Preparing to be privatized:
The hidden curriculum of a community college ESL writing class

Mary Jane Curry


*Saky:* Sometimes I think I should quit my job and go to school full time, you know.
*MJC:* Yeah.
*Saky:* And how can I eat?
*MJC:* Yeah, right, you have to support yourself and your family. Did you get to talk to anybody about what you would need to do to become a policeman?
*Saky:* I want to [feel] more confident in myself for writing and reading first. . . . I feel ashamed of myself, you know. I don’t want people to say, what the hell are you thinking about, you’re not even help[ing] yourself with it.

The American education system plays a large role in assimilating immigrants and refugees (McNeil, 1986, p. 5). Historically this social function was performed for children in K-12 schools, and for adults in high school or adult education “Americanization” classes. Today community colleges also play a role in the assimilation functions. This fragment of an interview with a 25-year-old male Laotian refugee illustrates the complex set of issues that English language learners face at the community college. These students experience tensions between work and school, between supporting a family and trying to realize their dreams. Often they feel inadequate to meet these challenges yet are highly motivated to improve their lives. Immigrant and refugee students form an increasingly large presence at community colleges (Arenson, 1998).1 The rise of this population in two-year colleges calls for an examination of their educational experiences—both the overt curriculum they study and the hidden curriculum embedded in ‘remedial’ English as a second language (ESL) 2 and writing courses.

One focus of such analysis is to examine how adult education courses try to meet the stated objectives of two-year colleges, which include providing an ‘open door’ to nontraditional students. The 1960s boom in community colleges resulted largely from the demands of racial and ethnic minorities (Brint and Karabel, 1989; see also Soldatenko,

---

1 Since the 1970s, more students have begun their college careers at two-year community colleges than at four-year colleges and universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989:v). In higher education overall, the share of students at two-year colleges continues to rise, reaching almost 40% in 1996 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999).

2 The term ‘English as a second language’ is problematic, given that many learners, including some in this study, are multilingual. However, as the program under study uses this term, I will follow suit.
this volume). Yet the goals of the community college have been contradictory since the inception of junior colleges early in the twentieth century (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994), making curriculum analysis difficult. These goals have included:

- training workers for specific occupations (Paris, 1985);
- providing high school drop-outs with a “second chance” at education;
- protecting the prestige of four-year institutions by diverting lower-status students (Brint and Karabel, 1989);
- “cooling out” students’ aspirations (Clark, 1960, 1980) by propagating “a meritocratic ideology, a critical piece of the body of beliefs which sustains capitalist social relations” (Ryan and Sackrey, 1984, p.112);
- and absorbing surplus labor (Shor, 1980).

Historically and currently, immigrants/refugees have performed many of the agricultural, janitorial, health care, childcare, and other low-level jobs that U.S. citizens disdain (Boyle, 1999). In the context of current debates about the roles and rights of immigrants/refugees in U.S. society—and actions such as the recent denial of benefits like food stamps to “legal” immigrants—the contested status of the public services to which new comers are entitled becomes salient. The educational field promises to teach English and the other academic proficiencies that these students need to pursue further education, job training, and employment. My first focus is to see if and how these promises are fulfilled.

A second focus analyzes students’ responses to both hidden and overt curricula, including the forms of resistance, mediation, and accommodation that they embrace. As Margolis, Soldatenko, and Gair (this volume) describe, many scholars have complicated the reproduction model of educational inequality to account for students’ agency as they encounter the curricula, both hidden and overt. For many immigrants/refugees, ESL and composition courses function as gatekeepers to college-transfer or vocational programs (Shaughnessy, 1977). These courses are therefore a pivotal locus of student preparation and enculturation into academic discourses. Students themselves recognize the importance of English language literacy to their future success, as Saky’s interview above shows. Yet they do not accept the curriculum unthinkingly. This chapter examines the curriculum—both overt and hidden—of an ESL basic writing class, a ‘remedial’ community college course. Ideally, the overt curriculum of an English composition course teaches the academic literacies and discourses that will enable students to undertake college-level work (Purves, 1988). In this study, however, as I will demonstrate, the overt curriculum was only superficially realized. Instead, multiple lessons of the hidden curriculum carried more force. The hidden curriculum worked on three levels: the institution, the classroom, and the larger economy.

On the institutional level, historical tensions among the competing goals of two-year colleges often come to the fore in ESL programs, which serve the widest range of students. At the same time, with the increasing casualization of academic labor, community colleges hire more part-time faculty, which can shortchange students of needed services. The state crisis in educational funding produces greater need for institutions to compete for government grants to support instruction in English language and literacy. This competition has curricular and policy implications, including the threat of privatization, which is the direction in which basic education programs in New York
are headed (Arenson, 2000). At the college under study, ESL students themselves became a commodity; they embodied the diversity that the institution actively sought to display.

At the classroom level, ESL students confronted a well-recognized hidden curriculum of low-expectations, docility, and the internalization of failure (Morrow and Torres, 1998). They were also constructed as a monolithic group with few individual differences in past histories and future goals. At the economic level, in this era of privatization and global capitalism, students were taught not to expect the social services, from schools to libraries to welfare support, that characterized the United States during much of the twentieth century (Apple, 1996; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe, 1995). As the relentless logic of privatization reduces public services, the gap widens between those who can afford to purchase such services and those who suffer from reductions. Nonetheless, many ESL and adult basic education courses are still funded by federal and state grants that allow programs to offer courses gratis. As this chapter shows, however, the ironic message becomes that if something is free, it must have little worth. The hidden curriculum on these three levels sends the message that in the United States, “You get what you pay for.”

The Hidden Curriculum and Forms of Capital

As Martin (1976) pointed out, the hidden curriculum is experienced individually; particular students receive different messages from and respond differently to the curriculum. Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of various forms of capital—economic, social, and cultural—provides theory with which to examine this process.

Social space is constructed in such a way that agents or groups are distributed in it according to their position in statistical distributions based on the two principles of differentiation which, in most advanced societies, such as the United States, . . . are undoubtedly the most efficient: economic capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998:6).

Examining ways in which players on the educational field embody these forms of capital facilitates a subtle and complex understanding of how students and teachers grapple with both overt and hidden curricula.

The influx of nonnative speakers of English into two-year colleges highlights the contradictions of institutional missions and creates new challenges for instructors and administrators. As the demographic data about the students in this study demonstrate, adult students have varied backgrounds, histories, and educational and occupational goals. The contemporary ESL classroom includes economic immigrants, political refugees, and relatives of international students or highly skilled international workers. Students differ on the basis of race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and educational attainment. Moreover, students occupy multiple categories, which contribute forms of capital, and therefore to their ability to maneuver in the institution and achieve their goals.

Monroe Technical College

---

3 All names used here are pseudonyms.
The research took place at Monroe Technical College (MTC), which is located in a medium-sized midwestern city that also houses a large research university. Founded in 1912, MTC, according to its mission statement, “welcomes all individuals who can benefit from the services provided. . . . supports students to choose and prepare for successful careers by assessing students’ skills and needs. . . . offers intellectually rigorous studies facilitated by highly skilled faculty in technical and vocational skills, basic literacy and arts and sciences.” Within the college, the Alternative Learning Division (ALD) offers ESL and basic education.

I studied one semester of a Basic Writing 3 course, using ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews. Approximately 18 students began the course, but only four stayed through the term. The students included five refugees, seven immigrants, and six students related to international students or staff at the university. In addition to the typical variety of linguistic, national, and racial backgrounds, a more unusual characteristic was the range of student’s educational attainment levels. Of all students, 12 had at least bachelor’s degrees; five of these had graduate degrees, including three Russian women with PhDs. Of the refugees, Saky had graduated from high school; Ahmad, 23, a refugee from the civil war in Sierra Leone, was taking the GED tests. I interviewed six students (three who left and three who stayed in the course), the course instructor, the lead teacher of the ESL program, and the dean of the ALD.

I did not set out to study the hidden curriculum. Initially, my research asked about how students learn, accommodate, and resist Western-style argumentation in academic writing (Reid, 1984). This focus emerged from the larger question: *If two-year colleges are to fulfill the promises they make to educate the public (including immigrants and refugees), how do the curriculum and the students’ experiences prepare students to transfer to academic or training programs?* However, the Basic Writing 3 class touched so lightly upon argumentation that little data resulted. Instead, a new research question arose: *If academic writing—the overt curriculum—was not taught in Basic Writing 3, what actually happened?* The concept of the hidden curriculum provides an ideal framework with which to answer that question.

**The Hidden Curriculum at the Institutional Level**

The course instructor plays a pivotal role in creating and implementing both overt and hidden curricula. Instructors are institutional actors imbued with pedagogic authority (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:20; see, Ehrensal, this volume). The Basic Writing 3 instructor was George Cleary, a white, middle-aged man who had taught English extensively in Mexico, but had little experience in teaching second language writing in the United States. Spring 1999 was Cleary’s first semester teaching in the ALD, although he was simultaneously teaching composition in the Arts and Sciences Division, and ESL to Mexican students at satellite locations. Besides teaching courses at three locations, Cleary worked on-call as a medical interpreter and had childcare responsibilities. Indeed, one structural form of the hidden curriculum, hiring part-time instructors, teaches students that free courses may not offer the services associated with for-credit courses that charge tuition. Colleges thus communicate that students cannot count on having well-trained, full-time faculty who are invested in the institution and knowledgeable about its systems. Cleary’s case illustrates some of the problems with this practice.
Cleary suffered from institutional policies and practices that put him in the classroom three weeks into the semester because of problems scheduling the first instructor. Being hired late deprived him of time to prepare for the course and learn ALD procedures. During the semester, Cleary received virtually no support or direction. Other than a textbook and course objectives, he was given no previous syllabi or materials, although the policy requires keeping such materials on file. Furthermore, even though he was assigned a mentor, a policy that the ALD implements to maintain certification, they never met. (See Margolis and Romero, this volume, on the nature of mentoring.)

Cleary was left in the dark about many key issues. For example, only on the last day did he learn about reporting requirements for grant and college recordkeeping. Cleary was supposed to follow-up with students when they missed class, and enter it on the computer system if they dropped the class. “Client reporting” data for funders requested detailed knowledge of not only students’ academic competencies, but also personal information such as whether they were U.S. citizens and registered voters. Part-time instructors rarely have access to such information, and they may not want to have such intimate knowledge. On the last day, Cleary also learned that the Basic Writing course was noncredit, which he noted was “a real letdown,” as it created “a big problem in a course like that as far as getting students to follow through.”

Cleary was not given an office, so he had nowhere on campus to store materials or read student papers. Nor did the ALD assume that Cleary would meet with students outside of class. In addition, lead teacher Maureen Powell had informed part-time instructors that they were not required to attend meetings. The labor union contract specifies that mandatory meetings and student conferences must be paid; by releasing part-time instructors, the ALD saved money but increased the isolation of instructors and kept them ignorant of institutional policies, procedures, and issues. These problems alienated Cleary from the ALD administration and his students. As a result of these conditions and the high drop-out rate, Cleary characterized the semester as unsuccessful. “The class was not a success . . . . If you’re going to be honest about it and measure it accurately, it wasn’t.” He identified as reasons “daily pressures” on students, the course’s lack of clear expectations for students, and little institutional support. However, the major problem that anybody in my situation is going to come into is that you’re being a part-time instructor, you’re going to be in off the street to give your class, and you’re going to be gone. That’s the fallacy in doing the part-time instructor. I think that’s a very difficult role to play . . . because there’s no feedback, [or] making contact with people in the department.

In his view, a key factor was that ALD courses were free. Cleary believed that students would be more attentive and responsible if they had to pay. “If you’re giving something for free, it’s worthless. People don’t appreciate when things are given away for free.” Charging students for courses “creates a commitment” like buying a textbook, as “an investment.” Cleary commented to students about the $38 textbook: “It’s an expensive textbook. But education is expensive.” Here the instructor—not necessarily consciously—promulgated the hidden curriculum of the privatization of education.

Cleary’s comments raise the issue of student expectations, using a consumer model. Cleary stated, “You pay more money for something and you expect a better product and you’re more proud of what you’ve done.” In discussing the private language
academy he ran in Acapulco, Cleary used the discourse of consumerism and contemporary business practices (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996):

The philosophy at our school, when we train teachers, is that the student is your boss, really. You must satisfy the student, for everything ordinary. . . . You’re there to serve the student and you must have results. And to do that you focus on strategies that are efficient, straightforward, so sort of the Japanese model, keep it simple and keep it functional.

However, it is not solely the instructor’s responsibility to get such “results.” On paper, the ALD provides student services to support classroom teaching. According to the Dean of the ALD, Ricardo Garcia, students are supposed to develop Personal Education Plans (PEP), a “road map” for their academic futures. Both full- and part-time faculty help students create PEPs, yet part-time instructors are not compensated for the extra work. Likewise, the ALD’s Transition Committee helps students who are planning to transfer into academic or vocational programs. It relies on instructors to identify likely candidates for the program. But because of the haphazard way that these services are implemented, no PEPs were developed for students in Basic Writing 3, nor were students directed to the Transition Committee. As a part-time instructor, Cleary thus received little support, yet found the ALD placing high expectations that he would be a conduit to student services.

The trend toward part-time faculty is not limited to adult education courses. “Part-timers now make up over 40% of the faculty in institutions of higher education, and about two-thirds at two-year colleges. And their share of teaching jobs continues to grow, almost doubling since 1970” (Brill, 1999:38). These statistics match the proportion of ALD part-timers, according to the president of the MTC part-time instructors’ union. Part-time instructors who do not receive benefits or job security obviously save the institution money and offer other benefits. Dean Garcia noted his preference for part-timers because, despite requiring more paperwork, it allows for “flexibility” in securing workplace education contracts.

The Commodification of Students

Institutional factors constitute one part of the hidden curriculum—that non-paying students may receive a lesser quality education. Also of interest is the role that the physical bodies of ESL students played in institutional politics related to minority students. Garcia highlighted the importance of good minority enrollment figures. “What we’ve been trying to get [the other college division administrators] to see is that when you need students, you can get them from us. . . . When you need to improve your retention numbers, guess who can do that.” Although MTC does not keep statistics on ALD student retention, Garcia claimed that ESL students are “the most consistent attenders. . . . They come back the most.” High retention rates help secure and retain

---

4 The lack of PEPs may be detrimental to some students, but since the “cooling out” function often occurs through the offices of counselors and other agents attempting to reduce students’ aspirations, such services can also have deleterious effects.

5 Statistics on adult education retention rates are difficult to obtain. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) does not track the retention of ESL students in ABE courses. “The NCES adult education questionnaire, which is a component of the National Household Education Survey, collects data
grant funds. Perhaps this is why, although Garcia claimed that, “[I]t is not the intention of the program” to serve international students, about one-third of the students in Basic Writing 3 were related to students or staff at the state university. The cultural capital that such students possess enables them to negotiate the rules that exclude them from free courses at MTC. At the same time, the ALD benefits from their presence in its ESL courses.

Discourses of Diversity

Like many institutions, MTC’s concern with diversity results in a commodification of the bodies of ESL students as an integral part of its curriculum. Diversity is codified in its Core Abilities program. A pamphlet for students proclaims that, “[MTC] teaches eight Core Abilities that support you as a life-long learner on the job, at home, and in the community.” The Core Ability particularly relevant to this study is global awareness. Interestingly, the institution appears less concerned with developing global awareness among the ALD students themselves, and more with using ALD students to provide global awareness to others. The Transition Committee’s 1999-2000 report stated that, “Basic skills education students are promoted to the college as a source of global awareness and well-prepared and successful degree-credit program students.” Thus in a curious twist, the ALD promotes “diverse” students who embody global awareness to the rest of the predominantly white institution.

The Overt Curriculum at the Classroom Level

Before describing the details of the hidden curriculum, I want to discuss what the course intended to teach explicitly. Basic Writing 3 serves “adults who have writing skills at a high school level and who want to improve their writing skills for further education, employment, or life.” As the range of goals included in this statement indicates, students’ goals varied considerably. In the Basic Writing class, three of the refugees were retired Russian Jews who had no further educational plans. Two younger Russian women were married to American citizens. Katarina, one of my interviewees, had trained as an engineer and planned to study accounting at MTC. The younger refugees, Saky and Ahmad, hoped to become a police officer and a lawyer, respectively. Some students with university connections wanted to obtain second bachelors or graduate degrees. Four middle-class students were applying to the state university system, including Minji, a 35-year-old Korean woman with a B.A. from a Korean university, and

6 The Core Abilities are: communication, critical thinking, ethics, global awareness, mathematics, science and technology, self-awareness, and social interaction.

7 Global awareness is demonstrated when students: “Express an understanding of the interconnections and interactions among people and systems . . . ; accumulate knowledge of and experience with people in their own and other cultures . . . ; describe the impact of the global economy on life, work, and opportunities; recognize the commonality of human experience across cultures; and recognize the influence of diverse cultural perspectives on human thought and behavior.”
the Hasans, two young Palestinian sisters and a brother who had grown up in the United Arab Emirates and had completed high school.

The course emphasized English grammar, pronunciation, and isolated skills. Writing assignments were intentionally short, partly to reduce Cleary’s (uncompensated) grading time and partly because of his teaching philosophy. Cleary believed in a product model of composition pedagogy, that if a student “conform[s] to a certain model in English, . . . that transition will be almost automatic. . . . The best way to learn writing is just a classical simple, simple model. Read good examples and imitate those examples, and do a variety of writing practices.” However, learning to write in a new language requires more than plugging in new vocabulary and grammatical structures or imitating other writers. Rather, cultures express their styles, values, and expectations for writers and readers in the rhetorical structures, use of evidence, and citing of authorities (Kaplan, 1966; Leki, 1991). Developing familiarity with the various roles and genres of text is also crucial to becoming a competent academic writer. However, the curriculum was not related to students’ cultural backgrounds, nor did it examine genres of writing or relate the writing in this course to future academic or other writing tasks. In this way the overt curriculum helped reduce the level of academic expectations for students.

Cleary’s espousal of an outdated methodology reflected his own situation, that after ten years in Mexico he was not current with ESL composition pedagogy. His lack of training and supervision communicated to students not to expect the most current pedagogy and methods in this free course. In addition, the absence of discussions of textual and rhetorical differences from the curriculum contributed the message that ESL students are a monolithic population, without distinguishable identities, histories, and goals. Further, the lack of discussion of academic discourse evidenced low expectations for students. Indeed, putting the onus on them, Cleary noted that teaching these students was “sort of an endless battle. And they need a lot of work. A tremendous amount of work.” The instructor’s reliance on the exercises in the book, the teacher-centered mode of instruction, and the traditional physical set-up of the classroom with chairs and desks in front-facing rows, created a pedagogy that, although perhaps familiar and comfortable to students, did not foster learning to write in preparation for college. (See Costello, this volume, for the messages sent by educational spaces.) The failings of the overt curriculum contributed to the high drop-out rate and overall dissatisfaction of the students.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Cleary’s curriculum occurred in conjunction with administrative structures and demands. Such “defensive teaching” (McNeil, 1986:88) can result from a complicated mixture of factors. “Even well-trained teachers are often unable to teach ideally in the face of the organizational systems controlling their workplace” (McNeil, 1986:161). Like Cleary, the high school teachers McNeil studied “felt that neither the support nor the financial reward was commensurate with the out-of-class time needed to preparing learning activities adequately, or to read and comment on the student essay tests or written assignments” (1986:176).

The Hidden Curriculum in the Classroom

Cultural models, which operate as “tacit theories” (Gee, 1996:17) are useful constructs in studying the operation of hidden curricula. Such models “involve (usually unconscious) assumptions about models of simplified worlds” (Gee, 1996:87). They
function as schemas, metaphors, and stereotypes that can motivate behavior. Cleary’s discourse about his students evidenced his cultural model of the “good student,” which had implications for the interactions in the class. Cleary viewed students in interpersonal terms as “wonderful, they’re marvelous people. . . . very motivated.” Compared with his native-English-speaking students, whom Cleary found distant, the ESL students “are much more eager, much more sociable, they’re easier to teach . . . because they’re friendlier. . . . And they know how to be good students.” To Cleary, “good students” are “interested in your presentation. . . . They’re not falling asleep, they’re not distracted. They don’t look disinterested, just the opposite, they look very interested. They enjoy being here.” Cleary’s upbeat assessment of the students glossed over much of their resistance, which I will discuss shortly.

Although Cleary became frustrated at the low level of academic performance of the ESL students, in daily interactions he communicated a hidden curriculum of docility, passivity, and low expectations that included these points:

- *Listen politely.* Cleary praised the students as “wonderful people that go along with whatever’s being presented.” He acknowledged the high proportion of the time he spent lecturing, often digressing with stories of his life in Mexico. In contrast, when he teaches for-credit courses, Cleary claims, “There’s no wasted time. You know, I don’t talk about my life.” The Basic Writing 3 students did not openly challenge this “waste of time.” Yet Katarina, for one, was dissatisfied: “[The class] wasn’t interesting. Again, because like Mr. Cleary, he was explain[ing] us all his experiences when he had been to Mexico a couple of times. It’s not an English class. I think a teacher should make some kind of plan before.”

- *Maintain hierarchical distinctions.* By introducing himself using the title “Mr.,” Cleary established his authority in the classroom. Supporting this role, he wore a necktie and pressed trousers to class. (See Tonso, this volume, on the gender aspects of dress.) Reflecting on the course, Cleary used the analogy of teacher as parent. “Coming in the middle of the course . . . it’s like changing parents halfway.” Like parents, such teachers exert authority over their students, even if they happen to be adults with much life experience.

- *Conform to traditional gender roles.* Not only did Cleary consistently call the female students “girls,” even older women with children, he frequently commented on their appearance. In a humorous manner, he also ascribed romantic motives to students’ absences—although he included men in this, too. When Rosa, a young Dominican student, returned after missing three classes, Cleary said, “I thought you had a new boyfriend.” She later dropped the class for good, although she did not discuss with me her reasons.

- *Participate by asking questions about grammar.* Students who asked about specific grammar points or pronunciation received positive feedback. Because the well-educated students knew grammatical terminology as well as the metalinguistic practices of language classrooms, it was easy for them participate.

- *Select “nice” topics to write about.* Students were assigned to write a research paper, but Cleary controlled their topics. For instance, when Susie, a Taiwanese student who wanted to get a master’s degree in special education, suggested suicide as her topic, Cleary replied, “That’s not very happy. Now why would you choose suicide?” After this feedback, Susie did not return to the class.
• Don’t give your opinion. Related to his dislike for emotional topics, Cleary criticized the author of a textbook reading on divorce for providing his opinion. You think it’s his opinion, and that he’s not being objective. . . . The author is talking, he’s mad, he’s angry, yeah, he’s very angry. . . . I don’t want to hear from this author. And I didn’t like it. . . . Because then I go against him. And I don’t believe what he says. Yeah, I want an author to be very neutral. . . . Just give me the facts. Be objective and just give me the facts. . . . Don’t get emotional. . . . I want you to be very logical.

Cleary’s commentary presented some elements of good sense about academic writing. Basic writers often need to learn to turn their opinions into arguments supported by evidence, especially on topics that evoke strong emotions. However, in preparing students for academic writing, this message of neutrality and docility does students a disservice. Students need to learn to substantiate their opinions, not to suppress them, in arguing a position and promoting an opinion.

Student Resistance to the Curriculum

Early in the semester, students began to show discontent with the course. Some responded to the failings of the overt curriculum, others to their perceptions of the hidden curriculum. They ignored Cleary during class; mildly disrupted the class; listened to him passively; carried on side conversations; skipped homework; complained to Cleary; and dropped out of the course. Saky saw that Cleary was unavailable in and outside the class. Despite Saky’s frequent confusion, he was reluctant to ask for clarification: “He [the instructor] explain[s] but sometime we need, there’s too many students asking, you know. And it gonna be my turn, second turn, time’s up already.” The students who stayed reduced their expectations of the course. Minji recognized the instructor as a novice in this environment. She commented:

I know he is the lecturer, not the regular professor at the university, I mean, MTC, so he is not responsib[le]. . . . I mean, that if there’s a regular professor at the MTC, he . . . [has] more experience and everything for the teaching. But he just teach the class, so he [does] not that much have responsibility about [doing] something for the . . . students.”

The range of resistant behaviors included the silent resistance of the high school students that McNeil (1986) documented. Likewise, it paralleled the junior high students in Everhart’s (1983) study, who carried on simultaneous unrelated conversations while completing their classwork. Unlike these pupils under compulsory school attendance, however, the Basic Writing 3 students had the option of leaving, and most of them took it. Ultimately, dropping out of the course (or the institution) constituted the fundamental form of resistance for three-fourths of the class. Of the 18 students who began the course, eight students attended regularly at mid-semester; by the last day, only four showed up.

The first two students to leave the class, Saky and Ahmad, were young male refugees who worked full-time or more and had the lowest previous educational attainment levels. These students conformed least to the hidden curriculum of docility and passivity, at times by sitting in the back of the room and muttering comments. They cited time constraints that prevented attending and doing homework, and they lacked the
word-processing skills that were an unstated prerequisite for the course. Ahmad, the only black student, also felt that Cleary made racist comments and discriminated by not accepting handwritten work.

That these students did not attend class regularly or complete assignments allowed them to be blamed for their own failure—or to blame themselves. As with the resistance that African-American community college students manifested in Lois Weis’s (1985) *Between Two Worlds*, dropping out became a contradictory response that negatively affected students even as it demonstrated their agency (see also Willis, 1977). Indeed, Saky and Ahmad’s goals were deferred indefinitely. A year later, neither had finished additional courses in the ALD; nor had Ahmad passed the GED tests.

The four students heading to four-year universities remained the longest, along with the retired Russians. These students were most compliant in their comportment and behavior toward Cleary. For instance, Ali Hasan consistently appended “sir” to his questions. Thus students with more cultural capital—higher levels of education, better language skills, better connections in the institution, and more familiarity with using services—benefited most from the community college’s courses and services.

**The Economic Level of the Hidden Curriculum**

The lack of a challenging curriculum constitutes one form of the hidden curriculum; it embodies the dearth of institutional confidence in and expectations for these students. It also represents the “cooling out” of immigrant/refugee students, which functions as one mechanism for keeping them in the low-paying labor force. In the case of Basic Writing 3, however, few students were prevocational, as most had or were planning to earn bachelor’s degrees. Indeed, given the mixture of students, few were working for pay or seeking work. Of those working, Saky’s supervisors at the plastics manufacturing company were pressuring him to further his education so he could assume more responsibility. Ahmad held jobs more typical for recent immigrants, cleaning at a bakery and driving a taxi. He characterized his work as usual low-level immigrant work: “the only work I think it’s capable for us here, so we have to do it. . . . Most of the immigrant[s] that comes here, . . . even if you are a doctor, you have to start afresh.”

In the current economic ‘boom,’ with its low unemployment rate, other rationales must therefore be found for the continued existence of these programs. Brint and Karabel (1989) argue that community colleges evolved in partnership with local businesses as a result of the empire-building goals of administrators. The success of the ALD in attracting state and federal grant funds as well as private workplace education contracts bolsters this thesis (see also Childress, this volume, for strong support). Moreover, Apple (1996:88) noted the government’s need for legitimacy in the face of economic policies that foster the shift of manufacturing jobs to off-shore locations. It is not surprising therefore, that after the passage of NAFTA, the federal government funded courses through the Economic Dislocation and Worker Adjustment Assistance Act designed to retrain workers who had lost their jobs to Mexico (Merrifield, 1997:274). Along the same lines, the government seeks legitimacy in absorbing the demands of minorities for education and other services. Weis noted that, “increased access to education is a political response to racial contest in the state sector” (1995:10). In fact, federal funding for adult basic education increased twelve-fold between 1965 and 1997 (National Center
for Educational Statistics, 1997), as the economy underwent a fundamental shift from a manufacturing to a service base.

**Discussion: The Student as Product**

In the final analysis, basic education programs that attract government grants and workplace contracts may be more successful at shoring themselves up than at achieving their stated mission of preparing students to transfer to vocational programs, community colleges, or four-year universities. In this process, these institutions create a new type of product—student bodies—in the same way that the mass media sells the audience to advertisers. The ‘student body’ is the accumulation of individual students who contribute to the body count demonstrating that the services for which grant funders pay are being provided. Likewise, the ESL student body provides a source of diversity for an institution concerned about minority enrollments. In this scenario, if a student drops out of one class but resurfaces in another, in the long run the institution’s student count remains unaffected, although retention rates for individual classes suffer. Of course, individual teachers and administrators often care passionately about student outcomes. An institutional-level analysis, however, challenges the extent to which individuals can effect large-scale change in the face of these structural goals and pressures.

On the economic level the hidden curriculum (re)produces the commodification of student bodies, a phenomenon that furthers the sweep of privatization, including vouchers and charter schools in public education. Currently, privatization is poised to take over remedial education at the college level, as the proposal to seek outside bids to teach basic education at the City University of New York demonstrates (Arenson, 2000:6). The hidden curriculum of the Alternative Learning Division, that you get what you pay for, helps prepare students—and the rest of us—to accept the privatization of basic education. Unlike the socialization of costs strategy that produced common schools and state universities with low tuition, in this model those who cannot afford to pay are left out. Students with more capital—of all types—benefit from educational institutions at all levels.

However, all types of students assert agency when they find themselves in substandard situations. Many of the students in the Basic Writing 3 course refused the various ways in which their bodies were commodified. Ironically, they learned the lesson of consumerism that the customer is always right. Students actively refused the lesser ‘product’ they were offered in the Basic Writing 3 course, despite it being free.
References


