

Janet Mayes: An Oral History of the CCNY 1960's SEEK Program
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I was born in 1942 in Washington Heights in Manhattan, just under the George Washington Bridge. I was a Jewish “red diaper” baby—meaning much of my extended family were Communists—and I grew up with those ideals. My mom was a housewife and my dad was a postal clerk. I was brought up to believe that women didn’t go to college, that “smart” women don’t find husbands; I was discouraged and discouraged (“you’ll use up your eyes if you read too much.”); I think that’s how I ended up resonating with students who had been not validated as people who could think.

I went to P.S. 173 in Manhattan; then we moved to Queens and I went to Hillside Junior High School. I went to the School of Performing Arts in Manhattan and studied music, mainly as a classical timpanist. Then I went to Queens College for a year but felt I had to leave home, so I transferred to City College and found an apartment with a roommate back in Washington Heights. I was a City College student from 1961 to 1964. I lived off student loans and part-time jobs. At City I met Rose Zimbardo. She validated me as smart and took me under her wing; I started as a pre-med major and wanted to be a psychiatrist. But I switched to English, focusing on dramatic literature; I felt it was another way to really understand human interaction.

I went to U.Cal, Berkeley for my masters in English Literature, and became very involved in the anti-Vietnam War protest, The Free Speech Movement (or FSM). We didn’t have masters theses there, but my equivalent seminar project was on “Hamlet and the Meditative Tradition.” I came back to New York in 1966; that summer, I completed the Instant Teacher Training Program and started teaching at I.S. 88. I was woefully unprepared and hardly lasted a semester. Rose suggested I apply to teach in the SEEK program. I interviewed (maybe with Ed Volpe and Tony Penale) and was accepted; I began teaching in SEEK in Spring 1967.

When I started, Tony Penale was the SEEK English Director; in the summer of 1967, he was replaced by Mina Shaughnessy. (I didn’t know he had a heart attack until this interview today.) Mina made me her assistant in a way, and I ultimately took charge of the tutorial program that I established there. In addition to Tony, I remember other SEEK English teachers, including Toni Cade, Addison Gayle, Fred Byron and Barbara Christian. Amy Sticht’s name is familiar, but I don’t remember her.

In later years David Henderson, Alice Trillin, Raymond Patterson, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich and Blanche Skurnick taught with us too. In 1967 or 1968, a special creative writing group came from Columbia University and joined us as writer-teachers, including Audre Lorde. I team-taught classes with Audre; she taught the creative writing side and I taught the grammar side. She often would visit my classroom, because she said she wanted to learn teaching techniques from me, which really blew my mind; I never believed I was special or particularly skilled, and Audre made me feel great about my work. I also remember how many of the women students of color would gather around her in the SEEK administrative office, and hang onto her every word. I’m sure many of them became great poets in their own right. In SEEK we taught three different writing courses; the team-taught course we worked on together was the first-level course in the sequence.

One summer, probably in 1968, I was visiting friends in Iowa with my husband and I observed a University of Iowa writing program that included tutors who were dedicated to assisting students struggling with writing. I thought this was a great model for us to use in the City College SEEK Program, and wrote a detailed proposal for how to structure the first-level basic writing course. I proposed longer classroom hours, more times a week, with peer support and student tutors whom we would screen, recruited from the pool of English majors. In these new first level writing classes, the students would have no homework—all work would be done during these longer classroom hours—because so many of our students experienced strenuous difficulties getting their work done at home. After the lesson of the day, the students would all do their exercises, writing and editing in this very supportive on-campus atmosphere, with tutors and their teacher circulating to help.

I developed my proposed model of learning-through-validation, by drawing from Harry Stack Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory about how people learn. Ultimately, my doctoral dissertation in Clinical Psychology (Yeshiva University, 1978) was on "Social Facilitation of Learning."

I remember presenting my proposal to a group of English faculty. I explained that students needed validation; it was more effective than learning in isolation, and especially more effective if the atmosphere did not include whatever was going on in many of their households. My idea was non-traditional and it made the faculty nervous. (I could tell because almost everyone simultaneously lit up cigarettes!) Nevertheless, Mina traveled to Iowa to study their program, and then, after obtaining our English Department's approval, asked me to implement my proposal.

I ran two or three of these proto-type classes. At the end of the semester, the students took a writing evaluation test of some kind and they performed better on that test than other students who had completed our second-level SEEK composition course.

Out of that model, we also developed the walk-in Writing Center. I remember Alice Chandler; I don't remember when she became involved, but I think this kind of supportive learning was in the air during those years, and together and separately we built upon these early experiences.

When Mina left, several people asked me about applying to take her place, but I felt there was no way I could fill her shoes.

In my teaching, I always believed that we must start where the student is and respect what they bring into the classroom. Nevertheless, when I first came to SEEK, I was a rigid grammarian; I thought all students should learn the "king's English." At first, in SEEK my teaching was grounded in my own freshman comp class at City in 1961; I taught direct grammar lessons. I taught using a literature model. I had students write about what they were reading. I also taught forms of model essays, a method that I had learned when I took freshman composition at City College. Professor Frederick Shipley was my freshman comp teacher there. (I volunteered to take it as a sophomore; I placed out of comp at Queens College, but I thought my writing should be better).

But soon I realized that students had to draft first and then use grammar rules to edit their writing. Get their ideas there, spill them out— and then “English it up” later. I continued to teach grammar, like subject/verb agreement and how to recognize and “fix” run-on sentences. But I told the students to write first, and then to use those rules later when they were editing. I never used the *English 3200* grammar handbook or another grammar textbook. I developed a different kind of applied grammar exercises for my book (*Writing and Rewriting*, Prentice Hall, 1972 & 1981) and for tutoring centers. I also developed worksheets for starting and generating essays.

I picked my own books and I primarily chose individual books rather than anthologies. I had become interested in Black writers at Berkeley; I began to offer great Black writers to students when I taught in I.S. 88; I included them in my City College SEEK courses starting in Spring 1967. I taught *Lysistrata* and Thoreau, but I also taught Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

One of my required readings was Thoreau’s “Essay on Civil Disobedience”. My students had my home phone number. One evening, a student in ROTC called me quite confused and upset, wanting to discuss the Thoreau essay, and we had an hour-long conversation; at the end he exclaimed that he had to shed his uniform. He later became a leader in the 1969 student protests. Another student, at my request, tirelessly sat with me in the cafeteria and tried to teach me Spanish; he watched, I think with recognition of his own struggles, as I struggled to learn it. One student gave me an anti-Vietnam War sculpture he made.

Tony Penale’s philosophy was to make the SEEK students into scholars. He taught the classics. He was very emotive; he said we should mold the students “like clay.” I disagreed; I thought we had to learn from them. But he was also extremely kind and supportive. I was so nervous when he came to observe my class that I made a mistake—it was a grammar lesson and I spent half the class teaching it all wrong; then I realized it and said “Wait!” and started over. I was deeply embarrassed; but Tony was very sweet about it; he said “Good for you!” In later years, I became so confident of my methods, especially when I did the tutoring-based courses, that I didn’t care who came in to observe. I was proud.

Mina was better than Tony at embracing the brilliance of what the students and teachers brought to the program. She listened rather than told; she picked people’s brains: “Janet, tell me your opinion about this; tell me your opinion about that.” She incorporated my ideas about tutoring based classes and the Writing Center into the program. In short I grew exponentially from Mina, the faculty and especially from my students.

We had SEEK teacher meetings. I don’t remember the content but I remember being in awe of Barbara Christian and Toni Cade. They talked about their teaching and students, but I can’t remember the details. They were both energetic, political, outspoken—especially Toni—models of what I wanted to be. They were amazing dedicated teachers. And Toni was always right on the money in catching and calling out racism in this white middleclass enclave in the middle of Harlem. I emulated Toni Cade; I’m not sure how she felt about me—she never knew how much I admired and emulated her. I was shy; I stammered, except when I was teaching. All I remember about Addison Gayle is that he was a sophisticated and gracious professorial type who always had a pipe in his hand.

We didn't have any high-stakes grammar final exams in our SEEK classes. I don't remember if we gave any formal final exams. I didn't give any grammar tests; instead, I showed students how to apply the rules that they learned when they rewrote their drafts. (I didn't give out grades on the early drafts.) So, one student would have trouble with subject/verb agreement, run on sentences. I'd ask that student to focus on one thing only in a rewrite and show her how to do it; then she'd edit the draft to "fix" that kind of issue. My mood was: don't let your wonderful ideas get tossed away by the traditional collegiate readers because of grammatical and organizational issues. Get your ideas out, and then make them "acceptable" to your readers, especially if they are going to give you a grade for your work.

I also asked students to do larger kinds of writing. One way was to have students talk out a rough draft. I'd say, "just explain it as you would to a very smart ten-year-old. Say it and expect them to ask questions and put in the answers to those questions." Students might tape record their words and then transcribe them. Or they'd work in pairs: one partner would talk into a tape recorder while the other asked questions. Then the writer would transcribe the spoken draft and revise. Students were often stuck because they worried about writing everything down perfectly the first time. They learned to just spill out their ideas. Then, I'd say, "OK, now let's put it into a form where you add a lead-in to the first paragraph and some kind of topic sentence for the essay, and then, in subsequent paragraphs add specifics to prove your point, or elaborate on your idea." That would produce a second draft (still not worrying about grammar and spelling). The third draft included editing and proofreading. This method evolved as I taught in the program.

I assigned in-class themes—which traditionally were supposed to be completed alone without much rewrite; but I organized the students to work with peer support, with students helping each other by asking questions when they got stuck and then rewriting and editing their own drafts.

I didn't study composition theorists, publish articles or go to many conferences. I learned as I taught; I experimented; and I developed my ideas over time.

I remember Les Berger and Allen Ballard because they were administrators and chaired meetings; I didn't know them personally. I thought the English Department Chair, Ed Volpe, was supportive; I don't remember much about him. I had studied with Edgar Johnson, the Dickens scholar who was Chair when I was a student.

I was close to Bertha Doleman, a SEEK reading teacher. Fran Giteles, a counselor, and I were very close. We kept up over the years when we ran into each other at demonstrations and rallies.

SEEK desegregated City College. There was a negative reaction among many professors who were worried about the college's status and standards going down. That was their big issue, and we, students and faculty, struggled against their conservatism in 1969. My student Henry Arce was one of the leaders during the struggle for Open Enrollment. I supported the protests in a faculty group along with Adrienne Rich, Fran Giteles, and so many others from the SEEK Program, and with other progressive faculty members from the "regular" college.

The faculty, administrators and students argued over the student demands. Some of us “sat-in” (I think at Shepard Hall) with the students during the struggle. Some of us on the faculty tried to mediate, but we shouldn’t have. There was a big raucous meeting in 1969 in the Great Hall during the struggle for Open Enrollment. Kenneth Clark had everyone stand up, hold hands and have a moment of silence.

One summer, when I was in London, gathering excerpts from African authors to include my basic writing text, Betty Rawls, from the SEEK Counseling Department, disappeared during a visit to the South with her boyfriend. Their small private plane had failed to show up at their next airport, but the Southern authorities stopped looking for them, so SEEK students went down, fanned out and found the wreckage in a farmer’s field. There were reports that racists, angry that Black people would be flying a private plane, had siphoned their gas tank.

I stayed at City College past the protests in 1969. I’m not sure exactly when I left. In about 1970, I entered a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology at Yeshiva University. But I kept working various jobs as a basic writing teacher, organizing tutoring programs, setting up learning centers, and as a consultant to administrators of programs or potential programs designed to accomplish goals similar to SEEK.

Kenneth Bruffee hired me to start a learning center, a tutoring center, in a quonset hut at Brooklyn College campus. (Mina recommended me to Ken.) He was an appreciative live-wire; he’d pop in and out; he was just a wonderful guy; we had mutual profound respect for one another. We talked for hours about the need for tutoring and peer support.

I became kind of known for doing that kind of work; so various colleges engaged me to come in and start the “Study Group” programs that I had developed, intervention programs for students on academic probation. I taught these students how to study using “parallel” and “cooperative” learning techniques. The premise, as before, was that people learn better when they are helping each other, supported by other people. Students who were getting Ds and Fs began getting As and Bs.

I consulted with Jim Nash and the faculty at Montclair State. (I think Ken referred me to him.) I taught at William Paterson University; I worked for a year establishing and heading up a program at Baruch. After I got my Ph.D. in Psychology in 1978, I was appointed Chair of the Basic Skills/Counseling Department at Bucks County Community College. I established and directed a similar program at Ramapo College. I continued teaching basic writing part-time and consulting until the 1990s at, among others, Hostos, Rutgers-Newark, Wayne, College of New Rochelle, Pace ... For a few years, I was a full-time counselor at York College, where I also established and ran Study Groups for students on academic probation.

In my *Writing and Rewriting* text that I published in 1971 or 72 and rewrote about ten years later, I created applied grammar exercises that used passages from expert writers. I went to London to cull examples for my book from African literature, to add to the collection of African American, Caribbean, and Latin authors I used as examples and for the substance of exercises. In the exercises, I created intentional errors (according to the lesson covered in a particular chapter) in uncredited passages from, for example, Baldwin’s *Native Son*. Students would read the

passage to find and edit the intentional errors; then they would look up the “answers” in the back of the book and read the original passage in context, with the author’s name and citation. So, learning how to catch grammatical and syntactical errors would be fun and instructive, because students were also reading great works of literature and guessing who the authors were.

I remember discussions about the City College Writing proficiency test. I wasn’t happy that they were developing that kind of thing. Maybe some of my students took it, but I left soon after it was implemented.

I don’t like what Mina ultimately did as a Dean at CUNY. She developed and implemented standardized tests as gateways. I don’t think you can judge people based on whether they can pass a standardized test in order to be allowed to go on and get a higher degree. It’s a British model, and it’s classist and racist. Not everybody tests well. And I’m sorry that she evolved into that, from where she came from with her wonderful heart. We talked by phone off and on over the years. I called her when I heard she was gravely ill, but we never talked about the testing systems and how she came to support and develop them.

I am now a full-time psychologist in private practice, and continue to work with people whose low self-esteem and other obstacles get in the way of their reaching their full potential and having satisfying, productive lives. I am completing a book on Interpersonal Theory with three other practitioners; we are about to send out proposals to publishers. I also published a science fiction novel under my penname, Janet Rose, *Beyond the Horse’s Eye; a Fantasy Out of Time* (2013). I remain very active politically, in affiliation with The International Action Center, founded by Ramsey Clark. As a lesbian, I am also very active in the LGBTQ community and in the International Working Women’s Coalition.

I have to say, that although I was brought up with progressive ideals, and began to find my voice at Berkeley in the Free Speech Movement, it was really my experience with my colleagues and students in the SEEK program that grew me beyond my wildest expectations. I am so grateful.