Using Creative Writing Instruction in the Urban High School English Classroom to Promote Writing Skills in Remedial Level Students

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Using Creative Writing Instruction in the Urban High School English Classroom to Promote Writing Skills in Remedial Level Students

by

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A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

January 2008

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1-8-08
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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the value of creative writing instruction for increasing the literacy of remedial students in urban High School English classes. Students who are placed in remedial level classes often have preconceived negative feelings concerning their ability to produce academic writing. As I later discuss through the research of Debra Holmes Matthews, John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, these preconceived notions impact the motivation and educational experience of remedial level students. In my research I will examine the ability of creative writing to motivate struggling student writers and help to improve specific writing skills that students need to demonstrate on standardized tests. I will consider the following areas: How can creative writing instruction help failing writers to succeed? What are the obstacles that remedial level students face in their ability to write? Can creative writing be presented in a way that does not intimidate students who have little confidence in their writing ability? How can creative writing instruction be used to improve writing skills?

Through an analysis of the problems faced by remedial level writers, I will specifically look at my experiences teaching the remedial level writing course at Passaic High School, Passaic, New Jersey. I will use these experiences to assist in the creation of a research study that tests suggested methods for improving writing instruction for remedial level student writers. As part of my research I will employ one of the strategies described in
"Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School," by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher. In the first writing assignment, I will use one of the works of graphic novelist Will Eisner to create a writing activity for my students. Eisner’s work often focuses on urban life and I feel that this will help to generate student interest. For the second activity, I will incorporate the concept of letter writing for process and improvement. I have based the creation of this experiment on similar experiments by Gregory Shafer as documented in his article “Reading and Writing in the Developmental English Class.” In this activity the students will be guided through the creation of a short story told through a series of letters. In my examination of the results of the research I hope to develop creative writing activities that help to prepare students for the writing sections of standardized tests as well as to boost student confidence and improve writing skills overall.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 1

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 6

Purpose of Research .................................................................................................................... 12
Remedial Writer Defined ........................................................................................................... 20
Issues with Typical Remedial Instruction ............................................................................... 22
Possibility of Creative Writing to Improve the Situation ...................................................... 31
The Need for Further Research ................................................................................................. 32

II. Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 33

Overview ...................................................................................................................................... 33
Teaching Writing to Bilingual Students .................................................................................. 34
Using Visual Material in Writing Instruction ......................................................................... 35
Effective Application of Alternative Writing Assignments .................................................. 37

III. The Study .............................................................................................................................. 38

Description of Research ............................................................................................................. 38
The Setting ................................................................................................................................... 38
Methodology ................................................................................................................................ 39
A Descriptive Empirical Approach .......................................................................................... 39
Data Sources ................................................................................................................................ 40
Potential Contribution of the Study .......................................................................................... 43
What should be accomplished? ................................................................................................. 43
Results .......................................................................................................................................... 43
Description and Analysis ........................................................................................................... 43
Analysis of the Stories ................................................................................................................ 44
Content .......................................................................................................................................... 44
Use of Transitional Words ......................................................................................................... 47
Changes in the Second Draft ....................................................................................................... 49
Sample from revised version ..................................................................................................... 50
Description and Analysis of Letter Writing Assignment ....................................................... 50
Analysis of Content .................................................................................................................... 51
Use of Transitional Words ......................................................................................................... 55
Changes in Revised Version ...................................................................................................... 58

IV. Final Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 60

Summary and Implications of the Study ................................................................................. 60
Limitations of the Study ............................................................................................................. 67
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 68
I. Introduction

As a fourth-year teacher of students who are classified as "remedial" writers, I am constantly searching for better instructional methods for teaching writing to struggling writers. This search was inspired early in my career. During my first year as a teacher at Passaic High School, I was assigned to teach five classes of remedial level Reading to freshman and sophomore students. As I began to teach I quickly realized that my students were resentful of the class placement and resistant to the work. I also realized that my students seemed resigned to the notion that they are poor writers. I found my students difficult to motivate and engage in reading and writing assignments. This experience initiated me into the reality of the challenges of teaching and the need to examine traditional instructional methods for teaching basic writers.

In New Jersey, an "Abbott" district school is a term used to distinguish schools in 31 of the states poorest districts. These schools have been selected to receive state financial assistance and to implement specific court mandated educational programs. This designation was the result of an attempt to ensure that the students in the poorest districts receive a quality education that equals the education provided in the more affluent districts.¹ One of New Jersey's largest Abbott district schools, Passaic High School is located in the inner-city of Passaic City, New Jersey. This high school serves 2,820 students in grades 9-12. Located approximately 12 miles from New York City, the majority of the Passaic City population consists largely of immigrants from Latin America and the surrounding islands. The residents generally fall into the lower income range. Approximately eighty percent of the students speak Spanish as their first language.

¹ For further reading on the history of Abbott schools, as well as official court decisions, please visit http://www.state.nj.us/education/abbotts/about.
As is characteristic of New Jersey's Abbott District schools, the standardized test scores of the students lag behind those enrolled in wealthier New Jersey districts. In an effort to meet the New Jersey State requirements of the "No Child Left Behind Act," students at Passaic High School are tested each year to identify students in danger of failing the official HSPA test which is taken during junior year. Students who do not receive a passing score in the Reading and Language Arts portion are placed in a remedial level (C level) reading class in addition to a remedial level English class. The goal of this C level course is to prepare students to succeed in passing the HSPA. Approximately thirty seven percent of Passaic High School students are assigned to remedial level English placement upon entering the high school.

Early in my teaching career, I quickly learned that this was not a popular course among the teachers and students at the high school. There are multiple reasons for this negativity. At Passaic High School, the additional Reading course takes the place of the students' elective. Students are aware of this fact and thus perceive the class to be a punitive experience. In addition, placement in a "C" level English class is problematic because students are aware that they have been placed at the lowest level of the school's tracking system. The "A" level is reserved for students who test into an advanced status and the "B" level includes students that have tested as being proficient in Language Arts and Reading. During my first two years of teaching I, quite foolishly, started the course with an explanation of the reason that the students had been placed in the class. Following this disclosure the room would become silent with the occasional sarcastic non-question, "Is this Special-Ed"? This past year I was careful to leave this information out of my course introduction in the hopes that some of the students would be unaware of
the classification. The potential drawback that may result from this omission is the possibility that students may not see the need to take the coursework seriously. However, placing emphasis on the importance of passing the test and the potential for success seems to be a better approach than placing focus on a perceived deficiency.

The most common complaint among teachers of C level students focuses on the behavior of the students themselves. The teachers of C level students report that the students are unmotivated and uncommitted to their educational experience. Behavioral issues and reports of students cutting classes are more prevalent in C level courses than in the other levels. An additional instructional challenge is the need to provide students with extra time and remediation with course work. In short, teaching C levels students may be more challenging than teaching students with a clear mastery of basic skills.

During the first few weeks of my first year of teaching, I assigned my students a one-paragraph response to an open-ended question. I carefully instructed students as to the correct format for structuring the response. The students were to open the paragraph with an introductory sentence, and complete it with three to four supporting sentences and a conclusion. In response, the majority of the students submitted “paragraphs” that consisted of one or two hastily written sentences with little adherence to rules of grammar or sentence structure. My response was, and continues to be, to return these incomplete assignments with a grade of 0 and instructions to rewrite and resubmit the assignment. Once the students rewrite the assignment it is clear they are capable of writing responses that are better constructed. While the second draft reveals errors in grammar and sentence construction, it is clear that the first attempt is not the students’ best effort. This leaves me to wonder as to what motivated the students to hand in the initial insufficient product.
Was it done in the hopes that I would simply accept the work and give it a passing grade? Was it simply a reflection of the students' resistance to the assignment? If the students were holding out on their initial writing assignments, what other skills were being hidden? And more importantly, why would the student make this choice and how could this pattern be changed? While writers of varying skill levels benefit from being encouraged to improve their prose it is especially crucial to encourage struggling student writers like those at Passaic High School. The students involved in this study live in an impoverished environment and their academic struggles put them at risk of not attaining a high school diploma. In an effort to avoid this failure it is important to determine the optimal methods for assisting these struggling student writers.

The work submitted by these high school students stood in stark contrast to the work I had reviewed during my student teaching experience in suburban Pompton Lakes, NJ. The students at Pompton Lakes were enthusiastic when receiving and completing writing assignments. The students often requested opportunities to read their writing. In contrast, my Passaic students were reluctant to participate or to complete assignments. This attitude changed little throughout the year. However, I was afforded glimpses of potential when I managed to assign reading or writing assignments that appealed to the students. On reflection I realized that this occurred when the following criteria was met:

- The story, or personal essay, was set in an inner-city environment.
- The students were able to relate to the situation in the story.
- The prose was written in a method of speaking that was similar to the way the students spoke.
- The writing assignment focused on issues that tied into the students' personal experience.

When my students were engrossed in the reading they were less resistant to the writing assignments, there were no behavioral issues in the classroom, and the students'
grades went up. In assigning engaging work I was largely aided by the freedom of the Reading course curriculum at Passaic High School. The reading material in the course curriculum includes high interest novels and allows teachers to select and order novels of their own choosing. As I began to use high interest material I realized that it was possible to create an environment where my urban high school students could be as engaged as my suburban middle school students had been. Unfortunately, there are obstacles that interfere with creating an engaging environment in many high school classrooms.

The curriculum for most English classes requires a focus on classic novels. Many of these works are difficult for students in inner-city environments to comprehend. The students typically do not relate to these authors who come from different cultural backgrounds and different periods of time. This makes motivation an ongoing challenge for English teachers. Nevertheless, the concept of incorporating contemporary works of fiction into the course syllabi is often met with resistance, as is the case in Passaic High School. Objectors cite the need for students to have a foundation in classic novels. Another challenge is the potential discomfort that may result from trying new and experimental activities in the classroom. The act of trying new activities forces teachers, students, and administrators out of their comfort zones. The incorporation of new activities may create the concern that students are missing out on course fundamentals. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of reexamining course material make the issue worthy of consideration. As many instructional practices for teaching writing are continuing to fail struggling students it is imperative to develop new and better approaches for teaching writing.
Despite my occasional successes, the fact remains that is more difficult to motivate my Passaic students. Research suggests that poor test achievement in high-poverty areas may stem from motivational factors (Jones; Lockett 94). Consistently appealing to student interests and meeting state curriculum standards is not an easy task. Mandated student textbooks are not selected to appeal to the preferences of students in an inner-city environment. Teachers of remedial level students are required to spend a large portion of course time preparing students using a book that focuses solely on HSPA test preparation. However, teachers are also provided with a list of novels to select for their instruction. Fortunately, in the Passaic High School English department there has been a concentrated effort made to select novels that will appeal to reluctant readers. The novels are usually well received by students while the standardized test preparation is looked upon with dread. In my position I am constantly trying to incorporate enjoyable reading assignments with writing assignments that relate to both the novels and the material on the HSPA. This issue relates to an ongoing debate in the field of education. This debate focuses on the issue of incorporating non-traditional books into school curriculums. Many educators contend that schools curriculums should maintain a focus on classic literature. Dissenters argue that curriculums should include contemporary material that will better engage student interest. In my research I attempt to fuse the traditional elements of classroom instruction with contemporary material that will engage the interest of reluctant learners.

The challenge of motivating struggling students is difficult for teachers in today’s public schools. The difficulty of unifying the dual challenges of preparing students to pass standardized testing and of inspiring struggling writers can seem insurmountable at times. It is no wonder that teachers and students become agitated when testing dates
approach. In this paper I hope to identify some viable options for assisting both the
students of basic writing and the teachers who teach them.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to investigate the value of creative writing
instruction for increasing the literacy of remedial students in my urban high school
classroom. Since my students are able to engage in reading and writing assignments that
relate to them personally, I believe they will become engaged in writing assignments
where they have control of the content. This is an opportunity to instruct students in
various writing skills and grammatical conventions that will aid students in passing the
HSPA. Providing remedial level students with assignments that interest them can help to
dispel some of the negativity that seems to come with course placement. Although a
positive environment in itself cannot guarantee success it is certainly a step in the right
direction. Students who are placed in remedial level classes often have preconceived
negative feelings concerning their ability to produce academic writing. In “Writing
Apprehension: Acknowledging the Issue,” Debra Holmes Matthews argues that students’
feelings can have on academic performance. Matthews reports that students who have
had negative experiences with writing instruction approach future classes with
apprehension and pessimistic attitudes (8). This negativity has an impact on the ability of
remedial students to grow and succeed as writers in an academic environment. In this
context I am defining success as the students’ abilities to effectively express themselves
in their writing as well as to demonstrate an improvement in writing skills in accordance
with state standards. This improvement can be seen in an increased adherence to
grammatical conventions and an increase in the clarity of student writing.
A positive experience with writing would clearly aid students in becoming engaged in the writing process. Creative writing may be an effective way of helping to improve student attitudes toward their writing instruction while simultaneously improving their writing skills. The freedom associated with creative writing may be a welcome contrast to the perceived rigidity of traditional writing assignments. Creative assignments have the potential to benefit students for whom traditional instructional approaches have failed (Jones 93). In addition, creative writing gives students the power to demonstrate their literacy and apply their skills to situations and environments with which they have a connection. This approach may appeal to frustrated writing students. In my research, I investigated the potential of specific creative writing assignments to produce a positive and productive writing experience.

Remedial level students, in particular, need writing assignments that educate and simultaneously help to dispel writing apprehension. In “Further Studies on Writing Apprehension: SAT scores, Success Expectations, Willingness to take Advances courses and Sex Differences,” Daly and Miller researched the impact of writing apprehension on student performance. To perform this research a scale was developed to measure writing apprehension. This instrument, called the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Scale, included twenty-six items on scale with a positive or negative value for each item. The test measures evaluation, stress and product apprehension. Daly and Miller’s research concluded that “no matter how skilled or capable the individual is in writing, if he believes he will do poorly, or if he doesn’t want to take courses that stress writing those skills or capabilities matter little” (255-256). Therefore, by the time my students have entered my remedial level class as high school freshmen they have already developed a
negative view of writing instruction and the act of writing itself. As a result, these students are likely to avoid actively engaging in the writing process as a result of the fear that it will result in further negative experiences. Students fall into a pattern of avoiding writing projects and make no attempt to increase their skill level or creative output. This pattern leads to the continued failure of the students’ writing instruction.

Although I see value in this study by Daly and Miller, I cannot completely apply this research to my own students. The students at Passaic High School have some unique attributes that set them apart from the students researched by Daly and Miller. For instance, since the population I studied is a largely immigrant population their previous writing instruction varies greatly. It is difficult to gain an understanding of the students’ past experience with education, as each students experience is unique to their specific situation. As a result I question what effect one’s previous writing instruction has on his or her ability to write well in a new academic context. I also wonder what effect being bilingual has on a student’s attitude and as well as his or her ability to effectively communicate in a second language. Although not specified in the study by Daly and Miller, I assume that bilingual students were not researched for the study. As I previously stated, 80% of the students in Passaic High School speak English as a second language. All of the students in Passaic High School are tested to determine whether they belong in courses that specialize in English as a Second Language (ESL). Students in the ESL program attend classes that are geared toward teaching them the instructional material in both Spanish and English. Students in this program are not allowed enrollment in standard academic coursework until they have tested proficient in English. In my classes the percentage of students for whom English is not their first language is much higher.
For example, in this past academic year I taught only one or two students who speak English as their primary language. I can’t ignore the fact that this must play a major role in my students’ attitudes and their ability to write well in English. It would be beneficial if the Daly and Miller study was expanded to address the issues faced by a bilingual population.

To investigate this issue I reviewed research that focused on writing instruction for students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and Generation 1.5 learners. It is important to note that the students used in my study are not classified as ESL students. The majority of the students in this study have spoken dual languages their entire lives. My students generally fall in the category of “Generation 1.5” learners. Generation 1.5 learners are U.S. educated English learners who speak dual languages (Singhal 1).

“Generation 1.5 learners … are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the areas of writing. Academic writing requires familiarity with complex linguistic structures and rhetorical structures that are not typically used in everyday social interactions” (Harklau 3). As with Generation 1.5 learners, my students communicate effectively orally but struggle with academic writing.

There are also points of similarity between the issues faced by ESL writing students and my remedial writers. One important connection is the cultural adjustment that both sets of students face. This issue is explored by Ilona Leki in Understanding ESL writers: A Guide for Teachers. According to Leki, students struggle to adapt to their new culture and this affects their level of academic motivation. The difficulties these students face include academic failures that affect their self-confidence. Leki points out that teachers of students dealing with cultural adjustment should be sensitive to the fact that this issue
may impact academic performance (Leki 8-9). In addition, Leki stresses the importance of assigning students meaningful activities that allow interaction with other students. As these students tend to be alienated from their peers it is important to provide assignments that will encourage and engage student interest.

This issue is particularly relevant to my students as they constantly alternate between two cultures. The majority of my students speak a second language at home and exist in a culture with values that may differ from values that are typically American. As a result my students are faced daily with the challenge of adapting to an alternate environment. This difficulty is reflected in the large proportion of students being placed in remedial level classes and the large percentage of students who fail to graduate.

Leki’s focus on the difficulties faced by ESL students helps me to understand why my students struggle with specific tasks. For instance, Leki points out that ESL students tend to struggle with errors in sentence structure and grammar. As a result teachers may become frustrated with the task of educating ESL students. “In some cases, teachers may even associate many surface-level errors with lack of education or intelligence” (120). Leki suggests specific methods for providing feedback to ESL students. According to Leki, the most effective method of providing feedback is typical structural analysis, peer response, and peer editing. (126-127). She suggests that students will need guidance in using these methods for providing feedback, as students may not be familiar the procedure. In my experience, I have found that my students also appear to benefit from these suggested methods when receiving feedback on writing assignments. This may stem from the students’ ability to see the immediate benefit from receiving feedback on his or her writing. The specific feedback can aid the students in conveying the intended
meaning through the writing assignment. This shows the student the value of peer editing and of revising.

Leki’s research helps me to recognize the need to apply different strategies with my bilingual students. My students need to be taught differently than students in other districts because they are different. In addition to socio-economic issues, the differences stem from the need to adapt to two cultures and speak two languages on a daily basis. These factors impact students’ academic experience and as educators it is imperative that we devise research-supported methods for assisting these students.

Because my students struggle with traditional writing assignments, the incorporation of less rigid, creative assignments may be beneficial. The value of traditional assignments, such as the five-paragraph essay, has been widely debated. In this assignment students are instructed to create an essay using a highly structured organizational format. Objectors claim this format limits student expression and forces students to conform their writing to a specific mold. Many cite the need for both students and teachers to recognize the five-paragraph essay format as a mere starting point for essay writing instruction (Nunnally 68). A common complaint from teachers is that struggling writers tend to cling to this format and allow it to protect them from venturing into the uncharted territory in their writing. Students who are instructed in this method while in high school later encounter college writing assignments that require them to break free of this mold. Unfortunately, the difficulties faced by struggling student writers demonstrates that this is something most students are not comfortable with doing.

For students who need additional remediation in test preparation the continuous reinforcement of this writing model does not appear to be beneficial. For these students
the incorporation of a different type of writing instruction in their test preparation may prove to be helpful when completing the writing sections of the HSPA. Overall, additional instruction in creative writing techniques on the high school level can help to broaden students writing skills and help to see beyond the standard five-paragraph essay model.

Although creative writing is not a major part of the Passaic High School English curriculum I believe that focusing on it will be a valuable method for teaching writing. One potential benefit of creative assignments is that they encourage risk taking in writing. Writers can try a variety of writing forms when their own creativity is encouraged. This approach is freeing when compared to the standard academic writing that is required in academic essays. I am defining standard academic writing as the written demonstration of the structured paragraph and five-paragraph essay format. Typically the academic writing required on the HSPA requires students to conform their writing to a specific format. For instance, the writing assignments call for the standard five-paragraph essay. By the time the students take the test they are well versed in the writing format and the grading rubric that will be used to evaluate their writing. As a passing score on the HSPA is necessary to graduate from high school, it is easy to see how this pressure cooker situation sours students' attitudes toward writing. It would be unusual for students to attempt to be creative or take any sort of risks in their writing given the pressures of the situation.

This hesitation to take risks is detrimental to the students' ability to produce an engaging piece of writing. According to Matthews a classroom environment that encourages risk taking is integral to improving student writing: “If students are to become less apprehensive and more effective writers, the classroom has to become a place where
risk taking is encouraged in a non-threatening manner, and the teacher plays a vital role in making the writing process user friendly” (Matthews 8). This highlights the need to incorporate some of the freedom and possible enjoyment that is associated with creative expression. Because reading creative writing is one of the few activities that sparked student interest I believe that the creation of creative writing assignments can do the same. Creative writing activities will appeal to their personal interests. In this way students can use creative writing to connect to the content of their writing. This correlates to the criteria I noted earlier that appeals to student interest. Students can focus their writing on topics that are related to them. As I noted earlier, students demonstrate interest in writing when that writing is assisting them in effectively conveying meaning. This is particularly helpful when the meaning relates to the students themselves and their personal experiences. When students are writing where they are able to relate to the context they will become more engaged in the process.

If students are able to learn how to express themselves creatively in their writing prior to taking the HSPA this skill set will carry over to the actual test. The use of alternative forms of written expression can aid students in overcoming their writing anxiety and becoming able to grow as writers. The implementation of positive writing experiences into the students’ education can help students gain confidence as well as improved writing skills. In exploring this issue some areas to consider are: How can creative writing instruction help failing writers to succeed? How do the assignments need to be approached? How can creative writing assignments be used to yield better results on the HSPA? How can creative writing be used to help to improve writing skills overall? What writing skills, in particular, can creative writing help to build?
Remedial Writer Defined

There are few terms in education that convey negativity as much as “remedial” or even “basic writer.” Although the implications of the term “remedial” remains negative, the actual term has evolved to be more inclusive of diverse populations. Teachers of composition have largely moved away from deficit theories of language and have shifted focus onto the effect of race, class, gender and ethnicity on academic performance (Stygall 321). For instance, researchers have noted the clear connection between low standardized test scores and high poverty areas. As a result researchers are reviewing the deficiencies in students’ educational experiences and the factors that limit educational opportunities. Exploration into the reasons that certain students are at a remedial level has led teachers to evaluate different instructional methods and approaches. However, this additional attention to the subject matters little to the students who are forced to wear the negative label.

The low status of remedial instruction has a detrimental effect on student work. The classification of a student as being remedial strips away confidence and may be a factor that encourages students to mimic the writing of others. Assigning students the label of remedial sends the message that the student is not capable of producing acceptable work. The more students are told that their writing is unacceptable the more the student will want to avoid the experience. The solutions outlined in this paper allow students to create writing as part of a developmental, creative process. The assignments described are not simply assigned and graded. Instead they are incorporated as part of a process that allows students to create a short story without the dreaded focus on form and grammar. Placing the instructional focus on creative thought will allow students to focus
on the potential of applying their imagination to the writing assignment. Although students are aware of their remedial status, positioning the writing classroom as a creative, enjoyable environment can help to balance out the negativity implied in the classification.

In the context of this research, I am considering students as “remedial” based on failing scores on the Language Arts/Reading portion of New Jersey standardized tests. In most cases remedial or basic writers, as examined by David Bartholomae, attempt to make their writing conform to what they interpret to be the expectations of their teachers. As these students attempt to produce academic writing they create samples of writing that is laden with errors and awkward sentence construction. This is an interesting concept to apply to my students. My students tend to avoid incorporating original thoughts into their writing. I have noticed that if I provide my students with a writing sample to demonstrate an example for an assignment, they copy the example closely in their own writing. Since these students are often provided with a formula for writing and are basically instructed to mimic the style, it's understandable that they would avoid risk taking or even inserting original thought in their writing. These students are not being encouraged to think creatively or even to think at all. They are being instructed, whether intentionally or not, to mimic a form so that their writing can be deemed acceptable for attaining a high school diploma or in the case of my students, a passing grade and hopefully a passing score on the HSPA.

By instructing students in this way, we are closing the door on the potential for the students to insert their original voice into their writing. It is this voice that will provide their writing with the life that it needs to be interesting and creative. If students
have not placed anything of themselves into their writing then it is understandable that they will continue to view writing assignments as tasks to be dreaded and avoided whenever it is possible to do so. By providing assignments that encourage students to relate to the writing it is possible to create a more positive writing experience.

When I review the work submitted by my students it is generally obvious that they put little time and effort into many of their assignments. Is this reflective of the fact that they are used to having little expected of them? Or are students so fearful of being unable to meet teacher expectations that the finished product is designed for the failing grade that the student expects to receive? I also question the role that being bilingual plays in this tendency to mimic language in an academic assignment. Many of my students are required to speak their second language when they enter a classroom. As a result the need to mimic the English academic language is both essential and probably uncomfortable. In my research, I hope to investigate ways to encourage these struggling students to overcome these difficulties and consider the possibility of becoming successful writers.

**Issues with Typical Remedial Instruction**

I am aware of the skepticism that will be generated by the inclusion of creative writing into a remedial writing program. Traditional writing instruction typically calls for drilling of basic writing skills. Indeed, the writing produced by students who are classified as basic writers commonly demonstrates a lack of adherence to grammar, sentence structure, and typical writing conventions. Instructing students in the skills that they appear to have "missed" seems to be a logical approach. However, it is one that does
not appear to be successful. In “The Language of Exclusion,” Rose explores the problems of such an approach.

Such work is built upon a set of highly questionable assumptions: that a writer has a relatively fixed repository of linguistic blunders that can be pinpointed and then corrected through drill, that repetitive drill on specific linguistic features represented in isolated sentences will result in mastery of linguistic (or stylistic) principles, that bits of discourse bereft of rhetoric or conceptual context can form the basis of curriculum and assessment, that good writing is correct writing, and that correctness has to do with pronoun choice, verb forms, and the like (345).

In this statement Rose points out some common issues with remedial instruction. The problems faced by remedial level writing students are more complex than repetitive drills in grammar can remedy. The focus on instructing these students in foundations of grammar neglects the essential issue of creating valuable content in writing. In addition, the focus on “correct writing” can cause students to feel the need to mimic an academic style and push their own thoughts aside in an attempt to make the writing conform to a certain style. This attempt to adhere to a particular format can cause students to experience the anxiety that Matthews noted as being particularly detrimental for struggling writing students.

Rose also focuses on the problem with the labeling of students as remedial. The narrowness of the definition of basic writing and the assumptions that one makes of basic writers harms both the teacher and student experience. This focus obscures the fact that there are literary forms that students can better understand. According to Gallego and
Hollingsworth in their critique of remedial education, typical intervention programs fail to recognize the multiple literacies that students do possess (Gallego 15-16). For instance, students who shun academic assignments may spend a great deal of personal time exploring alternative types of written media such as graphic novels and contemporary fiction. It is imperative that the instruction for these students is focused on the continual improvement of the skills that the students do possess. This is a contrast to placing focus on the areas where the students writing skills are lacking. Focusing on multiple literacies can make the writing instruction more interesting and relevant to the student.

My own experiences with instructing students through drilling them in basic skills have been disappointing. I have found that while my students would actively participate in the activity they were unable to transfer the skills into other contexts for writing. The focus of my students seems to be on participating in order to receive credit for the participation and the assigned class work. My students did not demonstrate the recognition of a connection between the skills applied to the immediate assignment and the need to use those skills in future assignments. The majority of my students demonstrate a concern for their grade for the course but not for the skills they are supposed to be learning. This may stem from the fact that the students do not recognize how the skills can help them to improve their writing. In addition, my students seemed to find drills in basic grammatical concepts to be demeaning. Students are aware that this instruction is taught to lower grade levels and this awareness makes them resent the assignments.

My findings are aligned with Patrick Hartwell’s argument in “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.” Hartwell states that teaching grammar does
not enable students to become better writers. According to Hartwell, a focus on grammar has not been shown to help students transition from remedial to regular writers (127). Hartwell urges teachers to research other methods of writing instruction: "At no point in the English curriculum is the question of power more blatantly posed that in the issue of formal grammar instruction. It is time that we, as teachers, formulate theories of language and literacy and let those theories guide our teaching, and it is time that we, as researchers, move on to more interesting areas of inquiry" (127). Although I agree that formal grammar instruction is ultimately ineffective, I do think that such instruction has a place in the curriculum. In teaching grammatical concepts it is helpful if the students are able to apply to concepts to the draft of a writing assignment. If students are able to see an immediate need and use for the instructed material they will probably not tune out as they would during a formal lesson in grammar. The examination of the role of grammar in secondary language instruction should be examined differently due to the age of the students.

Teaching grammar to high school students is a challenging task. When I attempt to drill students in basic grammatical concepts the lessons are met with resistance. Students appear disinterested in the subject matter and do not see a connection between acquiring those skills and improving their writing. Jim Burke, a teacher educator and former teacher, advises teaching grammar in the context of expanding students’ options as writers² (Burke 63). Burke suggests teaching brief lessons that demonstrate how the application of grammar aids in providing an immediate benefit in improving writing. A continuous reinforcement of lessons in basic grammar, paragraph and sentence structure

will help to ensure that students will be able to recall and apply the learned skills in writing assignments. Burke contends that while it is acceptable to freewrite without a focus on grammar, it is essential that students see the need for a sound basis in grammar. This approach is especially relevant in a high school English classroom. Older students will be able to see the benefits in using grammar to improve the style and clarity of their writing. Burke’s approach provides a balance that will allow teachers to employ the use of alternative methods such as teaching creative writing and use those methods to incorporate instruction in traditional writing conventions.

There are some teachers and researchers who argue against the advocacy of creative writing techniques and urge a return to a focus on traditional instruction. Some feel that grammar has been displaced in the curriculum and this is responsible for the difficulties faced by writing students. Martha Kolln voices her opinion in a response to Patrick Hartwell’s “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar.” Kolln states;

Back in 1963 when we saw the words grammar and harmful there in the same sentence, we panicked. And some among us translated that fear into pedagogy. The result? We’re not to waste our time on grammar anymore ... Our students should learn to write by writing-only by writing, by letting it all hang out ... We have produced a generation of teachers whose philosophy is that grammar is for teachers to know and not students” (Kolln 876).

Although this statement discounts strides in the content area of writing instruction I agree that students have suffered from a lack of grammar instruction. There is a clear need to include grammar instruction in the curriculum. This is especially relevant to
second language learners. These students are at a disadvantage in the English classroom because English is likely not spoken at home. Furthermore, these students may not have a foundation in English grammar. My Passaic students are not likely to receive this instruction because they are not classified at ESL. In order to attain a high school diploma a foundation in grammar is necessary. Therefore, I advocate a balanced curriculum that includes both grammar and creative writing instruction. In this research I focus on fusing creative expression with instruction in standard writing conventions. It is clearly possible to combine creative writing instruction and exercises in grammar and writing conventions. This approach will be particularly valuable for secondary level students who do not typically respond to drills in grammar and writing conventions.

Many remedial level writing classes lack the application of strategies that will best assist students. In Tom Fox's "Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict," he comments on the limitations of remedial course instruction. Fox writes, "Teachers of basic writing ... are frequently non-tenure-track and institutionally less secure. What to teach is usually decided by a program coordinator who may or may not be educated in the teaching of writing" (68). Although he is specifically referring to instructors of college students this argument applies to secondary education instruction as well. At Passaic High School, the remedial level courses are routinely given to the teachers with the least seniority. Teachers who have been there for long periods of time are "rewarded" with higher-level students. There is little oversight to ensure that the classes are being effectively taught. Furthermore, teachers do not receive any training that is focused on teaching remedial level students. Although there is an ample supply of professional development courses, these courses do not focus on teaching the remedial writer. The few courses that are
geared toward remedial instructional practices for English classes are aimed at teaching elementary level students. As a result of this study I hope to call attention to the need to examine writing instruction for remedial students as well to as provide effective strategies for helping student writers.

Currently, the curriculum for teaching remedial level students leaves little room for teacher creativity. Although the same can be said for teachers of all levels, the restrictions for remedial level instruction can be summed up with the dreaded phrase “teaching to the test” in its most literal form. Passaic High School’s curriculum calls for a focus on the following writing skills: Speculative writing (responding to a picture prompt by writing a short story), responding to open-ended questions, and writing a persuasive essay. The focus of these assignments is challenging because the students have already encountered the required assignments and they don’t like them. Students often express their dislike of the task and the prompts provided. With this preconceived resistance, achieving success is a daunting task. No matter how much my students enjoy discussing a topic or reading a novel they balk at the assignment of any type of written response. Whether the resistance comes from previous negative experiences with writing or fear of having their work evaluated is unclear. Regardless, the majority of the students appear to relate with negativity to writing assignments. Sometimes the resistance reveals itself with a dramatic sigh of discontent, or the placing of heads on desks. Most often it appears in the form of weakly worded responses and incomplete assignments that are finished in half of the time that are allowed for the assignment. My students are willing to complete writing assignments when they are required to do so for a grade but they have made it clear that this is not something that they are interested in doing.
Inspiring student interest is a major obstacle for teachers of remedial level students. Fox argues that, “Basic writing teachers, like their students, are denied the intellectual support to enliven their jobs. They have little control over their curriculum and teach in institutional settings that prevent thoughtful consideration of their course and their students” (68). Although teachers in Passaic have more control than Fox asserts, there are aspects of his statement of which I am in agreement. Remedial level teachers are not advised to encourage student creativity but rather to drill them in a series of assignments that will be measured by standardized tests. However, as speculative writing is part of the HSPA, teachers can easily make an argument for the incorporation of creative writing into the curriculum. Despite this, many teachers will not look toward this method since the connection with standardized tests is not readily apparent. As New Jersey public schools operate under the threat of funding reduction for schools that fail to meet goals for passing standardized tests, traditional test preparation is top priority. With a curriculum that is focused solely on standardized test preparation and a clearly negative classification system, where then do students find the motivation to attempt to be successful writers? How can teachers change feelings that developed over countless negative experiences? Although clearly difficult questions, a good direction seems to be to look toward examining aspects of literacy that already appeal to students.

Ironically, the speculative writing portion of the HSPA is intended to be creative in nature. The assignment provides students with thirty minutes to write a complete short story based on a picture prompt. The instructions urge students to use their imagination in the creation of a short story. Although technically creative in nature the assignment of this task is rarely well received. The displeasure associated with this task undoubtedly
stems from the way students have been drilled in completing the assignment. Students are provided with the assignment despite the fact that they lack previous instruction in creative writing. Students complain about the picture prompt and the amount of time provided for construction of the story. Although students are told to be creative, the rubric requires students to create a complete story using the traditional short story format. Students must include a conflict and well developed characters. Writing a short story within this narrow time span proves to be a daunting task. This beat-the-clock approach to creativity does little to inspire student writers. Many students fail the initial attempts at this task and this failure adds to the perception of the task being a negative experience.

The creative assignments described in this research are a contrast to traditional instruction in speculative writing. The speculative writing assignment I created assists students in the creation of a short story by essentially guiding the students through the situation shown in illustrated storyboard panels. This is helpful for students who are not familiar with creating a story based on a picture prompt. The panels are borrowed from a graphic novel that students will easily relate to because of its content. As the objective of the artist was to tell a story using pictures it is easy to follow the storyline. In addition, the teenager friendly format will help the assignment to be positioned for better student reception. The instructional plan for my assignment allows students the opportunity to rewrite and revise the writing at a later time. This is a change from the traditional method for instructing speculative writing at Passaic High School. Typically, students are given the assignment and assessed on the results. The opportunity to instruct students in creative writing techniques has been missed. Adding time to revise and edit will help students become able to recognize common errors in their writing. Unfortunately, the
thirty-minute time limit given during testing denies students the opportunity to revise and edit during the actual exam. My hope is that the practice with creating this type of writing will enable students to be able to approach the test section with confidence. As students will practice the skill during class time they will become more adept at creating a short story within a smaller span of time. While the testing time limit will inhibit students from achieving optimal results it will be possible for the students to demonstrate proficiency in speculative writing.

In attempting to create assignments that engage students in writing instruction my hope is that the students will gain a sense of ownership in their own writing. Although it is uncertain whether or not students will pass their standardized tests as a result of differentiated instruction, success is possible on multiple levels. Engaging students in writing assignments can lead to increased confidence. Students may gain confidence in the ability to express themselves in their writing, which can lead them to see the need to attain skills to help them to improve the clarity of their expression. In addition, the assignments can be used to teach essential writing skills.

**Possibility of Creative Writing to Improve the Situation**

Incorporating creative writing into the remedial writing curriculum offers potential for improving student writing. Practice in creative writing can help students to develop skills that will carry over into more standard traditional writing. For instance, students can learn the use of transitional words in a creative writing activity and then carry that skill over to all writing assignments. One article I reviewed analyzed the writing difficulties of students from Harvard who were struggling with originality, creativity, and elaborating on arguments (Armstrong 70-71). Although many had come
from honors level high school English placement they struggled with these skills as well as confidence as writers. In the basic level course the students utilized freewriting, a technique many had never heard of before in order to help them improve the content of their writing (75). Essentially, freewriting enhances student writing by allowing imagination and releasing students from the pressures of writing to a particular format.

The implementation of “No Child Left Behind” and the push to teach writing according to specific testing standards has been met with a great deal of opposition. Many cite the absence of creativity in writing as a result of the push to get students to write to meet testing standards. Susan Naomi Bernstein explores the absence of creative writing in the midst of preparing students for testing in “Writing and White Privilege: Beyond Basic Skills.” According to Bernstein, “For students classified as “at risk,” preparation for accountability testing rarely offers the middle-class luxury of time and space for imaginative writing … these students found imaginative writing to be a critical means of speaking back to their situation, if not resisting the institutional designation of “remedial” (129-130). Drilling students in traditional writing conventions and repetitive assignments serves to further repress student control over their own work. As a result, this approach increases the students’ negative attitudes toward writing.

The Need for Further Research

Recent research reveals increased attention to the value of creative writing instruction for remedial level students. However, the volume of the research is weak when compared to the potential value of this approach. Additional research is needed to determine how creative writing can best be used to help struggling writers. By experimenting and analyzing alternative means of creative writing instruction, teachers
can take a more active role in determining how best to assist students. In advocating the use of creative writing for remedial level students, I am not claiming that this is somehow a solution for solving the major challenges that basic writers face. As traditional methods have failed, and continue to fail, we need to examine the potential of nontraditional methods for teaching basic writers. This issue is especially crucial in high-poverty areas such as Passaic. Studies have revealed a direct connection between low-literacy rates and crime and poverty. According to the National Institute for Literacy, seventy percent of prisoners in American jails fall into the lowest two levels of reading proficiency (Jones 93). A 2004 *Washington Post* article reports that in California, “the number of future prison beds to fund is based on the percentage of children who never make it past the fourth-grade reading level” (94). This shows a direct correlation between low-literacy and crime. Although the low-literacy issues of these students cannot be said to be the cause of crime the connection between the two indicates that the issue is worthy of examination. Students in inner-city schools such as Passaic are at-risk and as a result attention needs to be paid in improving the literacy rates of these students.

II. Literature Review

Overview

In my research, I searched for material that was specifically focused on writing instruction for remedial level students in inner-city school systems. Teachers who are actively teaching remedial level students wrote the majority of the material that I located. Given the challenges faced by teachers of remedial level students it is no wonder some have sought out alternative methods of teaching basic writers. In examining the research,
I realized that the results of such instruction are largely reported as positive. Below I have isolated the material that is most relevant to my research project.

**Teaching Writing to Bilingual Students**

In order to examine the issues that bilingual writing students encounter, I reviewed several sources on second language learners. The majority of the material I reviewed focused on students who are newer to the English language than my students. However, I located some practical advice that applies to the Passaic student population. I reviewed Ilona Leki’s *Understanding ESL Writers*, and several collections of essays edited by Paul Kei Matsuda and Tony Silva; *Understanding ESL writers: a guide for teachers*, *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing*, and *Second Language Writing Research: Perspectives on the Process of Knowledge Construction*. I found the examination of cultural issues to be particularly relevant: the research points to the educational difficulties faced by English language learners when they transition between two cultures. This is exemplified through the findings of these researchers and the interviews with students who describe their difficulties and expectations of U.S. life and their writing experience. The findings revealed that second language learners grapple with cultural adjustment and this greatly impacts their ability and desire to learn. This information aids my understanding of my students and the many challenges they face. It also emphasizes the need to ensure students receive assignments where they can insert their personal voice. By allowing students to reveal themselves in their writing they may feel more comfortable inserting themselves in the alternate culture.

I also reviewed material that analyzes the academic needs of “Generation 1.5” learners. Suggestions for addressing the specific needs of these learners include a focus
on literary practices that are typically used for college preparation. For instance, Linda Harklau suggests a focus on revising, as well as argumentation and analytical writing. As Generation 1.5 students are often placed in basic writing classes the students do not typically acquire these skills and therefore are not as prepared for college writing as are their English speaking peers (Harklau 3).

Using Visual Material in Writing Instruction

In an effort to identify effective alternative strategies for writing instruction I investigated the use of visual material in writing instruction. “Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School,” by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, describes the results of an experiment that used forms of popular culture to assist in improving written communication. In this article, Frey and Fisher describe their use of elements of popular culture in the teaching of creative writing. In one activity, graphic novels are used in a ninth-grade writing course to inspire students to write their own short stories based on nine-panels of a wordless story. This exercise taught the students the use of a dialogue, punctuation, and short story construction. The article promotes engaging students in creative writing activities, as opposed to the traditional focus on remedial skills instruction.

I was attracted to this activity because my students have been routinely drilled in writing short stories in response to picture prompts. The increased focus on the picture prompt assignment began after standardized testing revealed that the majority of students in the Passaic School district were unable to successfully complete this assignment. A rise in the amount of students demonstrating proficiency in this section proved that the additional attention was beneficial. However, in addition to the increase in test scores
there was also an increase in student apathy toward "Speculative Writing," as it is termed. The students I encountered were uninspired by the picture prompts that were given to them and largely seemed to dislike the source of their intended inspiration. A recent picture prompt depicted a rocking chair in the middle of a living room of an old looking house. This led to the creation of multiple stories describing similar accounts of haunted homes of deceased grandparents. Other examples include a prompt that showed a key and one that depicted a young Caucasian boy standing on a lawn mower. This last prompt was extremely difficult for my students as they were not familiar with lawn mowers and many could not name the object. While higher-level student can find inspiration in these prompts, remedial level students struggle to relate to the depictions. The source of Frey and Fisher’s picture prompt is a much better fit for my students. The use of the graphic novel and the depiction of a solitary person facing difficult life challenges is something that my students can understand. Having a positive experience with writing based on a picture prompt may help to ease student anxiety when faced with an actual picture prompt on the HSPA. Students will be able to write a narrative based on the clarity of the intent of the story being told by the graphic novel panels. In addition, students would be able to put their own voice into the writing and this may improve the way their story is written.

Overall, I think the use of elements of popular culture will be particularly relevant to remedial level students as it can be challenging to hold their interest in writing assignments. Students who dismiss assignments that are typically academic, such as writing the standard essay, may be inspired by writing assignments that are non-conventional and allow the student creative control. I have noticed that some of my most
resistant students are receptive, even eager, when assigned to write a short story. Students who rarely submit homework and show little or no enthusiasm for writing assignments show an active interest in writing when they are allowed to be creative. This observation encouraged me to take notice of the use of creative writing.

Effective Application of Alternative Writing Assignments

In “Reading and Writing in the Developmental English Class,” by Gregory Shafer, the use of letter writing is explored as a way to increase the writing interests and skills of students in a Developmental English class. In Shafer’s article he describes how he taught his first remedial class with a class-wide activity in letter writing. In his activity his class successfully learned how to put expression first in their writing and to add polishing later. This particularly resonates with my own work because, like Shafer’s students, my students rarely voluntarily write anything besides notes to their friends. This leads me to believe that informal letter writing would most likely be a writing activity that my students could engage in without apprehension. In such activities students could role-play and take on the first person perspective of a character. As letters appear non-academic in nature I believe that they could be an appropriate vehicle for engaging student interest and incorporating writing skills.

Another article that I believe will be relevant to my research is “Writing instruction for struggling adolescent readers: A gradual release model,” by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. This article looks at ways to structure writing assignments to provide meaningful instruction for remedial level students. Fisher and Frey assigned writing activities that were designed to avoid creating anxiety for struggling writers. For instance, students were assigned to write an “I am” poem in which student wrote
sentences that all focus on one main idea (Fisher 401). The writing assignments built in difficulty as the semester progressed. This article reports gains in student writing when students are asked to refine their writing over multiple drafts. The gains that resulted were increased writing fluency, accuracy and length of response. As a result of the findings of this report I will incorporate drafting into the writing activities I will develop as a part of my own research.

III. The Study

Description of Research

My research covers six writing assignments and includes a portion of the basic writers who attend Passaic High School. These students are classified as basic writers based on failing scores on the 2006 New Jersey State GEPA examination, the HSPA release, and the HSPA. The participants in this study are not students from my basic writing class. The students in this study are volunteers who were enrolled in a remedial level writing class at Passaic High School that is similar to the one I teach.

I attempted to create writing assignments that encourage students to examine the meaning of their writing as well as the errors that they typically make in the writing they produce. I recorded the improvement, or lack of improvement, that is present in the writing samples of these students once the assignment was completed.

The Setting

My subjects are fifteen students in a sophomore remedial reading class at Passaic High School, in Passaic, NJ. Passaic is a public high school that is located in an inner-city environment. The graduation rate in this high school is approximately 60%. Students who are placed in this level class have typically failed the GEPA examination in eighth grade,
and a practice HSPA test taken during freshman year. The only exceptions are students who have recently moved into the school district and students who did not take the practice HSPA test during freshman year. These students are automatically placed in the remedial level course unless the guidance department receives a copy of passing scores. Students placed in this class typically need assistance with reading comprehension and writing instruction. The students who are placed in remedial level English classes are typically not highly motivated. However, the students in this study have volunteered to take part and this may indicate higher levels of motivation than usual. The study volunteers are aware that the produced work was submitted anonymously and that pseudonyms are used in place of their actual names.

Methodology

A Descriptive Empirical Approach

In my research, I used the descriptive empirical research method described by Richard Beach in “Experimental and Descriptive Methods in Composition.” As described by Beach, descriptive empirical research “assigns tasks or creates rhetorical situations rather than studying writing as it occurs as part of natural events shaped by social or cultural meanings” (219). As I assigned specific writing assignments this method is the appropriate fit. In addition, I am studying writing within the authentic setting of a classroom without using any experimental changes: “Descriptive empirical research … focuses on phenomena without attempting to manipulate the effects of variables” (221). This method will enable me to report my findings in a way that will be easily accessible to other educators.
As part of my research, I developed two activities that incorporate creative writing and the teaching of fundamental writing concepts that these students have not yet mastered. The writing concepts I focus on are: the use of transitional words and paragraph unity. I have previously taught both of these concepts using traditional basic skills instruction and achieved poor results. My students rarely use transitional words and their paragraphs consistently include off-topic sentences. This issue is particularly challenging due to the fact that students will be required to demonstrate these skills during a practice HSPA examination, as well as the actual HSPA. This examination will measure, among other aspects of literacy, student ability to use transitional words and their ability to answer an open-ended question demonstrating paragraph unity. My hope is that my research will result in the creation of a method to help my students become better prepared when they encounter academic situations where an application of these skills is required.

As part of my research I employ one of the strategies described in “Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School,” by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher. In the first writing assignment, I used one of the works of graphic novelist Will Eisner to create a writing activity for my students. Eisner’s work often focuses on urban life and I feel that this will help to generate student interest. I have selected Eisner’s wordless story “Hydrant,” which is included in New York: The Big City by Will Eisner. I use the first six panels of this story, which depicts the struggles of a woman in a tenement-housing complex. Students reviewed the beginning of this wordless story and brainstormed together about what story the panels are telling. Students wrote a brief story
Harrison 41

describing what is happening in the panels. Students were given twenty minutes to create their writing sample. Once the students completed that activity they re-wrote their initial writing sample and made corrections. As they made their corrections students were encouraged to focus on eliminating sentences that distract from the focus of the story and incorporating transitional words in their writing. This model will be beneficial in aiding students in applying transitional words to describe change. In each panel the women transitions from one activity to the next. As a result students will be encouraged to apply transitional words that describe the changes in the panels. In addition, students will be able to eliminate information that distracts from the focus of the story because the plot development of Eisner’s story is easy to interpret.

For the second activity, I incorporated the concept of letter writing as a means to emphasize the writing process and identify improvement in student writing. I based the creation of this experiment on similar experiments by Gregory Shafer as documented in his article “Reading and Writing in the Developmental English Class.” In this activity the students were guided through the creation of a fictional character. To assist students I modeled a character description and provided them with a basic outline for creating their character. After the students created a character they wrote a story devised around the character. The story is told though a series of connected letters written by the students. As part of the assignment students wrote a series of four letters over a two-week period. I provided students with journals where they wrote and edited the letters. During the two week period, students were allotted periods of time in which they wrote and edited their letters. They were allowed to take the journals home to work on the letters.
My goals for this assignment were to have students apply the writing conventions of transitional words and paragraph unity in order to effectively convey meaning. I wanted students to recognize how transitional words can assist them in moving from one concept to the next. I feel that the use of a writing form that students are comfortable with can help them to see the practical purpose of using these words. Likewise, the focus on paragraph unity in this form of writing can illuminate the value of applying the concept to effectively convey meaning. By focusing on the concept of paragraph unity students can focus on the goal of conveying meaning to readers. The use of creative writing may be an effective medium for teaching this concept because students are solely responsible creating the text and conveying the meaning of the text.

To determine the benefits of the activities, I analyzed writing samples that resulted from the assignment and looked for improvements in specific aspects of student writing. I assessed the ability of the students to make connections between the meanings that they are trying to convey in their writing and the ability of their writing to express this meaning. In addition, I focused on the use of transitional words and paragraph unity as well as student recognition of errors in their own writing. In the first activity, the wordless sample from a graphic novel was be used to provide a springboard for students to create a story based upon the visual example. In the second activity students had more creative control. I was interested in seeing how this freedom of expression affects the writing that the students produce. As the sole reviewer of the writing samples, I looked for improvements in student writing as well as the ability of these assignments to generate student interest and engagement.
Potential Contribution of the Study

This research has the potential to call attention to new approaches for teaching secondary level remedial writers. Although existing research already attests to positive results, additional research is clearly needed to get districts to recognize the value of creative writing as a method for teaching various writing skills. As a teacher of remedial level students I have had first hand experience of the lack of preparedness experienced by teachers in my position. Teachers of remedial writers are lacking the institutional direction that will guide them in assisting student writers. As a result of the analysis produced by this study, I hope to introduce additional approaches for teaching basic writers through the use of creative writing. In addition, I would like to highlight the untapped multiple-literacies of basic writers in an inner-city environment. Although student interests may not be as conventional as academia expects, students in this environment have their own interests in literacy that have yet to be fully explored.

What should be accomplished?

As a result of my research, I will analyze the potential for using creative writing to increase the writing skills of basic writers. This research provides me with viable options to share with colleagues who also teach writing instruction. The assignments in this study will increase student skill level and will lessen students’ negative attitudes towards writing.

Results

Description and Analysis

For this study I examined two creative writing assignments. My goal was to evaluate the students’ papers to determine if the assignment was able to improve the
students' ability to write short stories, use transitional words, and increase the unity in their paragraphs. The New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric requires students to demonstrate mastery of these concepts in the speculative writing assignment. A passing score requires "transitions evident" and a "logical progression of ideas." In order to demonstrate a logical progression the students need to create content that is sequential and demonstrates knowledge of short story elements. These elements are: plot structure, character development, and development of a story setting. In my analysis of the creative writing assignments I looked for evidence of the students meeting these rubric requirements.

Fifteen students took part in this study. From this group I randomly selected ten writing samples to analyze. To begin the first assignment I showed students the first six panels of the story from the graphic novel and we brainstormed together about what was happening in the panels. During the brainstorming session students pointed out details to each other and pondered as to the race of the woman in the story. Students were receptive and eager to begin writing their stories. Students completed the assignments on two separate occasions. On both occasions the students went past the allotted twenty minutes. On the first day the students brainstormed and completed the first draft. On the second day the students proofread and edited the story with the aid of a sheet that listed transitional words.

Analysis of the Stories

Content

My first goal was to evaluate the content of the short story. In this evaluation my aim was to determine if the student was able use the writing conventions of transitional
words and paragraph unity to help aid in writing a short story based on the panels from the graphic novel. The majority of the samples that I evaluated support my hypothesis that students would be able to apply these conventions and effectively write a short story using the panels for inspiration and guidance. In all ten of the papers, students were able to write a short story based on the picture prompt. All of the stories centered on a woman struggling to support herself and her child. Many included twists at the end where the woman was suddenly granted the promise of a better life in the form of a financial windfall, or unexpected help from her family or another outside party. In one case the help appeared in the form of a generous gift from Oprah Winfrey. Miriam’s story below is a fairly typical sample of the stories I received (all student work is presented as written):

Cynthia was a woman who did what she had to do to survive. She was an illegal immigrant from Jamaica and came to America for a better life, for her and her baby. Then, when she came to the U.S., she had no place to go. So, she found an abandoned building and made it her home. From day-to-day basis, she lugged two pails to a hydrant in front of the building and filled them with water.

Then, quickly she carried the heavy pails of water up the rotten wooden stairs because she heard the baby crying. She picked him up and carried him to the kitchen. Cynthia then put him in an old orange crate that was his bed until she put the water in the pots.

Meanwhile, she boiled some water to heat up the baby bottles. Not long after, she heated up some cans of soup she found in the cabinets of the abandoned apartment for her dinner.

Finally, she gave the baby his bottle and calmed him down. Cynthia looked over to the wall where she had pictures of her family in Jamaica. It got her thinking that maybe she should go back to her family in Jamaica because this wasn’t working for her.

In spite of her living situation, Cynthia went and applied for her green card so she’d be here legally. She then got a job to support her and her babies needs. She got the condemned building fixed and never had to use the hydrant again.

3 All student names have been changed.
In her story Miriam demonstrates an adequate grasp of the concepts of paragraph unity and transitional words. Miriam effectively transitions from one section to the other using transitional words to aid her in moving from one thought to the next. In addition, the concepts in Miriam’s writing are developed with a sense of paragraph unity as she focused on conveying the woman’s actions in each panel. In this exercise Miriam demonstrates that she has an understanding of the application of these conventions that will assist her in passing the writing portion of the HSPA. Unfortunately, I do not have a sample of Miriam’s writing on an earlier picture prompt from which to draw a comparison.

Not all of the writing samples analyzed were as successful as Miriam’s story. In two of the samples the student subjects veered away from writing a short story and drifted into describing what is happening in each panel. To illustrate this issue, a sample from Ana’s story is below.

In Picture 1, an African American woman is living in the ghetto. She lives in an abandoned apartment with broken windows and messed up doors. The lady is carrying 2 buckets outside.

Although Ana clearly references the graphic novel in the introduction to her story, there is only one such reference. A second student, A.J., takes a similar approach in the introduction to his story.

In this picture Ms. Jackson is carrying two empty pails to the hydrant outside her house. Ms. Jackson is doing this because she needs water for her baby and her water faucet doesn’t work in her house. As seen in the picture Ms. Jackson lost everything to hurricane Katrina.

The rubric requires students to create a short story with the following elements: an opening and closing, a single organized focus, transitions between ideas, details, and few mechanical errors that do not interfere with the meaning. These students will not attain a
passing score due to the multiple issues with the writing. In these completed stories the only time the students reference the picture prompt is in the beginning of the story. In addition, both the first and second drafts of the work from these two students reveal the identical references to the actual panels of the graphic novels. The students are to use the picture prompt for inspiration and should not clearly state that they are looking at a picture prompt. In this situation it is clear that these students need additional instruction in writing conventions as well as the appropriate way to create a short story based on a picture prompt as required on the HSPA.

In two of the samples, students include titles that reference a turn of events that would come at the end of their story. Students are not required or instructed to include titles in their stories. A.J. titled his story “Wish’s Come True,” to hint at a twist at the end of the story where his main character Ms. Jackson was granted a home makeover which transformed her entire life. In Yazmin’s story “A mirical Lottery ticket,” she also hints at the twist of fate that will come at the end of her story. In this way the students are able to effectively employ a literary technique in their short story creation.

In my analysis of the content of the students’ stories I also reviewed student work for off-topic sentences. I was surprised to find few examples of sentences that seemed to be out of place. This may be due to the fact that the students were focused on describing the events that were happening in the panels of the story. The stories I reviewed were concise and all of the information pertained to the story the student was trying to tell.

**Use of Transitional Words**

My second objective was to analyze the students’ use of transitional words in the short story. Students were instructed to include transitional words in the second draft of
the stories that were based on the picture prompt. After the students received the initial instructions and guidance for writing they were told, “Proofread and rewrite your story. Add transitional words whenever possible. Use the transitional word sheet to guide you.” In my analysis I determined that students used transitional words in all ten of the writing samples that I analyzed. Although most students used the transitional words correctly, some samples seem to reveal that the writer is forcing the words into places needlessly. A portion from Marianne’s story below reveals an overabundance of transitional words being used at the expense of the story’s content. Although this student clearly needs to improve her writing skills, her use of transitional words in this story shows that she is less focused on using the words to aid her story as much as she is writing the story around using the transitional words. This may have resulted from this student’s interpretation that using transitional words was essential in completing this assignment correctly. This student clearly responded to wording in my instructions that advised her to use transitional words whenever possible. In the future, I will clarify this by instructing students to only use the words when the use aids the writing.

Then, Mrs. Carmen started getting water from the pump. It seems that she doesn’t have no where else to get water from. Slowly, she takes the buckets and started entering the building. She was going up the steps. Not long after, she had to go up more stairs. She looked kind of tire. Also, the water was spilling off the buckets.

Finally, she got to her apartment .... In conclusion, Mrs. Carmen wasn’t rich. However, one day a guy came to her apartment and saw all the drawing that she had on her wall. The guy thought the drawing were interesting and he made her famous."

In other samples the students use the transitional words more effectively. In A.J’s story, he effectively uses transitional words to convey the sequence of time that is depicted in the panels.
In this picture Ms. Jackson is carrying two empty pails to the hydrant outside her house. Ms. Jackson is doing this because she needs water for her baby and her water faucet doesn’t work in her house. As seen in the picture Ms. Jackson lost everything to hurricane Katrina.

Immediately, Ms. Jackson started to walk up the steps outside her home. As she got to the top of the steps inside her house water began to fall because she was in a hurry. She thought in her mind, everything is going wrong.

Quickly, after she got in the house she made her baby some food and began to boil the water and food formula on the heat burner. Ms. Jackson had to do this so it can kill the germs in the water she got from the hydrant.

Last, Ms. Jackson gave her baby the bottle and rock back and forth in the chair. All she thought about was an home makeover on an island....

Although A.J.’s story begins with a reference to the graphic novel panels, this mistake is one that is relatively easy to correct once it is pointed out to the student. It is important to note that the subjects in this study proofread and edited their stories without assistance from a teacher. The only direction they received was contained in the initial assignment instructions: “Proofread and rewrite your story. Add transitional words whenever possible. Use the transitional word sheet to guide you.” The rest of his story goes on to indicate an understanding of the short story format and an understanding of the correct use of transitional words.

**Changes in the Second Draft**

Finally, I compared the students first and second drafts in order to evaluate the claim that multiple drafts produce improvements in student writing. I focused on the type of improvements as well as any changes in the content. I found that in every paper the students’ application of writing conventions improved in the second draft. The type of changes I located include spelling corrections, increased and effective use of transitional words, and the rewording of certain sentences to improve the clarity of the writing.
Overall, the creation of the second draft showed a marked improvement in the final product. A portion from Trina’s papers is below.

Sample from the first draft

Mrs. Lucia lieve in a very old house and old neighborhood. In her house she dosen’t has water. Mrs. Lucia carries two buckets outside and fills them with water on the fire hydrant.

Sample from revised version

Mrs. Lucia lives in a very old building and old neighborhood. In her apartment, she doesn't have water. Mrs. Lucia carries two buckets and fills them with water on the fire hydrant.

Trina makes important improvements in her edited version. She corrected spelling and word usage in order to ensure that her meaning was conveyed correctly. Although she did not correct every error Trina demonstrates improvement in her edited version. This sample is typical of the types of improvements I noted.

**Description and Analysis of Letter Writing Assignment**

For the second portion of the study, I examined a series of letters that were written with the goal of telling a short story. In this assignment students were instructed as follows:

Create a series (at least four) of letters between two fictional characters. In the correspondence between the characters convey a specific conflict between the two characters. Your letters should give the reader a clear perspective of each characters personality and the situation between discussed. Once the series is complete the letters should tell a completed story. Freewrite the first draft of each letter. Then, proofread the letter to make sure that the paragraphs have unity and
transitional words are effectively used. Rewrite a second draft of each letter using
the transitional word sheet as an aid.

Once they received this instruction, students were provided with a transitional word sheet
to aid them in their revisions. Students wrote both the first and second drafts of the letters
independently. I did not review the writing samples until the students informed me that
they had completed the assignment. The only requirement for this exercise was that the
student devoted at least four periods of twenty minutes to writing the letters.

My inspiration for the creation of this assignment came from two different
sources. I was encouraged by an article by Gregory Shafer that described the successful
implementation of a similar assignment in a remedial level class. The second source of
inspiration was my observation that my students who groaned at the mention of a writing
assignment were the same ones who had to be stopped from writing lengthy notes to their
friends. I reasoned that since students were comfortable with this writing form, letter
writing would be well received as a class assignment. That fact I was easily able to obtain
volunteers for this research once the project was described, served to bolster my
hypothesis that reluctant writers would willingly undertake this assignment.

Analysis of Content

My first goal was to evaluate the ability of the students to successfully write a
short story through a series of four or more letters. For this assignment I define "success"
as the student’s ability to create characters and a plot where a conflict is identifiable. The
writing samples I reviewed revealed typical problems seen in the writing of remedial
writers. The writing reflected poor spelling, grammar, and syntax. Despite these flaws, I
was easily able to determine the basic plot structure of the stories. The students’ stories
were written on a variety of topics. Many of the stories centered on serious issues that many young people face in real life. The students in this study had recently concluded reading *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. As a result, many of the stories reflected issues similar to those explored in *The Outsiders*. In some cases the students named some of the characters after characters in the novel. Jake opted to write letters from one of the characters in *The Outsiders*, who was supposedly in heaven, to his friends on earth. A sample of this is below. I was slightly disheartened by this because I had instructed the students to create characters of their own. However, it was encouraging to see that students liked a work of literature so much that they would allow it to inspire their own writing. All work is presented as written.

Dear Johnny,

What up Bud! How things going in heaven. Is God treatin’ you well? I hope so!! Anyway you been missin’ out on a lot. Well to start off Darry, Soda and I got into a fight again. Wow I was shocked to learn Soda has problems. I never noticed, so now everything cool between us.

Also I miss you so much you was like family. I be with you someday.

Your Pal,

Ponyboy

It’s interesting to note the use of slang in Jake’s letter. The type of slang in this letter reflects the way the students speak in this school district. During the creation of the letter writing assignment, several students asked if they could use slang in their writing. I informed students that since they were writing in the voice of a specific character, it would be acceptable to incorporate slang in the characters speech when it is appropriate. This created an interesting dilemma for me when I evaluated the work. It became difficult for me to determine where the students were making mistakes and where they were deliberately using slang to illustrate the speech of a specific character. The use of non-
standard English in an academic environment has been hotly debated. In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication adopted a resolution that confirms students’ right to their own language and language varieties. The resolution “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” explores this issue in depth.  

In Ethan’s sample below, two characters write to each other about a planned robbery. The differing perspectives on the situation are clearly illustrated in the letter.

Dear James,

I’m worry about you. Its not right to do what you are doing if you get caught by the police you are going to be in big trouble. Im telling you James if you don’t stop this nonsense someone is going to get hurt. It is better to leave it like this because the police doesn’t know who did it. If you keep doing it is going to get worse.

Instead of you getting involve with this kind of trouble you should think in going back to school. If you do this Im sure you are going to get more money by working for it than robbing stores and hurting people. Pls take my advise from a friend that cares about you. If something happens to you it would be like losing my brother. Pls do what is right and don’t do crazy things.

Your Friend,
Alfred

Dear Alfred,

Im not going to change my mind I know what I going to do that’s why Im asking you to help me Im sure everything is going to be ok and Im not going to get caugh. I you help, you are going to get a part of what we get. If you disconnect the alarm no one is going to notice. Im sure of this.

Beside its easier that working to get money like you said. Im not going back to school only to waste my time. I’m better like this not needing to follow anyones rules. Now I follow my own rules from now on. I hope you change your mind and decide to help me.

Your friend,
James

Dear James,

Are you crazy James. If I do what you’r telling me to said, to disconnect the alarm they are going to know that it was me. I never going to help you to do crazy things. Also don’t even think that Im going to help you only because I getting a part of the money. That money is no good.

However if you get back to school you not going to waste your time. I’m sure that if you don’t it is going to be better because your going to study to become someone in

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4 Further examination of this issue is addressed in “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” Special issue of CCC 25.3 (1974). In addition, Class Politics by Stephen Parks provides a history of this issue.
life. Instead of going around robbing stores and hurting people. Please think about what you are doing I’m sure that you are going to do the correct thing.

Your Friend,
Alfred

I was disappointed by the fact that Ethan only wrote three letters in his series. I feel that a fourth letter could provide an interesting conclusion to his story. The completion of the three letters left me wondering how the situation would work out. Despite this I feel that Ethan was successful in his endeavor. In these samples Ethan lays the groundwork for the plot of his story. The character of James is determined to commit a crime and wants his friend Alfred to help him. The story conflict is identified by Alfred’s refusal to participate and his attempt to dissuade his friend from participating in the robbery. Ethan also succeeds in character development. James is clearly stubborn and determined “I’m not going to change my mind I know what I going to do that’s why I’m asking you to help me.” In contrast, Alfred has a strong sense of ethics, which he demonstrates in his response to the situation “I never going to help you to do crazy things. Also don’t even think that I’m going to help you only because I getting a part of the money. That money is no good.” Alfred’s statement that the “money is no good,” shows that he values honesty and integrity above materialism. Ethan’s ability to develop his characters demonstrates his understanding of characterization.

I was also disappointed that Ethan did not thoroughly proofread his work. Additional revisions and editing could have easily cleaned up the spelling and grammatical mistakes in the piece. Generally, when my students review their writing it is relatively easy for them to determine and correct these types of errors. Teacher involvement or peer review in the proofreading portion of this assignment would have been beneficial. Overall, I feel that this assignment was effective in encouraging reluctant
writers to write a short story. Students voluntarily created their stories and seemed proud of their completed work once the assignment was completed.

**Use of Transitional Words**

In my analysis of ten writing samples I located examples of transitional words in all of the stories. However, students did not include transitional words in all of the letters they wrote as part of the series of letters used for their stories. In Tania’s sample below, she neglects opportunities for incorporating transitional words.

I’m happy for hearing you like that. You are going to be fine. You are going to be free from the drugs. I’m going to help you in anything that I can. Like I told you I’m not going to leave you alone. I’m going to be with you in the good and bad times.

A pattern emerged in my review of similar samples. The students who did not use transitional words also did not develop the content in their letters. The letters did not demonstrate the components of plot or conflict. This lack of focus on the use of transitional words may have led students to disregard the sequence of events demonstrated in the panels. This may be reflective of student confusion or disengagement. Another issue I noted was that many students neglected to use the appropriate punctuation with the transitional words. To illustrate, the sample below is a common example of the errors in punctuation that I noted.

Letter # 1

Also I’m sending you this letter to let you know that you’re no the only teenager with problem in his life.

Nevertheless, there were many instances where transitional words were used correctly and effectively. A sample from Lee’s work below shows an effective application of transitional words.

Letter #2
Finally, I just want to tell you that you can always write me at my new address.

Letter #3

All in all, I just want to tell you you’re going to be missed terribly.

Overall the use of transitional words in the letter writing activity was much weaker than in the previous activity. This may be due to the design of the graphic novel activity. The scenes in the graphic novel are sequential and show a clear transition from one activity to another. This probably made it easy for students to locate situation where transitional words could be placed to show the change in each panel. This left students the task of using the transitional word charts to select the correct word to indicate the transition. In contrast, the letter writing activity provided no such guidance. The letter writing activity required students to freewrite and then to later go back and apply the transitional words. This was challenging to students who may never have the opportunity to apply the use of transitional words in the past. At this point students are not adept at the application of transitional words and the using them in a letter writing activity without teacher feedback was premature as well as not being the optimal approach. In addition the letter writing activity requires students to complete multiple tasks at the same time. When writing the letters the students had to apply the concept of characterization and use the short story format in addition to focusing on the intended meaning of the letter. Since the intent of the activity was to have students focus on the use of transitional words and paragraph unity it would have been beneficial for me to lift the students burden of creating the content of the letters. The use of the graphic novel provided students with the material that is essential to create the story and left them to focus on applying the skills that are the true intent of the activity.
I cannot predict whether students will use transitional words in future writing assignments. Because the student volunteers who participated in this study are not my students I have no way to monitor the long-term results of the emphasis placed on the use of transitional words in this assignment. The weakness of the application of transitional words in this assignment revealed to me that the use of transitional words is largely uncharted territory for these sophomore-level students. There is also the possibility that students view the use of transitional words as nonessential in letter writing. This may be reflective of the students' perspective of letter writing as a nonacademic activity. Students are typically assigned to write short stories but letter writing is relegated to casual correspondence with friends. It would be beneficial to continually emphasize the benefits of using transitional words in student writing. The transitional word reference sheet that I gave the students proved to be beneficial in guiding student application of transitional words in their writing. In the future I will continue to make this aid readily available to my students.

Unlike the first assignment, this assignment required students to develop in-depth characters. Although students are to apply the same writing conventions as in the first assignment, this assignment required additional insight into character development. An understanding of character development will assist students in telling stories from a variety of perspectives.

The paragraph unity in the second assignment was weak as well. The students created poorly constructed paragraphs with ideas that are not presented in a unified fashion. This is probably due to students' prior experience with letter writing. My students typically write letters only in the form of casual notes or as informal e-mail
exchanges. As a result students don’t readily identify letter writing as a formal activity where unity of thought is essential. The paragraphs lacked structure as well as detail and elaboration. The students did not succeed in creating paragraphs that were able to effectively convey meaning. In the future, students can be aided by reviewing letters that model effective paragraph unity. In such an activity it will be beneficial for students to select sentences that aid in creating and also destroying, paragraph unity.

Changes in Revised Version

This revisions produced by this assignment were much weaker than in the previous short story writing assignment. In the second drafts of the students’ letters the revisions made ranged from few to none. In many instances the students did not create second drafts. I feel that this is due to the fact that students were simply tired of writing. This assignment called for four rough drafts of letters and four completed versions. For students who struggle with their writing this is an immense amount of writing. Also, since this second assignment followed the first short story assignment, it caused the amount of writing required to be even greater.

The success of the graphic novel activity demonstrates that this type of media can be a beneficial tool in aiding student writers. In this study, students responded well to the artistic rendering of the comic strip style characters. This may be due to the fact that the use of this type of media is completely unlike the typical assignments present in a school setting. As remedial writers are typically turned off by academic writing assignments, the introduction of an alternative assignment is bound to get their attention. Comic strips are a non-intimidating form of communication that students can easily comprehend. The approachability of the graphic novel assignment makes it a viable option for use with
struggling writers. The students in this study demonstrated confidence in their analysis of
the author's intent in the meaning conveyed in the story. As there is no text attached to
the panels students are given the freedom to interpret the events in the panels without
experiencing any concern over being "right." This freedom is essential in encouraging
struggling writers who often grapple with issues of confidence in their writing ability.

The drawbacks of the letter writing activity may have resulted from a lack of prior
instruction in letter writing. In administering this activity I did not provide any instruction
in formal letter writing. In planning the activity I neglected to realize that students likely
did not have any prior school instruction in this area. This was undoubtedly the root cause
of the weak content of the letters. Students did not know how to properly construct a
letter. The idea for this activity was largely inspired by my knowledge of the interest
students have in writing informal notes to each other. I overlooked the possibility that
students view the notes as casual correspondence that provides a divergence from
academic writing. Essentially, students enjoy writing notes to each other because they can
communicate freely in the notes and not worry about having their writing evaluated. The
students focus solely on the content of the notes and disregard writing conventions. In
addition, the letters allow students to incorporate slang and general language that is
unacceptable in academic writing. As a result, the students in this study may have viewed
the activity as one where they were permitted to disregard the guidelines of academic
writing and communicate in a manner they found appropriate. As a result the letters
produced demonstrated little adherence to grammatical and writing conventions.

In future activities with letter writing, I would include instruction in formal letter
writing. Other variations of the activity are also possible. For instance, students can work
with partners and create letters while role-playing specific characters. This can encourage students to take care in conveying the intended meaning in the letters being created. I would also alter the number of letter the students are required to produce. In this study the quantity of the letters required may have caused students to rush through the activities with the sole goal of completing the task. As the goal is to have students focus on applying the intended skills, the quantity of letters is less important than the content and style produced in the letters. While there are benefits in incorporating letter writing into lessons in writing skills, additional instruction in the skill is clearly an essential component of the success of such activities.

IV. Final Analysis

Summary and Implications of the Study

The results of this study validate my hypothesis about the instructional potential of using creative writing for remedial level writing assignments. It is important to note that the assertions made about remedial level writers were made without input from the students in this study. This thesis invited students to participate in activities designed to improve writing skills. The results of the activities provide me with concepts for writing assignments as well as direction for refining the activities. The results of my experience can benefit other teachers who wish to adopt the activities used in this study.

This study demonstrates that creative writing is an effective means for inspiring the interest of remedial level writing students. The fact that I was able to easily attain volunteers for this study reflects the draw of creative writing. It is likely students were willing to participate because the assignments were creative in nature and therefore less threatening than traditional writing assignments. The omnipresence of standardized test
writing requirements creates an environment where students are rarely provided with opportunities for freedom of expression in writing assignments. The assignments in this study allowed students to decide whether to voluntarily participate as well as granting them freedom in the writing assignments.

Participation in this study may have appealed to students because this was one of the rare occasions when a teacher openly wanted to learn from them. Placing students in this type of position shows students that their opinion is important and valued. This method of granting students control is unique in a school environment where so much of a students work is guided and controlled by teachers and administrators. Incorporating choice and control in student writing assignments can help make the English classroom more engaging. Teachers can incorporate this concept in numerous ways. For instance, teachers can incorporate freewriting activities into prewriting for numerous writing assignments. This type of activity can help to dispel some of the anxiety students feel when beginning a writing assignment as well as provide an opportunity for students to process their thoughts on the topic. Teachers can also provide students with control over their writing assignments by producing multiple assignment options for student selection. By providing students with the opportunity to select the assignment that most interests them there is a greater chance that students will become engaged in the work.

Providing students with the opportunity to complete writing assignments that are not graded also appears to have potential as a positive instructional approach. The students in this study voluntarily agreed to complete assignments without receiving extra credit or a grade. This demonstrates that many students are willing to voluntarily participate in writing activities for the sole purpose of helping them grow as writers.
Students do not benefit from the constant looking threat of having their writing evaluated. In contrast, this evaluation may cause students to experience anxiety and repress creative thought when completing a writing assignment. Although it is necessary to evaluate students writing it is possible and beneficial to incorporate assignments that are not graded and evaluated into the learning experience.

This is reflective of Peter Elbow’s argument in “High and Low Stakes in Assignment and Responding to Writing.” In this article Elbow states that low stakes (emphasis mine) assignments should be designed to inspire students to “think, learn, and understand more of the course material” (5). Elbow continues, “Low stakes writing is often informal and graded informally. In a sense, we get to throw away the low stakes writing itself but keep the neutral changes it produced in students’ heads” (5). The value of low stakes writing can also be seen in the reduction of pressure the assignment places on the student. If writing anxiety is an issue for a student, as Holmes Matthews asserts, then low stakes assignments can help to reduce this anxiety. Such assignments give students a chance to actually learn the material instead of constantly focusing on the grade they will receive. Low stakes writing assignments can give students the opportunity to experiment with their writing without the pressure of a high stakes evaluation. This can help to build student writing skills and confidence level. When students encounter the high stakes writing assignments on standardized tests the students will have the opportunity to demonstrate the skills acquired during the low stakes assignments.

My analysis demonstrates that students attempted to creatively construct short stories while applying traditional writing conventions. The assignments in this study allow a balance between student creativity and application of traditional writing
conventions. This balance is beneficial because the students were able to use the conventions to aid in the construction of their own creative expression. The conventions aided the students in this expression and did not dominate the overall purpose of the assignments. An exception to this is the overuse of transitional words in some of the writing samples. Nevertheless, areas such as use of transitional words, serve to inform me that these students need additional remediation in the correct application of the concept. It is clear that certain assignments were more beneficial in this area than others. The graphic novel panels clearly proved to be a beneficial assignment for aiding in the instruction for use of transitional words. In contrast, the letter writing assignment did not serve to effectively guide students in applying this convention. As I noted in my earlier analysis of the two activities, the design of the graphic novel panels aided students in the application of the concept. Students are aided by an assignment design that clearly guides them in the correct application of the transitional words. Assignments such as the letter writing activity can be better used for the purpose of instruction in different literary areas. For instance, the letter writing activity can be used to instruct students in developing and understanding characterization. It is beneficial for students to receive the initial instruction in writing conventions with different instructional approaches such as the graphic novel activity.

Support for the concept of using creative writing in remedial writing instruction stems from the belief that students will be able to better express themselves in creative writing. Gregory Shafer's use of creative writing in his developmental English class was inspired by notion that "We do not learn to read and write for mechanical purposes or academic pursuits, but for selfish, social reasons. Both are participatory in nature and
demand our contributions as well as our passions” (11). Remedial level students need to be engaged in their writing assignments and dedicated to improving the writing in order to communicate their perspective. Although this can be difficult to accomplish, the analysis of assignments in this study demonstrate that it is clearly possible. In “Joining the Literacy Club,” Smith contends that writing “must be rooted in the lives of the students and include meaningful activities.” In “On Reading,” Goodman asserts, “learning is done in the context of activities in which language is necessary” (124). Examination of the writing produced in this study reveals this to be true. In the samples students willingly elaborated on situations that they personally understood.

The majority of the students’ writing reflects a grasp of the concept of short story structure. Ironically, these students have failed the release HSPA test for two consecutive years because they have failed to demonstrate mastery of this skill. There is a disconnect between the actual skill set and the application of the skills during standardized testing. An argument against this disconnect would be to assert that the students have only recently attained the skill set through recent course work this year. However, I doubt this is true because these skills develop over a long period of a student’s education. It is doubtful that the students were just recently taught the concept of short story structure. This realization has caused me to continue to question the validity of determining a student’s writing ability by tests that are administered on a once yearly basis. Also, it is evident that additional, non-traditional, writing instruction in the writing conventions that are noted as weak would aid these students in the development of writing fluency. As a result of reviewing the writing samples, I argue that the majority of the students in this study are capable of passing the HSPA. Nevertheless, success in these assignments does
not guarantee a passing score on the HSPA. There are multiple factors that may impact the ability of students to pass the HSPA. Personal confidence, test taking anxiety, and the ability to relate to the material on the test are all factors that impact student success.

The time constraints included in the HSPA is one of the biggest hurdles students encounter during testing. Armstrong echoes the challenge of time constraints in her analysis of college students who are characterized as basic writers. "Given a difficult task and the pressure of time, any of us can experience at least some of these problems. We may berate ourselves for not working quickly enough; we may lack confidence ... we may even find ourselves distracted from the meaning we are working toward by the fact that our essay does not sound polished enough" (Armstrong 76). Although time limits are not conducive in promoting optimal writing instruction it is imperative for students to become accustomed to time constraints in order to prepare for testing. Time limitations were not incorporated in the writing assignments in this study. In using the activities in this study it is possible to incorporate time constraints. I suggest initially working with students without time limitations and then slowly incorporating similar activities with a time limit. Once students are able to comprehend and apply the requirements of the task they will be better able to deal with the time restrictions of testing.

Using the activities in this study will enable teachers to inspire student writing in a way that the HSPA test cannot. The activities provide students with the opportunity to write about an issue that is interesting to them. In addition, they are given the chance to review their writing and experiment with the use of writing conventions that will assist them in expressing meaning. The activities in this study measure potential and offer
students the chance to view writing as an ongoing, developmental process. This is a divergence from the timed drills that characterize traditional HSPA preparation.

Despite my personal reservations regarding standardized testing, it is my role to position the test positively and to assist my students in attaining the skills necessary to meet state requirements. Utilizing the assignments in this study can serve to engage and encourage students who struggle with basic writing skills and with confidence as writers. At Passaic High School, a portion of the test preparation consists of providing students with routine drills in assignments, similar to those found on the HSPA. For instance, at regular intervals during the year, every English teacher is required to provide her class with a picture prompt activity. Students are given thirty minutes to write a short story based on the picture prompt. The teachers then grade the essays during an assigned time period. The students receive a grade but not necessarily feedback or instruction on how to improve their writing.

This instructional practice is reflective of Fearn’s statement “we are causing more writing than ever before ... writing scores have not changed as a result (Fisher, Frey 396). Fearn goes on to explain that many teachers have missed the critical step of instruction. Results from the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) support the role of teacher instruction in writing improvement (Fisher, Frey 396). The Nation’s Report Card (National center for Education Statistics, 1998), suggests that writing achievement at grades 8 and 12 was aided largely by writing instruction. The most notable achievement gains were demonstrated when students were required to revise their writing over several drafts (Fisher, Frey 396). At Passaic High School we are often causing (emphasis mine) writing and infrequently focusing on ways to develop the
skills the students need to improve their writing. This type of instruction is detrimental to student learning. Participation in writing drills may cause the anxiety that has been deemed to hinder the student writing experience. Forcing students to write with the sole goal of meeting the requirements of the rubric removes any possible pleasure from the writing experience. As personal investment is essential in encouraging student writers it is imperative to create opportunities that encourage this investment. The activities outlined in this study infuse instructional techniques with creativity and this is an essential component that traditional test preparation lacks. The results of this study demonstrate the potential of the application of alternative method for teaching and inspiring remedial writers.

**Limitations of the Study**

My study was limited to a particular group of ten students. The teacher of these students has been teaching remedial level writers for twenty years. It is possible that using students from a different class might yield different results. The students used in this study were volunteers and this indicates a high motivation to learn. This motivation is not characteristic of all remedial level writers. A possible future enhancement to this study would be the incorporation of student input regarding the decision to participate in the study. This study raises additional research questions. Would the results have been different if I had made certain changes to the design this study? For instance, I feel the study might be enhanced by teacher assistance in drafting the assignments, control over prior lessons in the use of transitional words and prior lessons in short story construction and character development. As the researcher I would have liked to know what, if any, exposure students had received in working with transitional words and paragraph unity. It
would be helpful to know if students were familiar with the terms and what type of direction students had in applying the skills. As I did not have access to this information it may have benefited the students if I had conducted a few preliminary lessons in using these conventions. In these lessons it may have been helpful to model writing where these conventions were appropriately applied and benefited the writing. Doing so may have aided students in the application of these skills.

As the students at Passaic High School are a largely bilingual population, it is possible to receive different results with another student population. Finally, this study is not intended to be a comparative study. My assertions regarding the limitations of traditional writing instruction, such as the use of the five-paragraph essay model, are based upon my observations of the challenges faced by students being drilled in essay writing for HSPA test preparation. It is possible for similar results to be achieved with more traditional writing assignments that are intended to teach the same concepts. However, as traditional test preparation continues to fail these students it is time to reconsider current instructional practices and look in a new direction for instructional approaches.

Conclusion

The incorporation of creative writing assignments in the remedial writing classroom can help to prepare students for the writing sections of standardized tests. The assignments in this study are likely to generate student interest while simultaneously helping to improve skills required in testing. The graphic novel short story writing assignment proved to be a particularly beneficial writing assignment for struggling writers. There are other means teachers may use to improve writing skills and inspire
struggling writers. Ongoing teacher feedback, consistent reinforcement of required skills, and a positive environment will also help to assist student writers.
V. Works Cited


Appendix A: Parent/Guardian Consent Form for Participants Under 18 Years of Age or Dependent Adults

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Study's Title: Using Creative Writing Instruction in the Urban High School English Classroom to Promote Writing Skills in Remedial Level Students

Why is this study being done? To evaluate the ability of creative writing assignments to improve student writing skills.

What will happen while your child or dependent is in the study? The students will complete a writing activity that requires the student to write a short story based on a picture prompt. This story will be revised upon completion. The second activity requests students to write a short story using a series of personal letters. At the conclusion of the study, I will randomly select the work from ten of the students to analyze for the research.

Time: This study will take about 6 sessions, 20 minutes per session.

Risks: Your child or dependent may experience anxiety, if he or she commonly finds writing assignments to be stressful.

Benefits: Your child dependent may benefit from this study by gaining improvements in essential writing skills.

Others may benefit from this study because: if the activities are successful they will be used with other students in the future.

Who will know that your child or dependent is in this study? Your child or dependent will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who your child or dependent is confidential (Or if applicable, anonymous) according to the law.

Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used for participants during presentations.

Does your child or dependent have to be in the study? Your child or dependent does not have to be in this study. She/he is a volunteer! It is okay if she/he wants to stop at any time and not be in the study. She/he does not have to answer any questions that she/he does not want to answer. Nothing will happen to your child or dependent. She/he will still get the things that were promised.

Do you have any questions about this study? Phone: Maureen Harrison 973-470-5444
**Do you have any questions about your rights?** Phone or email the IRB Interim Chair, Tim Kirby (kirbyt@mount.sinclair.edu 973-655-7534) or the IRB Administrator, Fitzgerald Edwards (edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu, 973-655-7781).

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to have your child or dependent in this study, please fill in the lines below.

I would like to get a summary of this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Parent/Guardian</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<th>Name of Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Name of Faculty Sponsor</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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Appendix B: Assent Form
(to be accompanied by the Parent/Guardian Consent Form)

ASSENT FORM

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Who am I? I am Maureen Harrison. I work at Passaic High School in the English Department.

Why is this study being done? I want to see if creative writing assignments can help students to improve specific writing skills.

What will happen while you are in the study? If you choose to be in this study, I will give you specific writing assignments to complete. The first will be to complete a writing activity that asks you to write a short story based on a picture prompt. The next activity will be to revise the short story. The second activity asks you to write a short story in the form of a series of personal letters.

At the conclusion of the study, I will randomly select the work from ten of the students to analyze for the research.

Time: This study will take 6 sessions, 20 minutes each.

Risks: You may experience anxiety, if you commonly find writing assignments to be stressful.

Benefits: You may benefit from this study by gaining improvements in your writing skills.

Others may benefit from this study because if the activities are successful they will be used with other students in the future.

Who will know that you might be in this study? You and your parent will know that you are in this study. I will know that you are here, but we won’t tell anyone else.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. We won’t get mad with you if you say no. It is okay if you change your mind at any time and leave the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you. You will still get the

Do you have any questions about this study? Phone: Maureen Harrison
973-470-5444
**Do you have any questions about your rights?** Phone or email the IRB Interim Chair, Tim Kirby (kirbyt@mail.Montclair.edu 973-655-7534) or the IRB Administrator, Fitzgerald Edwards (edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu, 973-655-7781).

I would like to get a summary of this study:
Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Research Participant</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<th>Name of Witness</th>
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<th>Date</th>
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<th>(Name of Faculty Sponsor)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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Appendix C: New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric

Used for the "Writing to Speculate" (Picture Prompt) and Persuasive Writing Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Inadequate Command</th>
<th>Limited Command</th>
<th>Partial Command</th>
<th>Adequate Command</th>
<th>Strong Command</th>
<th>Superior Command</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May lack opening and/ or closing</td>
<td>May lack opening and/ or closing</td>
<td>May lack opening and/ or closing</td>
<td>Generally has opening and/ or closing</td>
<td>Opening and closing</td>
<td>Opening and closing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimal response to topic; uncertain focus</td>
<td>Attempts to focus</td>
<td>Usually has single focus</td>
<td>Single focus</td>
<td>Single focus</td>
<td>Single, distinct focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No planning evident; disorganized</td>
<td>Attempts organization</td>
<td>Some lapses or flaws in organization</td>
<td>Ideas loosely connected</td>
<td>Logical progression of ideas</td>
<td>Logical progression of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Details random, inappropriate, or barely apparent</td>
<td>Few, if any, transitions between ideas</td>
<td>May lack some transitions between ideas</td>
<td>Transitions evident</td>
<td>Moderately fluent</td>
<td>Fluent, cohesive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No apparent control</td>
<td>Errors/ patterns of errors may be evident</td>
<td>Some errors that do not interfere with meaning</td>
<td>Details appropriate and varied</td>
<td>Attempts compositional risks</td>
<td>Compositional risks successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usage</td>
<td>No apparent control</td>
<td>Errors/ patterns of errors may be evident</td>
<td>Some errors that do not interfere with meaning</td>
<td>Few errors</td>
<td>Few errors</td>
<td>Very few, if any, errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe/ numerous errors</td>
<td>Excessive monotony/ same structure</td>
<td>Little variety in syntax</td>
<td>Variety in syntax appropriate and effective</td>
<td>Few errors</td>
<td>Very few, if any, errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Construction</td>
<td>Assortment of incomplete and/ or incorrect sentences</td>
<td>Excessive monotony/ same structure</td>
<td>Little variety in syntax</td>
<td>Some variety</td>
<td>Variety in syntax appropriate and effective</td>
<td>Precision and/or sophistication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>Errors so severe they detract from meaning</td>
<td>Numerous errors</td>
<td>Patterns of errors evident</td>
<td>No consistent pattern of errors</td>
<td>Few errors</td>
<td>Very few, if any, errors</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Harrison 77
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Scorable Responses</th>
<th>NR</th>
<th>No Response</th>
<th>Student wrote too little to allow a reliable judgment of his/her writing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Off Topic/Off Task</td>
<td>Student did not write on the assigned topic/task, or the student attempted to copy the prompt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Not English</td>
<td>Student wrote in a language other than English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WF</td>
<td>Wrong Format</td>
<td>Student refused to write on the topic, or the writing task folder was blank.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content/ Organization</th>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Sentence Construction</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Communicates intended message to intended audience</td>
<td>• Tense formation</td>
<td>• Variety of type, structure, and length</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relates to topic</td>
<td>• Subject-verb agreement</td>
<td>• Correct construction</td>
<td>• Spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opening and closing</td>
<td>• Pronouns usage/agreement</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Capitalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focused</td>
<td>• Word choice/meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Logical progression of ideas</td>
<td>• Proper Modifiers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Transitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Appropriate details and information</td>
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