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## Transparent from the Start: Unpacking Assumptions in the Composition Class

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*Valdosta State University*

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# **TRANSPARENT FROM THE START: UNPACKING ASSUMPTIONS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASS**

**GARDNER ROGERS**

**VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY**

# CONTEXTS

- **Democratization of American higher education**
  - Sounds good, but how many graduate, and how long does it take?
- **Influx of “new” students**
  - First-generation students nationwide, and at VSU
- **Challenges in the classroom, esp. 1<sup>st</sup> semester**
  - Students in the “middle”
  - The disaffected

# WHY TRANSPARENCY MATTERS

- **To close gaps**
  - Expectations
  - Acculturation
- **Precondition of student engagement**
  - “What do you want us to do?” (**always** voiced plaintively)
- **Precondition of **my** engagement**
  - Assignments, in-class work always in service of learning goals
  - If I can’t say “why” in one sentence, why are we doing it?

# **COX, *COLLEGE FEAR FACTOR*: PROBLEMS IN WRITING CLASSROOMS**

- Student desire for professor to be authority: “stranglehold of professorial model on higher education” (111)
- Student desire for “informative information”
- Readings meant to generate ideas or model rhetorical approaches judged “irrelevant”
- Instrumental approach to education: “How does this help me?”
- Resistance to peer work (“I don’t want some stupid kid **grading** my paper”)

# ***COX, COLLEGE FEAR FACTOR:*** **“COMING DOWN TO OUR LEVEL”**

**Teachers in successful composition classes:**

- **Demonstrated expert knowledge**
- **Authority through interpersonal relations**
- **Rigorous content and standards:**
  - Explicit expectations
  - Showed how to reach them
  - Encouraging
  - Respect for student abilities (willingness to be impressed)
- **“Mutual relationship based on responsibility”**

# HOW DO YOU DO IT?

What tactics do **you** use in the classroom?

- How do you explain (or get students to understand) learning goals?
  - Assignments (tests)
  - In-class work
  - Homework
  - Grades
- What's hardest to explain? When is it hardest to be transparent?
  - Why?

# **TRYING TO BE TRANSPARENT: GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS**

**Handout:**

**Sections 1 and 2: Trying to spell out college codes**

**Section 3: Trying to spell out differences in high school and college writing**

**Section 4: Trying to spell out my role**



# **OTHER MATERIALS**

## **Handouts on Technology:**

- **Welcome and explanations and demos for D2L tools**
- **Online info on word processing—tools and shortcuts**
- **Online demo of MLA formatting with links to video tutorials**

# **FOLLOWING UP**

## **Sample Early Online Notebook Entries**

- **What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student?**
- **What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?**

## **Sample Later Online Notebook Entries**

- **What's the difference between successful and unsuccessful college students?**
- **What are you learning about yourself as a writer? What's improving? What needs more attention?**
- **What can Gardner do better to help you learn?**

# CURRENT/FUTURE DIRECTIONS

## Current

- **Making student success explicit subject of ENGL1101 classes**
  - Ken Bain, *What the Best College Students Do*
  - Documentaries of student success at VSU
- **Future**
  - Integrating Problem-Based Learning