



Real World Writing for Secondary Students

Teaching the
College Admission
Essay and Other
Gate-Openers for
Higher Education

Jessica Singer Early & Meredith DeCosta
Foreword by Charles Bazerman

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In this important book Jessica Early and Meredith DeCosta describe a readily replicable set of activities that provide motivated, meaningful opportunities for writing development and helps potential first-generation higher education students gain university admission. The two author-researcher-teachers provide activities, lessons, and scaffolding (Chapter 4) for students in difficult circumstances. They diagnose and provide solutions for the tensions that impede students from developing strong statements (Chapter 5). Almost as a by-product of the learning experiences, the student writing provides poignant views into their lives, and their persistent strength in pursuing ambitions (Chapter 6).

We see the students at first anxious and uncertain about whether they belong in the university, whether they can be accepted, whether once accepted they will survive. Their first drafts are short and unelaborated, often far from the most important experiences of their lives. They represent themselves as they imagine a conventionally acceptable student might appear, although they themselves do not have much of the experiences of conventional students and have little knowledge of conventional students from which to create fictional conventional selves. The guidebook examples from more affluent and culturally dominant students the instructors initially offer are intimidating and not useful because the students at Libertad High School do not have the club participation, academic enrichment, and holiday travel that are the touchstones of conventionally successful application essays.

In the course of the workshop classes, however, the students learn to find their subjects in the events and motives that have shaped their lives and reveal their drive. They learn to elaborate on these events with the felt intensity of life. As writing teachers, the researchers are quick to realize that these tales from the student lives make for compelling reading and powerful essays likely to impress application readers. They abandon the conventional models and help students find models of personal narratives closer to their experience.

But there is something more here. Students have now been able to construct robust university-bound presences for themselves from which

to interact and learn in their new environment. Rather than trying to pass as conventional students and continuing to wonder whether they belong, they will be aware they have been accepted at the university for who they are. They will address the excitement of the university fully fortified with all the motives, passions, and puzzles of their lives. Nontraditional students often have difficulty finding their way at the university and wind up being undistinguished students unless they can discover a workable identity that allows them to draw on their full beings as they address their academic challenges. Paradoxically, they often discover their most usable academic selves by drawing on their full identities that stretch far beyond the academy. The personally felt application essays the students from Libertad will have written allow them to walk in the door, already sure of who they are and ready to work.

The richer and more complete selves they are able to assert will transform their institutions as well. Universities are affected by who the students are and what they share with their peers and professors. Diverse students who confidently explore their interests and identities, rather than hiding behind uncertain conventionality, open up the experience of the university for all students and press the curriculum to address more needs and more viewpoints. As the Libertad students (and all the other students at their institutions) then make the next transition of their lives to the workplace and public sphere, they will bring with them an enriched set of experiences and engagements that come from robust diversity on campus.

A gateway not only is what one must pass through; it is a frame for announcing one's self to the world one is entering, the self that will engage in new experiences. What is true for universities and admissions essays is true for job applications and project proposals, for letters of introduction and personal websites, for all genres that present the self for new opportunities for interaction and growth. Our entry selves set in motion who we will become and, in becoming, transform those spaces for all others who share the space with us. Gates have two sides: from the front they are imposing; behind us, they mark starting points for new chapters in our lives.

—Charles Bazerman
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