because the term itself is so ambiguous, so open to varied interpretations of what is to be diagnosed and how such diagnosis is to be arrived at. This complicates the already complex process of writing an essay prompt, for as Edward White explains, "The extraordinary compression of form, the need for clarity and exactness of communication, [and] the requirement that the assignment elicit a response from students with disparate interests and varying levels of creativity" all contribute to this difficulty (21). Given the challenges faced by the designers of diagnostic prompts, it is hardly surprising that critics have found cause to complain about the way diagnostic essays are frequently shaped. In "The Writing Autobiography: Where to Begin in a Two-Year College

Writing Course," John Sandman and Michael Weiser criticize the typical diagnostic essay which solicits responses to such prompts as "write an essay about a significant person in your life," or "describe a place that is particularly special to you."

> The essays teachers receive in response to this kind of assignment often cause them to underestimate students' abilities, or to become overly concerned about students who, given a longer time and more practice at composing, turn out to be very able writers. Therefore, these essays are, at best, unreliable indicators of students' writing abilities. Most importantly, these essays are a very indirect way to assess students' strengths and weaknesses. (2-3)

In the first week of a basic writing class, such prompts are likely to generate, in Anne DiPardo's words, "a batch of . . . essays [which] is comparable to a summer's stroll in the Sahara" (46). In my view, there are at least three fundamental problems which contribute to the failure of such diagnostic prompts to provide desirable results:

1. **Masked intentions:** Most diagnostic essay prompts ask one question when in fact they are designed to answer another. The student may be writing about visiting his Aunt Bettie in the hospital, but the teacher, in looking for rhetorical strengths and weaknesses, is likely to be more interested in diagnosing the student than in reading sensitively about the doctors' diagnosis of Aunt Bettie. And the student *knows*, even as he is writing about Aunt Bettie, that the teacher's agenda is hidden somewhere beneath the overt language of the prompt. The result is that student and teacher begin their basic writing journey facing in different directions.

2. **Magical thinking:** Such prompts embody what Janet Emig calls "magical thinking" (135). That is, they operate under the assumption that the teacher can clinically diagnose problems, and that their students will learn because (and only because) they address these problems in their teaching (135).

3. **Assumptions of expertise:** In a typical diagnostic essay (even those which ask sophisticated questions), rhetorical expertise is assumed to reside only with the teacher. The student is the expert on his Aunt Bettie; the teacher is the expert on writing and the discourse surrounding its evaluation.

In the project detailed here, a study of two students' responses to a self-diagnostic assessment prompt, I explore one alternative to the indirectness and covertness of ineffective

diagnostic essay prompts, an alternative which seeks to address each of these three problems. The students were asked to begin the semester by assessing, in writing, their abilities as writers. Such an approach differs from the diagnostic prompts criticized by Sandman and Weiser in the following ways:

1. **Unmasked intentions:** The question being asked is precisely the question the diagnostic essay is designed to answer. Because the agenda is explicit, the first assignatory gesture of the course engages the student and teacher in a collaborative project; they begin their journey facing the same direction.

2. **Nonmagical thinking:** Gone is the assumption that the teacher must teach for the student to learn. This approach invites the student to actively participate in the articulation of her own rhetorical strengths and weaknesses. As Mary Beaven suggests in her work on individualized goal-setting, such participation may be crucial to the student's ultimate success: "Only when a student is free to decide upon his or her own goals for improvement or experimentation," Beaven suggests, "will he or she be able to explore those elements which impede progress—elements which a teacher or peers may know nothing about" (145).

3. **Assumptions of expertise:** Rhetorical expertise is assumed to be shared between student and teacher; the discourse surrounding the evaluation of rhetorical concerns is constructed at the outset as a dialogue. As Richard Beach argues, the writing student's entrance into this dialogue is fundamental to her long-term progress as a writer; beyond the short-term goals of helping students "revise and improve a particular paper" is the "ultimate, long-range goal" of "help[ing] students learn to critically evaluate writing on their own" ("Showing" 127). And in order for students to engage in that critical evaluation, they must have the linguistic tools which make metadiscursive reflection possible. According to David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, "the purpose of this reflection is to enable revision, to enable students to reimagine the roles they might play as readers and writers. A course in . . . writing must, then, provide students with place to begin, and it must do this in the first week of class" (7). It is Bartholomae and Petrosky's version of "where to begin" that this project attempts to locate.

The challenge, then, was to design a prompt which would represent a reasonable beginning point (as suggested by Berthoff's maxim), while simultaneously resisting the criticisms offered by Sandman and Weiser, operating under Emig's nonmagical assumptions, and meeting the mandate implicit in the advice of

Beaven. And a self-diagnostic assessment seemed, in theory, to answer each of these concerns.[3]

A Prompt and a Project

The diagnostic instrument in this study was tested in practice by examining case studies of basic writing students to determine whether or not their self-diagnostic essays early in the semester provided an accurate picture of their writing abilities. The essays were examined for both content (*what* was said—students' assessment of their needs) and form (*how* it was said—teacher's assessment of student needs). The content analyses were tested against interviews with the students, whereas the form analyses were tested against late-in-the-term interviews with the instructor. We assumed that if the content analyses were accurate, the implication would be that the prompt was an effective instrument for these students to articulate their writing goals; if the form analyses were accurate, the prompt could be considered effective as a diagnostic measure.

To this end, the following in-class writing prompt was distributed to a class of basic writing students in the Spring semester of 1993 at a large land-grant university in the Northwest. Seventeen students responded to the prompt the day it was distributed, taking the full fifty-minute period to respond; two students who were absent responded to the prompt a week later during the instructor's office hours.

> *Compose a personal essay which answers the following questions:*
>
> 1. What do you feel are your strongest attributes as a writer?
> 2. What are your biggest concerns about your own writing?
> 3. What are the skills you would most like to learn or improve upon in English 100 [basic writing]?

Whereas Sandman and Weiser propose an instrument which is much broader in scope, one that will elicit a literacy narrative rather than a self-diagnostic, this prompt asks the students to focus directly on the questions a diagnostic essay is designed to answer.

The Case Studies: Scott and Jeline

From the group of seventeen who initially wrote responses to the prompt, four were invited to participate in the project

based on a subjective evaluation of their potential to be "representative" of the rest of the group; in other words, their responses were generally consistent in content and form with the responses of the class as a whole. Of these four, two (Scott and Jeline, both of whom were native speakers of English) agreed to be involved. These two became the subjects of our case studies.

Scott went to a suburban high school in the Northwest, graduating in 1986. After high school he worked in a gas station, eventually doing work as a mechanic, then progressed to managing a wrecking yard, and finally went to work in construction. Now, at 25, Scott is a freshman pursuing a degree in construction management. His last experience in academic writing was his sophomore year in high school, a class he "snuck out of" with a C-. After that he avoided English by taking music classes, physical education, and weight lifting, and graduated from high school without ever seeing the inside of another English classroom. Since then, his experiences with writing have been sparse; what little he has done has consisted of brief notes to jobmates during the workday and three or four letters to his grandparents. Scott is currently being treated for an ulcer, which has caused him to miss class frequently during the course of the semester and has made it difficult for him to focus on any lengthy academic task.

Jeline, 33, dropped out of high school at age 15. Fifteen years later, a single mother of one, she has decided that she needs to do more to ensure the future of herself and her child; thus, her return to school after more than fifteen years. Since high school, Jeline's experiences with writing have been largely vocational. In working as a secretary she learned the fine art of changing a few words around in an old letter in order to produce a new one, a responsibility she recalls performing at a rate of about one per month; she relied on friends and coworkers to proofread her business writing, never sending out a piece of writing that hadn't been checked by "a good writer." Infrequent letters to close friends or relatives represented the balance of her writing experience since leaving school.

Our goal was to evaluate how well the diagnostic prompt fulfilled its mandate of outlining student goals and providing the instructor with a clear window into the more technical rhetorical aspects of the students' writing. The first steps in this analysis were suggested by Rose, who writes that "students' literacy narratives [and in this case their self-diagnostic essays] may be understood to represent their authors' experiences not only in their content but also by their form" (246).

The suggestion here is that such essays be examined in two ways: first by *what* the student says (content), and second by *how* the student says it (form). The content and form analyses were independently validated through interviews. In order to check the content analyses, Scott and Jeline were interviewed and asked to respond verbally to the same issues solicited by the prompt. In order to check the form analyses, the subjects' instructor (Paula) was interviewed late in the semester and asked to discuss the specific rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of the subjects. By comparing results from the first tier of inquiry (the content and form analyses) with results from the second tier (the interviews), a diagnosis of sorts was performed on the self-diagnostic prompt.

Scott's essay

Below is Scott's essay. This is a self-diagnostic essay written during a fifty-minute class session in the first week of a basic writing course; the prompt Scott received was identical to the one reproduced above.

> [no title given]
>
> I have lots of concerns about my writing skill. In school, elementary thur high school it was my worst subject. I din't really have any english classes from fourth grade to sixth grade. Then in seventh grade I failed english the whole year. I was given no specail attention by the teacher and she was really strict about the way we wrote. Being at a new school I didn't want to draw attention to my self.
>
> Well I continued to go to class thur ninth grade until my teacher called my parents. Well I still rescieved no help from school just my parents forcing me to do extra work the rest of the year. By the end of the year I pulled my grade up to a C-. The in high school we only had to take one semester of English and I got another C-.
>
> Now I in college after being out of school for over six years, and I concenerd about this. English effects every class that I'm taking right now and I the teach can't understand my writing. I would like to leave college with writing skill that will help me in the future. I think even if I a smart, if I can't write I can't show it.

To the evaluator of this essay, with no prior experience with Scott's writing nor any personal knowledge of him, the first

item of interest would be the self-portrait the writer paints. Recall the prompt to which Scott is responding: he has been asked to detail his strongest attributes, his concerns, and the skills he wishes to acquire during his semester in basic writing. Scott responds by essentially ignoring the first part of the prompt, the question about attributes and jumping straight into his concerns about his writing. From his final sentence the perceptive reader might make an inference that he does in fact see himself as being intelligent; but otherwise he wholly involves himself in explaining his concerns. What Scott writes, in fact, is the literacy narrative that the prompt was designed to free him of; rather than abstractly analyzing his writing acumen, he opts to tell his story and let the reader (his teacher) make of it what she will. This more personal result was neither unexpected nor undesirable, as long as it was volunteered and not demanded. His story isn't terribly intimate, but it does trace a history of open helplessness as he traverses the byways of academic writing.

The finished product fails only on the surface to address the prompt. Admittedly, for this student, the narrative form does not adapt well to the tripartite reckoning of the essay's instructions. However, the reader can derive much from what is said—and is not said—in Scott's essay. For example, the following list of inferences, categorized along the format of the prompt, might be compiled simply from a close reading of the content of this piece.

Attributes
- intelligence

Concerns
- unanimously negative responses of past writing teachers
- desire throughout schooling to avoid academic writing situations
- deleterious impact of poor writing skills across the curriculum
- inability to communicate effectively in writing
- inability to represent true-level intelligence in writing

Desired skills
- ability to succeed in academic writing situations across the curriculum
- ability to communicate more effectively in writing
- ability to demonstrate true level of intelligence through writing

- ability to write at a level that will contribute to professional success beyond college

Despite Scott's overwhelmingly self-deprecatory narrative, most writing instructors would discern and appreciate his attributes. The structure of his piece is, if not creative, at least eminently logical in its linear progression, with one paragraph devoted to presecondary experience, one to secondary experience, and one to his current status as he begins college. Further, his instinct for punctuation appears to serve him well: nearly every sentence is grammatically sound, and his syntax is modestly varied. Clearly, Scott has some substantive strengths.

On the other hand, a pair of lawyerly eyes could fault Scott's performance here on a number of levels. He departs substantially from the prompt by producing a narrative rather than an abstract assessment, a transgression that was anticipated but not one that should automatically be forgiven. As Scott's writing takes him on interdisciplinary voyages to other departments, the ability to stay focused on an explicit writing task will become increasingly important. So he might be faulted for straying off-topic. More seriously, Scott's lack of control over surface features indicates an abiding discomfort with written discourse—spelling errors and other surface inconsistencies seem to proliferate toward the end of the piece, particularly in the final paragraph, indicating that his task focus deteriorated toward the end of the hour. A final concern might be his fluency of expression; the academic tasks he faces in future courses will require the ability to produce longer texts in shorter periods of time (Scott's essay was only 212 words).

In the form analysis, parts two and three of the prompt can be condensed into a single step; part three is the *student's* invitation to set his *own* goals. The following list, then, reflects a form analysis designed to parallel the content analysis performed above:

Attributes
- logical linear structure
- sound instinct for punctuation
- high level of sentence grammaticality
- moderate level of syntactical variation

Concerns
- inattention to assigned topic, judged according to conventional academic standards
- erratic spelling

- surface inconsistencies
- deterioration of task focus
- lack of fluency

The two lists differ substantially. The student's list (on the preceding page) is general and personal, whereas the teacher's list (above) is specific and impersonal. Mismatches derive from differing emphases. As a result, the two lists do not stand in conflict, but rather complement one another, providing an accurate and fairly complete perspective on Scott's writing.

Jeline's essay

Responding to the same prompt given Scott and working under the same time constraint of a 50-minute session, Jeline produced the following piece:

> In-class Essay #1
>
> Being a good writer is not what I would call myself. I don't spell well and putting ideas together in an organizxed form is diffecult for me. I don't speak in an organized fashion, so writting that way is very hard. I do feel that I speak well, given that quality there may be hope for my writting ability.
>
> I have many concerns about my writting skills one of which is fear. Fear of not ever being able to get my point accross on paper. What if I didn't have my voice and the only way to communacate was to write it down. At this point I think I would be in big trouble.
>
> Writting skills are important to me. I would like to learn to get my point accross to the person, reading my writting without boring them to death. I also would like to learn proper sentence structure. Writting letters is a skill that I truely would like to master. At this point in my life I only write to people who know me. They know I switch gears in conversation so only they understand my letters.

Jeline begins with a categorical indictment of her current abilities as a writer: "Being a good writer is not what I would call myself." The prompt, designed to nurture an organizational hierarchy that would place attributes *before* concerns, has been circumvented here to lend stronger emphasis to the importance of this statement. Jeline conjures up an image of herself stricken

without voice, forced to rely solely upon the written word for communication, an image that for her is nothing short of nightmarish. The reader can hardly help but make the inference here that Jeline's self-image as a writer is quite low and her level of writing anxiety is high.

It is also evident that Jeline, unlike Scott, has a great deal to say about the specific deficiencies she perceives in her writing. She alludes to spelling, organization, focus, and sentence structure as either concerns or desired skills; she also mentions a desire to write letters more successfully and to be able to write so as not to "bore [readers] to death." Like Scott, Jeline has nothing overtly positive to say about her writing; however, writing teachers may interpret her endorsement of her speaking abilities as a tentative foray into positive self-analysis and an awareness that she possesses some valuable language skills.

Jeline's list of attributes, concerns, and skills-to-develop are as follows:

Attributes
- strong verbal skills, which might eventually have a positive impact on writing skills

Concerns
- fear of being dependent on writing for communication
- poor spelling
- organization
- "getting my point across"
- writing "boring" texts
- sentence structure

Desired skills
- organization
- spelling
- get point across more effectively
- sentence structure
- producing interesting text
- writing effective letters

Jeline, like Scott, leaves the reader to come to conclusions about where her strengths as a writer might lie; thus, the category of attributes again seems a logical point from which to embark on a parallel form analysis. And Jeline, like Scott, gives herself rather short shrift in her assessment of her abilities as a writer. Despite struggling with written conventions, she most certainly "gets her point across"; she paints a reasonably thorough picture of how she perceives the current state of her

writing skills. In doing so, she demonstrates a certain degree of comfort with the metadiscourse of the composition classroom, throwing around phrases such as "sentence structure" and "organization" with relative ease, though perhaps not with perfect accuracy. Furthermore, after detouring around the first part of the prompt by neglecting to mention any significant attributes, Jeline's essay does effectively organize itself around the structure of the question—not an insignificant accomplishment during the first week of a basic writing course. Another substantial success in this essay is its thoroughness of details in support of its thesis, "Being a good writer is not what I would call myself."

A more subtle attribute here is one suggested by Richard Haswell in his analysis of the writing of "lean" writers: "verbal wit" (275). This is suggested in a number of passages in Jeline's essay: the grim humor of "there may be hope for my writing ability," the colloquial candidness of "at this point I think I would be in big trouble," the hyperbolic self-deprecation of "without boring them to death." Jeline likes to "tell it like it is," to talk the straight talk rather than jazzing up her writing with academic jargon.

Switching back to our lawyerly mode, a quick diagnosis of Jeline's error patterns leads the reader to affirm a number of concerns discovered in the content analysis. Inconsistent spelling is abundant, noteworthy perhaps only in that it suggests concomitant discomforts with other conventions of written language. Jeline is still developing her instincts for punctuation and sentence grammaticality, and she is still learning how to transfer her verbal language skills to the written page. Moreover, Jeline's 189-word production is insufficient for comfortable academic survival across the disciplines. Fluency seems a problem, a concern that is also implicit in the allusion Jeline herself makes to her high degree of writing anxiety.

A teacher's analysis might find the following characteristics to add to Jeline's own comprehensive list:

Attributes
- familiarity with some of composition's metalanguage
- follows, at least loosely, the organization of the question
- supports "thesis" with abundant details
- "verbal wit"

Concerns
- punctuation
- sentence grammaticality
- lack of fluency

Once more, the student's list and the teacher's list appear to be complementary and potentially complete. Combining the two provides a thorough and useful tool for developing strategies for this particular student's instruction.

Talking It Out: The Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to move away from the limitations of the time-constrained diagnostic, to invite a fuller and more accurate representation of Scott and Jeline's self-perceptions as writers and their goals as writing students. In this way, the accuracy of the inferences made above could begin to be judged. Each subject was interviewed twice. The first interview was comparatively informal and served merely to lay down a biographical foundation and to establish a personal conversational relationship between researcher and subject. The second interview was more formal in nature, and it was during this session that a thorough verbal response to the questions from the essay prompt was pursued.

The objective in interviewing Paula (their instructor) was to determine whether the form analyses had provided accurate representations of the subjects' abilities. In other words, would Paula, after reading their work for ten weeks, agree that the form analyses performed on their diagnostic essays had accurately pinpointed the major attributes and weaknesses in their writing? This question was significant, as it would tend to reveal whether or not the proposed prompt was eliciting writing capable of revealing the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of the subjects—the central goals of traditional diagnostic assessment.

Scott's interview

Scott talked at length during our second interview about his concerns as a writer and about the skills he desired to cultivate in basic writing; he even suggested a few characteristics which he considered to be attributes. From a forty-minute discussion which roughly paralleled the structure of the essay prompt, the following list of characteristics in each of the three areas was compiled:

Attributes
- gets to the point
- directness and honesty in writing
- enjoys writing about interesting things

- enjoys creating things
- learns from experience of writing

Concerns
- thinks more about what's wrong than what's right
- spelling
- sentence structure
- unity
- transcription of pretext to written text
- insecurity about mechanics prevents use of some available skills
- used to hate writing
- writing about personal issues
- interference of external stresses in writing process

Desired Skills
- ability to write interesting, enjoyable text
- increased creativity

There are no contradictions between these lists and the ones derived from the content analysis of Scott's essay. There is, however, a major difference in emphasis: in his essay, Scott emphasized academic concerns and expressed a desire to write more successfully for a specifically academic audience, while in our interview his reflections seemed more personal and more introspective. Still, the two lists complement one another. The information generated by the interview is more specific, more personal, and more complete. In the place of an earlier sense of "poor writing skills," there are now specifics such as "spelling," "sentence structure," and "unity," (the latter two of which were already either added or alluded to in our form analysis of Scott's essay). Further, the list now reflects personal concerns, such as his difficulties in shutting out affective interferences and staying focused on an academic task.

In evaluating the form analysis performed on Scott's essay, Paula was limited to discussing work performed in the first six weeks of the course. Scott's ulcer had, apparently, kept him from attending the basic writing class for the three weeks preceding the teacher interview (of interest here is Scott's expressed concern that outside pressures dramatically interfered with his writing process). In regard to the four attributes and five concerns diagnosed in the form analysis, however, Paula was able to agree enthusiastically that they represented an accurate and thorough prediction of the salient characteristics she had observed in Scott's writing throughout the semester.

With only one minor reservation (that his punctuation was a sporadic strength, not a consistent one), Paula endorsed the form analysis's diagnosis.

In his interview, Scott affirmed the goals he had set forth in his essay. While he was able to build upon the essay's framework and present a variety of additional personal goals, he was happy enough to let his essay stand as an accurate indication of where he wanted to go as a writer. Moreover, his teacher verified that Scott's diagnostic essay had provided excellent information.

Jeline's interview

During our second interview, Jeline had the opportunity to elaborate thoroughly on the essay prompt to which she had responded in writing during the first week of the semester. The following table is a condensation of the information generated during that interview:

Attributes
- imagination
- life experiences
- audience awareness

Concerns
- overstressing things
- getting point across
- not being able to use gestures, inflection, etc.
- punctuation
- grammar
- focus
- staying private
- measuring self against peers
- negative reader response

Desired Skills
- organization (focus)
- audience awareness
- ability to write more colorfully
- ability to communicate through letters

A comparison between this list and the one produced by the content analysis of Jeline's self-diagnostic essay reveals no glaring contradictions. During the interview, Jeline, like Scott, shifted emphasis slightly (the concerns were more interpersonal rather than technical) and the list generated by the interview is more elaborated. There has been a move, comparable to

the one described above, toward greater specificity, toward a higher degree of personalness, and toward completeness. The form analysis of Jeline's essay achieved similarly satisfactory results. In our tenth-week interview with the teacher, she agreed without qualification to the four attributes we had observed in Jeline's diagnostic essay. She demonstrated particular enthusiasm for Jeline's comfort in the metadiscourse of composition: Jeline had become part of a study group that met regularly outside of class, where students "would take the classroom out of the classroom and use it amongst themselves." Paula also confirmed two of the three concerns diagnosed in Jeline's essay, dissenting only in regard to the predicted lack of fluency, a problem which had manifested only during timed writing situations.

Jeline's interview, like Scott's, confirmed the goals set forth in her diagnostic essay, coupled with an ability to elaborate verbally on those goals in order to paint a more personal and complete picture. Moreover, our first-week "form analyses" of both students' essays agreed substantially with their teacher's tenth-week analysis of their writing skills.

Some Lessons Learned

Much can be learned from self-diagnostic assessments by studying both their form and their content. In these two cases, the content analyses were verified by interviews with the subjects and the form analyses were verified by interviews with the instructor. The interviews suggested that the students had communicated their goals effectively in their written responses to the prompt (and could communicate them even more effectively and completely in interviews); the interviews with the instructor appeared to confirm that the writing samples generated were sufficient to provide a cogent glimpse of the students' strengths and weaknesses. On the whole, the prompt appeared in the case studies to have performed its duties well.

However, some qualifications are in order:
- Of the three weaknesses of typical diagnostic essay prompts, the alternative explored here seems to have resolved at least one—that is, its intentions are unmasked. However, this approach only *begins* to address the two other principal weaknesses (magical thinking and the assumption of the teacher's evaluative expertise).
- The importance of dialogue and verbal communication between teacher and student is underscored by the dis-

crepancies between the goals outlined by Scott and Jeline in their essays and in their interviews. The goal-setting process that begins in the diagnostic essay must be continued in conference, where metadiscursive dialogue (so important to students' growing ability to envision and reenvision their own texts) can develop.

- In formulating this prompt, we tried to create a writing task that would not demand a large measure of personal revelation. Thus, it is interesting that both subjects of the case studies indicated in interviews that they were deeply concerned about exposing too much of themselves in their writing. Both expressed a desire to be able to communicate on paper in such a way that only their ideas, not their personality, would be transmitted. What percentage of basic writing students feel the same way is unclear; why Scott and Jeline feel the way they do is equally oblique. However, their testimonials lend some credibility to the notion that a focus on writing rather than on writers might be (at least for some students) a good way to start.

- Among the issues neglected in this analysis is that of affect. Implicit in the argument made here is that students ultimately are the ones who must deal with their affective processes, and that we as teachers/facilitators can only help *them* achieve resolution of difficulties which derive from affective origins. As Susan McLeod suggests, the teacher's own affective state, when projected energetically toward his or her students, is one of the most powerful tools she has in addressing affective processes which interfere with writing processes. If the affective processes of basic writing students are as heterogeneous as this evidence suggests, a self-diagnostic prompt which helps illuminate the relations between students' affective processes and their writing could be of immense value.

These case studies suggest only the beginning of the complex process of individualistic student growth. They do, however, reveal that the problem of where to begin does have viable solutions. Beginning a basic writing course with self-diagnostic writing invites students to begin searching out names for the moments of problem and promise they find in their own world of discourse. It helps them reflect on what they are doing and why, moving them toward a growing awareness of their rhetorical behaviors. It is this goal, this figurative "end" to a process which has no true ending, that makes the question of where to begin so important.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Susan McLeod, Susan Wyche-Smith, and Richard Haswell for their thoughtful and patient advice at various stages of this project.

[2] This maxim has been propounded by many scholars, including some whose interpretations of it are quite different than Berthoff's. Janice Hays, for instance, employs this adage in defense of a developmental approach to learning—an approach, she argues, that "Berthoff deplores" (17).

[3] The practical use of self-descriptive and self-analytic writing has been explored from many different perspectives in recent research. Sandman and Weiser recommend the "writing autobiography," more commonly referred to as the literacy narrative, as a point of departure for the two-year college's composition course; Shirley Rose examines students' literacy narratives as a window into gendered aspects of student writing; Beach has studied the self-assessments of extensive revisers and nonrevisers, the pragmatics of self-assessment, the self-reflective narratives of students and teachers, and strategies for modeling self-assessment in student-teacher conferences; Dipardo advocates the use of personal narrative as a means for basic writing students to "perceive continuity between the people they have been and those they are becoming" (45); Janet Marting discusses practical self-assessment strategies that "encourage an awareness of writing as decision making" (128), arguing that "it is the understanding of the self as a writer and the development of the discerning reader in the writer that help transform students into writers" (132). Susan Miller, in her study of "How Writers Evaluate Their Own Writing," perhaps sums up most concisely the benefits of self-evaluation: "those who do not evaluate their own writing," she concludes, "do not gain from *having written*" (181). There is evidence, too, that the study of writers' self-evaluative practices is gaining momentum. In the Winter 1993 issue, the New Directions for Teaching and Learning series published a collection of six articles devoted to student self-evaluation. This volume (*Student Self-Evaluation: Fostering Reflective Learning*, edited by Jean MacGregor) explores a specific self-evaluative practice aimed at outcomes assessment. While this approach differs considerably from the one used in the present study, the collection represents a significant step forward for scholarship on self-evaluation.

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